

THE GLORIA E. ANZALDÚA JOURNEY: PATH TO CONOCIMIENTO  
A TESTIMONIO OF QUEER HEROICS

A Thesis

by

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## ABSTRACT

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As an auto-historia testimonio, I approach my work from my experience with performance poetry where I used my personal experiences to express the continuum of gender through poetry. I also draw from Gloria Anzaldúa's "path of conocimiento" as a framework for my narrative stories as queer rites of passage.





## DEDICATION

Jotería, we are poems and real magic. I see you.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Part I: Methodology, Craft Choices, and Influences**

The idea to write my own life story was first planted during my senior year in high school when I came across *Take It Like A Man: The Autobiography of Boy George*, written by the pop artist with Spencer Bright. I was only a child as his career skyrocketed during the 80's, but his visibility in pop culture gave me my first glimpse of queerness, so I became not only a fan of his work, but also of the aesthetics of his gender non-conforming image. When I encountered his autobiography years later as mentioned above, I thought about how revolutionary it was that he not only grounded his image through his work but also wrote about the difficulties he faced in his attempt to sustain himself not only professionally but personally. As I had not yet read any works by women of color, Boy George's autobiography at that time was the most influential.

There are many labels such as autobiography, life story, and memoir, personal narrative, and personal essay that attempt to define a writer telling their story; however none of these labels fully encompass my linguistic identity as a border pocha. My narrative, which combines both poetry and prose, can be defined in part, as testimonio. Testimonio as defined by the editors of *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*, states:

From our different personal, political, ethnic, and academic trajectories, we arrived at the importance of testimonio as a crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the

alchemy of erasure...giving voice, documenting silenced histories...Other feminists have developed self-reflexive research methods and social practices, creating oral histories and feminist ethnographies that capture the everyday lives and stories of women. Drawing from these various experiences, *testimonio* can be a powerful method for feminist research praxis

(2-3).

The genre of the *testimonio* encompasses the reasons I was inclined to write in the first place; for “bearing witness” to prevent my story from “succumb[ing] to the alchemy of erasure” and to engage in “self-reflexive...feminist research praxis.” The collection uses *testimonio* as the Spanish translation of testimony, “evidence or proof of something” ([en.oxforddictionaries.com](http://en.oxforddictionaries.com)) to assert the stories of women with “*latinidad*” identity. To assert these stories as *testimonios*, the editors of this pivotal collection engage in an intentional artistic, linguistic and political act of creative resistance. The *testimonio* captures my desire to be visible on the page as queer and gender nonconforming, but also as brown.

I also invoke *testimonio* within the context of my experience in a church setting—where *testimonio* is also used as a means to “bear witness.” I draw from my own experience of being indoctrinated as a Protestant Methodist, due to my mother’s conversion from Catholicism when she married my father, and her continued worship as an active member of La Santísima Trinidad church community in Weslaco. While I remain at arm’s length due to the religious politics of my gender nonconforming identity as a queer Xicanx—instead practicing and reclaiming my spirituality through a less institutionalized, more indigenously ceremonious way—my mother often shares the latest in church activities, as well as those *testimonios* from congregation members that move her to tears of joy or sorrow during the service. I therefore inquired with the

following, “Mom, how would you define a testimonio that someone gives when they go up to the altar?” Her response to my inquiry was as follows:

A testimonio is when someone goes to the front to give thanks for something good that has happened to them and they are thankful for all the blessings they’ve received because of the prayers and faith that they have. They don’t necessarily have to go to the front, the point is to say it out loud and give thanks and praise. In some instances they are so grateful for the good that has happened to them; they consider it a miracle and have to let everybody know. They can’t keep it to themselves, they have to say it out loud—how grateful they are—of what has happened to them and how it has transformed their lives.

(Irma G. Solís, April 15, 2017)

A true to form definition in regard to testimony, “the public recounting of a religious conversion or experience” (en.oxforddictionaries.com), although what struck me about my mother’s interpretation of testimonio is that the bearer was moved, out of faith and gratitude, to witness or “say it out loud.” Similar to the scholar mujeres’ intention to document the unnoticed and my mother’s interpretation of testimonio, the voicing of an experience of faith and gratitude, I too, voice with my writing what would otherwise be an unknown, thus extend my gratitude to those mujeres with queerness and brownness as part of their identity that wrote their essays, narratives, poetry, and stories, and set the example for me and so many others who identify on those margins.

Along with testimonio, my writings may be understood as autohistoria and autohistoria teoría (The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader 2009). Ana Louise Keating defines these terms in the following way:

**Autohistoria** Anzaldúa coined this term, as well as the term “autohistoria-teoría,” to describe women-of-color interventions into and transformations of traditional western autobiographical form. Deeply infused with the search for personal and cultural meaning, or what Anzaldúa describes in her post-*Borderlands* writings as “putting Coyolxauhqui together,” both autohistoria and autohistoria-teoría are informed by reflective self-awareness employed in the service of social justice work. Autohistoria focuses on the personal life story but, as the autohistorian tells her own life story, she simultaneously tells the life story of others.

**Autohistoria-teoría** Theory developed by Anzaldúa to describe a relational form of autobiographical writing that includes both life story and self-reflection on this story telling process. Writers of autohistoria-teoría blend their cultural and personal biographies with memoir, history, storytelling, myth, and/or other forms of theorizing. By so doing, they create interwoven individual and collective identities. Personal experiences—revised and in other ways redrawn—become a lens, Anzaldúa and other autohistoria-teorístas expose the limitations in the existing paradigms and create new stories of healing, self-growth, cultural critique, and individual/collective transformation. Anzaldúa described *Borderlands/La Frontera* as an example of one form autohistoria-teoría can take.

(319).

As an auto-historia testimonio, I approach my work from my experience with performance poetry where I used my personal experiences not only “a lens...to create new

stories of healing, self-growth, cultural critique, and individual collective transformation,” but as a mirror for the audience and reader.

In terms of my craft choices, I include poetry and narrative together in my testimonio, specifically poetry before each narrative in this writing, and the reasons are multilayered. To begin, historically for me, poetry was the first genre I used for expression during my adolescence but, I also included it as a glimpse and introduction to the narrative text that follows, as well as for its economy of language. Another reason I include it, is that the poetry in my work, also served as a proclamation, in part due to some of it originally being written for performance. Ultimately though, the poetry itself, whether performative, where I have engaged reading it with bodily expression, or it simply being read and reflected on, along with the rest of the narrative, as an enactment of Rosenblatt’s Transactional Theory (1978), is what grounds the work as a whole. Drawing from scholar mujeres documenting their narrative stories as testimonadoras and a witness declaring his or her testimonio in a church as influence and process, I include my poetry as a craft choice for voicing artistic presence as well as gratitude.

The possibility of approaching my work with a performance lens took shape in Dr. McMahon’s Latino/a theater and Performance class as we read Monica Palacios’ one woman show, “Greetings from a Queer Señorita.” Palacios’ work was the first text I was exposed to that conveyed brown queer comedy which I could identify with. I also admired her work for its authenticity to queerness. Palacios work led me to ground my work in a performance monologue for that class. When I met Palacios a year and a half later, that encounter helped me to keep with the trajectory of writing my story with a queer lens.

I developed my desire to work with performance after working with Amalia Ortiz in the recently formed poetry collective, WAKE-UP, Womyn Artistically Kollecing Experiencias-

Unidas Prosperando. As a poetry collective, WAKE-UP takes an intersectional approach by engaging in scholarship and social activism through our creative writing. We do this by not only telling our stories but by also honoring those women of color who had been silenced before, but somehow found a way to write, thus leaving a truly feminist foundation before us. When I decided to join WAKE-UP, the dormant poetic voice I had been ignoring for too long finally woke up. In my thesis, I recount my experience:

As I was preparing to perform for the first time with this group, I watched the videos they had uploaded so that I could see their performances and understand not only their style of delivery but also their politics. I was happy to see that, like me, they centered and wrote around feminist and intersectional issues. As I watched them on video, I remember thinking that if I was going to perform with this group, I better bring my ‘A’ game, so I decided to write something that resembled a narrative monologue to not only read during our opening act for the upcoming El Retorno event but because I had decided it was time to deliver this piece in front of an audience. In addition to reading with WAKE-UP, I had signed up to read for The Valley International Poetry Festival (VIPF), which was going to be taking place during that coming weekend.

(Solís 135-136)

When I read for both annual events on their sixth run in 2014, the result was two very different versions of the same narrative piece. While VIPF, featuring poets from across the Valley and Mexico, had a well-lit stage partially blinding the poet from the audience who sat at a distance, El Retorno, an event honoring Anzaldúa, had a well-lit and fully visible venue with the audience sitting about three to five feet away from our poetry collective, who were to read at the

front. This full visibility and proximity created not only a more intimate space but the perfect setting, even after having rehearsed a number of times with the group, for my unexpected and extremely emotional performance. The audience, along with the featured presenter and guest poet, Dr. Inés Hernández-Ávila—a dear friend of Anzaldúa’s, witnessed this profound reading of my narrative monologue. A few days prior, at the request of our advisor, Professor Emmy Pérez, WAKE-UP collective were all able to spend some time with her as she spoke to us about how important it was for us to write our stories. It wasn’t until I presented with the poetry group that I realized how accurate her advice was about speaking my truth, and how it would have a profound impact on me and the audience.

Dr. Ávila’s writing in *Telling to Live* also validated my reasons for writing. Not only did she spend time with our poetry collective to personally advise us about our group, but her words in the collection capture how I went from the quiet reflective act of writing to working with WAKE-UP poetry collective and performing as an amplified version of myself, showcasing my gender through my poet persona. Dr. Ávila writes, “Telling the truth defeats the hierarchy of domination by creating miracles. Each truth telling makes the next time easier. Each miracle reconnects us to ourselves, to our source, to life itself, and to our visions for ourselves” (300). She was right in that from the first reading to the next and thereafter, it did become easier. In regard to the repetition of performance, Judith Butler writes, “...gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts* (Gender Trouble 140). As I continued to perform, the fear about proclaiming my queerness *again* so late in life, as well as being a home grown queer Xicanx from the Rio Grande Valley, kept subsiding.

Working with WAKE-UP also allowed me to engage in writing as an act of healing. When I went with WAKE-UP to present at the Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambios Sociales or

MALCS Conference for the first time, I challenged myself, with the encouragement of Amalia Ortiz and Professor Emmy Pérez, to rewrite a more condensed version of my narrative poem. Further, as I was writing to heal, I was also reading, performing and presenting, my poems and short narratives to do the same.

WAKE-UP was not the first group to have members challenging not only themselves in their writing, but in their performance as well. In chapter fourteen of *Performing the US Latina And Latino Borderlands*, Paloma Martínez-Cruz and Liza Ann Acosta describe Teatro Luna's intentions with their play *Machos*. "[I]t is through the live articulation of sexual transformation that the performance exposes gender as contingency" (288). Cruz and Acosta add, "the performers...experiment with and also experience gender expression as a continuum of being" (294)...thus "in becoming machos by performing *Machos*, Teatro Luna endorses gender instability as a liberatory project (294). During the time I began performing with WAKE-UP, I had not read about Teatro Luna's incredible work, although when I did, I felt validated in that their previous work *Machos* spoke volumes in regard to a collective feminist recognition about addressing gender and performance. As Teatro Luna's play was a "liberatory project," addressing gender, my poem "Donde esta mi gente" addressed the same issue, although I considered it a personal healing project.

Writing as an act of healing connects with Anzaldúa's ideas on *conocimiento*. In a Special Topics course in Xican@ Poetry and Poetics with Professor Pérez, I read Gloria Anzaldúa's "the journey: path of *conocimiento*" for the first time. As I reflected on it, I considered especially how it starts, with an "arrebato...a rupture, fragmentation...an ending, a beginning" (*This Bridge We Call Home* 546). I thought about what my late father would say when we were hit with difficult situations and the circumstances became dire: "Bueno pos hay



que aguantar la vara,” which means sometimes there isn’t a way around; you just have to grin and bear it. Anzaldúa herself described the path of *conocimiento* holistically as:

[A] form of spiritual inquiry /activism, reached via creative acts—writing, art-making, dancing, healing, teaching, meditation, and spiritual activism—both mental and somatic (the body, too, is a form as well as site of creativity). Through creative engagements, you embed your experiences in a larger frame of reference, connecting your personal struggles with those of other beings on the planet, with the struggles of the Earth itself. To understand the greater reality that lies behind your personal perceptions, you view these struggles as spiritual undertakings

*(This Bridge We Call Home 542).*

During that class, I began to apply what Anzaldúa had described in the path of *conocimiento*, each step in relation to the other, as an overarching outline to write about my experiences, elations, and traumas; to process and reconcile my life’s events. Not wanting to drown in the despair of having suffered them, I also drew on the path of *conocimiento* to integrate my auto-historia testimonio with poetry that extends its meaning and healing into narrative pieces.

The decision to include poetry and narrative was initially influenced by Anzaldúa’s work *Borderlands*. The irony, which I see happen continuously with *Borderlands*, is that the poetry in her book was written first, yet is mostly ignored over the more academic essays at the beginning. Perhaps this speaks to the audience of her work, so as I considered this, I chose to intersperse poetry and narrative because I didn’t want one genre to overshadow the other. I also wanted my work to complement itself across genres, in this case between poetry to narrative, and as stand-alone pieces rooted in either performance or again, the transactional theory (Rosenblatt 1978).

As a queer Xicanx, Anzaldúa's intellectual work has been critical to me because she made the brave choice to identify as a queer, something difficult for someone from the Rio Grande Valley. I admired her for the bravery she exemplified in her choice for queerness because she had helped lay the foundation for me. Further, when Anzaldúa came up with "the path of *conocimiento*," she had created a solution to the problem of not having a "queer rites of passage" framework. I therefore also include my narrative stories as a way to illustrate one version of this.

## **Part II: Ramifications of Intertextuality**

One of the first *arrebatos* I had, occurred in my early childhood when I began recognizing early on that I was negotiating two genders. Whereas I felt and acted out my masculinity, I resisted femininity being imposed on me because of my biologically assigned sex and the resulting strict cultural gender roles. In her book, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler points out "we (read hegemonic society) regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right" (140). True to form, the inclination of acting out my gender identity resulted oftentimes in being misgendered, then being shamed and policed by my family about my gender expression. I could never escape the judgements or parenting diagnoses my family would give my mother about my gender expression being a phase and their expectation of my growing out of being a tomboy. In *Female Masculinity*, Dr. Jack Halberstam describes tomboyism and its parameters:

Tomboyism tends to be associated with a 'natural' desire for the greater freedoms and mobilities enjoyed by boys. Very often it is read as a sign of independence and self-motivation, and tomboyism may even be encouraged to the extent that it remains comfortably linked to a stable sense of a girl identity. Tomboyism is punished, however, when it appears to be the sign of extreme male identification

(taking a boy's name or refusing girl clothing of any type) and when it threatens to extend beyond childhood and into adolescence

(358).

The result of my inclination toward “extreme male identification [and] refusing girl clothing of any type” was my having to endure teasing at school and other social settings. In fact I could recall a time when one of my mother's friends had invited us to her son's birthday party where, before the cake was served and the piñata broken, the birthday boy himself, began gender policing me for playing with the He-Man and Battle Cat action figures his mother had put on display for the theme of the party. It hadn't been the first time this happened and I knew by that age, that this was going to continue being a frequent occurrence, so in order to survive the rest of my childhood, I began limiting my social interactions with my peers and family.

In the meantime, I decided I'd give myself two things. First I would allow myself to continue adhering to my “tomboy instincts” (Halberstam 358). The second thing I gave myself was a deadline until my adulthood to see, if in fact, what they said was true—that this was a phase and that I would grow out of it.

I did grow, but mostly to love books, girls and Madonna for whatever outrageous thing she was doing at the time. Despite criticism through my childhood and in my adolescence, my masculinity was, as Judith Butler put it, my preferred “*corporeal style*...both intentional and performative” (Gender Trouble 139). I continued living out, with my own permission, but as the deadline I set for myself approached, I did the occasional check in, asking, “Am I still me and do I still feel the same? Can I be more feminine, smile more while wearing dresses and not want to puke or crawl out of my own skin?” The answer was always, “Yes I am still me. I do feel the same and I hate wearing dresses.” I never felt like I could do femininity justice and was more

comfortable in my own masculine of center gender expression while witnessing gender non-conforming femme-ness in queer communities; especially appreciating the aesthetics and performance of drag culture at 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue and the Saint, the then popular local gay clubs in McAllen and San Antonio respectively. However, for me to embody femininity was like asking an apple to become an orange. I shouldn't have had to feel like I needed to pull it off for the sake of fitting in to the skin I was born into, and I strongly believed, and still do now, the same goes for anyone being forced into a contrary gender role.

Unfortunately though, that's what was happening in my adulthood, when I came back home from a hiatus in California and began working in the Valley's public schools at the end of 2011. It was never explicitly stated, but I could sense that this "compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler 141) from cisgender folks was the cultural norm and expectation, specifically with certain family members as well as new colleagues and acquaintances. For this reason, I could never really join the conversation as it was geared more toward cis feminine topics. I don't think I was ever really in the closet during my formative years but having returned, I felt many times, that I was being pushed into one, despite having had a wife and raising three children in what could only be described as a family.

Prior to this in my early adulthood I had made the decision to quit writing shortly after receiving my undergraduate degree. My reasoning behind this was that I had acquired an instant family with my then partner who didn't really appreciate my need for creative expression. I also felt that I had to be more practical about my career choices and writing creatively was not a viable option for me if I was going to help raise a family. I decided instead to enter the public educational field for a time, but the consequence of not allowing myself to flourish as a writer,

was that it inevitably led to a deeply felt void. My internal demons began to plague me while the life that I was living didn't feel like my own.

A friend of mine recently said it best, "La sangre llama," and after my partner and I went our separate ways, I listened to the pull of my blood and returned here, to the Valley where I grew up, knowing that if I wanted to write creatively again, I had to move beyond the self-check-ins about who I was but also had to face the fact that I had put myself in the closet in another sense. This had to do with my inclinations to express myself and write creatively which is why I decided to hold myself accountable and apply to graduate school for creative writing. This was also when I did my last self-check-in and decided that the 'phase theory' had long passed. As I mentioned prior in part I of this introduction, it wasn't until 2014, when I began writing and performing with WAKE-UP, that I began to literally wake the dormant poetic voice and fill the void I had been experiencing so I decided to set out on that voyage. The question was how I was going to approach this. I had to consider the questions Butler put forth in her preface to *Gender Trouble*:

[W]hat configuration of power constructs the subject and the Other, that binary relation between 'men' and 'women,' and the internal stability of those terms?...

What best way to trouble the gender categories that support gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality?

(viii)

I attempt to answer those questions by pointing out two rites of passage frameworks as culprits for the compulsive and presumptive heteronormativity that Butler mentions. The hero and the heroine's journey, coined by Joseph Campbell and Maureen Murdock, serve not only as literary paradigms but also societal frameworks, where the former serves as a generally

prescribed white male-centered way of approaching life, while the latter, a splintering of the first as its feminine counterpart.

The question I asked as I considered defining my own journey was “can the hero and heroine’s journey be queered?” This idea is discussed in the essay, “Queering the Borderlands: The Challenges of Excavating the Invisible and Unheard” where Emma Pérez writes,

If we have inherited a colonial white heteronormative way of seeing and knowing, then we must retrain ourselves to confront and rearrange a mind-set that privileges certain relationships...disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy...In other words, the queer-of-color gaze is a gaze that sees, acts, reinterprets, and mocks all at once in order to survive and to reconstitute a world where s/he is not seen by the white colonial heteronormative mind...To disidentify is to look beyond white colonial heteronormativity to interpret documents differently.

*(Gender on the Borderlands 124)*

Understanding this I knew the answer to my own question. The heteronormative hero and heroine’s journey did not encompass queer identity. However, when examining them, “disidentify[ing]” the context within the masculine and feminine heroic paradigms was what most important for me because they were the lens through which I had experienced the world. “Disidentification” and synthesis was a way to recognize a more comprehensive spiritual cycle for myself as well as for other people of color who could identify with the “reconstitute[d]” world Pérez described above.

In that regard, I recognized that Anzaldúa's path of *conocimiento* falls within the same format of the hero and heroine's journey in that it is a cyclical spiritual voyage, although what she adds, as she chooses to identify as a queer Chicana, is a definitive framework for "queer rites of passage," (The Anzaldúa Reader 169). Anzaldúa's path of *conocimiento* starts off with the *arrebato*, as if the struggle is understood and to be expected, in the same way Campbell explained to Murdock that 'the woman is [simply] *there*' (Murdock 2). This also implies what we all know to be true for people of color, but mostly for women of color as well as gender non-conforming individuals, and it is that not only do we suffer, but we have sought to understand and master it with (s)heroism embedded in each of us for having survived all this time not only through cultural, racial, class, and religious, but also gender and sexual oppression due to colonization. As Anzaldúa explains in *This Bridge We Call Home*:

We stand at a major threshold in the extension of consciousness, caught in the *remolinos* (vortices) of systemic change across all fields of knowledge. The binaries of colored/white, female/male, mind/body are collapsing. Living in *nepantla*, the overlapping space between different perceptions and belief systems, you are aware of the changeability of racial, gender, sexual and other categories rendering the conventional labelings obsolete. Though these markings are outworn and inaccurate, those in power continue using them to single out and negate those who are 'different' because of color, language, notions of reality, or other diversity. You know that the new paradigm must come from outside as well as within the system.

(541)

In the above explanation, Anzaldúa states that many “binaries...are collapsing,” including gender. To define this ambiguity in *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes, “Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived. As credible bearers of those attributes, however, genders can also be rendered thoroughly and radically incredible” (141). In other words some cisgender folks that subscribe to heteronormativity see gender performed differently than what they would expect but can’t or won’t contend. What follows is the understanding that gender non-conforming people still experience oppression through misgendering or non-acceptance and struggle because of their capacity to nepantle between genders. Even though we exist as models and symbols of gender nonconformity we are still oppressed and denied our existence for enacting our gender-fullness, or capacity to not only embrace but continuously perform both our femininity and masculinity. Therefore, Anzaldúa’s “conocimiento” framework allows one to go beyond both paradigms set forth by Campbell and Murdock. Unlike their frameworks which are centered on encountering struggle based on femininity and masculinity, the “path of conocimiento” is less concerned about the binary and more concerned about an individual sustaining spiritual growth.

Ultimately what intrigued me about Murdock’s feminine heroic paradigm is the last stage in the journey, the integration of masculine and feminine. As the true definition of feminism, this stage led me to recall a term I had previously encountered as the title of a documentary called *Two Spirits*. In this documentary Richard LaFortune, a Two Spirit organizer from Minneapolis describes the two spirit phenomenon. “The masculine and feminine together are sometimes reflected so completely in the body of one person it’s as if they have two spirits” (Chapter 3-43:42). This statement perhaps gives a better definition of what I meant by embracing and enacting gender-fullness. The subject matter of two-spiritedness had intrigued me to the point



that I began researching and found several sources. The first of which is called *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America*. In this book, Will Roscoe chronicles the gender diversity that this documentary was referring to, through historical and firsthand accounts of Native American people, even providing a “Glossary of Native Terms for Alternative Gender Roles and Sexuality by Language Family” (213-222) and a “Tribal Index of Alternative Gender Roles and Sexuality” (223-247). Roscoe’s chronicle of case studies, and inventories, gave historical flesh and blood examples of what Murdock included in her heroine’s journey as the abstract idea of the integration of the masculine and feminine.

In her book *The Last Generation*, Cherríe Moraga also describes two-spiritedness as a contemporary indigenous praxis as she champions the title term in her essay “Queer Aztlan: the Re-formation of Chicano Tribe,” with the following:

My Native American friends tell me that in some Native American tribes, gay men and lesbians were traditionally regarded as ‘two-spirited’ people. Displaying both masculine and feminine aspects, they were highly respected members of their community, and were thought to possess a higher spiritual development. Hearing of such traditions gives historical validation for what Chicana lesbians and gay men have always recognized—that lesbians and gay men play a significant spiritual, cultural, and political role within the Chicano community. Somos activistas, académicos y artistas, parteras y políticos, curanderas y campesinos. With or without heterosexual acknowledgement, lesbians and gay men have continued to actively redefine familia, cultura, and comunidad. We have formed circles of support and survival, often drawing from the more egalitarian models of Indigenous communities.

Moraga's statement further serves as validation toward the historical idea of two-spiritedness that Roscoe proved and LaFortune embodies along with their (LaFortune's) cultural, social and political contributions through their gender-fullness. As Moraga claims, "...that lesbians and gay men play a significant spiritual, cultural, and political role within the Chicano community," I would add that *jotería* is constantly *nepantleando* along the gender continuum, and I have also witnessed and considered the long established transgender community as two-spirited individuals who also lay claim to these significant roles "within the Chicano community."

In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Gloria Anzaldúa also referred to the integration of genders using different language that is precisely in the same realm. In the section titled "Half and Half" she states, "I am the embodiment of the *hieros gamos*: the coming together of opposite qualities" (41). That she used Greek terminology was indicative of her desire to be accessible to a white reading audience, which includes people of color, and to thus be recognized by those in academic circles who still hold true to European language models as the basis of all intellect. Anzaldúa's explanation of *hieros gamos*, and the path of *conocimiento* she created along with the idea of "disidentification" that Emma Pérez discusses, as well as the concept of two-spiritedness, and Moraga's queer *aztlan*, accurately reflect how I have felt negotiating my gender identity as a female child living out my preferred masculinity despite imposed feminine roles. I saw Anzaldúa's path of *conocimiento* for what Pérez described as a "strategy of survival that occurs within a decolonial imaginary" (*Gender on the Borderlands* 124).

