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The Taming of the Bull

Mark Zavala

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

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THE TAMING OF THE BULL

A Thesis

by

MARK ZAVALA

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2018

Major Subject: Creative Writing

THE TAMING OF THE BULL

A Thesis
by
MARK ZAVALA

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Dr. Britt Haraway
Chair of Committee

Dr. Amy Cummins
Committee Member

Dr. Rene Saldana
Committee Member

May 2018

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ABSTRACT

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This work is an original manuscript composed of fictional vignettes compiled together to produce an interconnected novel. The work demonstrates the effects, issues, and culture that encompass the borderlands of the Rio Grande Valley. The young protagonist experiences loss, isolation, self-realization, friendship, and the importance of family and friends, all within the context of the unique culture of south Texas.

DEDICATION

To my wife, Sulema, and my daughter Heaven, for your patience and understanding. To my little Hope, whom I love and miss so very much. To my community for your support and encouragement. And to the students of the Rio Grande Valley – especially from Edcouch-Elsa, Progreso, and San Benito – whom I hope to inspire.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the many professors of the University of Texas – Rio Grande Valley who have believed in me and patiently worked hard to mold someone like me: Dr. José Skinner, Dr. Jean Braithwaite, Dr. Christopher Carmona, Dr. Douglas LaPrade, Dr. René Saldaña Jr. and Professor Emmy Pérez.

Special thanks to Dr. Amy Cummins, who has been supported me since the moment she wrote, “Hemingwayesque” on one of my creative writing pieces. Thank you for the opportunities, feedback, and inspiration.

And a special thanks to Dr. Britt Haraway, the first and last teacher of my UTRGV creative writing venture. You were the first person to believe in my work. With your words of encouragement, I shifted my academic focus to creative writing and have since enjoyed every moment of it. Thank you.

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CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

My Book Isn't Good, Write a Better One

I am not a writer.

In Fall 2015, I began classes for the Masters in Fine Arts in Creative Writing as a non-degree seeking student. In other words, I had not yet been officially accepted into the program. Numerous reasons for my abrupt and spontaneous impulse to enroll in graduate courses before applying speak volumes about my personality as well as a very personal life-changing situation, to which I will not speak of. Well, who knows, I might bring it up later. Hey, I'm abrupt and spontaneous, aren't I?

My first courses were both on Form and Theory: one on Non-fiction and the other on Playwriting – both of which I will be writing about in the later part of this piece. I know this to be true because I keep going off into tangents and saving them for later.

For our final paper for Non-fiction, we could write a critical introduction to prepare for our thesis hours. Some students, who were already in the final courses of their program, took advantage of this opportunity. And, of course, I wanted to as well.

Why do I write the way that I do? Who do I admire? What led me to pursue this time-consuming, psychologically draining, self-expressing art, “Mark, people-only-do-this-for-fun” type of graduate program? The truth: I didn't know.

And so, the first words written, and repeated over in my head for many years after, were, “I am not a writer.”

My first experience with storytelling – at least, the earliest I can remember – happened in fourth grade. I don’t remember much of fourth grade other than my best friend, Eric, and my two crushes. Two, Mark? Heck yeah, I wear my heart on my sleeve. Ah! A cliché!

One moment that did have an impact, however, came in the form of a late assignment. I guess I’ve always had problems with deadlines. While every other student played and enjoyed their last day of school, I sat close to my teacher, Ms. Ybarra. She told me that my chances of passing were slim unless I were to complete this one assignment on creating a sequel to “You Can’t Scare Me!” by R.L. Stine, a novel we read as a class.

The novel featured mud monsters, and the assignment called for a one-page sequel. I don’t know why I kept writing. I remember the story I wrote featured two characters who were best friends, and it began at a nice picnic by the swamp. They were eating their snacks when they heard groaning close by. Then, suddenly, a mud monster appeared. I remember they were chased while riding their bikes to one of their parents’ house, except that when they arrived and told the adults no one believed them. And so the conflict of the story developed out of my characters’ need to fight off this monster on their own – which is usual in young adult literary works.

I don’t know why I kept writing. I just remember loving the feeling of not knowing and my ten-year-old fingers going as fast as they could to get to the next scene. And fearlessness. I remember fearlessness. By the time the last bell rang, I didn’t want to stop, but I had to go home. My ending, hastily written, caused more disappointment than missing my entire day of play. And I should have known then. I should have known.

When fifth grade came around, I became part of the “Losers Club,” although we called it something else entirely, of course. Come to think of it, I don’t think we gave ourselves a name. We did, however, form an identity. The members of our nameless group: my best friend Eric, the same one from fourth grade, and the smartest of us; Joseph, our dark, rocker-type leader; Mark R., another rocker-type with a little more angst; Jerry, the friendly odd-ball; and myself, the wallflower. While visiting the library, we hovered over the mythological section and decided to escape – metaphorically of course – and our identities were formed. We were Greek Gods.

I still think about the strength of Western society – that powerful force that educators and librarians and politicians possess over minorities - because a group of Mexican Americans would identify more with Greek mythology than that of the Aztecs. And I wonder what type of water-obsessed, powerful, mysterious, creative God I might have been to make my ancient ancestors proud. Even with the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley’s emphasis on Mexican American and South American Literature, I honestly still wouldn’t know much about the Aztecs.

As an educator myself, and as a product of the Rio Grande Valley and its academic institutions, I have come to understand the historical significance of our people. Since the Spanish conquest, the European nations have always tried to rid the history of the conquered. But there is hope in this area of concerns. There are still scholars and professors willing to investigate deeper into the ancient South American empires. Furthermore, the programs in the Southwest are emerging, helping the next generation of high school learners develop a sense of identity and culture. As a result, I too hope to further the movement by providing a regional identity to the students of south Texas.

Unlike the Mexican Americans of the future, we spent numerous days in the library reading Greek Mythology. But the Gods did not last long. In the fallout of our friendship, Jerry

and I continued to hang out and read books. But something happened. I noticed that in comparison to the rest of my classmates, I read slowly. And so, my short love affair with books came quickly to an end.

And it remained that way for a long while after. Yes sir, I picked up a calculator and pencil and became a math person. In seventh grade, I admired three of my teachers, Mr. Ybarra, Mrs. Morón, and Mrs. Lomas. On the first day of school, my math teacher, Mr. Ybarra, opened with a magic trick, and I became convinced that math equaled to the best subject ever!

But I did have some good memories with English. And so, the subject remained in the back of my head. I still remember the assignment. We were all assigned literary devices and mine, alliteration. I came up with “Tony the Turkey taught tango to tiny Timmy.” The sentence impressed my English teacher, Mrs. Morón, as well as myself. I liked it. I found it cute. But I had never given alliteration much thought. Now as