With this I posed another question in regard to the masculine and feminine heroic journeys, “Why do I have to subscribe exclusively to one paradigm?” I recognized the heroine’s journey was to reinterpret the hero’s journey and ascribe a transcendent paradigm as a breaking off, but then realized that the idea of a strictly binary gender system as a transcendent model was very limiting. Anzaldúa’s framework allows for gender-fullness, again a very feminist idea, through a symbolic journey, as well as one of spiritual inquiry and practice. What’s more, however, is that she concluded this path with a way to reclaim individual truth through a ritual indicative of indigenous spiritual practice.

My hope is that whoever reads my work will recognize it, not only as an artistic rendering of the hero and heroine’s journeys but also as an auto-historia testimonio of “queer rites of passage” and as an example of “[l]iving in nepantla, the overlapping space between different perceptions and belief systems,” physically, geographically as well as psychically (541).

## Dónde está mi gente?

So I thought

By this time

By this age

\*\*

I should say I was taught—

To be Rid

Of the feelings I have

And I say *have* because

I STILL FEEL THEM

THIS IS STILL WHO I AM.

¿Quién soy?

La Vero

La Nueva

La Profeta

La Mera Neta

Romeo, también Julieta

Yo soy Alma y Corazón completa

La derecha a tu izquierda

So—

Con migo no chinguen.

Porque yo  
De mi mami salí.  
Soy mujer de mujeres  
Y tú no me dices  
Yo te digo a ti—  
Que dicen?  
*Ay si muy chingona!*  
FUCK YEAH!!  
And I'm leading this charge  
Because I got people  
In this country and  
And in other countries too  
Closeted.  
STILL!  
Queens, gays, bi-, transgender  
And lesbianas REFUSING to bloom  
Because!  
...this is the part that pisses me off  
They're getting killed and even  
Killin' themselves  
Since you say it ain't right with you  
And then you justify it with "it ain't right with God."  
You people need to understand

WE don't ASK for this!

But you blame and condemn us

For not fitting one or the other-

Here is your binary:

Fuck. You.

\*\*\*

You know

I don't want to be angry.

The "angry lesbian."

What a lame cliché.

Hmm. I don't have a dick, wah!

FUCK THAT SHIT!!!

Y'all got your peter and I got my chalice and it's all good.

You know some of you pricks

Are making it very difficult

For us to just live.

Well guess what?!

Right now it's all equal opportunity.

Todos parejas cabrones!

'Cause I'm leading this charge.

Do unto others...

Is what I'm here to remind you

Cause I got it right

Y ¿quién eres tú?

Enséñame

También aprende

Que soy Verónica

Y Acuérdate

That's MR. Solís to you.

So what the fuck?!

Dónde están?!

Salgan?!

Que pinche onda?!

DÓNDE ESTÁ MI GENTE?! Ya sé que esta mi Raza

Pero DÓNDE ESTÁ MI GENTE?

DÓNDE ESTÁ MI GENTE?

## CHAPTER II

### CROTCH PILE

It had taken us a little over an hour to get to South Padre Island's Beach Access 5. As we drove on the shoreline early in the afternoon around 3 pm, I sat on my mother's lap undulating my right arm out the passenger window of my dad's truck, imitating the waves as they crashed onto the sand. Their edges reached for the front tires as it crawled over the sand and under the truck tires as we drove over them. I became more and more anxious to play on the shore as my dad continued looking for a spot to park his truck, which was an old beat up blue Chevy, yet nonetheless his chariot. When we finally found a location to set up camp, I popped the door open, and jumped out. Before sprinting barefoot toward the beach, my feet hit the loose fiery sand and while gathering it between my toes; I ran and made my way toward the shoreline, which stretched south to the jetties before the opening of the port. Northward it extended for miles with families setting up camp, with chairs, tables, barbeque pits, and shade just like us. To the east there was the vastness and serenity of the gulf beyond the crashing waves of the shoreline. Mom yelled as I took off toward them, "Cuidado con los carros!"

I ran across the compacted road leaving her admonitions behind along with the loose grains of sand, in order to throw myself into the welcoming Gulf of Mexico. As I played I kept myself in between the first sandbar and the shifting shoreline where the waves would form before swarming the beach. I was just learning to swim so amused myself for hours, jumping over the waves as they crashed me onto the shore, then chase them back, dive into them, or



shoulder and break them, like a football player. Occasionally they would catch me off guard as the relentless walls of waves knocked me over, the salt water made its way up my nose, burning my throat like harsh medicine. It mixed with the mucus draining from my nostrils, and my eyes burned from the same sensation. When I was finally able to recover and get back up, I began watching for them, anticipating their constant arrival, harsh or serene, yet feeling nurtured in spite of it all. I didn't ever want to leave nor could I ever get enough of the gulf. It was my sanctuary, my place of peace but there was always a battle between it and my Mother calling me back to get a different kind of necessary nourishment. Subsequently, I would finally give in, make my way out of the waves and back across the solid sand road, keeping an eye out for vehicles cruising or racing across the shoreline to claim their campsites. After drying off a bit, Mom would hand me a plain burger—two slices of bread and a patty. As I bit into it, I felt the grains of sand inevitably stuck in the bread or on my fingers reveal themselves between my teeth while I chewed, tasting the salt of the sea left on my lips. After finishing, I sat near our camp and played in the sand at my mother's request, unknowingly allowing my food to digest before going back to play on the shore.

It was there that I met him, a boy about my age, seven or eight, with short light brown hair, olive skin, and dark brown eyes, just like me. He wore shorts and a t-shirt, although his attire was all dark blue and mine was white with light blue shorts. He approached and began playing next to me in the sand. When I felt it was time to rinse, I made my way to the shoreline and after washing the sand off we continued playing side by side, running from, jumping over, and diving into the waves. We raced each other along the shoreline until we became exhausted, and eventually made our way back across the flattened sand road to the low lying dunes where our parents were camped. This time, after throwing ourselves on the ground, we began burying

each other, sitting up with our legs extended and pressed together. Cupping and pushing the loose sand at our sides, we compacted a cocoon of fine salty grains onto our lower limbs, eventually unable to distinguish between them and the rest of the sand around us. To test our covering we raised our knees slightly, making the pressed powder faintly heave and crack like the top layer of a quicksand pit in the middle of a desert.

Laughing and relieved that that wasn't the case, we continued lifting our knees, kicking and flexing our legs until we eventually shook the sand off to break free, then returned to the water to rinse off. We then repeated burying ourselves in the sand and shaking it off, although this time we sat leaving a thin layer of sand caked on our skin. The loose grains rolled off the sides of our legs making ragged little peaks –the molded indentation of earth underneath cupping the bottom of our legs. We continued digging, scooping and shifting the sand to make small piles, the beginnings of sandcastles and then spread it even all around us when we weren't satisfied with the results. The boy went back to repeatedly continuing to bury and shake himself free from the sand. I sat next to him watching as he created his mounds and as he noticed me looking on, he gathered a pile of sand, cupped it in his hands, and planted it on my crotch and then turned his hands to mold it upwards. "This is what we have," he said.

I looked down at the pyramid like heap, stunned as I surveyed the indentations of his small fingers meeting at a peak. In his ignorance, or innocence, he christened me a boy. I was embarrassed but I couldn't tell if it was for him not being able to distinguish that I was a girl or because I didn't know how to convey to him that he had made a mistake. I felt my heart sink into uneasiness. Still confused, I looked up and sneered at him saying, "I'm a girl," then swatted off the molded pile he had placed on me. He shot up with a burning clarity yet still muddled in sand

and his own misinterpretation. As he stood brushing and clapping the sand off his hands and legs he looked down at me and retorted, “You look like a boy.”

The realization of his mistake along with his disgust shone through right before he ran back to his father at their beach camp. They had posted a little further away from where my parents had set up our camp and I watched as he approached his father, and then pointed toward me explaining what had just happened. The boy’s father put his hand on his son’s shoulder and looked over at me, defensively. I looked back at them and then continued shifting the hot sand around me, running my fingers through it, bringing scoops up to eye level allowing it to fall through my fingers. The boy stayed with his parents for the rest of the late afternoon, while I continued to play alone. Eventually I grew tired of being in the sand, so I rolled my legs underneath to prop myself up on my knees and clap off as much sand from my hands as I could. I then got up and went to wash the grains and heat off as the air and water grew colder with the setting sun. I sat in the shallow pool of water near the shore as the low tide cradled my body with the small waves crawling toward the beach.

My family began packing up our camp before heading back home. Mom called me in to help and when I went back, she cheerfully asked about my transient friend, “What happened? Where did your friend go?”

I looked over at the empty camp next to us and responded solemnly, “Mom he thought I was a boy.”

She pressed her lips, grabbed my shoulders, and like the sea, pulled me toward her and as she comforted me said, “It’s ok, mi’ja. Don’t worry about it.”

Mom understood that I was different from other children, but she didn't know what else to say to make me feel better. She simply held me tight for a bit before saying, "Help me pick everything up mi'ja. We gotta get going. It's getting dark."

I helped pack up the rest and when Dad finished loading the last of our stuff, I returned to the shore one more time to fill some tall cups we brought with water from the beach to rinse the coarse sand off our dangling legs and feet before we each got into the truck. Our skin was still sticky from the salt and sand but we were cleansed from the heat of the day. While we drove away in my dad's beat up Chevy chariot, I thought about that little boy and the way his father looked at me. My heart sank again because I hadn't known how define and defend myself. I grew more and more thoughtful as I sat on my mother's lap and we drove home. I knew things were always going to be this way because I didn't fit the mold, he had assumed of me. I also knew I didn't fit the mold that I had been given and I didn't know what to do with all of this. No one did.

## **I liked La Sirena**

Inspired by César de León's *I liked El Mundo*

From an early age I knew  
The color blue and camouflage patterns

were supposed to be for boys.  
I liked them anyway. In secret

my eyes traced lines, plaid squares, and floral patterns  
blooming on grandpa's guayaberas.  
--my dad's shirt blooming with grease stains.

On summer afternoons  
when we played Loteria, I knew

I was supposed to like El Mundo  
The round of his pecs tried hard to lure me  
into the depths of womanhood.

I liked La Sirena, instead.

The curve of her hips, her breasts supple.  
The locks of her hair cascading behind her shoulders.  
The elegance of her extended arms centered in my eye.

I knew,  
when I played outside,

butterflies were supposed to be caught  
in nets or crushed in boys' clenched hands.

I preferred to watch them float  
from flower to flower hoping they would turn to me  
and say

"We know you."  
"We see you."

## CHAPTER III

### BOTH

Tia Paty and Aunt Oralia were teachers during the school year and therefore vacation bible school teachers for a week during the summer, so by default they were taking my sister and me to church to sign up for vacation bible school. I wasn't looking forward to their ministering but Tia Oralia was watching over my little cousin, my sister and me, and it was something to do to keep us from being idle at home—plus there were kids who were always walking around in the neighborhood that I was hoping would come around so I could play with during the breaks. So a weeklong vacation bible school session it was.

When we got there my tías went to discuss the logistics of their tenet with the other members of the congregation in the back dining area. As the eldest of us my sister joined them, believing in her own entitlement to be included in adult conversations. My little cousin, Natalia joined them as well because she was attached to my Tia Oralia's hip. Adult meetings weren't for me so I decided I'd indulge myself and go sit in the empty parish hall, content with its vastness and silence, while studying the blue-crossed stained glass pattern of the windows. Eventually my curiosity took over as I approached the steps to the altar, making my way to it to run my hands over it and trace the letters "HACER ESTO EN MEMORIA DE MI." I walked over to the piano tapping the keys to break the silence I had so cherished in the minutes prior then splayed the hymnal on the piano rack open. I flipped through the pages wishing I knew how to read the notes so that I could impart my talent as a testament of my faith and have the congregation clap along

with the music I was creating—so we could all praise God together. Then after playing the piano for the hymn we sung, everyone would clap and I would bow in appreciation, but I didn't know piano so I just tapped the keys and made up melodies.

When my curiosity was fulfilled, I went back out, opened the doors and went toward the dining hall to look for Tia Paty, but before getting there I noticed the door on the left side of the hallway leading out to the playground. As I had anticipated, a group of kids about my age had been walking around earlier, so I went outside hoping to see them in the school playground next to the church. It wasn't long until I heard their chatter and frolicking around the corner. Moments later they were passing through the open walkways of the school next door. We caught a glimpse of each other and I looked back at them hoping they would approach the fence the way my new neighbor did when my sister and I first met her and her brothers. Instead they ran away shrieking and laughing imp-like and untamed. They then returned calling out, "Aye! Aye!" As they yelled for my attention and I was excited thinking this was their invitation for us to gather at the fence and eventually they could rid themselves of their apprehension and just talk to me. I'd get the friends I was hoping to play with and was even thinking I could invite them to bible school, for the recruiting points from my tias; win-win. But no, instead they scurried off cackling and I was left alone in the playground, staring at the empty slides, monkey bars and swings on my side of the fence waiting for my tias to finish discussing bible school business.

I heard the imps running around the corner to the back of the school, so I ran to the back end of the yard and gripped the wires of the fence between us while trying to see where they went. They peaked out from behind the school building and called out to me again, "Aye! Aye!" and then said something incoherent, only to disappear behind the corner again. I was confused about their teasing and didn't understand why they kept calling me then disappearing.

Disappointed, I slid my fingers down along the fence and decided to go back inside toward the parish hall to the front of the church so I wouldn't disturb the adults still working in the back dining hall.

When I reached the front of the building I rammed the front door and it flew open with my annoyance and exasperation. I walked back outside and followed the sidewalk to my right to see if I could catch a glimpse of the kids between the church and school buildings. I was on the sidewalk out in the open wanting them to see me so they would know I wanted to join them, so they would know they could come and talk to me. A few minutes later, one of the little girls came out running from behind the building. She stopped between the buildings to yell, "Aye! Are you a boy or a girl?!" I felt my heart sink like it had before. The other kids giggled and took turns staring at me from behind the school building. I gathered my strength and smiled, not wanting to answer in favor of either 'boy' or 'girl,' because I didn't feel like I was one more than the other.

Somehow I saw the word flash through my mind, so that's what I proclaimed. "Both!" I yelled back to them. They ran off saying "Es un boy! Es un boy!" I was disappointed again. They heard 'boy' and I stood there sighing, watching them run off and thinking to myself, that this wasn't going to be the last time this happened. This wasn't going to be the last time they or anyone else couldn't understand. I felt dejected and alone as I stared at the now empty space between the buildings. I turned to look at the cross, mounted on the outside of the church wall, wondering, *why am I like this?*

Just as I began sinking into this somberness, my tías came out from around the corner, walking out of the church, both with purse and bible in hand. Tia Paty towered over aunt Oralia



and the other members while they, along with my sister and little cousin, trailed behind, comadreando. Surprised to see me, Tia Paty exclaimed, “There you are! You ready to go?”

Pleased to see my tia Paty’s glowing beautiful smile, I ran over to help carry her bags to the car. “Yes. Vamonos,” I said.

We left the church and my tías took us to our usual post ecclesiastic food establishment for our noontime bodily nourishment. The following day we returned for vacation bible school week, there was no sign of those fairy children anywhere, only the usual pious and reverent children I grew up with, including my sister, although her piety was questionable. And then there was me alone among them all, wondering where those kids went, and if they ever really wanted to talk to me. Why wouldn’t they just talk to me?

## **Bilingüe Perfecta**

It was decided for me.

To mutilate languages

When I speak,

I do, through

Split tongue.

Nunca será bilingüe

Perfecta.

¡Perfecto!

Soy bilingüe

Code switch

Con mi lengua partida

When I speak,

Mutilo mis idiomas

That is now MY decision.

## CHAPTER IV

### DRESSES AND RUFFLED CHONES

The pastor's voice was like background noise while I was sitting in our usual pew with the rest of my family—my mom, sister, three aunts and little cousin who readily obliged with their passive receptiveness to the sermon, giving the pastor their complete and undivided attention as they listened. I always sat between my two favorite tías, the matriarch Tía Toña and her niece, my Tía Oralia's prima-hermana, Tía Paty who could always sense my angst and need for activity. While one tía shushed me the other engaged me, yet both sat like pillars on either side as guardians and guides for the salvation of my soul. To alleviate my disquiet, Tía Paty always handed me the church bulletin so that I could generate drawings on the last blank page like I use to in my kindergarten class the year prior. I wasn't very good and mostly created things with hard lines like houses, picket fences, square cars and stick people. The closest I got to the roundness of curved figures was when I was drawing huge flowers with four or five petals, and sketching the four pane circular window like an encircled cross above the entrance of the house. Once I finished drawing and didn't know what else to do with myself, Tía Paty said, "Fill in all the o's and the zeros and then connect the dots."

Her kind directive to create these neural nettings on the bulletin, contrasted the dogma of the Spanish sermon the pastor was delivering and allowed me a distraction from the monotony of his voice on the mic. All of this to keep from remembering that I was forced to wear ruffled socks, ruffled underwear and a ruffled dress. I hated this imposed sinuous curvilinear attire. I felt

displaced in church, and in this false garb. My Tía Paty seemed to understand my need for diversion. I also didn't like being talked at which was the dynamic occurring every Sunday between the pastor and the rest of the complacent congregation. I did, however, look forward to singing the hymns especially since everyone sang them in unity and also in Spanish, which made it easier for me to learn the language and engage with the message of the sermon. It was communal not pontificating where I could partake and not feel subjugated. As we began, I always recognized the last hymn to be sung before the final bendición, which I always looked forward to.

After church all I wanted was to peel off the layers of ruffles, to molt back into my natural state and not remain in the one imposed on me by virtue of my sex and church dogma. I especially hated the itchiness of those ruffles on the skin of my buttocks because when I sat down, it always felt like I shit my pants. I hated the way the curvature of the lace flared out at my ankles on the seams my socks. I couldn't take the poofiness of my shoulder sleeves, nor the elastic threads squeezing my arms, binding my chest, constricting my breathing as if this dress was choking the life out of me. I wanted out of that façade and into my comfortable shorts, t-shirt, and tennis shoes. Mom, however, insisted that I stay in my burdensome church clothes to continue 'looking pretty' in public while we went to have lunch at Bonanza in Weslaco with the rest of the family, who knew better, but also insisted on this double dealing.

When I rode to the restaurant I went with my Tía Paty, and would often share my protest because church was over and I wanted to be comfortable. She understood I wanted to change, but knowing this was my cross to bear, she would console me saying, "It's just until after we eat. Your mom will let you change after."

She would then distract me once again, making me show her the neural net I had created in church at her request.

“That’s a lot of dots and connections you made there! It looks like a huge web!” She smiled in astonishment as I grinned proudly before arriving at the restaurant after our short 5 minute drive from our church, La Santísima Trinidad.

The restaurant was set up cafeteria style, so as we stood in line waiting to get trays and silverware before getting to the register, we saw the food displayed on the other side of the glass. The cooks poked and prodded at our future entrees, as they worked the pans on the grill over the flames. I always saw fit to choose the Sunday special—salad bar and chicken fried steak with white gravy, veggies and my favorite, a fluffy biscuit that I liked to break open before buttering. It was interesting to me that they called it chicken fried steak, considering it was neither.

Meanwhile, my other conservative and prissy aunt, Oralia, always warned, “Be careful not to stain your dresses. You all look so pretty.” My sister and little cousin loved the ‘encouragement’ of femininity. I knew my aunt would say these things collectively to help with my intended conversion. My sister and cousin who stood at eye level stared blankly at me after readily receiving my Aunt Oralia’s gushing. I returned a sneering glare and stuck my tongue out at both of them so as to make them avert their judgement.

I couldn’t stand their verdict after my aunt’s commentary any more than the ruffled outfit I was forced to wear. Mom and Tía Toña, aunt Oralia’s mom, were none the wiser, and busy staring up at the menu display trying to decide their meal, while my Tía Paty smiled sympathetically and soft as a dove said, “It’s ok Ron, just ignore them. I’ll get you lunch today.” Her offer was secondary to my concession because I knew she understood me better than anyone

else in my family. There were times during the week while I was in school and even after, however, when I stayed with Tía Toña and Aunt Oralia, that I didn't have her wing to shelter me.

After school my mom would arrange for us to stay with Tía Toña and Aunt Oralia who lived in the two story house my late grandfather had built and left to my Dad after he passed. A few years later, my Dad signed the house over to my aunts since they had been living in it and he felt it was theirs anyway. When my Dad married my Mom he and my uncles built our house next to my Tía Paty. When I went over to stay with Tía Toña and Aunt Oralia, I reaped the benefits by enjoying the house my grandfather had built.

My grandfather designed and built the house with one small flight of stairs leading up to a three cubic foot platform before the last flight of stairs up to the bedrooms. I loved sitting on the first level platform because it was where I began training my imagination as I thumbed through and read the kids' books my Aunt Oralia had collected for us as she started her teaching career. My aunts also had a six foot book shelf opposite the last flight of stairs mounted with World Book Encyclopedias that I enjoyed looking through for their wild life sections.

When I felt fully enlightened, I went up that final flight of stairs to the immaculately kept bedrooms. At the top foyer platform, there were two doors on the right and two on the left. The one to the far right belonged to my uncle who lived in California, but was kept as a spare for guests. It had an old spring bed and a roll top desk that my late grandfather had also made for my dad. My Aunt Oralia's bedroom was to the left of my uncle's which she kept with the door closed. My Tía Toña's bedroom was on the other side of the top platform foyer to the left. She usually had the door open with the full sized bed and vanity catty-corner and visible from the entrance. Next to my Tía Toña's room was another spare room split with a narrow walkway to the entrance of a storage room at the end of it. The spare bedroom itself had a twin bed pushed

up against a window on one side and on the other there was a desk cubicle with a sewing machine and chair that my Tía Toña used to sew blankets and clothes for us. Just above that, there were cabinets for storing threads, materials and other supplies.

I was only allowed to go into in there since the storage room at the end was also the kids' playroom. It was always hard to maneuver around the full black bags of clothing, the boxes filled with outdated Home Interior and Christmas decorations, not to mention my Tía Toña's huge three foot circumference stitching circle on a stand. It never failed that I would want to go outside to play because of all these interferences. My aunt Oralia forbade it. She couldn't understand why I wanted to race and ride bikes, play canicas with the boys across the street, or climb trees. She would say things to me like, "Stop acting like that. You already look like a boy and you're going to end up turning into one!"

I would listen to her say this *hoping I would* so she could let me have my privilege and leave me the fuck alone, but she would constantly pester and police me about my body, the way I dressed, my recreational choices, the way I moved, and my masculine mannerisms. I know she even told my parents about this because later on when I was at home all of a sudden, my dad became inclined to have a conversation with me a few days later. Her poison had seeped into my safe space.

I was outside in our front driveway, throwing a ball imagining it to be a small planet hurtling through space and I the giant entity saving it from its destruction. I had gotten it out of a vending machine when I went to the grocery store with my mom earlier that day. As I was tossing and catching my puny planet to keep it safe from harm, my dad approached me saying, "Roni, come here. I need to talk to you."

Surprised, I caught the ball I had been tossing and cupped it in hands to keep it from obliteration or bouncing off and disappearing into the grass filled with patches of espinas. When I turned to look at him, a knot of apprehension built up in my stomach and throat as he approached. He kneeled down in front of me and said “Roni you need to stop acting like a boy. I have two girls,” referring to my sister and me, “not a boy and girl. You understand me?”

I tightened my grip around the little world in my hand, resisting his words and trying to ground myself. I nodded in compliance but my spirit was torn up and I was left with a sinking anxiety after that conversation with my dad. I knew that I couldn’t live up to his expectations and I wondered why I always felt like myself acting like a boy, doing boy things. That day I began to think that maybe I would outgrow this feeling and because Dad insisted I even made the effort to try. It didn’t last. I couldn’t stand to wear the charol shoes with the dresses and ruffled chones to church so I kept the secret of myself from my dad, and Aunt Oralia, and tried to conform as best as I could when I went to church. Every time I went though, my spirit was still painfully divided. I was always only in that place because that’s where I was forced to present as an inauthentic being and it stung me every time.

I was more myself when my sister and I played with the neighbors, Chávela and her little cousin Graciela, who both always knew that when we played house, I wanted to play their brother. Chávela even named me ‘John’ and I donned it because it made me feel more like my authentic self. I liked that I was given a boy’s name and for them to think of me as one. My sister on the other hand, didn’t like my given identity at all. She would scoff and ridicule me, embarrassed that I was the sister she had and not the sister she wanted. It wasn’t that I didn’t care for her feelings, it’s just I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t not be me.



## **Semilla salvaje**

Un pajarito que voló

Una semilla se comió

El pajarito la dejó

Y la semilla se sembró

Un arbolito después creció

Entonces la fruta maduro

Semilla salvaje

Mi ojito conoció

Y el pajarito

No regreso

## CHAPTER V

### OJO PIQUÍN

When my sister and I weren't being dragged off to a weeklong vacation bible school experience, the rest of our summers were pretty uneventful with my Tía Oralia keeping us inside the two story house like Rapunzels in the tower. At home our neighbors Chávella and Graciela along with their brothers and cousins were gone for the pisca which meant my sister and I only had each other's company. Pretty dreadful seeing as my sister and I were socially incompatible. It was always a relief, especially for my mom, when she took us to my grandfather's house in Elsa to stay with mom's younger sister, Tía Leyla. Visits to Elsa meant my sister and I could go our separate ways—she with my older budding teenage cousins who were more interested in hair, make up, and boys and I with my younger cousin Amado who my Tía Leyla nicknamed J, even though his given name was Amado Jr. She had come up with this for him because she thought calling him Junior was lame. Plus there were already two other juniors in the family and it was just confusing to add another one to the mix.

J and I usually gravitated toward one another given that our Tía Leyla was busy on the phone all the time. Her communication savvy gave us a lot more freedom to play in the street in front of my grandfather's house, but since I was a few years older and therefore responsible for J when we were outside, I defended him from the older neighborhood kids who wanted to intimidate and scare him for being so small. J would then let me use his Big Wheel trike which I didn't fit into, but that didn't matter much since I would ride it like a scooter. I put my foot on

the axle between the seat and rear wheel, riding it hunched over, steering the handle bars looking like an Olympic in-line ice skater with an added accessory. J would always see how fast I could go and wanted his turn to sit in the rider's seat so I would let him have his trike but he could never pedal as fast as he saw me go. When he asked for a push, it was always difficult for me to manage his weight while he balanced his body on his butt with his feet off the pedals. I would usually end up steering him into the curb, so we'd compromise taking turns using the trike individually.

On one occasion though, we weren't running around on the street triking because my uncle had locked J's Big Wheel in the back storage room. We were upset about this, but wanted to make the most of the day, so we started playing tag. At first, we played in the back yard of my grandpa's house, then moved the game to the front because who can contain a game of tag solely in the back yard. Eventually, of course, neither the back nor the front yard were enough for running away from each other, so our game trickled onto the street and evolved from tag to hide and seek throughout the closest surrounding houses in our neighborhood. We continued playing through the morning hours and as the day passed, the heat of the day bore down but we pressed on, covering our eyes with our hands to block the sun, leaning head first against the cars parked along the curb. At the end of each countdown we ran across the street into the neighbors' front yards, chasing each other and hiding between their houses, some of which were empty from the families having to go up north for the summer's pisco and yet some with the families still in them hiding from the heat.

Cousins and neighbors alike heard us, but J and I never really worried about the noise we created. We simply carried on outside screaming joyfully, surprised when we snuck up and found each other after having hidden in their patios and open air garages, or in between cars

parked along the side of the street. After our jubilant discovery of one another, we'd start the game again, circling back to hide in between our grandpa and uncle's houses. Some of our older cousins heard us playing and we were hoping to entice them with our amusement, but they were unaccustomed to the scorching heat and preferred the cool breeze of the box fans sitting in the windows. Tía Leila stayed inside as well, satisfied to hear us occasionally outside the window.

J and I played late into the afternoon and when the heat was too much for either of us to bear, we decided to go back to my grandfather's house to cool off and have some bolis from the freezer. As we sat on the front steps of my grandfather's house enjoying our ice pops, we heard incoherent yelling from the house across the street. It was Mrs. Salazar, and a few minutes later we saw Beto, her youngest teenage son, a few years older than my cousin J and I, walking out the front door as she continued with her incoherent bickering. Beto made his way to the yellow glider chair that his mother had on their front porch. He was barefoot and shirtless wearing only a pair of cut-off jeans, the neighborhood Peter Pan. As he let the screen door slam shut behind him, he sat with his legs crossed at the ankles and looked over at us smiling as he let his arms settle on the metal pipe armrests. J and I watched him while we ate our bolis and he sat there watching us from across the street, legs crossed shifting to one side then the other until he sat upright again, in his original position to continue his stare down. When we finished, Beto uncrossed his legs and decidedly pushed his hands off the armrests to walk across the street toward us. He approached asking,

“Qué hacen?”

J and I answered simultaneously, “Nada.”

Beto continued, “It's hot right?”

I answered him with, “Not anymore!” as I held up the empty plastic ice pop wrapper with the remnant threads of sugary liquid gathering on the edges. He surveyed the bag I held up and then looked over at my cousin J to tell him,

“You can cool off another way too.”

He walked over to the water faucet in the front corner of my grandfather’s house and turned the knob. We stood up leaving the left over plastics on the steps and dusted our butts off before we approached.

“Look. Come over here.” Beto held the knob with one hand and cupped his other hand underneath the running water. He brought it up to his mouth and drank then lowered it to collect more water. This time he lifted his cupped hand to splash water onto his face and forehead and then rubbed his wet hand over his head and onto the back of his neck. He looked at us saying,

“If you put water on the back of your neck, you’ll cool off faster.”

My cousin and I observed Beto then mimicked his actions. He smiled, then redirected our attention once again to the plant growing from the base of the water faucet. He then tugged one of the small branches and as he pointed to the tiny fruit he asked,

“What is this?”

J, eager to please Beto, immediately pulled it off the plant and handed it to him. Beto took it from J and held it between his thumb and forefinger to take a closer look, lifting it up into the light to observe. He cupped his hand once again, and then dropped it into his moist palm. J smiled proudly for having gotten such a good specimen for Beto to look at and after having placed the tiny pepper in his hand, Beto lowered his arm then bent down to show us. J quickly turned toward the plant and grabbed another piquin off the thin tiny branch. I watched as he

continued placing the small peppers in Beto's palm and then after collecting a few more, he told my cousin,

"Go get me a little bag so I can put these in there."

Beto followed J with his eyes as he ran into grandpa's house, then turned to me and said,

"Help me collect more while J brings a little baggie."

We began pulling the peppers off the tiny thin branches, placing them in Beto's cupped hands. Shortly after, J returned and showed the baggie he had gotten to Beto, who didn't take it. Instead Beto asked,

"Can you open it for me?"

My cousin J tried but couldn't separate the plastic with his thick little fingertips. Beto and I waited, but seeing that my cousin was struggling and that Beto didn't have two free hands I took the bag from J to open it. It was all wrinkled, so I flattened it then placed my thumb and forefinger just below the opening. I then slid my forefinger down across my thumb and as quick as I had opened it, Beto separated his palms slightly to let half the piquin peppers fall into the open baggie. He then cupped one palm with what he had left then took the bag from my hand and moved the baggie closer to J asking,

"Which one is the biggest?"

J pushed Beto's arm up to observe the piquines piled in the plastic bag. He looked for the biggest one and when he found it, he brought Beto's hand back down to pull it out. Beto turned and held the bag up in front of me, gesturing with a nod for me to do the same. I saw that J had already gotten the biggest pepper in the bag, so I opened Beto's hand to look for the biggest one then plucked it from his palm so that I could hold it up for him to see. He turned his palm to let the rest fall into the baggie. Beto then led J over to my grandfather's porch,

“Let’s go over here and see if you got the biggest one.”

J liked that Beto had turned it into a contest. He snickered at me and walked a few feet away with Beto to confirm. Beto looked at me and said,

“Wait here, okay?”

I watched as they stepped a few feet away and began examining the pepper J had chosen. Beto maneuvered J by the shoulders, putting him face to face with himself, where J could see me over Beto’s shoulder while Beto gave me his back and sat on his heels. I heard Beto say something as he showed J his thumb and forefinger pressed together with a piquín. Beto then moved his hand toward his face and lowered his head while J watched. A few seconds later J was showing Beto his thumb and forefinger pressed together, also with a piquín, and then put his fingers on his tongue, to leave the pepper on it before swallowing. A few seconds after, I saw my little cousin clawing at his mouth then screaming and running into my grandfather’s house.

Beto rocked himself upright and as he approached me he explained,

“I told J that the big ones are hot but he didn’t believe me so he put it on his tongue.”

While he spoke I mostly heard my little cousin screaming as he opened the water faucet in the kitchen sink, to relieve the burning on his tongue. Beto returned to the outside faucet where we found the little plant, then turned the knob to rinse his hands, still holding the little bag of peppers. He patted them dry on his cutoff jeans then held out his hand for me to give him the pepper I had been holding. After I gave it to him, he gazed at me blankly before saying,

“Hey it looks like you have something in your eye. Let me see, go like this.”

Beto demonstrated by holding the top and bottom lids of his eye open and closing the other eye. I followed suit, trusting that he would be examining my eye for the foreign object he claimed to have seen. Beto bent down at eye level and while he inspected my eye, he brought up

the hand holding the piquín I had chosen between his thumb and forefinger up. Before I had a chance to react Beto aimed and squeezed.

All I saw were the juices and seeds from the pepper shooting directly into field of vision. My eye stung with seething pain as I instinctually slapped my hand over my eye and began trying to rub the liquid out with my fingertips, thinking this would help relieve the burning. I turned around to reach for the water faucet we had just used to cool off, but as I walked toward it, I felt Beto's bare foot block mine before I hit the ground. I rolled over and sat up as I continued wiping my eyes, this time with the back of my hand, as the tears mixed with the dirt and dust on my face. I heard Beto's voice again as he said,

“My Mom said for y'all not to be running through our yard. You're making too much noise and she's trying to watch her novelas.”

As I lay on the ground, I watched Beto's opaque figure holding up the baggie, twisting and securing it with a knot. Through the tears that flowed out of my eyes—my body's effort to relieve the pain of the piquín's sting—I watched the figure of this asshole turn around and strut back to his house clutching the bag of peppers my cousin and I had collected for him.

The rest of that summer we steered clear of Beto and his mother's window in the front yard, until the Fourth of July when my older cousin Miguel along with my little cousin J and I, were playing a combination of tag and hide and seek but this time with bottle rockets, roman candles and black cats in hand that we stuck in a balls of mud to use as grenades. Beto's mother never bought him fireworks so he snuck over to Miguel's house to claim the roman candles and bottle rockets from the porch where we had everything laid out. To J and I, this meant if he was playing, he was fair game. To my cousin Miguel it meant pay back for Beto taking his firecrackers.



It had already gotten dark and Beto was hiding in his house, occasionally running out through the back patio then alongside his house lighting my Cousin Miguel's long range firecrackers and shooting them at us. He was trying to catch us off guard but what gave him away, was his mechón and the lit Roman candle fuse as he aimed at us. J and I spotted him and were able to take cover and get a few shots in before Miguel decided we should save what little we had left and ambush him. He then took J and ran down the street all the way around the block then circled back through the callejón behind Beto's back yard. I stayed behind lighting and aiming roman candles at Beto to distract him from across the street. As he ran along the side of his house for cover, Miguel and J were already positioned in the back with a Roman candle. Miguel lit it and then handed it to J, helping him to aim it at Beto as he ran through his backyard to take cover from the fireballs I was launching at him. When he realized he was being overwhelmed from both sides he ran toward the back door of his house, but Miguel had already anticipated his move. While Jay aimed the shooting Roman candles at Beto, Miguel lit the bottle rocket fuse and aimed it towards Beto's back door. Just as Beto reached the knob, the bottle rocket hit the door and BOOM!

The next thing I heard was Mrs. Salazar screaming through the front window,

“BETO! QUE CHINGA'OS ESTÁS HACIENDO!?” Beto responded,

“NO FUI YO MA!”

Meanwhile I had ducked and covered my mouth to muffle my laughter, for fear that Mrs. Salazar would come out of her house and pull me by the hair to accuse me as the culprit of that mega explosion. Miguel and J had already run back around the other side of the block waving at me to go hide. I dropped the spent Roman candle I had in my hand and ran into my grandpa's

house through the garage door letting out the laughter I had been suppressing as Miguel and J flew through the door behind me, also cracking up at Beto's expense.

After that night there was a new understanding between Beto, me and my family. He wouldn't trick my cousin J into tasting piquín pepper or shoot its juice in my eye or steal firecrackers from my cousin Miguel and we wouldn't attempt to blow up his house with him and his mother in it. It was a cordial agreement.

## **How to Become Black Jaguar**

See your skin

In night's sky

As cradle

For moon and stars

Before day

Master your fire

Let the rain fall, to

Spout the water lilies

Out from your mouth

Fruitful pickings

Show your teeth

Show no fear

So they know

You devour ills

Guard yourself

Along with them

From our troubles

We'll need to defend

In the dark

Nourish and give aid

It is now yours

You are a black jaguar in your element

Light their way

## CHAPTER VI

### THE UNLIT WAY

We had moved out of the city and into our new home right outside of Elsa, about a mile from my grandpa's house and a world away from where we grew up in Weslaco. We were sad to leave our neighbors Chávela and Graciela and reluctantly said our good byes, knowing we would be seeing each other less frequently.

When our parents decided to relocate us, my sister was eight, I was seven years old and we were expecting a little brother a couple of months after we moved in. Mom and Dad had settled on building in Elsa, about a half-mile out from the edge of town. The distance was enough to keep my sister and I isolated from the rest of humanity and since I still had to wait a few years for my baby brother to grow up, the only consolation I had was that we were closer to my cousins J and Miguel. Dad always said,

“Moving out here was the best decision we ever made,” since he would be away from the public, which he loathed, and we would be closer to my mom's aging father, my grandpa Salvador.

Because ours was one of four houses in the vicinity, Dad would sometimes sit and stare out at the monte for hours. He eventually invested in a pair of binoculars, not because he was looking for anything in particular, but to maintain the habit of hypervigilance that he had acquired as a result of military training and the experience of combat and war in Vietnam. It was here in this new house, en el monte, that Dad's Vietnam war-based teachings became more

applicable. Prior to moving to our new home, my sister and I had received infantry combat training, which involved us wielding a bokken, the samurai's wooden practice sword, against Dad who was using a long quarter inch PVC pipe. It was his way of bonding with us and now with two acres as our amenity, Dad thought it was time we began learning marksmanship, so his lessons carried on after we moved to the new rancho house.

Dad coached us in preparing our targets by filling his empty beer cans with water so it would spill out confirming our direct hits with a BB gun replica of an M-16 rifle I was given for my seventh birthday. At first dad showed us how to shoot with it, but then later on, he brought us a small crossbow he had gotten, probably in the same sports outdoor store where he got my BB gun, to teach us about other weapons with different mechanisms. I could never really tell if he had acquired these practice weapons to teach us how to use them or for his own amusement. I knew in part though, Dad began showing us these things because he hadn't had a son to pass all this on to. Although, even after my little brother came along, he continued imparting what he knew, emphasizing simply that it was important for us to know how to defend ourselves.

At first Mom was weary of Dad's gifts and instruction because they seemed dangerous, and she didn't want any one of us getting hurt. She would ask emphatically,

“¿Pa' que les compraste eso? ¡Se van a sacar un ojo o algo!”

Dad had a way of always reassuring Mom and living so isolated from town, eventually, Mom came to appreciate the practical reasoning behind Dad's training.

“Babe—les estoy enseñando como me enseñaron a mí en el Army. No les va pasar nada!”

His instructions for us included the safe and responsible way to handle weapons and as he demonstrated he would say,

“Keep the safety on unless you’re ready to fire. Make sure you point the barrel up or down when you’re holding the gun. NEVER EVER point it at anything or anyone unless you’re going to shoot. When you’re ready to shoot, pull the trigger, don’t squeeze it because then, it will offset your aim.”

As we listened to Dad’s directives, I would see Mom in the periphery, sometimes standing in the patio or looking on through the kitchen window while we aimed the BB gun or crossbow; aligning our sight with the red part of the logo on the Miller Lite can, since, as Dad suggested,

“It makes for a perfect bull’s eye.”

While I favored spending time with my Dad, hearing the lessons he would impart, and his advancing us from crossing a wooden sword with the PVC pipes he would bring home from work and turning us into expert marksmen, my sister’s gentler nature and anxiety kept her from fully comprehending and practicing Dad’s training. Because he noticed my sister asking me to spot her before hesitating to throw the trash after cleaning up in the kitchen, there came a time when Dad had to impart a lesson for us to not be afraid of the dark.

Dad began by calling and guiding us outside to the front yard so that we could see how clear the view was through the window when all the lights were on.

“You can see everything and everyone!” he said, and then suggested we not use so many lights when we were inside.

“Remember how the house is laid out and where the furniture is. This is what blind people do and if you take from them and do what they do, you won’t hurt yourself and you won’t be scared because you’ll know where everything is.”

Dad also advocated that having the lights off inside the house would expand our field of vision, giving us the upper hand to spot anything or anyone who may potentially be outside. He continued by guiding us around to the eastern perimeter of the house, stopping to tell us how to observe and distinguish things at a distance in the dark.

“Don’t look directly at the object. Instead to use your peripheral vision, because then your eyes, and then your mind, begin to play tricks on you if you focus directly on what we you’re actually trying to look at.”

I concluded that this was also important to know so as to maintain your sanity as you’re walking in the dark because most people wouldn’t be comfortable walking around not knowing where they are going. It was especially important during that moment because I began getting anxious trying to figure out where we were going.

Fortunately, we didn’t go far and Dad brought us around to the back of the house and we stood in the patio as he began saying,

“You have to be comfortable in the dark if we’re going to be living out here.”

Dad then showed us how far a small oak tree was from where we stood, which was about fifty feet. We took inventory of everything around but especially noted the silhouette length of the tree’s thin trunk, its budding leaves on the branches reached up like a cheerful stick figure drawing. Dad flipped the light switch on in the patio.

“Do you still see it?” he asked as he held out his hand toward the tree.

We searched for it at the fringe of the dome of light above us, but the view of the tree was now just out of range.

My sister conceded, “No.”



I looked in the direction where I knew the tree stood and could only see the thick darkness beyond the dome of light we stood under.

“I can’t see the tree anymore.” Dad replied, “This proves my point. If you’re in the dark, you can see better and farther.”

Dad flipped the patio light switch back off, then spoke in a low controlled tone saying, “Wait for your eyes to adjust then look for the tree.”

We stood silently while we heard a dog barking, frogs croaking and crickets rubbing their legs together in the distance. After a few seconds, we could see the tree again, confirming Dad’s words. Just to drive the point home though, he then led us into the garage, turning the lights on as he entered. He spun around to face us and said,

“This is what I’m going to do. I want you to look around and notice where everything is placed. I’m going to stand over there on the other side of the garage. I want you both to walk to me, but before you do, close the door behind you and then turn off the lights.”

I followed his instructions and closed the door, then turned around as I watched him walk across the garage, taking note of everything between us and the direction he was walking. He stopped at the far end, turned around and instructed,

“Ok, turn off the lights and walk to me.”

My sister flipped the switch off. We waited for a few seconds just like before, so our eyes could adjust to the pitch black. We then heard Dad’s voice in the same controlled tone he used earlier guiding us and saying,

“You know where I am. Walk to me.”

It took only a few seconds to reach him, and when I did, I found his wrist and then reached for his forearm with my other hand. I felt his body shift to receive my sister as well. He then reassured us with,

“You knew where I was, and nothing happened to you. If you can find me in pitch-black dark, then you can walk outside without having to be scared.”

“What about snakes and stuff like that?” I asked.

“You don’t have to worry about those because they’re usually underground, and even if you do encounter anything like that in the dark, it’ll be more scared of you.”

So far Dad has been right about nocturnal creatures keeping their distance. In all the time we’ve been living out here, we’ve only come upon mice and jack rabbits, scurrying and grazing through the yard, and aside from the occasionally suggested bunny or bird carcass left at the doorstep by the cats, there has been less worry about encounters with wildlife.

As the years progressed, more and more people moved into the area and brought with them their collection of domesticated animals, including livestock and house pets. Domesticity also came in the form of outside lights for the more recent inhabitants of the area. Throughout the time that we have been living here though, Dad has still held on to the same notion of preferred invisibility.

As my brother grew, Dad imparted the same lesson to him as he had with us. We can all now navigate confidently and comfortably in the dark.

## **Ode to Peer Mentors a.k.a Peer Unicorns**

Thank you for being you

And there

As a friend and example

While I found my way

While you knew your own

Or like me, were just being told

This is where you gotta go

This is what you gotta do

To grow into a better you

Now I think I'm a better me

All thanks to you

I hope that makes you proud of me

I'm proud of you too

## CHAPTER VII

### SMELLS LIKE TEAM SPIRIT

I was nervous about graduation. It was the end of middle school and the district had done away with the freshman campus so no buffer year for the newbies. We were all going directly into high school but what was truly dreadful was that according to my Mom the end of my eighth grade year was a special occasion and for that reason she wanted to see me in a dress as I walked up and got my middle school graduation certificate. She couldn't make it that day, or I didn't want her to go, but either way I was coerced, to my shame, into using a dress for the 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation. I was to take the post congratulatory picture with the principal, because she wanted the evidence of my accomplishment—with me in drag. I agreed but only in exchange for an end of the year party at our house. It was a cringe worthy give-and-take to which I agreed because this baby lesbian wanted out and I had plans to make that happen.

To make sure everyone got to my house, I drew the roads and streets mapping the way in simple straight lines continually thinking about what I was going to tell everyone when I handed out the maps.

“I live far, but it's really easy to get there.”

More importantly before that, I had to consider how I was going to get copies of the map for my party. I decided to ask my enrichment teacher, Ms. G, who was able to use the copy machine that day for more than just her own copies. When I got to her class the next day, she handed me the small pile of papers and gave me a *you're welcome* wink. I decided I would only

hand out maps to the people I knew would show up, because fuck everyone who I knew wouldn't. My close friends and I were looking forward to this party but a few days earlier the bus driver and some of the other kids wanted to have an end of the year celebration *on the bus* as well.

Not being keen on celebrating with people who always terrorized me on my way to school, I asked if I could leave and go home right when we parked. I didn't elaborate on why, so when the bus driver opened the door to let me off, someone asked my sister and she told them I needed to clean the garage, insinuating it was a punishment my parents had bestowed. They laughed as I walked away, but I didn't want to waste my time trying to argue with my sister for having done that or to explain to those basic bitches my reasons. Instead, I made my way home brooding on how I hated the way she framed the things I did to make fun of me, yet knowing I needed to go clean up the garage to prepare the house for the party I was looking forward to throwing that night. It was gonna be a blast and I wanted to make sure of it.

Shortly after I cleaned up and got things ready people started arriving. I was able to introduce some friends to my parents while others arrived and snuck around the back with cheap wine coolers and beer, which I never specified to bring but I guess they assumed they could since my house was so far away and secluded. I didn't drink so it didn't matter to me but I did tell my friends that they couldn't drive themselves home, which for them would've been an unlikely possibility because a cop would only stop you if you didn't look old enough to drive. However, adding alcohol to that sketchy combination would have been detrimental not only to my drunk friends attempting to make their way home, but to my party, any future celebrating and even my own existence if my parents were to find out. After I was assured designated drivers were available I went to the back where everyone was hanging out in the patio area and garage.

I had set up a strobe light to use while we danced as soon as enough people had arrived. We closed the garage door to mosh to Nirvana's "Smells like Teen Spirit" and about a third of the way into the song, Mom opened the garage door from the kitchen, as usual fucking up my shit, and switched the lights on thinking we were having sex or doing drugs or a combination while worshipping the devil. She stared blankly from the threshold of the kitchen with her hand on the knob of the opened door before asking,

"What are you all doing in here?! Is that devil music?!"

I yelled back, "No Mom! It's Nirvana, not devil music!!" as if it made any difference to her that I tried salvaging some of my dignity as well as the party mood.

I told everyone to wait a few minutes while I went inside to explain to my Mother that we were just dancing and not engaging in lascivious and sinful acts. She wasn't having it because our dancing couldn't take place with the garage light off, which made no sense to me because I had bought a strobe light in the mall at Spencer's for that very reason and I had no other agenda other than to dance and have a good time; I was an innocent little lesbian—at the time.

After I explained everything to my Mom, I went back out and my friends and I decided to kick back and hang out in the yard and patio area before attempting the dance party again. We made sure my Mom was asleep this time, then cut the lights to the garage and powered the strobe light on. This time though, we closed the back door leading to the outside but it being summer with all the dancing and movement, the room quickly got hot and a foul smell began emanating in the enclosed space. Unfortunately, it didn't smell like teen spirit anymore, it smelled more like dog shit and as it turns out its origin was a mound of fecal matter stuck to the bottom of my shoe. I had been dancing and spreading it across the garage floor, stomping it into the cement to the

tune of teen angst. I then saw my best friend Amber run toward the back door and pull it open for fresh air.

Everyone rushed through the door and after Amber herded them out of the garage, she switched the light on and I was then able to survey the mess I had made. She busted out laughing while I “ughed” in disgust. We both then went outside with the rest of the group and I began wiping my shoes on the grass to remove the excess crap on the side and bottom of my boots as Amanda yelled,

“I can’t believe you stepped in shit at your own party!”

I yelled “This sucks man! And it’s fucking gross! Damn dogs!”

While she continued her cackling, I turned on the faucet we had right outside the patio to rinse them off a little more, then quickly looked for the mop and bucket my Mom usually had in the patio, so I could fill it up with water and Pine-sol. My friend Randy had also exited with the crowd but then came back in with Amber, both wide eyed and grinning behind me, while I carried the mop and bucket to begin the cleanup. They stood there as I mopped up the mess, then Randy, always one to make the most annoying but relevant observations yelled,

“You look like the janitor from the Nirvana video!”

Amber began cackling again and took his cue to switch the lights back off and power the strobe and cd player on as I continued mopping. I then began imitating the custodian in the video for a few seconds but the novelty of that analogy quickly faded for me, so I yelled back,

“Ya! Switch the lights back on bitch!” as I finished.

After I was done, I walked back out into the yard with the bucket in hand making sure I didn’t step on any more feces and dumped the water at the base of a tree. I then came back to the faucet, rinsed the mop, and put everything back in its place. By that time everyone, including

Amber and Randy, had made their way out to the end of our two acre property to smoke cigarettes. I figured I'd join them because I needed one after mopping up all that shit. I made my way to the back and Amanda handed me a ciggy, giggling and saying,

“Here, you deserve this.”

As soon as she lit it up for me and I took a drag of my cigarette, I heard my Dad yell out,

“RONI!”

I immediately exhaled the smoke and threw the cigarette at Amber to get rid of the evidence, then turned around thinking “*Oh fuck!*” as I saw my Dad standing under the light of the patio. The embers of the cigarette I had thrown in Amber's direction bounced off her arm as she yelled,

“OW, what the fuck V!?”

“DUDE! That's my Dad calling me! If he saw me with that cigarette in my mouth, I'm in so much trouble!”

My heart sank into my stomach and Amber added, “Damn your first party ever and tonight's just not your night.”

“Shut up dude!”

I ran back to my house, wondering if I was in trouble or my Dad needed me for something else. Once I got to the edge of the patio and stood in front of him to find out what he wanted he simply asked,

“What's everyone doing out there in the back? Why do I see lighters going off?”

I looked back toward the yard where my friends were gathered, then turned towards him and began with my dog shit explanation,



“Oh it’s because it’s dark back there and I had stepped in the dog’s crap earlier and they don’t want the same to happen to them so they’re using their lighters.”

He looked at me knowing full well that my friends were smoking in his back yard and followed with, “Well I was just asking because if they were smoking then I was going to go join them for a cigarette.”

I thought about how awkward that would’ve been and then responded, “No Dad, they just want to see where they are going and what’s back there.”

He understood that my feigned explanation was me not wanting to be embarrassed again, especially after my Mom’s earlier intrusive assumptions. Dad then went back inside the house but not before side eyeing me and saying,

“Make sure they don’t burn down my yard, Roni.”

I responded with “Ok,” before letting out a sigh of relief as my Dad walked back in through the garage into the house asking, “What’s that smell?!”

I rolled my eyes and went back out to the end of the yard to join my friends. We stayed out there talking, joking and laughing at the ridiculousness of the happenings earlier until it was time for some of them to go.

Parents and older, responsible designated driver siblings began pulling up and taking some home, while my closest friends stayed a little later. I invited them in to hang out in the room my sister and I shared, all along thinking how glad I was that she made herself scarce after the lame ass bus party earlier. More importantly though, I had made the decision to come out to my friends on this night and I didn’t want my sister there to be part of that revelation.

My friends Amber, Eugene, June, Randy and Sunny, were among my closest friends and we were all gathered in my room.

Eugene was a computer geek but also had a band and played guitar. He sat backwards on my desk chair, next to June who mumbled when she talked but had really good taste in music and could dance just as well. Sunny stood next to her leaning against my dresser looking like he could have been playing varsity football even though he was a freshman like the rest of us. Amber, who had helped me get everyone out of the garage earlier, sat on the edge of my sister's bed. She had a pretty mature sense of humor since she always hung out with her Mom who was counselor at the state hospital in Edinburg. Then there was Randy who had also helped in the garage earlier by making keen observations. During our 8<sup>th</sup> grade year, he and I had bonded over making fun of our teacher and we had been friends ever since.

After everyone got situated in the room I closed the door behind us, and sat on my bed. We all talked while listening to music discussing local bands and other people we knew. We also talked about our upcoming freshman year not being at the freshman campus and as we mused, I waited for a break in the conversation to tell them that I was a big ol' blossoming lesbian.

"Y'all, I'm gay."

When I finally said it, not one of them expressed any kind of surprise. None of my friends were gay, so I appreciated that they simply shrugged their shoulders and replied with a mixture of,

"Yeah ok," and "We knew that."

I found comfort and reassurance in their reactions and I was grateful to know they accepted me for who I was and were supportive of what I was experiencing. The conversation continued and shortly after Amber asked,

"So, what we're doing tomorrow?"

Sunny suggested we all meet at the new movie theater on Nolana. It was the best summer I had, and before the upcoming freshman year, it had been a necessary comfort.

## Queer in Bloom

Hey baby girl with the bad boy blues

Don't fret

Baby butch skin's

Lookin' good on you

You a small-scale stud

But you's-a-gonna bloom

Dapper young dram<sup>1</sup> k—

i-n-g.

It's-a-mighty fine that

She's-a-poppa queer-in'

So greet him when you see her

'Cause she's a handsome fella

You might get a wink-wink

From the beau-bella

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<sup>1</sup> DRAM (dressed as a man). The counter-part to DRAG (dressed as a girl)

## CHAPTER VIII

### HEY BUTCH

Upon entering high school, quite literally upon entering the building on the first day of my freshman year, I recognized the stares and silence of people giving me the third degree as I walked into the cafetorium looking for my friends. Onlookers confided in one another turning and whispering in their companion's ear, yet some more bold asking loud enough for me to hear,

“Is that a boy or a girl?”

This was reminiscent of that day I was outside at church before vacation bible school, except by this time, I had learned to not engage knowing full well that it wasn't worth my time and that these fuck wads didn't have the intellectual capacity to inquire or the emotional intelligence to hear me out. I took comfort in that I had friends waiting for me who were supportive and showed such fierce loyalty that they either screened these people's curiosity or became offended on my behalf when asked about me.

After last year's end of the year party where I had revealed how I identified, they knew I had become grounded in who I was and in part, that meant being part of a new group of freshman “freaks” on campus. We wore our hair long at the crown and shaved underneath, dressed in flannel shirts, and old cardigans, usually with a t-shirt of our favorite band—Nirvana, The Cure or Morrissey—with faded jeans and either Doc Martens or combat boots, which seemed appropriate since it was like war and presenting like this usually made us targets to the cholos, jocks and preps. Some of us had friends among them in middle school, but we all knew

we didn't quite fit in with those groups and were better off sticking close to one another. We all met up in the morning in the first couple days of school but the following day, we found out very quickly that there was a group of older freaks interested in finding out more about all of us, fresh meat so to speak. Before the first bell on that third day of my freshman year, to my dismay, the senior freaks were engaging in the usual inquiry of my gender. I guess I was too much 'freak' for them, although not knowing if I was either male or female fascinated one of them enough to want to find out. Enter the dark siren.

The first day of school came and went but the following week after lunch she had asked my friend Amber to give me a message to meet her after school in the hallway between the journalism room and the snack machines. I was dumbfounded, and a little suspicious about her intentions. Amber not being so sure either, could also sense my uneasiness about this request so we both agreed that she would accompany me to make sure it wasn't a joke or that I wasn't going to get jumped. One could never tell, and I especially, needed to be cautious.

We walked to where Delia asked me to meet her after school. She had brought her best friend with her, and while Amber had walked me to the meeting spot and waited for me from afar, they approached. Delia had her hair up in a ponytail that day. She wore a black oversized t-shirt with a pleated navy skirt, black tights and baby doll shoes. Catalina, who was always with Delia, but had a totally different style, was dressed in a white ruffled long sleeve shirt, faded jeans and black flats. Delia introduced herself and Catalina who I was told was her best friend. I felt a bit more reassured as it didn't seem like either one of them had any malicious intent, so I turned and nodded towards Amanda to let her know that I would be ok. She nodded back to concede and took off knowing I'd fill her in about this meeting later.

Since Delia's bus was one of the first ones to leave she insisted,

“Hey walk me to my bus,” and followed quickly with, “Wait, before we go,” then handed me a folded piece of green paper saying, “Here I wrote this for you.”

I looked down at the origami folds and before I even considered opening it, she grabbed my forearm and held it tightly saying, “Read it when you get home.”

She smiled shyly and I smiled back, stunned and confused at her desperate gesture but willing to adhere and a little excited wondering what she had written that had to be kept a secret until I got home. I walked her, with Catalina alongside, to her bus. She hugged me goodbye and when she let go she pointed her finger up then waved it at me saying, “Wait until you get home to read it.”

I laughed and said, “I will!”

She grinned back at me and said, “Ok,” before mounting the steps into the bus.

Catalina followed her as I stepped away and watched her find her seat. Once they sat, she and Catalina began chatting and I stared at her a little before walking away and watching the bus drive off. Waiting for that half hour to pass before my bus got there was slightly agonizing but I knew she would ask if I waited until I got home to open her letter and I wasn’t very good at lying so I distracted myself by imagining what I would end up reading when I got home. I thought maybe she had written me a poem that she didn’t want me to read in front of her and when I finally arrived at my house, I went to my room and pulled the tab to open the note.

*Hey what’s up? I wrote this letter on green paper because green is my favorite color. So I met this rad girl today, yeah that’s you, and I had wanted to meet you. Hope we can talk soon.*

She had replaced my expectations of finding a poem with this short message followed by her phone number. With that, I went along with her implied request, dialing to give her a call.

Delia and I spoke briefly before she asked me to be her girlfriend. This came out of nowhere for me because I didn't know exactly what that entailed and I was a little confused because just the week before on the second day of school, I remembered seeing her and Catalina sitting at a table with another one of the older freaks.

Nathan had been sitting next to her with his fingers intertwined in front of him like a choir boy, only he had a mohawk and wore a flannel with a white t-shirt underneath looking totally enchanted by her every movement. My friend June, who mumbled and had great taste in music and I had met up earlier at a table across from them. We had both unknowingly been observing and admiring Nathan and Delia as they interacted with one another. A few minutes later June fessed up, "They make such a great couple."

I agreed with her saying, "Yeah they do huh?!"

June followed with, "She's so pretty!"

I continued looking over at them focusing more on Delia's bronze skin, her beautiful plump lips as she smiled, agreeing with June, but not for the same reasons. I imagined how I might have approached to ask for her number but then looked over at how Nathan was fawning over her so I thought *nah, nevermind*.

After school that same day I saw Nathan walking her to her bus. They hugged and when they let go of each other, it was only after letting their hands slide down each other's forearm. Now here I was on the phone with her wondering why she had asked me to walk her to her bus and then gave me her phone number so I could call her, if she and Nathan were together? I thought back to a few minutes prior, when I opened the note and read flattering words like "rad girl" and "wanted to meet you." My unexperienced mind couldn't wrap itself around her wanting to talk to me.



“I thought you were with Nick?”

She replied flabbergasted, “What?! Nick and I are just friends!” I then presented the evidence. “Well June and I saw you sitting with him last week and it looked like you all were together. She even said that you all made a great couple and I agreed.”

Delia started laughing and said, “He was just sitting with me waiting for everybody else. Catalina was there. We were all just talking.”

I replied with, “Well he looked really into you and I even saw y’all after school hugging and not wanting to let go of each other when he walked you to the bus. That’s what confirmed it for me.”

She quickly retorted with, “Well you have nothing to worry about. Nathan’s cool but he’s definitely not my boyfriend. Seriously, I’m not messing with you. If it’s one thing I hate is lying and liars. I’ll always be honest with you and I’m telling you Nathan’s not my boyfriend. He never was and he never will be.”

I was a little stunned at how defensive she got.

Her words had been so forceful and she was so enchanting that I agreed. “Ok.” I said. “Yeah, I’ll be your girlfriend.”

It didn’t dawn on me until the next day when I was helping my Dad lift a table out of the way so he could cut the yard. As we were moving it, I thought, *Wow, I have a girlfriend.* It was such an exciting realization. The only problem was that she didn’t want anyone to know about us because she wasn’t ready to be out and it would cause a scandal if people knew that this beautiful girl, who dressed like a freak and looked like a doll with accentuated full lips and curves to make any guy swoon over her, preferred making out with girls and eating pussy. After I had accepted, she told me we needed to keep our relationship secret so naturally I told a few of my closest

friends like the ‘mature humor cackler’ Amber and ‘mumbles/good taste in music’ June as well as the Reyna siblings, Patricio and Ruth, who as I found out during our ritual morning conversations, were more freak on the inside, but more importantly were Delia’s classmates in photojournalism.

I got more of a congratulatory a response from Amber and June but from the Reynas’; it was the satisfaction of knowing they had something on Delia as well as ammunition to tease me for their own entertainment. I could handle their tongue-in-cheek, and I trusted them with this secret because they were super antisocial and never really spread gossip. Lucky for me neither did my Algebra teacher Mrs. Molina, even though she had told us on the first day of school that she wouldn’t tolerate people writing love notes in her class.

Mrs. Molina had warned us specifically at the beginning of the year that she would take up any letters being written during her lessons to boyfriends or girlfriends and read them aloud, since it was so much more important than what she was teaching. She figured why not share the wealth of this love with everybody in class. And it was so nice of her to be inclusive of everyone’s preferences, especially since I was the first one who got caught that year doing just this, so fuck my life when she picked up the response letter I had begun writing to Delia at the beginning of her lesson. My heart sank and my stomach tightened as she put it on her desk to screen it before deciding on the juiciest parts to read aloud. When she finished her lesson and gave us time for practice, she sat at her desk and looked it over sipping from her mug before catching me staring at her and grinning back from behind the paper.

She never read it aloud, which was a relief that day, even after explaining to Delia that I didn’t have a letter for her because I got caught writing it in class and had it taken away. For the

rest of the year though, Molina addressed the class with, “Ladies, gentlemen,” and then while looking directly at me, finished by emphasizing the word “others,” then lifted her eyebrow.

I usually sat back in my chair, gripping my pencil and returning a glare, while she grinned at me and sipped from her mug. Mrs. Molina made it very clear that she knew my secret and was going to use it to lovingly terrorize me, but not say a word to anyone about it. She simply continued running her class with her usual dark humor and sass, even when one student asked her, “Ms. what do you have in your mug?”

“Vodka,” she answered boldly followed with her usual grin and sarcasm while reminding us how to complete the assigned work.

I had to hand it to her, she was like the fuckin’ queen of her classroom and we were the peasant farmers plowing the fields of our pages with formulas, numbers and square roots, at her command. Even though I hated algebra, she made her lessons memorable. The first few weeks of class continued like this, but then one day she noticed I was not my usual self, so she let off.

Delia had broken up with me after about a month. We never really went anywhere or did anything together except talk on the phone, but also I think it was more the novelty of the idea for her. For me though, it was my first relationship, so of course, I was devastated.

She let me down easy claiming that she got back with her boyfriend who she liked hitting up clubs with in Reynosa and since she was a senior, this meant she had more freedom to go places and having a boyfriend who was not only older, but had a car, made it difficult for me to compete on both those fronts.

“Look V, no matter what happens between us, I’m always going to be your friend and you can talk to me about anything.”

Her words were not comforting, and after a few weeks she grew bored with her boyfriend again but still went out with him to the clubs because he was just too cool and according to her, different from the other guys. Delia did always say she liked people that were different from the rest and she had confessed this once during our relationship along with the fact that she had spotted me waiting for the bus in my practice uniform for tennis, since the year prior when I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. But the little lesbian has lost her charm. I was out and even after she had tried comforting me with her olive branch speech, I couldn't help but think I had simply been collected.

A few weeks passed and I got over it, but that's when the rumors began circulating about her sexuality, and when her younger brother got wind of it by way of locker room talk he approached her and asked why he was hearing that she was dating girls. A few days later she approached me, filling me in about her conversation with her brother, and then asked if I had told anyone else besides my close friends. I told her I hadn't revealed anything to anyone, but I couldn't help it if people overheard our conversations. Not soon after she began dating someone more interesting from California. This beach boy wore Adidas with Jnco jeans and oversized t-shirts with a shaved head, except for a small part in the front, that he combed back, which made him look like he had cockroach whiskers to match his dirt mustache. I couldn't fathom what Delia found so interesting about him except the way he dressed, which confirmed her superficiality.

Beach boy ended up sitting behind me the following year in chemistry class. She had graduated and was long gone and done with him by then, but when he was in that class, he pushed me, trying to exert his dominance for no good reason while making his way to his seat. I didn't take kindly to this and pushed back.

“You’re like a guy, so I’ll hit you if I have to,” he said.

I stood there and moved forward looking at him dead in the eye, and replied, “Go for it,” as I waited.

He gauged me for a second before sitting down. A few weeks later he noticed the buzz cut I designed underneath the longer layer of my hair and asked,

“You cut your own hair?”

I turned around and replied, “Yes I do.”

He pressed his lips together and nodded saying, “Firme.”

I rolled my eyes and turned around to wait for class to start. After that, as the year progressed, I didn’t see him in class anymore. Nor did I care to.

After my break up with Delia, I didn’t have very many people to talk to about how I had been feeling, so I started writing to deal with the pent up anger, angst and frustration, which was profound for me not only because of my gender and sexual identity but also how I chose to present to the world. Even among the older freaks, which I would occasionally run into, I was always an anomaly. I could see them processing it in their minds, but they never approached to ask due to my resting bitch face.

On one occasion during lunch, however, I went to the snack machines with my friend Amber, and yes these were the same ones I met Delia in front of, this one guy Gabe was in dire need of attention or was trying to intimidate me. I couldn’t really tell, but as Amber got her drink, he was standing with his one person entourage and tried engaging me with, “Hey butch.”

I turned and sneered at him as Amber stood up after getting her drink and change from the machine’s dispenser. She heard him too and had her back to him while looking at me to see what we needed to do before pocketing her change. I looked at her and glared back at him

gauging whether or not he and his companion were going to charge. I looked at him up and down, noticing how tall and lanky he was and that we somewhat mirrored one another with combat boots, jeans, his black and mine faded, dark t-shirt, a black leather motorcycle jacket on our backs and a chip on our respective shoulders. He stood there sizing me up too, as I finished my evaluation and then glanced over at his friend Tabitha, who was way shorter than him wearing almost the same outfit, minus the leather jacket.

I knew right then he called me out wanting me to simply notice him. I walked away with Amber as she asked, “You alright?” I said, “Yeah. Let’s go back to the table.”

Nothing happened that day but later in the week, Gabe ended up asking my best friend June to be his girlfriend and at one point she also became his messenger when she asked to borrow the cassette single I had recently purchased of Madonna’s “Justify my Love.” I told her to tell Gabe to grow some balls and ask me himself. Surprisingly, he did and I told him to give it back to me the next day. He obliged which also confirmed that he only needed it overnight to record a copy for himself.

A few weeks later he broke up with June, then came out to me confessing that he had only been with her as a cover because he was actually gay. That’s when I understood why he was trying to get my attention during our first encounter. Pinche Gabe was a big ol’ queen and needed affirmation from the big ol’ freshman butch. When I told June she wasn’t surprised.

Meanwhile another girl had caught my attention and I didn’t know how to approach her about it considering we both had different lunch periods, which made it difficult to talk to her. I decided one day to skip my fourth period class and join my friends at the lunch table where I knew she would be as well.

I sat next to Stacie for a few minutes and while my friend Randy was also trying to get her attention, I leaned in to whisper something to her but when I cupped my hands around her ear, I licked it instead. It was a pretty bold move and Stacie even confessed that she liked it. That evening I asked Rico, another one of my queer friends who had come out to me because I seemed to be the only one with balls enough to proclaim it, to phone Stacie on a three-way call and asked her if she liked me. Stacie wasn't naïve and she took the opportunity to say that she did with the suspicion that I was on the other line on mute, listening to her and Rico's conversation. I confirmed with her later that, that was exactly what I was doing and we started talking after that. Unfortunately, it quickly became complicated for several reasons. The first was that Gabe needed another cover for his flaming queerness, so he and I walked around campus holding hands so everyone could think we were together. All this while I was developing a romantic relationship with Stacie, whose ear I licked, and who also had some identity issues of her own, namely being the principal's daughter. Of course I reaped the repercussions of this as I was summoned into the office a couple of times by the administrators.

The first time I got called in, was in the morning by the security guard that everyone called Baloo, because he was tall, and wore the upper half of his uniform, a light blue collared shirt, over his huge belly, and ended up looking just like the bear in *The Jungle Book* animated movie. Baloo walked me over to the office of the first administrator that wanted to talk to me, Mr. Salas.

As I sat in the chair across from him in his office, I wasn't really listening to what he said but what I do remember were his beady dark little eyes, the Nazi-like haircut and his thin mustache. I looked at his shiny comb over as the tone he was using made it seem like he was trying to find common ground, trying to convince me that I needed to leave Stacie alone. At the

end of his mini lecture he asked if I had any questions or if I wanted to say anything to him. I shook my head and asked if I could leave so I didn't have to endure anymore of his bullshit lecture. Years later I ran into him when I began my first teaching job. He looked at me and I'm sure he recognized me too, but I guess he didn't want to follow up on the conversation he had with me all those years ago.

After I left his office that day though, I went about my business, but later that night when I talked to Stacie, she told me that she had gotten called in by him, to have a talking to as well. She told me that she had snapped at him saying,

“Veronica wasn't going to talk to you! I don't know why you called her in here; she isn't going to talk to you!”

It made me happy to know that she understood my introversion and lividity. Later that same day though, I got called in by the other principal, Mrs. Saucedo, who I thought was a repressed lesbian and way too butch for her own unrecognizable good. It was really weird sitting in front of her listening to her telling me that this was all just a phase. I was confused because of the way she presented but at the same time, I read the anguish and shame she was trying to project on me and simply nodded back with a glazed look because I was thinking that this must be what the authority figures in her life had told her when she had been out chasing beauties. I felt sad for her but also relieved that I knew myself well enough by that time to know that this was only the beginning of my having to deal with this kind of bullshit.

The next day I was caught in the hallway going to the restroom by another principal, Mr. Gomez, who looked like the shorter Mario from Super Mario brothers, except he always wore a brown suit and tie, but unfortunately no oversized hat. It was obvious by this point that those principals, whether it was instigated by Stacie's father or not, had it out for me, and as their



henchman Baloo was helping Mr. Gomez round up students that afternoon, he recognized me, and began gloating about having adding me to the line of people they were sending to the 'In School Suspension' or ISS room. I spent the afternoon there copying definitions from a dictionary, which ironically I would do at home anyway because I was so hungry for knowledge but more because we didn't have cable.

After copying definitions I sat there with the rest of the rejects with nothing to do but fill up another page with my own words. The ones I felt coming through from my core due to my anger, frustration and loneliness. When I finished exorcising my swollen rage, I stared at the page of sappy rhyming lines of poetry I had just produced, then the coach who was in charge of ISS called me over to his desk. I sighed and pushed my hands against the edge of the desk, reluctant to approach him. He looked at me, half bored and half in dismay, then lowered his eyes to my chest and asked,

"You're friends with Mr. Ramirez' daughter?"

I was wearing my leather jacket so I felt protected and simply nodded in response then waited, glaring and expecting him to say something else, something sarcastic and insulting. Instead he just looked ahead stoically as if he had just confirmed why I was in there, and if that wasn't any indication, he then followed by saying,

"Ok. Go sit down."

I finished the day there and left with the knowledge that I had been singled out. I was pissed off about it, pissed off that I couldn't do anything because if I told my parents any of it, they would somehow find a way to blame me. It didn't matter anyway because within a couple of weeks the whole thing blew over after I found out that Randy, one of my closest friends, and Stacie had been trying to get together to meet at the mall without my knowing. I ended up going

with my cousin anyway thinking I coincidentally ran into them, but in reality, busted them at Spencer's novelty shop, hanging out before going to a movie they thought they had convinced me they weren't going to see.

Still too naïve to realize what was really going on and what their intentions actually were, I ended up sitting between them as we watched Sylvester Stallone in *Cliffhanger*. The following night when Stacie and I were on the phone, she fessed up and I found out that unlike mine and Gabe's relationship front, she and Randy really liked each other and had wanted that to be their first date. I broke up with her, and out of overwhelming guilt, she stopped talking to both of us for a while. We eventually reconnected but it wasn't the same. Everything was still too raw and I didn't like that feeling when I was around either one of them.

After these first two months in high school, I was done with relationships and only hung out with the Reynas in the morning, with Amber and June after school and with Rico and Gabe on the weekends. Randy went nuts not being able to talk to either his crush, Stacie or me one of his good friends so he ended up going to rehab after he started experimenting with heavy drugs.

During the following months Rico occasionally helped me take care of Gabe when we went out to 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue because we found out his home life wasn't that stable and I was afraid someone might hurt him. I finished out the year with my heart hollowed out while the rest of me exorcised my secrets on paper to keep from going crazy, or numb.

## **My Pen-The Creed of a Writer**

after “My Rifle-The Creed of a United States Marine”

This is my pen. There are many like it, but this one is mine.

My pen, without me, is useless. Without my pen, I am useless. I must write my words true. I must pen more precisely to slay the inner and outer critic who tries to stifle me. I must silence him before he silences me. I will...

My pen and my self know that what counts in writing is not the number of pages, the noise of our outer critics, nor the smoke of fallacies. We know that it is the substance of our rhetoric and ideas that count. We will write...

My pen is human, even as I, because it is my life. Thus I will learn it as a sister. I will learn its weaknesses, its strengths, its parts, its accessories, its grip, and its barrel. I will know it for the smooth lines of the words it creates and will ever guard it in my pocket against the ravages of disuse and damage as I will ever guard my legs, my arms, my eyes, my heart and my mind against damage. I will keep my pen clean and ready to write. We will become part of each other. We are...

Before the Goddess, I swear this creed. My pen and my self are the defenders of my creative and scholarly intellect. We are the masters of our critics. We are the saviors of my life.

So be it, until victory is attained for the marginalized and there is no longer a need for bridges to be built, but instead peace among us all.

## CHAPTER IX

### SAVING GRACES Y CHINGANDO QUEDITO

While at night and on the weekends, I either worked or went out, and my love life was either coming together or falling apart, but my friends were always there to sustain me. However, of all of my friends, Ruth, the younger of the Reyna siblings, with her modest and at times forceful dignity, was always there to remind me to suck it up and stay focused on the more intellectual aspects of my high school career.

I met Ruth when we were on the tennis team in middle school. We were barely acquainted then, but when we entered high school, Ruth, her brother Patricio and I were among the first to enjoy the perks of living out in the monte and having to be bussed to school before dawn. At the start of freshman year I joined them every morning at the table where they usually sat, and during these first few hours before school started, I became familiar with their m.o. and their inner freak. We typically discussed things like what colleges would be good for us to go to, potential majors we should pursue, the latest drama which included mine and Ruth's crushes and of course Patricio's favorite subject, how to hide dead bodies, since both our parents had significant amounts of land out in the middle of nowhere. We also shared breakfast, well I tried sharing breakfast, but at the beginning neither Ruth, nor Patricio would accept, so I just continued bringing and enjoying my tacos or breakfast sandwich in the morning. At first Ruth would comment enviously on how my Mom was kind enough to grace me with breakfast every morning, and then it got to a point where she was anxious to find out what I had gotten that day

before I even unwrapped the foil. Finally at one point, she watched me take my first bite, and then asked me to cut off a piece of tortilla, so she could have a taste. I obliged, because who can resist a warm flour tortilla in the morning. Eventually she asked me to bring her a single tortilla with nothing in it. I found it strange that she didn't want an actual breakfast taco and when I mentioned it to my Mom, even she was puzzled, but nonetheless packed an extra tortilla for me to give to my friend.

The next day when I got to school, Ruth immediately asked, "Did you bring my tortilla?" I smiled and replied,

"Yes, let me get it for you."

She anxiously responded, "Hurry up! I've been looking forward to it since I asked you for it yesterday!!"

I laughed and fished it out of my bag to give to her. As soon as I extended the foil wrapped bundle, she snatched it out of my hand, unwrapped and devoured the tortilla in front of me and Patricio as we stared in perplexed shock. It was a disturbing and impressive sight; like watching an animal devouring its prey after the hunt. Ruth dabbed the corners of her mouth saying,

"That was delicious."

We all looked at one another before cracking up afterwards. This was typical of Ruth though, her m.o. in high school where pettiness reigned. She was a pounce-and-devours kind of girl, siempre chingando quedito, which I have always appreciated and valued along with our discussions on the ridiculousness of any situation because it was how we sharpened our wits off of one another. The result was a shared precision for pointing out the absurd and it was out of these discussions that we pointed out how ludicrous it was for the principal to ban Disney t-shirts

because she thought anyone wearing them was affiliated with a gang, YET HER NICKNAME was 'Mini.'

As part of the editorial staff for the school newspaper Ruth decided to write an article that not only protested the principal's decision but also called out the incongruity of her name in regard to the entire situation. Principal Mini then got wind of the article and demanded the name of the author by intimidating staff and students as she brought them to her office. No one was absolutely sure how she confirmed it was Ruth, but in defense of the action, the photojournalism teacher, Mrs. Lloyd, had to cite the charter for the school journalism department, which allowed students and teachers to operate with complete autonomy. From then on Ruth became Mini's nemesis, although for me Ruth was and still is truly an inspiration.

Psychological warfare and the conversations on how to bury dead bodies aside, Ruth also taught me a calming technique that her mother used with her and Patricio. It was a simple thing she would do, which was to take my hand and lay it face up telling me to keep my eye on her forefinger as she traced each digit, starting and then returning to the base of my hand just above my wrist. This hand calming technique allowed me to center myself enough to write when I needed to, and in fact, helped me survive the rest of my high school and college years. It was like a recalibration for my mind and body and in part, I think she demonstrated this for me, to help me cope because she noticed how anxiety crept up on me a significant number of times considering what I was going through while navigating my family, school, and my social life, while presenting the way that I did.

Through all the drama, Ruth was one of the people in my life that reminded me that there was one objective and that was my education. In fact, at the end of our freshman year, she was the only friend who suggested I start considering colleges to attend and that I find one where I

could major in Latino Studies because she saw the potential effect, even though I was unfamiliar with the field. I didn't end up majoring in ethnic studies of any kind although, I often thought of her when I was taking my first Mexican-American Literature class at a university even I surprised myself for attending.

During our junior year, Ruth and I began looking at prospective universities during a campus college fair. I had my sights set on getting information from Texas A&M for a degree in veterinary science but since they didn't attend that college fair, I took information packets from other in-state universities a little closer to home. I also began receiving packets in the mail from Brown, Brandeis, and other east coast colleges, which I wasn't really interested in attending. A few weeks later that semester, I found out there was going to be another college information session specifically for major state universities including Texas A&M, although it was going to take place at the new high school campus. I asked my Mom to accompany me, and when we went she became highly concerned about how we were going to pay for my going to college. After the information session was over, I became concerned as well because when I saw the Texas A&M recruiter's presentation which included the team slogan and hand gesture, I basically came to the conclusion that Texas A&M was a cult, which is true of any major university in Texas that has a football team by the way, so I decided I didn't want to go anywhere near that place and I told my Mom to forget about it.

By the time my senior year came around I wasn't in any hurry to apply or attend any away in state or far away out of state colleges, unless I was going to be awarded scholarships. My back up plan was to attend UTPA and it became more and more likely that this was the route I was going to have to take. Ruth of course was disappointed because it was our senior year and everyone including her, had already decided where they were going for their postsecondary

education. Early in the spring, however, the guidance counselor who was also Ruth's nemesis by the way, called me in to her office to discuss my plans for college. At first, Mrs. Paz started off asking politely if I had submitted my FAFSA, and when she found out I hadn't, she became visibly annoyed and irate literally yelling,

"Hurry up and submit your FAFSA!"

I remember looking at her perplexed, and thinking, *Is she supposed to be using that tone with me?* I wasn't sure if this was behavior showing concern or panic to meet her quota for the campus and the district, which was both understandable and quite entertaining for me.

A few days after the meeting, I did end up getting help from my friend Rico to submit my financial aid form because Ruth was busy, along with the other editors, staying late after school to finish the year book. Surprisingly, a few weeks later, I got a call from Our Lady of the Lake University about an offer for an \$18,000 scholarship to be awarded over the course of my four years of college. I had no idea where in San Antonio, this university was or that it was a historically private Catholic university for women, but to my credit they had no idea that they had just recruited the most infamous lesbian from Edinburg High School. Men had joined the church to become priests for far worse reasons. I didn't want to become a part of the clergy, all I wanted was to get my queer ass an education and sure the amount they were offering was only going to cover a fraction of what I needed to pay but I figured what better way to gain my education, than from the Catholic establishment itself. I spoke to my Mom about the scholarship I had been offered, but she was still concerned about paying for the rest.

My response was, "I'm going Mom. I need to leave the Valley because if I don't, I know I will regret it."



At the end of every year, the Edinburg High School administration held a recognition ceremony for those students that received scholarships and since I told my Mom that I was set on going, she insisted I attend the ceremony to be recognized. I knew this was more about her, so I went and had to sit there for over an hour while people were called up on stage to be patted on the back and given certificates for receiving full scholarships to their chosen university. The rest of us simply stood to be recognized; a decision made because the year before, they hadn't expected so many scholarship recipients to show up for the ceremony. I was relieved about this because I didn't want to be there anyway and was hoping for a way to cut the night short. When the administrators announced my name followed by the university I was attending, I stood and nodded at the audience's acknowledgement while the administration turned to whisper to one another, most likely processing the mismatch of their own announcement for my scholarship to attend a private Catholic university. I read their faces as they looked at me and asked, *But how?* while I responded with a glare and a, *LATER BITCHES!* in my own mind.

## **Standing/Hovering**

And there I stood

Passing them

over and over and

over with

Vacant greeting

Heavy eyelids

Sliver of interest

My body weighing

On feet enclosed

Above worn soles

Swollen under the ankles

Aching legs

Split second dream

Freedom cut

By the grip of task and

Reluctant performance

There I stand

Passing them over

and over and

over

Some values memorized

Some faces

Worth regard

Keys to the prison of monotony

I like it when the old ones come

The smell of Tabú

Mothballs emanating

From sagging skin and bones

“Do you need help with that?”

-No mi cielo, yo lo llevo.-

The little ones come too

Begging for quarters and candy

With rings of sugar

Around their mouths

Pasty on their tiny fingers

Eyes wondrous

Scan me

Like the machine

Scanning the bread

Their mothers take home for them

They find a smile

Not a price

The young ones

Look down to avoid

My glare

Look around

For what they want

They don't need their mothers

They live bubbled, lovely

Denying

Their mortal skin and bones

And there I stood

Reluctant performance

My mind hovering

My body light

Floating

Into the grip

Of a split second dream

Longing freedom.

Now long gone.

## CHAPTER X

### CLASS AND CULTURE

The summer after my graduation, my mother and I were invited for a campus visit and my subsequent orientation to Our Lady of the Lake University. The drive up was a long four hours and it was the first of many where I would begin marking the time by the towns we passed. Mom didn't say much until after we reached the first highway interchange as we approached downtown from the south and she announced,

“We're almost there!”

We marveled at the tall buildings we were approaching and compared to the hospitals, hotels and the one building in McAllen that went over the 8 story mark, the San Antonio skyline was a wonder. We made our way on Commerce Street after cruising by the Alamodome, exiting and heading towards the west side, passing buildings over a century old and driving on cobblestone at touring speed through downtown. I had never seen such magnificent decadence, beginning with the hotels, the Rivercenter Mall and continuing with the trees sprouting out from the Riverwalk right before passing Alamo Street, which lead toward the Alamo Plaza. We continued on Commerce, catching a glimpse of the Aztec Theater sign as we approached the Main Plaza and San Fernando Cathedral where Mom and I were awestruck by its gothic design. We became more excited and curious when we caught a glimpse of the papel picado hanging at the entrance of El Mercado Square.

“Mira Mom! Que están celebrando, allí?” I asked.

Mom replied excitedly, “Pos quien sabe mija!” as we beamed with delight looking at each other all wide-eyed.

While Mom continued driving I thought about how anxious I had been to leave home because I was so ready to be on my own, to see what was outside of the Valley, and this introduction to the river city was confirmation that I had made the right decision.

When we arrived at the university we parked across the street in front of the dorms in full view of the campus. My Mother, being a former Catholic and all, was in complete admiration of the neo and Victorian gothic architecture of OLLU Main and the Sacred Heart Chapel. I too was overwhelmed with the magnificence of it all, having never before seen the gothic design of the church up close with its pedestal stairway leading into the stained glass window enclosure for worship, confirmed by the medieval style pointed, gothic arches on the north end. Its cross crowned steeple surrounded by the smaller spires with the faces of clocks gave the time of day, and in front of the stained glass windows, on the east end, was the walkway leading to the next building.

My eye was guided to the turrets holding up the silver spires flanking the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes posed in prayer and framed with the same pointed gothic style archway above the entrance. Main Building’s top windows followed suit with a break in view style with framed rectangles for the second floor and Roman arches for the first. The double gothic archway at the entrance leading to the front foyer caught my eye as they complimented the huge double mahogany doors and in front of the building, was a cobblestone roundabout with the middle clearing divided into four parts by a concrete sidewalk with foliage in the spaces in between and in the intersection of the sidewalk, a statue of the child Christ being held by a crowned Mother Mary standing on a pedestal.

It was all such a magnificent sight to behold as I stood there thinking to myself, *I'm going to be having class in a castle*, but as I looked back over at the Sacred Heart Chapel, it quickly went from the extravagance I had perceived to realizing that this was simply just another oppressive edifice I knew I had to avoid, as I began recalling how I had been obligated to go to church back home. No amount of extravagant façade would convince me that I needed to be there to worship where I wasn't fully welcomed and I found comfort knowing that even though I would now be living next to a church, I was not obligated to attend. I reveled in this from where I stood as my mother looked at me she said,

"That's where you'll be going to church every Sunday."

I rolled my eyes and turned to her saying, "Not if I have homework to do, which I will and besides, we're Methodists, not Catholics."

"It doesn't matter!" she retorted. "You can still go!"

"I'm sure Jesus will understand that I'll have to complete the homework his brides have assigned."

She laughed astonishingly as we proceeded through the archway to find the auditorium. The inside was just as magnificent as the outside with its mahogany wood arches framing the entrance of the hallway. We made our way toward the back to find where I had to be before my Mom made her way to where she had to be for the parent orientation she had to attend as well. As we were walking, she said, "Here," and handed me a pack of gum. I told her, "No, Mom it's ok." She hastily replied, "Take it! It's always good to have gum." I reluctantly accepted the pack of chewing gum she handed me and put it in my pocket. When we reached the doors of the auditorium, she bid me farewell and went on her way to her parent orientation session where later on I found out, that she found out, how meager the scholarship was for me to attend.

I stood in front of the auditorium doors to prepare a bit for what might be on the other side before walking in, and when I finally decided to pull the door open I saw that mostly everyone had already found their seats and began settling in towards the front near the stage. As they all chatted, I listened to whoever the speaker was, but I couldn't tell if the presentation had already started because the conversation was so informal between the student audience members and the person already on stage speaking into the mic.

There were a few scattered bodies in the rows behind them, and in the back, it was empty except for a few people and one girl with long straight light brown hair, an oversized t-shirt, baggy jeans with strands at the seams, and what looked like skating shoes. She reminded me of a girl from back home named Sophia, an acquaintance who I knew to be kind of sneaky and an asshole. As I stood in the aisle looking to the front trying to decipher the occurrences, I turned over to her, trying to get her attention to see if the presentation had begun. She never even flinched to look in my direction. She simply sat there in the auditorium chair, stone faced looking straight ahead. I knew she noticed I was there, but I wasn't sure how approachable she was so I went back toward the entrance of the aisle to go around the other side. I made my way to the same row where she sat and then settled a few seats away from her with the intention of making conversation.

She seemed uninterested in engaging, so I sat there for a few minutes looking towards the front where everyone else sat, still trying to figure out what was going on, and simultaneously annoyed at all of them already while thinking about how I could make conversation with homegirl. I remembered the gum my Mom had just given me, so I took the pack out of my pocket, pulled a piece halfway out, and then held it out towards her. She pivoted her head slightly to look over at what I was trying to hand to her, and as she held her stone faced look, she



quickly snatched the gum from the pack in my grip, like Van Damme snatching the coin from the guy's hand in *Bloodsport*, the sound like a snake beginning to, then cut short from its hiss. We weren't saving any damsels then, but it was what led Selia, and I to become the best of friends and to saving each other many times over in the years to come.

In August of 1996, about a month after orientation, my Mom made the trip to San Antonio once again, this time with my Dad, to drop me off at Pacelli dorms, and wish me well on the beginning of my college career. I was a little sad at how easy it seemed for them to just leave me there without any words of advice, but years later, I found out that my Mom had been holding back tears to keep me from having doubts about leaving home. Dad comforted her on the way back, reassuring her that I would be ok.

At first I didn't have any regrets as I enjoyed the novelty of living in the dorms and being in a new school in the big city, although about a month later, I got an urgent message to call home. I had been in class the whole day and we didn't have direct lines in our dorm rooms so by the time I received the message it was nightfall. I went to the corner store on Commerce and 24<sup>th</sup> Street to buy a calling card and decided to use the nearest payphone on campus on my return. After I dialed all the numbers and got through, my uncle answered,

"Hello?" I said, "Tio, it's me Roni."

I heard the receiver rattle and then my Mom's voice, "Mija," as it began cracking she continued, "Grandpa died earlier."

Grandpa had arthritis during most of his golden years but he managed and was cheerful when we went to visit him or my Mom brought him home to our house. I hadn't really gotten a chance to see him before I left so the news hit me like a jackhammer to the heart and I began sobbing as I held on to the receiver. My mother went on to tell me,

“He was asking for you. I told him you were in school in San Antonio.”

It was September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1996, the day I began to regret having to be in San Antonio on the payphone at OLLU between Main and Moye Building. I stood there bawling my eyes out at the thought that my grandfather had asked for me on his death bed, and I wasn’t there to see him off to the next life. My Mom and I discussed my trying to get back home but I couldn’t afford it and she was going to need to help my aunt and uncles with the funeral costs.

After I got off the phone I slumped down onto the floor and sat for a while, sniffing, resting my head on the palms of my hands, my elbows on my knees, with tears running down my face, loathing where I was, and that I couldn’t do anything about not wanting to be there.

In the following months, the impressive university buildings with their gothic religious façades, the statues and pictures of saints in every dorm hall, hallway, and courtyard, and especially the cemetery behind the convent, became even more eerie and oppressive to me.

It had been difficult to recover and continue that semester, but I had made friends that helped me cope like gum snatcher Selia, who I had met in the auditorium, and her creepy pothead roommate Sabina. Chloe and Abbi were cool potheads that had gone to Thomas Jefferson High School down the street together before coming to the Lake. Also there was Elida, who everyone met during orientation because she questioned the ridiculousness of the ‘yes candles-no incense’ policy in the dorms and later ended up joining theater to become an amazing actress. Then there were the Matthews, who were both gay, although one immersed himself on the stage and the other, was who knows where most of the time. There was also their best friend from back home, Mercedes, who was super pretty because she looked like Vivien Leigh but a bitch like Scarlet O’Hara from *Gone with the Wind*. She eventually joined theater too and at one point comforted and helped me suck it up after one of my breakups. I appreciated her for being

that kind bitch, although she's a Republican now so it's weird to recall my gratitude for her presence during that time in my life. Last but not least there was Jerry, the older queer who had joined theater at the behest of his psychology professor. It was probably the best decision he ever made...well that and working at Godiva so that he could help us, "...less educated queers become more cultured," were roughly his words and I think maybe he meant that us knowing the story of Lady Godiva would make us more cultured. I think it had more to do with the store being located at North Star Mall, so whatever.

On one of our first nights hanging out at his apartment we also met Jerry's roommate Dana, who he regularly referred to as Daniel because she was queer and because he typically used our names to fit our gender, in part, thanks to his 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue education. He had told me that Dana and I were from the same town and after I annoyingly introduced myself by jumping on her bed to greet her while she patiently listened to my barrage of questions, I found out she lived down the road from where I lived back home and attended the rival high school on the other side of town. I could care less about the rivalries, what I found the most comfort in was that I not only found Valley folk with the same familiarity of back home, but that they were also queer. After our conversation, I also found out Daniel needed to sleep to be fully rested for class the next day, so we left her alone to begin the night's festivities. She was sound asleep as soon as we all filed downstairs to settle in for a night of debauchery.

Needless to say we hung out all night trying to keep the noise level down but were unsuccessful since the first thing we inadvertently did was get into a circle while we were conversing and getting to know each other. Since it was Jerry's place, he wanted to find out who exactly he had invited into his abode, so he began playing a round of duck-duck-goose, except it was more like a round of,

“I’m going to point at you and you’re going to tell me if you’re gay.”

Selia was reluctantly outed while everyone else, including me, proudly proclaimed their sexuality, although as our college years progressed, not everyone else remained as consistent as some, in their declaration and practice. Also there was a certain Republican that wasn’t there at the time but eventually joined us later to hang out and then began demonstrating her own four-year fluidity. Unfortunately for me however, that fall semester I hung out way too much at Jerry’s apartment and endured far more real life drama like Jordan, the girl I was talking to and Jennifer, the girl Selia was talking to hooking up. With that, and not being able to afford going home for Thanksgiving Break, I decided to join Selia during her visit back to Las Cruces. We drove to her home with some friends from El Paso, who had been kind enough to take us to her parents’ house, where she and I hung out during the break. Being with Selia and her family was what held me over until I was able to go back home for Christmas break.

The following semester’s shit show was no different, so after I finished my first year at OLLU, I went home for the summer to regroup and decided on trying to get ahead of my basic course work by enrolling in a summer computers course at what was then, STCC. That took up most of my time in June but after my class was over, there wasn’t much to do since my parents weren’t keen on vacationing because my Dad preferred staying home because he “hated people” and didn’t like “dealing with the public.” It was beginning to get awkward being home when he arrived after work as his rants were becoming more and more frequent and he directed his frustrations towards me, not really knowing how to deal with the fact that I was back home for the summer after my first year in college. Meanwhile I was still trying to cope with my grandfather’s death, all the bullshit drama that happened afterwards, and my own academic

missteps as a result. I spent a few days at home but since it was the middle of summer I also found I had too much time on my hands and began feeling restless.

During the spring, gum snatcher Selia, the candle vs incense police, Elida, cool pothead Chloe, and her cool pothead friend Celestino, had decided they would all be moving out to Albuquerque because they couldn't tolerate living in the dorms and wanted a change in scenery from San Antonio. Knowing they were moving Jerry took the opportunity to plan a road trip and had been talking about going to see them after the spring semester was over, and apparently that time had come. I figured I would join him because I had nothing better to do and wanted to go visit them too. Jerry was taking Jennifer and wanted me to go with them, but his ulterior motive after we returned was for me to move in with them into a new apartment after we came back to San Antonio. Even though I couldn't stand Jennifer for what she had done to Selia, I had agreed to join them for the former but was still on the fence about moving in, although it was either that, stay home and figure out how to stay out of my Dad's way, or go back to living in the dorms, adhering to convent-like rules for the next fall semester.

Both the trip and moving in with them was a huge mistake, first because as we drove the 14 hours from the Valley to San Antonio to pick up Jennifer then to Albuquerque to go see our friends, Jerry decided he would be playing the recently released *Rent* musical cd the entire time. I was literally being driven insane. When we got to Albuquerque, I found out the only reason Jennifer went was because she and Selia were crushing on each other again, which annoyed me because I knew Jennifer had not only slept with the girl I had been talking to, two semesters prior, but because she had flashed a conquering grin at me, treating the incident like a new notch on her belt. I guess I should've thanked her for fucking up and not being able to go since Selia invited me instead but still I was really bothered by the fact that I didn't even have to ask

Jennifer what happened because she was being so cocky right before we left. And when I told Selia all of this, she stopped talking to her for a while, but then overlooked it all when we went to visit, refusing to accept that Jennifer sucked. It was the most awkward visit I had ever made.

When we all returned to San Antonio, once again to the tune of *Rent*, I reluctantly moved in with Jerry and Jennifer to avoid the other options which turned out to be huge mistake number two. Jerry chose these new apartments on the northeast side of town because living anywhere else would be “ghetto” and he wasn’t about that life but this also meant my having to work part time to pay rent. I guess the musical must have been a premonition.

After moving in, I quickly found a job in downtown San Antonio as a cook at a bbq restaurant since I had the experience. As I was being introduced to the cooking crew, the first person I met was Giovanni who gave me the ‘sup girl’ look, which confused me a little because I thought I was presenting masculine enough for everyone to know I was queer. The rest of the cooks, except for this one lady who was really nice, were looking to score with me too. It was creepy and gross but they apparently got the memo and in addition to that, a few nights later while I was working, I got googly eyed by a girl, who was a server working there, named Michelle. She made it really obvious that she was interested in getting to know me better, but she looked too much like my ex, Delia and was aggressive like her too, so it was kind of weird and triggering for me.

Instead, I hung out with Giovanni and even started crushing on him a little because he was really nice, but it was short lived because I found out he and Michelle had an open hook-up between them when she would give him rides home. This sealed the deal on my not letting it get serious enough for me to pursue on either front since I wasn’t interested in a threesome but it got complicated because I didn’t realize after getting a job downtown, how difficult it would be to

get off work before the bus lines stopped running at 11:30. Fuck my life that Michelle was the only one that lived close to me, and that I had to start relying on her to get me home after closing on the weekends at 12:30 or 1:00 in the morning, to avoid being propositioned to be some random guy's date, while waiting for the bus to get home after my shift ended.

Out of gratitude, I invited her and Giovanni over to the apartment the first time she dropped me off which was another mistake because then Jerry became enamored over her bitchiness since it reminded him of a friend whose name he kept using instead of her own. Early on during her first visit she had established her cool points but quickly got annoyed at Jerry trying to impose a new identity, so she castigated him in front of everyone in a way I had never seen which was hilarious for me but terrifying for Jerry because she threatened to leave if he kept it up. After work almost every weekend after that, Michelle, and occasionally Giovanni, ended up hanging out at my apartment with Jerry and Jennifer even though he also went to school and she had to work, although it was easier for her to stay up late because she didn't have to go to school. Or maybe she did. I could never tell because she never really led a stable life.

At first it didn't bother me that they stayed since I needed a ride home anyway but then the Js would also invite their friends over on a regular basis and it got to be too much for me because I never had time to recuperate from work, much less read and study for my courses. Giovanni was also hanging out less and less because he could tell that I was uncomfortable with the entire situation and I didn't hold it against him but then Michelle told me why he had distanced himself.

One night she was having some trouble with a flat tire he fixed it and when she asked what he wanted in return. He told her he wanted a piece of ass. I got pretty disgusted and ended up keeping Giovannie at arm's length after that.

In the coming months, only Miranda continued dropping me off, but I could tell she was getting curious about me and then it got annoying as she would stay at the apartment under Jerry's open invitation to hang out. As she spent more and more time there, I realized that she was not a stable person either and she demonstrated this one night after going to the club, getting drunk, and then coming back to the apartment, going into my room, lying next to me and passing out for a while before telling me she made out with Jennifer. I could smell the alcohol on her breath as she spoke and before she decided to put her hand down my pants while I was trying to sleep. I was freaked out but reacted quickly as I grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand out as I yelled, "NO!" before she was able to do anything. I could tell she was disappointed but it was the vilest and most disgusting thing she had done to me and I eventually distanced myself from her as well afterwards.

I ended up having to rely on other people to take me home even though Michelle was always at my apartment and eventually moved in because supposedly her lease was up and she was looking to live somewhere closer to work anyway. Jerry also took it upon himself to allow her to move in, and his bitch ass never consulted me, to invite another roommate named Seth who he had met at the club. After I found out he worked at Tony Romo's during the day and did drag at night I didn't think it was so bad. He was a beautiful soul but that also meant there were too many people in this three bedroom apartment and I knew that I couldn't stay there to live with Jerry, who liked picking up the strays, Jennifer who was emotionally unstable and even attacked me once because she didn't think it was appropriate for me to be talking to my friend Selia who she still crushed on, and Michelle who was questioning and tried to test her sexuality with me as well as being emotionally unstable.



Eventually, I also quit my job downtown because one night after work, I had asked one of the managers to take me home and during the whole ride until he left me at the curb in front of my doorstep, he kept trying to convince me to go over to his house while his wife was out of town. I was lucky that I was able to politely refuse but decided that I wasn't going to subject myself to any more sexual harassment. That along with paying rent for a place where there were too many crazy distractions with all of my roommates' lifestyles had been my breaking point. Moreover, it was difficult getting to class on with unrealistic public transportation schedules or having to rely on others to take me, when I was living on the other side of the city. My grades had suffered because of all of this and it was weighing on me. At one point my Mom came up to visit and I told her about what had been going on. I asked if it was ok for me to go back home for Thanksgiving break and she said,

“Of course! Why hadn't you come home before?”

I told her, “Because it didn't seem like Dad wanted me there since he had yelled at me for being back home for the summer.”

My Mom tried to reassure me that I could always come home, but I knew that wasn't true. Still, I decided to go for the break anyway and to give myself a little recovery time before returning to school to finish out the semester and then move back into the dorms. Before I went home, I took my stuff out of the apartment to put in storage with the help of my neighbors, while Michelle taunted me by barking orders for me to leave. I watched her dressed in her pink robe with her bath towel on her head, knowing that this arrangement with her Jerry, Jennifer and Seth living together was not going to work for very long and I would be there to watch it all go down. I mostly stayed out of my Dad's way and after I returned

Meanwhile I finished out the fall semester knowing my grades were screwed up but then went back for the spring and stayed in the dorms again while I took classes and recovered from the semester prior. I took courses but couldn't commit to them fully because I think I had PTSD due to my living situation the semester before but I found comfort in knowing the situation with my former roommates did lose its novelty and their relationships imploded as expected.

Seth ended up moving out first because he couldn't handle all the arguing and fighting, and I was glad for him because I knew he was a gentle soul. Jennifer confirmed how much she sucked by being the worst roommate in that she never paid rent or her portion of the bills, and Jerry and Michelle were constantly arguing not only about that but over Jerry's disgusting bathroom habits and his expectation that she would be the one to clean. It was glorious to find all this out when Jerry was complaining to the Matthews, Mercedes and Dana, who had all ended up rooming together with the last two cohabitating as a couple. This was, of course, years before Mercedes decided to marry a man and become a Republican.

When I moved back to campus the following spring, my grades hadn't improved so I cut down on my course load to readjust and life was definitely better since I didn't have to worry about any in house distractions or getting to campus to make it to class on time. That summer I went home and was there for about a week before it began bothering my Dad to the point that it escalated to a verbal argument that I was home visiting again. I had resolved to improve my grades but that wasn't going to happen until the second half of the summer so in the meantime I decided it was best I find something to do to get out of the house. I then took the car and went looking for a job and ended up scoring a part time gig as a cook at Yoli's a local restaurant off of the corner of Closner and Schunior in Edinburg for the first half of the summer. They were

paying me under the books and 15 cents less than minimum wage, which I was ok with because I just wanted to stay out of my Dad's way.

Being out of the house also gave me time to start writing in my journal again and to keep myself busy and the opportunity to hang out with my friend Maxine. She was another cool queer kid I had met in high school when she would return on the bus from the medical magnet campus in Mercedes. On one occasion Max picked me up and asked,

“How was it today?”

I told her about the day cook, “Dude the lady that works in the morning is always calling me Pápi even though I explained to her that I was a girl.”

Max proceeded to taunt me with kissing noises, and cooing “OOOH...Pápi Chulo!” while squeezing my face, and laughing. She then explained, “She knows who you are dude. She just sees who are and is acknowledging it.”

In hindsight, Maxine's comment was pretty accurate because as this woman continued referring to me as “Pápi,” she was also showing that she had a clear understanding about gender, and I have to admit that even though I was a little confused at her insisting to continue with this label, I appreciated it.

I enjoyed a few more weeks of working with her at the restaurant before I got fired because the owners got upset that I couldn't figure out how to get years' worth of caked on grease off the floor with a washcloth and dish soap. I really didn't give a shit because the money I earned at that job, I invested in taking another course at STCC Weslaco campus during the second summer session. I had failed it twice before at OLLU in part because of all the drama that I couldn't miss in my life but more importantly because there was only one sociology professor

on the entire campus whose monotonous voice kept inducing me into a coma during his sociology class. Again I never went, so this is where I was as a result of that.

While I worked and hung out with Maxine during that first part of the summer I also began writing and taking the time to really reflect on why I had gone to San Antonio in the first place, remembering my middle school science teacher Mrs. Gallagher pulling me out of class into the hallway, after acting up, to tell me in a hushed voice,

“If it’s that bad at home then you need to do something to get the hell out of there.”

It was good advice then and worth taking into consideration again, because I don’t think my Dad could handle me being back home and it not bothering him. I was never really sure why he and I clashed so much during this time and I was never inclined to inquire because Dad wasn’t one to share his thoughts and much less his feelings. I decided to go back to San Antonio and fully commit myself to my studies because I knew this was what I needed to do to leave and be away from my father which also meant for starters, moving back to the dorms.

## **Class and Culture Part II**

The following semester I returned, and found a job on campus in a computer lab doing low maintenance work, like adding paper and ink cartridges to printers, making sure the lab was clean and occasionally restarting a program or doing a hard reboot for a computer, while finishing homework. That allowed me the time to focus on my studies, which I highly recommend as a time management strategy by the way.

Selia, Elida, Chloe and Celestino also decided that their hiatus to Albuquerque was over and decided it was time to come back, which was a huge relief for me because Selia and Elida were my kindred spirits, my people, and they had coupled up, which I hadn’t expected but

nonetheless they were my friends and I appreciated their renewed presence in my life. We had signed up together for a drawing class, which I was at first really excited about, but then ended up hating.

The first class we had, the professor showed off his paintings then his first assignment was for everyone to choose what they wanted to draw and bring it in so we could discuss their subject choice. When everyone brought in their first drawing, he went through their work and made rash judgments on their choice depiction and technique one by one. I knew I wasn't a good visual artist but I didn't expect to be compared to an accomplished one and then be judged for my one drawing based on his work. The class continued as my motivation waned but I got through it even though my professor was an asshole.

The Intro to Fiction course, I had also taken that semester allowed me some relief and immersion in the reading and writing of literature, which I was better at anyway and the final project for the semester was for us to write a short story. I used the opportunity to showcase what I had written while I had been spending time with Maxine during the summer. My professor was really excited about it and said I should get it published but the closest I got was giving the story to my friend Maxine years later for her 35<sup>th</sup> birthday, since it was mostly about our adventures. The same semester I had also taken an Astronomy class which made me consider changing my major because gazing at stars was probably the coolest thing I could think of doing, but I decided against it because I just wanted to finish school.

I also took a class, Women in Scripture, which I wasn't too excited for because the professor just kept talking about how women in the bible were demonstrating their subservience to the patriarchy. It was difficult for me to incorporate because I had an extremely different interpretation of the Ruth 1:16 bible verse, thanks to one of Selia's favorite pastimes, which was

watching *Fried Green Tomatoes*, for its obvious to us subplot. I barely passed that class but I had done much better overall, and the following semester I took an anatomy course which, made me consider changing my major but again I didn't want to veer off course. My other two classes, desktop publishing and Elementary Spanish were great in that they were easy enough for me to complete, but I found myself paying really close attention to the content in the anthology *Infinite Divisions* in my first Mexican American Lit class. When I read this book, it was the first time I became aware that there was literature I could relate to as I came across authors like Lucha Corpi, Alma Villanueva, Carmen Tafolla, Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. My professor had mentioned Moraga and Anzaldúa's collaboration on *This Bridge Called my Back*, although it was years later before I read it, along with *Borderlands*, and realized Anzaldúa was from the same region as me.

This class was the first time I saw my identity as a Mexican American womxn being acknowledged not only through these womxn's roles as writers, but also as mothers, sisters, friends, lovers and leaders. It was also, where I saw firsthand, that womxn writing about collaborating and owning their communal and domestic spaces, was considered offensive to a man who was also taking this course. Everyone became aware of this when he stopped the lecture my professor, the late Dr. Antonio Rigual, was giving on these womxn's leadership roles in these spaces.

He yelled, "NO!" while shaking his head and continuing with, "La mujer no manda. Así no debe de ser. Los que mandan son los hombres."

I felt the blood under my skin rush into my face as I clenched my jaw and tightened my hands around the edge of the book we were discussing. I composed myself a little, sat up, pushed my book forward and turned to listen for how Dr. Rigual was going to handle this. He stopped

his lecture and closed the book of the discussion page around his finger to hold that place and the book in his hand as he began explaining,

“Yo entiendo que en unos lugares hay gente que piensa y vive así, pero hay gente en otros lugares que no creen eso y de eso les estoy explicando.”

The man dropped his head shaking it fervently in denial as he once again yelled, “NO!” but immediately after Dr. Rigual yelled back “SI!”

There was a dead silence as he paused a little before calmly explaining, “Al contrario hay gente que dice que la que manda es la mujer. No lo tienes que creer pero así es y aunque no te guste, hay gente que cree y vive así.”

The man looked puzzled and fell silent as Dr. Rigual opened the book to continue the lecture. I sat there listening less, thinking more about the women in this man’s life, feeling sorry for them, because of how he must have subjected them to this mindset and behavior as a result. This was of course before I realized how some women were complicit regarding the patriarchy. A few weeks passed after that incident and except for the one time I saw the man walking around campus, he was nowhere near class for the rest of the semester. I always wondered why he was enrolled in the first place and concluded that he probably didn’t realize that not only was it a Catholic religious institution but one founded on educating women.

The following spring, sparked more interest in writing but this time instead of simply reading and analyzing it, I signed up for a creative writing class that would allow me to explore my own writing abilities. I took a class with the late Professor Cynthia Harper, who I first met while I was working in the computer lab where class was going to take place. I had heard the loud tapping of her boots when she approached. I matched the sound to a blond curly frazzle haired woman wearing glasses, boots, worn out jeans, carrying a linen shoulder bag over her jean

jacket. She looked stressed out and confused as she entered the classroom and then exited, eyeing the papers in her hand and then the room number on the outside of the door trying to verify that she was in the right place.

What I didn't realize is that I had been staring, annoyed and freaked out at how much noise she was making and how disheveled she looked. She noticed and we locked eyes, which resulted in her calling me out by making a face at me for my reaction. I rolled my eyes and went back to composing the email I had on my screen in front of me as she walked out. A few minutes later she walked back in with my other professor, Dr. Davis who was the head of the English department. I was a little embarrassed at having reacted the way I did but she brushed Professor Harper brushed it off as she conversed with Dr. Davis and got acquainted with her new classroom. It was then that I realized, she going to be my creative writing professor for the rest of the semester and after a few sessions, I also realized she was going to be the catalyst for my taking writing more seriously. Professor Harper encouraged her class to find inspiration in the most mundane of tasks, she encouraged us to reflect on and write about the pain we had suffered in our lives, she encouraged us to be creative with our words, but most importantly she told us to listen to our poetic voice. Out of all the professors that had guided me in my undergraduate classes, she was the most genuine. In fact, being in her class and talking to her privately helped me find closure over a relationship I had been in, for about 10 months.

The girl I had been with was a Boricua from Queens, New York named Serafina and I talked to Professor Harper about how completely devastated I was because Serafina had left me for another girl with an overbite who collected action figures. It was pathetic but Serafina broke up with her eventually and asked me back but while we were attempting to renew our relationship, she wanted to be honest in telling me that the girl she left me for was still going to



be in the picture as her friend. That didn't sit well with me so I left Serafina to figure it out on her own with her "friend."

Professor Harper's class definitely served as an outlet because all my friends knew my ex and it was awkward to be dealing with these issues while everyone was just trying to have a good time. I couldn't really turn to my parents about my personal life yet. I had just come out to them the year before and I didn't want to give them the wrong impression about my relationships or for them to think that I was on some destructive path in regard to that, because I wasn't. I just needed someone to understand my heartache. Professor Harper was that someone and because of that she went from not only being my professor, but also my friend, making sure that I was keeping up with my academic work. She reminded me that I needed some grounding, so instead of allowing my pride to be wounded or waiting for my heart to be ripped out once again, I distanced myself from Serafina and another potential plutonic threesome situation.

I had also been going to counseling sessions and that helped with making the decision to stay out of relationships for a while to recuperate. When Serafina and I broke up initially, Elida had invited me to stay with her and Selia, since they had moved into an apartment together after enduring one semester in the dorms upon their return, but again, it got weird especially when everyone would try and get together and Serafina wanted to include her new girlfriend. We were all part of the same social circles so to avoid the awkwardness I would opt to stay at the house so I spent a lot of time alone there but even living with Selia and Elida, logistically it got too crowded for three people sharing one bathroom.

I decided to find my own place which ended up being an old drafty apartment that left me a little lonely, but I resolved to have my own space where I could concentrate on my academic work because I didn't want to be distracted again and all I cared about was graduating. In all my

efforts to remove myself from the situation though, I found out that Serafina had moved out of the apartment she and I found together before we broke up, and into a place with her girlfriend about two blocks away from where I was living. When she told me, she said she hadn't noticed how close it was to where I had moved until after she signed the lease and saw the name of the streets. As a result I was often privy to seeing her with her girlfriend, and when she broke up with her, her new boifriends in their comings and goings as I went about my own business. So there went my psychological recuperation.

To my relief a few months later, I moved out of that place, into a duplex right outside the King William district, and began rooming with my friend Brenda who I met and hit it off right away with, while working at the HEB Mercado. Brenda was a few years older, and a cool cat who I started calling bro since we both had a very clear indication of our identities. As the bromance continued; the rooming situation was short lived because Brenda was never there, and Elida and Selia had broken up so it was my turn to play host to Selia before she finally asked if she could move in with me. That meant letting Brenda know she had to move out, which I found easy enough to do since she was never at the apartment and it was always difficult to locate her for the rent money.

When Selia moved in, it was the best cohabitation experience I ever had with anyone, including my family because she was usually at her old apartment with Elida, and I never had to ask for her half of any of the expenses. She even confessed that she felt relieved about having her own place to come back to when she needed a break from spending the day at school with Elida and I told her how grateful I was for being able to live with chosen family. Balancing work and homework for my classes became seamless and about a year later I ran into Serafina and started

talking again, little by little, although it got a little complicated when I met someone else before trying to rekindle that romance.

I had met Analee while I was working at the check stand and she walked up to the counter after loading all her groceries on the belt. I was having a rough day and it was refreshing to see how cheerful she was as I noticed she was wearing the same uniform as mine. I greeted her like I usually did everyone else and she smiled responding gleefully with

“Hi!”

I asked, “What store do you work at?”

She replied, “I work at the pharmacy at the one on Roosevelt.”

The rest of the exchange was pleasant but I decided that if I saw her again I would give her my phone number, so she could call me if she wanted to go out for drinks or something. A few weeks later I got to see her again during another one of her trips to the store, and did as I promised myself, giving her my phone number on the receipt for her groceries, which she claimed she accidentally discarded, after she got home and put them away.

It was a while before I had an encounter with her again and when I saw her a third time, we exchanged pleasantries before I asked “Hey you haven’t you called? You threw the receipt away didn’t you?”

She giggled and let out a sigh of guilt, “Yeah I don’t keep my receipts so it’s not a good place to give me your phone number if you want me to call you.”

I then said, “Here let me put it somewhere you won’t forget.” I took the wallet she had in her hand, opened it and grabbed the first business card I saw.

“This looks important.”

I turned it over and put my phone number on it, with the trusty pen I always carried, and put the business card back in its place in her purse, closed it and handed it to her.

“There now you won’t lose or throw out my number and you’ll remember to call me when you want to hang out.”

She was astounded at my audacity but a few days later she called and we went out. At the end of the night went back to my place to finish off what we had started at the club. A few days later we talked, and not wanting to withhold anything about my situation, I told her that I started seeing my ex again. She took the opportunity to tell me she had a husband who had been locked up for about six months already and that in fact when I gave her my phone number, I had unknowingly written it on the back of her husband’s lawyer’s business card. After she revealed all of that, I wasn’t inclined to pursue anything with her.

My thinking was that the one date we had would be the last, but Analee wasn’t going to let up and a few days after we had talked, I heard her blaring horn at three o’clock in the morning, letting that be known. Along with the rest of the neighborhood, I was of course trying to get some rest because I had class early the next day. When I answered the door I saw her sitting in the driver’s seat of her car with her knee up, pressing her hand into the middle of her steering wheel. When she saw me, she let her hand off the horn, got out of her car and pranced toward me smiling wide about her accomplishment to get me out of bed and open the door for her. When she got to where I was standing at the threshold of my door to see me livid and up close, she stopped smiling and with a confused look asked,

“You’re mad?!”

I was shocked at the inquiry and replied, “YES!!”

She sucked her teeth grumbling in disdain, immediately turning around to leave while I slammed the door behind me and went back into my apartment still upset that she would even do this simply to get my attention. It took me a while to get back to bed and the following day I talked to her, letting her know how inconsiderate she had been not only to me but to the entire neighborhood and especially to my downstairs neighbor because she had parked right outside her window while she was going at it with her car horn trying to get my attention. She said she had been out that night and didn't want to drive home because she had been drinking. I felt bad but I told her it was selfish of her and that she couldn't do that again. She gave it a few days before coming around again, and after we continued talking I eventually thought the best solution to avoid a repeat of the situation was for me to give her my house key in case she needed a place to crash for next time.

It was shortly after that, that I began talking to Serafina. Both were aware of each other but Analee disapproved of my seeing Serafina more than Serafina did of her. My thinking was that I could continue to date them but keep Analee at a distance because she was becoming too clingy and give myself some time with Serafina, which did happen. Analee was spending more time with her friends and I had begun to see Serafina more often. After one of our dates, we had gone back to my place and had a wonderful reunion. Unfortunately, I had completely forgotten about the spare key I had given Analee until she walked into the room that night seeing Serafina topless and me completely naked in bed. Serafina shook me awake from my post coital slumber as Analee's eyes widened with rage at the sight before her. Serafina got up frantically while I sat up half asleep, again shocked at Analee's presence, inside my apartment. As Serafina scrambled looking for her clothes Analee began arguing with her,

“What the fuck are you doing here?! You have no business being here!”

Serafina answered back, “I was invited here! You’re the one with no business here, walking in on us like this!”

Analee then held up the object in her hand for Serafina to see as she snapped back, “Well I have a key!” showing her legitimate right to be in the house.

I dropped my head into my hands at the reminder and realization of this and as soon as Serafina tried responding, Analee swung and hit her in the face. Then, titties swinging, Serafina tried defending herself by grabbing Analee’s hands to keep them from making contact again. I jumped out of bed and stood between them to keep the altercation from escalating any further, but realizing that I was still naked, I held out my hands between them and yelled,

“Wait!” then I bent down to pull my shorts on, figuring that if I was at least half way dressed I could salvage some of my dignity.

Serafina went back to clambering around my tiny room looking for her clothes and finished getting dressed. As I stood between her and Analee, Serafina walked out yelling,

“Don’t call me again!”

That night I stayed up listening to Analee throw a drunken fit about the scenario she had walked into as I tried explaining that it would’ve been best if she had called first. That same night I had to accompany her to the hospital because of a self-induced overdose of my pain medication which she took when she locked herself in my bathroom. It was a fucking disaster that night, to say the least, and what’s worse is that all this happened the night before a required and scheduled pre-graduation exit oral exam.

That morning after making sure Analee was released in the care of her friend, I rescheduled to take the final exit exam. A few days later, when Analee and I talked again, I explained that she and I had never agreed to be exclusive and that she fucked up by jeopardizing

my studies and making me miss my exam due to her, once again, selfish act. We stopped talking for a while and I continued my studies. When I took the rescheduled exam, I was disappointed about the topic of discussion because it had not been my first choice and some prick was dominating the conversation, which wasn't allowing anyone in the discussion group to fully participate. I think the only reason I passed is because I challenged him in that regard. What I couldn't reconcile was why I was in there in the first place.

After a few months Analee and I got back in touch. She agreed that if we were going to be involved and exclusive, she wasn't going to be so crazy. Even though I knew she was self-destructive if she didn't get her way I went with it because I felt like I was supposed to be there for her, I the hero and she the damsel. Our relationship began as a perfect disaster.

## **No Slips**

It didn't just slip out.

Something like that

Doesn't just slip out.

When you say it

You mean it.

Feel it.

Right before you speak.

Like when you've indulged

In certain

Debauchery

And you find yourself

In a sort of mourning.

Your Kneeling

Anticipating those oral tears

Over your own condition.

You don't just say something like that

Not thinking about how it's gonna be.



It's in you

Wanting to explode.

So when you say it

It doesn't just

Slip.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE DAMSEL AND I

There were more manic and self-destructive episodes at the beginning of our relationship, like the time my friend Brenda and her girlfriend Cassandra and Analee and I went out to play pool. While Brenda and I were playing pool, Analee started getting drunk and obnoxious. I told her to take it easy on the drinks, so to avoid my admonitions she went to get drinks at the bar and found some friends and left me playing pool with Brenda. I kept wondering where she was until Brenda noticed she stayed at the bar. Brenda eventually left with Cassandra and I stayed out of guilt but quickly regretted it when Analee wouldn't leave with me.

The pool hall wasn't too far from my apartment but it was late and I didn't want to walk so I called the only other person that I knew would come get me. Javier was Analee's cousin's boyfriend and a sweet guy. When I called he answered the phone and he was cheerful and willing to pick me up, which I was glad for since it was such a late hour. It was the only night I hadn't brought my own vehicle and I sat there regretting it as I waited for Javier to arrive. When he finally got there, he didn't ask any questions which I was also glad for. I didn't want to leave Analee there at the bar but I did after all because she wasn't being reasonable. The next day we talked and I told her what she had done as she sat there trying to recall as I was explaining it all to her because she couldn't remember everything.

I thought a lot about that night and what I was willing to accept. I wanted to leave Analee and live a separate life because I knew I'd be better off. I kept trying to save the damsel, but had

finally reached my limit, so I stayed away for a few weeks with the intention of taking it slow. Things were normal again and after about two and a half months Analee and I decided that it would make more economic sense for me move in with her, her three kids and her brother and her cousin.

I began working at a non-profit organization transcribing interviews for their drop-out prevention research project and then got a second steady job working the night shift at a call center. This was convenient since Rosie, the youngest of Ana's kids, was starting preschool and Ana usually worked early as a pharmacy tech. Very quickly I began to realize I was going to need more than two part-time jobs if I was going to help raise this family. Ana never asked me for that but it was inevitable given the circumstances. I was hoping to get a job in town and even applied at the UT Health Science Center. I got a call back but by that time, I had decided to enroll in a teaching certification program at UT Pan American.

Analee relocated her family here to the Valley so that I could complete my certification and get full time work as an elementary teacher. I knew this would be the best way for me to gain experience but this would also be the biggest distraction from what I really wanted to do, which was write. After my first year I got that opportunity and what I produced was commendable and true to life.

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### **Feet First**

Damn it! What the hell is going on with my shoe? The back part of it is digging into my ankle. I shouldn't have worn these socks. They're thin! I hate thin socks! I don't know what type of material it is, but I feel as if I'd been walking through mud.

I think I just found the culprit! A sticker entwined in the worn cuff of my jeans! Yes! Oh no! It wasn't my shoe. Poor shoe, I'm sorry. You've treated me so well and here I am blaming...wait a minute, I still feel something in there; but the culprit's already been removed! Damn it shoe, it is you! No wait...it's the sock! It's too thin! I hate thin socks! Why did I wear these?!...Because they match my t-shirt. Oh my God, because they match my t-shirt? Really?! Of all the things to coordinate with, I choose a t-shirt?!

*I'm going to the t-shirt ball so I must wear matching socks, that way when it's my turn to walk the cat walk, as everyone at the t-shirt ball is expected to do, they will all see that I have matching socks. Although when matching my socks with my t-shirt for the t-shirt ball, I failed to take into consideration that these socks SUCK! My feet are all moisturizing but not in that Palmolive way, and the back of my ankle, currently a prodded target, like a conductor on a train with a pistol in his back; all of this, because I wanted to be fashionable instead of comfortable. That goes totally against my rules! Why did I break the rules?! I never break the rules! The rules are there to make my life simpler. Now I'm up to sweaty feet and prodded ankles in discomfort, but hey it's important that I do it "in style" for the sake of the ball ::sigh::*

I remember the last time I disregarded the rules. I had to pay for it in a whole different way. You see comfort is important to me especially when traveling because when I go, it's always with my girls and my lovely Analee. I never have a cold soda, always water at room temperature. I make sure I wear jeans and thick socks as a precaution because Ana always feels the need to emulate the Pantene commercial or perhaps a thousand mile vertical freefall, except we're not jumping out of airplanes or whipping our heads to show the silky smoothness of our hair. We're simply sitting in front of the air conditioner becoming one with the popsicle. The

kids know to bring their sweaters and heavy San Marcos blankets too. You need something heavy to protect you against the pseudo-arctic Analee commands.

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### **My Favorite Mistake**

Title inspired by the hit single from Sheryl Crow

My three year old daughter Rosie was at my sister's house and my other daughter Erin was in San Antonio visiting her aunt. Analee decided she wanted to go get Rosie. It would be quick just to and from, but she also had the notion of calling Erin, who again was in San Antonio, to see how she was doing. Erin, my sweet Erin. Let me explain.

Erin loves her world. She is at peace in it because she is the center of it. Those on the outside of her world, which is the rest of the planet, or anyone outside of her primary circle of friends (herself), abhor her world because it distracts her from the responsibility of simple tasks such as listening, following directions and well you know, eye contact. Simply put my sweet Erin is a prisoner of her right brain and at times it becomes problematic. At some point during her visit, she was supposed to be taking care of her one and a half year old cousin. She dozed off instead. Her baby cousin then decided to paint a mural on the wall with crayons. You can imagine the mess. Her aunt insisted we go get Erin for what I concluded to be lack of responsibility. It's understandable, and so our great voyage began, Analee still in her uniform, which I had suggested she change out of, and I in thong sandals, both of us completely unprepared, and on our way to get Rosie at my sister's and Erin in San Antonio.

Not once did it dawn on me. Not once after Ana hung up with Erin's sister Iris, who conveyed the message of irresponsibility did this occur to me; not once when I walked up and down the stairs to and from the babysitter's apartment to get Rosie did it occur to me; not once

when we were on our way to San Antonio from my sister's house, which was only fifteen minutes away from our house, did it occur to me that I was wearing thong sandals and we were about to embark on a road trip.

Rosie sat in the back seat buckled with her chin resting on her palm. She dozed at the scenery and occasionally turned to make sure the truck wasn't all of a sudden on autopilot driving itself. The 5 p.m. heat and Analee's polar pneumatic blaster allowed for a good negotiation in temperature. This is why I didn't even think to complain about my chanclas.

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### **Hour 1: The Announcement**

As we approached the Falfurrias checkpoint I rigidly announce, "Me feet are cold."

"Well, lower the a/c," responds Analee. She then reached to remedy my frosty feet, turning the thermostat dial closer to the red for warm.

"But then it's going to get hot," I retorted. Analee tightened her lips and her grip on the wheel. She growled, "You need to make up your mind. Do you want the a/c on or off?"

Not withholding my own crabbiness, "I don't want it off; I just want to be comfortable. Had you told me that we were going to San Antonio after picking up Rosie, I would have known to bring the right shoes. Instead here I am in my chanclas."

"What difference does it make what you're wearing. It's not like you're walking over there!" snaps Ana.

"No, I'm not walking over there but I like my feet to be comfortable when I travel. But NOOOOO! You have to have the a/c blasting in our faces all the time..."

She interrupted belligerently, "That's because it's hot!"

“I’m not hot! Rosie isn’t hot! You’re the only one that’s hot! Did you ever notice that? You could be standing the middle of the Arctic Circle and you’d still be hot!” After this last retaliation, my aggression began to subside. With the checkpoint coming into view, and a line of cars at a stand-still Analee bitterly asked, “Do you want me to turn back so you can get your shoes and your socks?” I thought, *How could she ask that?! We’re already an hour away! I’d rather stop somewhere and get some shoes and socks but that’s not going to happen because there aren’t any shoe stores in the middle of the montes in Texas!*

“Well are you going to answer me?” she asked. I wanted to continue but I hadn’t the energy. It was all being used to heat my feet. I continued to look out the window as the truck came to a cruise, then a creep, then a stop. For a few minutes the silence was impenetrable. Analee continued to inch the truck forward toward the border agents and their monotonous questioning.

She broke the silence with, “Can you get my card out?” She was referring to her resident card. Before, she would have never thought to expose it until I pointed out that one day they might ask her if she is an American citizen. She would respond with a ‘yes’ and the cosmos would, with our combined luck, insist that we be pulled over and questioned. It would be at this point that the border agents find out Ana was not an American citizen, but rather a permanent resident from Durango, Mexico. So how would a little white lie about citizenship look to a border agent? I therefore always advised her that showing the card would save everyone time and energy in the long run.

We approached and as always I remembered my mother, trained while traveling north with her migrant family, in the art of responding gaily to government officials. She made us, my sister and I, veterans at this by the time we were able to speak. I began my review.

*Remember to look cheerful. It's the American way. When they ask where you're from and where you're going, answer them quickly. Say 'Yes sir' and maintain eye contact. Any hesitation will invoke suspicion or perhaps a long delay...I wouldn't mind a delay though. It's not like I've got an illegal immigrant family cooking up a pot of beans and roasting corn in the back of the clearly visible pick up. I'd be able to defrost my damn feet too. God I'm cold and she kept the a/c vent on high. Isn't she cold? Okay there he is. She's opening the window. Get ready.*

"Hello." The border agent peers into the front cab of the truck. Cheerful and simultaneously, "Hello-Hi."

"Where y'all headed?" Cheerful and simultaneously, "San Antonio." Before he could continue questioning, Ana handed him her card. He reviewed it as she lowered the back window. Our daughter Rosie propped herself up as he took a step to look in the rear cab. *Nothing suspicious in there either*, I thought, *just a five year old waiting to take her nap. Move along now*. He stepped back toward Analee and handed her card back. "Have a nice day." We continued on our way with the pressure of validating our citizenship relieved. Physical comfort then continued to be the only issue-for me.

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## **Hour 2 The Remedy of Silence**

After passing the checkpoint, the conversation transitioned from that of verbal to a variation of sighs and body shifting. I closed all the vents on my side of the dashboard, but the only way to navigate the floor vent was to put my feet up and leave them completely exposed to the passing public. I couldn't stand it. I felt like a foot whore. Like one of those people that sit in the passenger seat with their feet propped up for everyone to see. You may as well have your ass hanging out the window. I despise seeing any transitory vehicle with a pair of feet propped up on



the dash. And then it's even worse when you catch the feet that look like they've been walking the pavement before entering and assuming their exposed relaxed position in the front seat. I guess for me it's an issue of intimacy and mystery. It's the only thing we have left to hide and if you show that, then well, what else is there? It's just not right.

We continued in our 'dumbness.' For me it was threefold, for not only was I maintaining my muteness but a hypocrite of my own traveling etiquette. I tried to keep my feet firmly planted on the dash, but to continue this position for another three hours I would've had to have been a practiced yogi. I had to face it. It was my turn to be the person I despised.

I watched the scenery go by just like I had dozens of times before. Its familiarity always soothed me as I kept a mental inventory of certain foliage along the way. I reviewed the reasoning behind my argument.

*I should have said something when we were closer to the house. No, I should have done something even before leaving the house, namely put on my shoes. I knew I was going with Ana. Ana is spur of the moment. We're spur of the moment. We do this all the time. It's what keeps us sane. Why didn't I just put on my shoes? Look for the source. What is the source? It was hot during the day...I didn't need shoes...I wore sandals. Driving with Ana should automatically say to me shoes and socks. Were we rushing? She was. She didn't even change out of her work uniform. But I had plenty of time to change. I got home way before she did. AHHH! I got it. I was tired from my long day. That's it. I was tired and not expecting this trip, this soon. I thought she would say 'let's go home, and pack a bag for tomorrow,' which is what I was counting on, but she didn't. She did what we always do. She just went for it. Sometimes it works for us, but today it didn't. It's that simple.*

“Ana I’m sorry. It’s just that my feet were cold and they still are...” I reached for her forearm as I continued my monologue. “...plus you never know what might happen. I may end up having to walk to the nearest town for gas or we might end up with a flat tire or something. How can someone maneuver a huge tire, like the ones on this truck, in sandals?” I asked as I chuckled. I mean it’s not impossible but you need traction. Traction is important for manual labor, otherwise it’s going to take twice the amount of time it would for someone with the proper attire. God forbid this ever happen...”

Her solution pounded at me from the inside of her lips. “DO YOU NOT REMEMBER THAT WE HAVE ROADSIDE ASSISTANCE? DO YOU NOT REMEMBER THAT THIS TRUCK IS STILL UNDER WARRANTY?”

I stared at her for a few seconds with my jaw slightly ajar, in utter disbelief. I returned my cajoling hand to my own lap thinking, *How could she bring up roadside assistance when it’s completely irrelevant to me?*

I came back with, “DO YOU NOT REMEMBER THAT I HATE WAITING?”

“Well what choice do you have?” she retorted sarcastically. “You’re in chancas.” She had me cornered like an idiot. What else could I say? I couldn’t say anything. I didn’t know what to say.

“Damn you Analee. I’m trying to apologize here.”

“I don’t want your apology. I want your shoes on your feet so you could shut the hell up. You knew you were coming with me. We always do things like this on the spur of the moment. It’s what keeps us sane. Why didn’t you just put your shoes on? You got home before I did.”

The accuracy of her critique to my sentiments halted my indisposition and even warmed my cold feet. She reminded me why I always gravitated to her. She sees me even before I see

myself. There was nothing left to say except. “I’ll stop Ana.” And with that she left me with the last inch of my pride.

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### **3,4 Shut the Door**

Our daughter Rosie had been asleep during the entire episode but she awoke just in time for our break in Alice. I went inside the store with the hopes of following through with my traveling regiment of burritos and more water, but I was quickly disappointed because they were out of burritos. Ana reminded me that it was late in the day and the clerks were probably going to wait until the following day to fix a fresh batch. I should’ve known that the cosmos had long ago decided this day was going to be a humbling travel day.

After our pit stop in Alice, Analee and I agreed that after picking Erin up we would rest overnight at her brother’s house in Floresville, and enjoy a burrito the next day on the way back home.

The rest of the way to San Anto we speculated over what else Erin may have done to win her aunt’s disapproval. The possibilities were endless. We talked about trivial household matters as Rosie continued her acute observations. Occasionally she would verbalize them in her matter of fact tone. She had a way of finding things out and telling you about them as if she had known their intricate truths all along and at times it sounded pretty convincing because of her thirty year old mentality, only she’s in a smaller three year old package. It’s hard to uphold authority over her too because, like her mother she tends to point out the obvious or the deficiency in any argument.

We got to San Antonio and quickly made our way to Floresville. I wanted to shut the whole matter out on the other side of a door, but just as I suspected Analee went off about my

episode, telling her brother EVERYTHING. Jr sniggered at my foolishness and later when we began discussing what we could all do together during his time off, he loosened his tongue and wit on me as he enjoyed his nit picking.

“Maybe we can go hiking somewhere? Not a chanclas hike but a regular hike, you know, like with boots and socks on our feet.”

I was being devoured.

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### **A Note for Closure**

JR. brought his fiancée Roxi down for her birthday for the following weekend. I knew we were going somewhere as soon as they arrived, so there I was putting on my shoes. I noticed my ankle was still bothering me so I took a closer look at it and found a small circular redness on the back of my ankle. I found the real culprit of my original discomfort. It was a splinter I had somehow embedded from the sticker I found in the cuff of the jeans I wore. I took some tweezers and removed it before heading out. I of course wore my shoes and socks.

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The trips between the valley and San Antonio to visit Ana’s family went on for about two years before Ana began expressing her frustrations. One night she had finally had enough and drank a whole bottle of wine and went to work the following day with no trace of a hangover. We talked and decided to leave the house we were renting and stay with my cousin for the spring so it would give us time to look for a house and jobs before moving back to San Antonio. Analee asked for a transfer from her job. In mid spring, I went up for a teacher’s job fair at UTSA and quickly found a gig in south San Antonio in the neighborhood where Ana wanted to move. She

was being strategic in choosing that location because she knew the school district was exemplary. It even said so on their website.

In the meantime, while we were living with my cousin and her son, Jacob, my second cousin who had come out to me when I was in high school, told me that my father was adopted. I couldn't inquire about it much because a few days later my uncle died and no one was interested in sharing who my father's family really was and how he came to be adopted by the Solís family. I've found out more, slowly as the years have gone by, but I must admit that after finding out initially, I didn't want to leave. I would've preferred to stay and find out the circumstances of my father's adoption, but the decision had been made and we went back up. Our relationship lasted another 5 years before we couldn't stand each other any longer. Honestly I think the only reason I stayed is because of the kids but mostly because of my youngest, Rosie

Analee eventually found comfort with a woman that she worked with and I wasn't going to compete so I moved out. A few months later I started graduate classes which kept me busy but still within Ana's grasp. She visited me a few times in my new apartment, which kept giving me hope, but I realized her visits were more for her own closure. Eventually, I told her I didn't want to see or talk to her anymore unless it was absolutely necessary. We still had some mutual financial obligations. After those were taken care of I made it a point to lose touch with her while I finished my graduate work. It was difficult to shake her memory because we had been raising a family together but for my own sanity, I had to distance myself from the girls too. Analee's divorce became final after she and I separated and two months later she had a wedding ceremony for herself and her new catch.

About a year later at the end of my graduate studies things were changing at work with a new administrator who had no clue and I, less patience. Realizing that I had nothing but a job I

didn't want anymore, to look forward to everyday I decided to move to California with Delia my first girlfriend from high school that had dumped me because I couldn't go out to the bars with her and her boyfriend in Reynosa. She had reached out to me and I thought how serendipitous it was that I had separated from Ana and Delia was finding less and less interest in her alcoholic husband.

Once I moved out there, I found out very quickly how much of a disaster it was because we were completely incompatible. What was worse is that I had just received my master's degree and I couldn't find a job in California because I failed to realize that the country was in the middle of a recession and I was better off, financially, staying in San Antonio with the job I hated. I still felt broken from my previous relationship and, with these new circumstances, also defeated. Delia had no patience to help me figure it out and pick up the pieces because she had two teenagers and a seven year old son to raise. Late that September I decided to call my mother and ask her to help me get home. I packed my truck with as much as I could and drove to Arizona where I stayed at a rest stop because I had no money for a hotel. The next day I drove to my friend's parent's house in Las Cruces, New Mexico. I then drove to San Antonio from there and stayed with my comadre Selia. I hung around there for a few days to regroup and then came home still feeling totally wounded and completely disillusioned about every decision I had made up until that point.

## **A Seam in the Grass**

That's an impressive trick,  
but I saw you.  
Slithering  
as I hacked away, clearing the  
Obscurement around you.

I didn't expect to find you here;  
to encounter you in my  
Moment of Diligence.

I wondered what I should've done  
after seeing you  
Mingling so well with the grass.

I granted mercy  
for Coatlicue's seam.

And although you were exposed  
in your temporary locale  
you remained—  
to my amazement;

as if you knew  
I was to be trusted  
while I completed my charge.

Anyone else would've included you  
as part of their preening.  
An allowance expected  
to honor Eve.

You were lucky  
there was some brush nearby,  
and that I know your kind.



## CHAPTER XII

### PRODIGAL

My attempt at trying to live in California was a disaster and I arrived back home from that west coast hiatus feeling like a failure. I knew I needed to look for a job as soon as possible to pay my Mom back, to be a productive member of the family and society.

I looked for a job for a month and a half. Considered going back to San Antonio before finding one in McAllen ISD.

When I began working I found that the administrator I worked for was not the kind to encourage but to dictate to her staff. There were several occasions where I saw teachers leaving her office in tears. This overbearing style was in direct conflict with what I knew to be more effective in leadership and educational practice. I finished out the year and left that campus for another, settling for work that wasn't conducive to my degree in reading education and even though I was not able to teach in my field of expertise, I was willing to compromise, were it not for the conflicting philosophies (mine and the campus supported by district administration) of bilingual education and language acquisition. I was not only not teaching in my field of expertise, I was also perpetuating a colonization of language and therefore culture, because I was not able to deliver instruction in the language that allowed the majority of my students access to their heritage, to their Mexican-ness. I thought— how contradictory to our border region, how contradictory to me. This was also where I decided that it was my last year as a public school educator.

In both localities of employment I had found that there was a place for me as a woman as long as I was able to engage in heteronormative conversation, which was at odds with my identity as a lesbian. At times when I commented about the children I had raised with my former partner but because of the nature of my relationship with another woman and not ‘genuinely’ and biologically a mother, most of the time during conversations, I experienced uncomfortable silences. You get shut out of these conversations. When I would comment on any aspect of my previous relationship my role in it was dismissed because my counterpart hadn’t been a man. My role in the conversation was further constricted to that of a mute observer because I had no verbal place in it.

As I continued to navigate my work life I did have my immediate family as a support system. This however, meant choosing between two extremes; either I drink and smoke away my sorrows with my drug and alcohol addicted father or go to church to praise the lord with my mother. The choices I was given felt limiting but I tried engaging through my faith and found that there was a place for me in my church on the condition that I accepted the pastor’s interpretation of the bible as the word of God. As I sat there listening to his sermons I understood the rhetoric as an oppressive patriarchal tool; a man’s weapon. I did not take well to feeling threatened in a church my grandparents and father were instrumental in constructing both in terms of edifice and community.

I stopped attending services because the message was, and still is, in direct opposition with my interpretation of the bible, my way of life and preference for inclusiveness and acceptance as a worshipping member of the congregation. I attended fewer services but despite this my Mom kept inviting me to church. I instead busied myself with exercise, work, and in moments of despair, I tried writing as a form of catharsis but there were too many incohesive

thoughts going through my mind. I continued distracting myself by watching a lot of movies and reading some of my favorite books from my undergraduate studies that contained short stories, essays and poetry.

Occasionally I visited old friends that I had kept in touch with over the years but my interactions with people were less frequent as I had already turned to the books I read during my undergraduate studies because I felt the need to reacquaint myself with literature that would reaffirm that there were other women who lived like I had. I reencountered all the feminist theories, poetry and short stories recorded in this anthology that validated women's experiences. I understood that the disenfranchisement some of these stories conveyed were not new concepts among Mexican-American women who embodied their values. I could relate and understood them as creators and models for me. More and more I came to realize that I was even getting bored with these distractions and I needed to move on to what I had always wanted to do all along—write.

I asked a friend of mine to help me with a personal statement for my application toward an MFA. I also sought community but found very little because I had been gone for so long. When I would converse with my chosen family, I found that a community of younger gay and lesbian folks was present here throughout the Valley but there were a very small number of my gay peers with the same boldness of presence and outward visibility. I found this tremendously strange and, again, clashing with what I was used to—where the different people and aspects of my life converged and flowed very well; where I didn't have to choose between hiding and not. What I also found odd especially in the dealings with people here was that I had to qualify with others knowing me and where I came from through my family, which in my case was challenging because I had not been living here for the past ten years.

When I returned to living in La Blanca, a *colonia* east of Edinburg just outside the small town of Elsa, no one knew me nor of my accomplishments unless I was mentioning my parents or handing them my resume. This felt very disheartening because I was accustomed to being trusted and having my autonomy, not being policed or keeping myself, including my sexuality, separate from all other aspects of my life.

This small town and its heteronormative community standard of identifying felt too reductive for me and had been the reason I left the Valley right after graduating in 1996 from Edinburg High School, in the first place. I would come back for the summers but then eventually stayed in San Antonio figuring that the LGBTQ community here would become more visible as time progressed. On the contrary, society here was and still is operating under the paradigm of patriarchy and familial origins, which is fine if you're a man or weren't estranged to the Valley, like I had been. It was all very different from living up state for the last ten years because I thought I was done having to prove my self-worth.

Here in the Valley, I was constantly being challenged in all aspects of my identity. For instance, when I went to work in the last teaching position I had, I was hired at the school district where I originally began teaching. The principal that hired me knew this and also knew that I had returned. During one of our conversations, she made the comment that if I hadn't gone up there I would have already been better established here. I wasn't exactly sure what she meant by "here." Did she mean here at work? Here at the home? Here in the village-like Valley society? I interpreted it as all three and her comment made me feel like I had made all the wrong choices in my life. I continued trying to manage but became overwhelmed being *arreatada*, experiencing mini occurrences of *conocimiento* having them compile into a metaphorical wall, with everything I tried to do. I determined that when I was living upstate, I had been existing in what

turned out to be my defiant bubble—teaching children their core subjects using English and Spanish congruently as the academic language, raising a family with another woman as my spouse, having friends of all ages and different walks of life, and even worshipping at an inclusive church of the same denomination as the one I attended here in the Valley since childhood.

I wasn't expecting some outlandish celebration for when I came home, I just wanted to a smooth reintegration to continue my life as it had been, but it wasn't a warm homecoming because I did not fit and was quickly dismissed as an outsider in this place I call home. My entire value system had been brought into question and the message being communicated to me was that it was all wrong. I struggled to understand this because I thought even though I was gone, it had been long enough that the people in the Valley would have caught up to the idea of acceptance of my kind—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender—us queers. That was not the case and with this I began to battle thoughts of suicide because if I couldn't find a place to work, live, and thrive as the person that I became, then I could not exist here at all. And it's not that I had changed, it's that I have always known who I wanted to be and how I wanted to present myself to the people around me. I "[took] [my] story out into the world, testing it...[and] the world fail[ed] to live up to [my] ideals (This Bridge We Call Home 545). I didn't realize my expectations of it were so high.

I navigated my inner struggles with my Mother as a strong proponent continuing to offer her support. I knew these suicidal thoughts were simply my mind's reaction to my agonizing situation. I asked my Mom to start waking me up in the morning so that we could begin our day with some exercise. It seemed the logical thing to do at the time so that I could deal with these heavy issues. (Recently during a conversation with my partner, I came to find out that running is

considered a form of prayer by the Hopis, every step honoring your ancestors and at the same time considered a sacrifice so that the Great Spirit could impart some of its strength to you.) Needless to say, this routine activity was the best thing I could have done for my mental, physical and spiritual health. I also would not have been able to get through the changes and challenges in my life were it not for my Mom helping me work through some aspects of my inner battles. Afterwards, what was left to figure out was what to do after, which at first I mostly handled on my own.

## **A Former Educator Gone Rogue**

They were young and eager and I was fresh full of theory

80-20 is the model I was given to implement

Translation—

Transitional beginnings of dominating second language acquisition

At the time I didn't understand what that meant

'Cause all I saw was the need for 50/50

Cognates, transliteration, cognitive translation

Of the interpersonal, social and academic language.

I was proficient.

And took that on 100 percent.

'Cause Gisselle just wanted to talk to her daddy

Whose name to her was actually pápi.

They were my babies too you know

Jesse, Irene, Destiny, Robert and Rafaél

Their minds like sponges and I

The living water they soaked in.

Now

A former educator gone rogue

Out the other side of the educational pipeline

The system's worst nightmare

Hello.

I have returned.

Training under my belt

You don't even know.

I am a specialist efficient in accountability.

This is my systematic responsibility.

Call this the one two three four math of mirrors

Call me your social experiment and scientific reflection.

The end result of my training

Re-Cog-ni-tion

Of our linguistic educational oppression.

It's time to catch up Raza!

Even the Anglos know

Some even better able to speak our own language.

They see, I see value in bi-, tri-, and multi-

In our culture and language

'Cause it all equals life squared, cubed



And gold

So here's your permission slip

You only need to challenge yourself

Follow my lead.

It all adds up.

So let me spell it out.

This was my reading response thanks to Rosenblatt,

Louise. ('Cause you always gotta quote someone...)

Do you know this poem?

Do You Read?

DO YOU READ?

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE POWER OF PERFORMANCE

I had made it into graduate school for a second time but I think my personal statement was good enough that whoever took the application and reviewed it along with my poetry, took pity on me and just let me into the program. I think about it now and I know that because I was still trying to recover from the last two years of my life, and what I wrote were just fragmented thoughts I passed off as poetry. I remember calling the university in this “are we doing this or not” tone wanting to know if I had been accepted. I decided that if they had told me no, I was just going to find some mindless job and be swallowed by the everyday of existing.

My first two classes were pretty exciting but during my second semester in the creative writing program at UTPA, I found hope when I was invited, by my friend and xingona slam poet Amalia Ortíz, to join a poetry and performance collective called WAKE-UP Womyn Artistically Collecting Experiencias-Unidas Prosperando. She and the rest of the mujeres who made up this collective, included founding members Laura Lee Oviedo, Gladys Ornelas, Claudia Hernandez, Eloisa M. Torres, Linda Anne Gonzalez, and Nayeli Garcia, all of which are now UTRGV and/or WAKE-UP alumni.

WAKE-UP was due to perform at *El Retorno: El Valle Celebra Nuestra Gloria*, the preconference symposium of the 2014 *El Mundo Zurdo Conference* in the Borderlands Room on the UTPA Legacy campus. As I was preparing to perform for the first time with this group, I watched the videos they had uploaded so that I could see their performances and understand not

only their style of delivery but also their politics. I was happy to see that, like me, they centered and wrote around feminist and intersectional issues. As I watched them on video, I remember thinking that if I was going to perform with this group, I better bring my ‘A’ game, so I decided to write something that resembled a narrative monologue to not only read during our opening act for the upcoming El Retorno event but because I had decided it was time to deliver this piece in front of an audience. In addition to reading with WAKE-UP, I had signed up to read for The Valley International Poetry Festival (VIPF), which was going to be taking place during that coming weekend.

Several weeks prior, the rest of us had met to discuss the theme of our work and arrange our pieces for cohesive delivery. Afterwards, we began rehearsing enough times to know our cues, to read fluently, and to engage the audience with our narrative and poetry, practicing as a collective and preparing our individual work that followed for the best audience impression. What the mujeres had written, for a previous event, was centered on the theme of identity. It was a seamless way for me to not only join but create, considering my circumstances at the time and that I had already written something around that theme for the 2014 Valley International Poetry Festival (VIPF). The writing I had done came about as a long narrative and I was glad to already have had something to present for WAKE-UP’s very important presentation at El Retorno.

I hadn’t realized the magnitude of it all until I connected several facts about it: (1) this university was Anzaldúa’s alma mater, (2) the event was taking place in the ‘Borderlands’ Room named after her book and (3) the event at which I was performing was named after a poem she had written in the Borderlands book. Along with all of that, the guest poet Dr. Ines Hernández-Ávila, had come to give us some guidance at the invitation of WAKE-UP advisor & El Retorno coordinator Emmy Pérez, and was one of Anzaldúa’s friends during the time that she had been

writing her early famous works. I was to perform in a space literally created out of Anzaldúa concepts where the poetry of the Valley was being honored and celebrated through the Anzaldúa legacy. It was an honor to be performing for such an impressive occasion.

As my first performance with this group, I read and delivered my individual piece as a response to the treatment I got in the Valley upon my return. What I didn't anticipate, while I was reading, was how it shook me viscerally and unexpectedly. During the actual delivery and presentation of my work, I was overcome with emotion because it was such an intimate space so proximal to the audience, compared to the previous time where I was on a stage reading for VIPF mostly blinded by the lights with a limited view. As I read, I pushed through and continued reading, choking back the knot in my throat and the tears that continued surfacing. It was my first experience reading in front of an audience so close in proximity and in such an intimate space, and what's more is it was also my first experience having a visceral reaction to my own realization of being marginalized. I was just as surprised as the audience when it happened and grateful afterwards to have Amalia step in and explain that sometimes when poets read their work they have visceral reactions to what they are sharing with the audience. For me it was just confirmation that I was beginning the process of healing and what I was expressing came from a deep rooted suppression of angst and frustration. I was grateful to have her support as well as that of the rest of the mujeres in the group.

The presentations and performances continued that summer with Amalia once again inviting me to perform with WAKE UP for the MALCS 2014 Conference. I agreed to join her and the other mujeres and even invited my friend Sylvia Vera-Huesca along since she had studied theater in Xalapa, Mexico figuring she would be an asset to the group. The day after getting back home from a study abroad trip in London and Paris, I was driving to El Rito, New

Mexico to perform with this group for a second time knowing full well that this was an opportunity to prove myself.

Before this surprise invitation I had agreed to perform with the group in the fall to open for visiting author Tim Z. Hernandez. Taking into account that we were going to have a limited amount of time, I changed my two-page narrative into a poem that expressed the same ideas morphing it into a shorter version for economy of language, easier memorization and performance delivery. It was fortunate that I had already made these changes because this was the piece I was going to be reading for the upcoming MALCS performance, the summer conference which Amalia had once again invited me.

When we performed this second time it was in a small narrow adobe building at the back of El Rito's Northern New Mexico College campus, which looked like it was part of a hacienda type structure. After rehearsing a few more times, we set up to present. At first, there was a small audience crammed into a narrow room but we waited before beginning our presentation and soon there were people trickling in to sit and eventually standing to watch us perform. During our rehearsal, Amalia decided we would do a two-part performance titled "*Slices of Life*" and "*Lotería: Everyday Divine*," which the other group members had performed at the NACCS 2014 conference. "*Slices of Life*" addresses the struggle with how we identify as women of color living on the border. "*Lotería: Everyday Divine*" is the empowerment piece for how we reconcile and navigate the border as women of color. Since most Mexicanos living on the border are familiar with the game, each of the mujeres chose one of the lotería cards as inspiration and reference to reinterpret that idea. Some versions of the cards even have dichos written on the back, which the mujeres also used to help with their writing. I really appreciated the twofold intention here because not only were we transmitting the iconography of these cards and their

sayings as cultural touchstones but also reinterpreting them and giving them a women of color and third space spin during our performance, although I didn't have the words to name that at the time.

With my piece for "*Slices of Life*," I took the Emily Dickenson approach naming my poem with the first line. Later it came to be known as "*Donde está mi gente*." I had not been with the group long enough to have written a "*Lotería*" piece so I ended up reading founding member, Laura Lee Oviedo's piece called "*La Soldada*." I don't remember the exact words but I do remember how powerful a piece it was and that I could easily read and identify with it because I come from a family that has a legacy of veterans including my father who is a Vietnam veteran.

During that performance though, I felt myself transforming from a daughter of patriots into someone else. Those first three performances, reading for the Valley International Poetry Festival, opening at El Retorno and the MALCS 2014 performance were key turning points for me realizing my own artistry as a writer. It was a whirlwind I would not soon forget and would continue to look forward and advocate to in the weeks and months to come.

We wanted to continue the momentum of the group so we met and talked at the beginning of the 2014 fall semester. Linda, one of our members at the time, advised us on the benefits of making WAKE UP a student organization so we decided to begin working on making that happen. A few days later Eloisa went to the Office for Student Involvement (OSI), like Linda had suggested, and asked for information about what we were going to need and how to draft the document to make WAKE UP a student organization on campus. OSI gave her a Constitution Requirements Checklist and a sample constitution that we referred to, as we began drafting a constitution of our own for the group. We met again in early November to discuss the

mission statement, which would outline what kind of organization and space we wanted to provide for women students on campus. Thankfully someone had already drafted something along those lines and the document had been saved on a pamphlet from a previous performance. We took the information under the “Who we are” section and the paragraph describing what the group does, amended those and added it as Article II Section I of the WAKE UP constitution. Initially we wanted for it to be an organization exclusively for women but then when reading the checklist that OSI had provided, this was only going to be possible if we were establishing ourselves as a Greek organization. This seemed unfair but we ultimately decided that the best solution for this was to write the constitution so that it would not only include women but also anyone who identified as feminine. We continued discussing the non-negotiables and came up with a constitution to turn in to OSI for review. Although, it was pretty close to the end of the semester, we knew it would be best to submit next semester and then continue following up. In the spring of 2015 we submitted the document for approval but were unsuccessful the first time. It was sent back to us and we edited as necessary. This occurred several times, I lost count of how many but then finally got an approval from OSI and WAKE UP officially became a student organization in February 2015. Everyone was relieved but I knew there was more that needed to be done.

I remembered the conversation we had initially where Linda said that setting up WAKE UP as a student organization would make it easier to fundraise on campus, so what was left to do is not only consider fundraising but also consider where to put the money once we did. I knew that if we were going to become a legitimate organization on campus, we needed to have a bank account, but that’s all I knew, so once again I went to visit OSI for some guidance. They told me that in order to get a bank account I was going to need to register our organization as a non-profit

entity and in order to do that I needed to get an Employer Identification Number or EIN from the IRS. I also went to the bank to find out what they were going to need in terms of documentation and the woman at the bank helping me, said I was going to need an official letter from the university stating that our bank account was to be opened on behalf of an approved organization on campus. This all sounded very serious and official and I have to admit I was a little apprehensive—mostly because of the EIN from the IRS. I thought, “*Man! Anything to do with the IRS is fuckin’ scary! They can take whatever they want if you screw up with them. Is it really worth it for this organization to continue?*” The end of the spring semester approached and I began the process again at the beginning of the fall semester.



## **Pocket Poem**

*Adapted from a written work by my late father Noe Solís—May 26, 1950-January 28, 2017*

THE UNIVERSE MUST LOVE YOU  
VERY MUCH, (INSERT YOUR NAME HERE). BECAUSE  
AT YOUR CORE,  
HEART AND MIND, YOU ARE  
THE UNIVERSE IN MINATURE, YOU ARE  
THE LIVING PLASMA OF CREATION,  
THE POSITIVE, UPLIFTING  
FORCE, YOU THE COLLECTOR, THE  
PRESERVER, PROTECTOR, THE NEST BUILDER.  
YOU'RE THE BRIDGE OF THE  
GENERATIONS (INSERT YOUR NAME HERE). IT'S UP TO  
YOU TO PRESERVE WHAT MORTAL MEN  
WOULD DESTROY---  
WITHOUT YOU.

## CHAPTER XIV

### CREATING SPACE

At this juncture, I had done a lot of reflecting and concluded that I would have to do this for several reasons, 1) I wanted WAKE UP to succeed as a student organization at the university, 2) because I was the only one with a schedule flexible enough at the time and 3) I was already working with a non-profit without even realizing it, meaning I had been helping my Mom balance the church's financial reports, therefore, I was the logical choice to make this happen. I was still nervous, so I asked my Mom if she knew what an EIN was. She did and after we talked, she reassured me about the decision I was going to make so I went ahead and sent in the registration for the EIN. After receiving it, I went to OSI to get the official university letter with our organizational status to open the account. This took several weeks because I was at a point where I was trying to keep up with attending class, homework, domestic obligations as well as performances for the group but I was finally able to secure the letter and open an account. Within a few days I also added one of our other members, Claudia Hernandez, and we were good to go with fundraising. One thing that helped though, was that before we made WAKE-UP an official organization, we got a paid gig on campus which allowed us to have the start-up money that we needed for our first deposit. By the time we got paid we had already established ourselves as an organization and continued fundraising mostly with raffles and garage sales because we're still learning and finding ways to sustain this group not only financially, but within the university by recruiting and ensuring active membership.

We're still learning not only about how to make this group successful but also about each other through our work. Specifically, there is one piece that we began performing called "*Chola Scholar*" written with the idea that you can't spell scholar without chola. In fact, we begin our performance giving credit to Chola Pin up for this concept and to emphasize the idea we spelled it sCHOLAr for our conference proposals. What we did to create that piece was fill in the blanks for a questionnaire that addresses the chola and scholar identity and how these identities, at times, compliment and conflict one another. We addressed how a woman of color goes from her chola identity to her academic one, how she goes from navigating the everyday space of being out in the world as a street wise ruca to navigating academic space, or the street front versus the academic front. We also addressed the outside limitations and influences, what she values, the spaces she can and can't inhabit, what she would like to pass on, what she loves, hates, is afraid of and her hopes for the future. This performance begs questions like: What and how are we teaching Latinas? What is omitted? How do language, race, class and gender figure into education? What would we change about our educational systems to spare others the frustration we endured? What are we ready to teach the next generation? We named this collective piece *The (Mis)Education of the (S)Chola(r)*. It's a poetic and theatrical examination of the classroom where it intersects, or inhabits a third space, with the culture of Latina feminists from the frontera of South Texas.

In the two years since this group has started I have learned many things about these women, about their struggles not only in academia but on a personal and even spiritual level. We've laughed and cried together but I think what's important about this group is not only challenging each other intellectually and personally but holding space for one another. I know that making sure this group is successful requires a lot of work and for me there have even been

times when it's come close to just dropping the whole venture. I always remember, though, a comment that Amalia made when we were all having a conversation about how we had gotten to where we were at the time, which was at some conference where we were scheduled to perform. I can't remember exactly which, but what I do remember was what Amalia told me and how it made me feel.

She told me she had asked me to join this group because she could tell by the look on my face that I needed to be part of this collective, because I had something to say and I needed the space to say it. She was right. I did need to be part of a group that would listen openly not only in regards to my writing but also to me as a person. I needed to be part of this collective because, as I told them, I needed my thoughts and ideas to be acknowledged and for the women of this group as peers, to challenge me enough to want to bring my 'A' game. These women, especially the founders, Laura Lee Oviedo and Gladys Ornelas whom I consider peer mentors, along with Amalia, *have* challenged my intellect and social outlook and have been pivotal figures in my development as a writer, artist, and a conscious human being. I am and will be forever grateful for that. So in essence when I became a member of this group two years ago I've been engaged in a healing project and it has been ongoing ever since.

As the semester began, all members of WAKE-UP had graduated except for me. Some of us, along with our academic advisor Professor Emmy Pérez, had met previously to discuss our concern about the future of this group. Understanding how busy we always are, Professor Pérez started suggesting and actively looking for members to recruit for WAKE-UP in her classes and during literary events on campus. During one of the Festiba 2016 spring events, she introduced us to Amanda Victoria Ramirez at one of our performances for her class. Amanda wasn't actually enrolled in Professor Perez' class, but she had gone to see us perform that day.

Unbeknownst to us, she had been following each of our performances since our opening for Virginia Grise's reading and performance of her then new book, *The Panza Monologues*. I had noticed Amanda in the audience but didn't think much of it and I didn't see her at any of our other performances thereafter. When Professor Pérez introduced her, though, she approached us saying she had been interested in joining WAKE-UP, but was mustering up the courage since then.

We were ecstatic to have another *mujer* poet interested in what we were doing and immediately asked if she wanted to join to present with us at our next conference, which was going to be in Laramie, Wyoming. Amanda agreed to join us and went through an interesting initiation period that included a road trip across two state lines so that she could present with us at the 2016 MALCS Conference this past summer. We had never seen her perform but Emmy mentioned that Amanda had been in mariachi, plus I did mildly stalk her Facebook page where I saw her sing, so we took at her word that she had works of poetry to share. It wasn't until our actual presentation that she performed her poetry and blew us away with her *flor y canto* as she literally sang part of her poem. Amanda has since proven to be an asset to the group and I am grateful to have her as one of our newest members.

On that same trip for our presentation, Laura, our founding member, brought another *mujer*, Alejandra "Caty" Camacho along and during the trip Caty asked to join us in becoming a member of WAKE UP as well. I thought it was awe-inspiring that she wanted to join a group of poets considering she has a scientific background. Although, some of the best writers in history were also scientists, so this was just validation for me in that regard. As for new student members, this semester Amanda recruited three more undergraduate *mujeres*; Muriah Huerta, and Olivia Hinojosa who are both liberal arts majors and Valeria Juarez, another scientist with

literary and performative proclivities. These new members are without a doubt powerful writers who I have seen firsthand use their fire to immediately claim their experiences and turn them into poetry and performance, no doubt furthering the intention of WAKE-UP. To have them join, to help sustain a space so that they can read and workshop, to process their experiences through discussion, through writing, and to present and perform about issues deeply affecting them personally, intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and all the while learn from them and they from me, has been and continues to be a project I continuously look forward to.

## EPILOGUE

In part joining the WAKE-UP poetry collective helped me deal with everything that had been going on not only regarding my identity as a queer Xicanx and reintegrating to Valley life, but also in dealing with my father's mental and emotional instability after being forced into retirement. I had seen my Dad spiral into a self-destructive pattern of chronic alcohol addiction often consuming either or both bottles of liquor and massive amounts of beer, which was far more than the usual six packs he used to drink after getting out of work. It had gotten to the point that my Mom and I had to try and reason with him, to slow down and not drink so much because it was not only taking a toll on us emotionally but financially as well. After some time he did cut down, but his world became even more closed off since he had never engaged with anyone in a social capacity other than at his job. This was all due to his PTSD from serving in Vietnam and after his forced retirement even less so since he didn't have the obligation of going to work anymore.

Dad eventually settled into his retirement and began occupying the living room to watch his favorite movies and television programs. It was an adjustment for all of us but we got used to seeing Dad in our daily comings and goings. Mom explained that he preferred being there because he liked seeing what was going on and didn't want to be forgotten. He only ever engaged and interacted with us, his immediate family, unless he was going to buy his mandado of beer and cigarettes, although if Mom wanted to go on outings for special occasions she had to

begin mentioning it a few weeks in advance so that he could not only agree but prepare himself mentally. It was like this for the next few years until recently in September 2016.

Dad's health had been declining due to his sedentary lifestyle although it became extra clear how bad it got as I was leaving for work and saw the condition of my Dad's foot. He had been sitting right outside warming his feet while sitting on the bench we had in the porch area. As I was walking past him to get to my truck, I noticed his foot, particularly his big toe, had begun blackening at the tip. It was only by circumstance that I noticed because he always made sure to either have his slippers or his socks on his feet, and my Dad was never one to complain about anything so when I saw this, I had to insist that my Mom take him to see a doctor. She came home from work early that day and took him. They admitted him ran tests, and gave him medication but as his foot grew worse, the doctor told us that the only option would be amputation. My Dad didn't want that so they released him after two weeks and he went back to his usual routine, hanging out in the living room, but this time not drinking anymore.

After about three weeks of this, he decided to vacate the living room and go back into his and my Mom's bedroom to sleep. Two days later, he had begun hallucinating and couldn't stand on his own. My Mom was home for lunch at the time and had to call my brother to put him in the wheelchair so that she could take him to the hospital once again to be admitted. Dad was in the hospital for the next two months where they eventually had to amputate both legs. Mom was hopeful that after his surgery he would be able to undergo physical therapy and then be ok. We kept visiting and staying with him over night to keep him company but he grew more bitter and impatient for not being able to go home.

As I was leaving work on January 27<sup>th</sup> I got the call from Mom telling me I needed to go to the hospital. I hadn't seen my Dad in a few days and knew by the tone of her voice that it was



urgent so on the way I was preparing to hear and see the worst. When I got there I saw how weak my Dad had become. I couldn't contend with this because the man I was looking at was not the same one I knew as my Dad. Mom spoke to him letting him know that I had arrived and as I approached and held his hand my vision blurred with tears at the sight of him looking so fragile. I listened as my Mom told me that she was waiting for the doctor's recommendation on whether or not he was going to have a third surgery for another infection he had gotten. I stayed with my Mom and my dying father for a few hours before leaving the hospital that night, knowing my Dad's body was too weak and that he wasn't going to be able to sustain another surgery much less get better. Mom stayed at the hospital still holding out hope that he would.

The next morning, I carried out my Mom's wishes and woke my nieces to take them to see their grandpa. As they got ready, I told my brother to meet us at the hospital. I didn't expect my Dad's condition to have improved as Mom had hoped, but we both knew it was time for all of us to be there together. When we arrived, most of my Dad's family was there along with my favorite Tío Lalo, Mom's older brother. As more family and extended family from our church began to arrive, Mom was welcoming and giving them updates on Dad's condition. While Mom spoke to everyone including the doctors and nurses, my brother and I revisited a discussion about my Dad's wishes for not wanting to be resuscitated and after Mom came back all three of us had one last discussion about it together. We agreed it was time to let Dad go. This was difficult for my Mom, but the time had come for her to make the decision she was dreading, so she took some time to reflect, then went back to talk to the doctor.

In that time, my sister had arrived and when my Mom went left the room, my aunts, uncles and nieces had gone outside in the hallway to update the members of the congregation about our decision. My brother, sister, and I remained in the room with my Dad. As we sat

quietly with the inevitability of the decision we had made, my sister approached my Dad's bedside and began speaking words of comfort, telling him it would be ok to just let go, to look for my grandmother, my aunt and uncles on the other side. I listened to the words my sister spoke as if they were my own and when she left the room, I remained by my Dad's side for a few minutes before telling him that what my sister had said was the best thing to do and that I loved him, hoping that he had been listening.

Some of my uncles came back into the room to sit with my brother and I while the rest of the family remained in the hallway outside the room. Mom came back to the room shortly after and sat with my brother and I for a few minutes before being informed that there was some paperwork she needed to sign. She then followed the nurse and stepped out. We were all still sitting around my Dad, pensive and quite as his chest heaved with every pump from the machine until Mom came back in a few minutes later, and announced that there needed to be a second signature.

I looked over at my brother thinking he was going to get up and follow my Mom out the door, to perform the duty of an only son relieving his father of the pain from which he had been suffering, but my brother remained in his seat across from me, returned a quick gaze, and nodded as if to say, *You're up*, then lowered his eyes. I turned to look at my Mom and she nodded as well before waving her hand for me to follow her to the nurse's counter. I stood up, remembering my Dad's wishes, and walked out of the room behind my Mom. As I approached the counter, I saw the pen laying on the paperwork waiting for me to add my signature to the two empty lines with the words, 'print name here' and 'signature here' underneath. I took the pen in my hand, trying to steady it. As I hesitated, I turned around to look back at my Dad through the glass as he lay in his frail and waning state. I spun back around to the paper in front of me, held my breath,

then printed and signed my name pushing through the swell of my chest, throat, and blurring vision.

I returned to the room, and as I went back to sit by my Dad's side, I passed my brother in his seat and grabbed his shoulder as he grabbed my hand. I sunk down in the chair as my brother's head sunk into his crossed arms. A few minutes passed then our family and some of the people from the congregation began trickling into the room going to my Dad's bedside, despidiéndose de él.

The nurses came in a short while after and asked everyone to leave the room so that they could unhook the machines, and remove the respirator and feeding tube from my Dad's throat. When they were done, my family came back into the room and gathered around my Dad holding his hands, holding each other, praying and singing to guide his spirit home. My eldest niece had been standing next to me but was exhausted from crying so much throughout the morning, that she decided to sit where I had been sitting by my Dad's side the whole day. I turned to look at my niece behind me seeing that she had buried her face in her hands, and as I let go of my Dad's hand to sit beside her and place my arm around her shoulders to comfort her, his heart stopped beating. It was 1:25 pm on that January afternoon.

The funeral service took place a few days later, the church overflowing with friends and family having to sit in chairs placed in the aisle. My Dad's image was on display in the front on a tapestry, while his ashes sat in a wooden box on a table, next to a beautiful flower arrangement my partner Victoria had delivered for the service. As the pastor spoke, I sat at the front next to my Mom and brother, looking around laughing inside thinking about what my Dad would have said in regard to the ridiculousness of all this pomp and circumstance. He was never one to

participate in any occasion, especially if it was on his own behalf and we always ended up having to convince him. That's what this felt like because he hated coming to church.

After the pastor finished speaking my Mom nudged me to go up and speak. For my Dad's eulogy, I read a short inventory of the things he taught me over the years in the hopes that family and friends would apply this to their own lives, but I also read this, recognizing for myself how complicated my relationship with my father had been. After the closing statements were announced, everyone filed out of the church and waited in the yard for my Dad to receive the 21 gun salute for his service in the Army while in Vietnam. During the ceremony, my Mom was given a Bible along with my Dad's three cornered folded flag, and as everyone filed through to give their condolences, my brother and I were given three shell casings from the firing salute each, along with pin crosses with the American flag, and a patch of the Airborne battalion my Dad had been a part of, on behalf of the veterans who were in that battalion and had performed his last honoring.

After the service and ceremony finished, our family church sponsored a comida after the funeral where my family and I were surrounded with supportive and loving individuals. I thought a lot about my Dad and what his opinion would've been about the whole occasion, imagining his unfavorable reaction to all of it because he was never cared for anyone or anything in regards to community even if it was the church he had helped build. His immediate family was his community but what sustained us were the people that gathered for us on that day and I was grateful for all of them. I went home afterwards and took some time to rest for the remainder of the afternoon. In the following days, the shock of the whole situation finally settled in as I realized that I kept expecting to go visit my Dad in the hospital or to see him sitting in the living room, either watching his favorite TV shows or playing HALO to pass the time. I began grasping

that I wasn't going to see him anymore and that night, I bawled my eyes out before finally passing out, into my night's slumber, from the exhaustion.

Exactly a week after my Dad's passing I had a dream where he was walking on his own again, and inviting me to follow him into a room where everything was ivory white and glowing while different people strolled past, on their way to nowhere in particular. I beamed at how my Dad looked. He was his younger self again and when we reached where he had wanted me to sit and join him, my Mom appeared and then sat next to him smiling and leaning on my Dad's arm. I was astounded at the scene before me but even more at how amazing he looked.

"Dad, you look great Dad!"

He simply nodded and turned to wave his hand as if introducing the people strolling by. A few days later I shared this with my Mom as we both teared up. It was a good dream y una buen despedida.

I share this with you the reader for several reasons. The first is to recognize that my father's death was another real world example of the *arrebato* that Anzaldúa describes in her path of *conocimiento*. It was a culmination as well as a commencement for me and my family, one that we are still learning to navigate. For me though, part of dealing with this heavy occurrence is to not only examine it intellectually and spiritually, *conociendo* that however distant my father was while he raised me and my siblings, and however difficult he sometimes made life, he was my father and a highly influential person in terms of my spiritual growth. In this regard, I couldn't help but want to be like my Dad. The irony though was that I remember having a conversation with him when I was in the early years of my undergraduate work. I was talking to him about wanting to join the armed forces thinking it might be a good idea since it would help pay for college but when he heard me say this to him, his response was, "Don't be like me." I

was surprised and confused at first but later I understood this to mean that he didn't want me to experience the aftermath of having to endure the violence he had during war. There are other things he taught me but these are some of the most important lessons he taught us, and they arose from his experience in that so I leave them here as a way to fortify yourself through life.

1. A love for reading. El gusto de leer un buen libro Dad always smiled as he read his books. I always appreciated that he would sit there with a huge grin on his face while he read his action adventure and romance novels. That grin was the reason I read so much too.
2. Patient Persistence-persistencia paciencia. Dad wanted my brother and I to sit with him in what he called the Enchanted Forest, which is a section in the back of our yard with an overgrowth of mesquite trees and nopales, and a hidden clearing in the middle. I tried using the excuse that I was doing laundry. My dad just said "Ok hurry." I didn't have my shoes on so I used the boots my Dad had left in the garage to walk across an acre to hang out with him and my brother.
3. He taught me to be selective with whom I choose to spend time with because only some are worth our time. Escoge bien con quién andas porque con eso te diré quién eres.
4. A military proverb coined by General George S Patton, "Lead, follow or get out of the way" "Dirige, sigue, o háganse de lado."
5. Confucius saying--"If you make a mistake correct it or else you're making another mistake." "Si comete un error, corregirlo o de lo que está haciendo otro error."
6. "If all else fails read the instructions." "Si todo esto falla, lea las instrucciones."

7. Preparation—Preparación Mi papa me dijo una vez "Una mujer preparada vale por dos" (I'm not including the English version because it just doesn't translate well.)
8. He taught us to walk in the dark because you will never be prepared for everything in life. Sometimes things become unavoidable and we have to figure things out on our own. That's when you have to become your own light, but with that you find that there are other lights as well. Those are the people around you that support you and that show you love. Look to them as examples. Busca el lucero en ti y la gente que son como luceros en tu vida. Ahora firmes y adelantes.

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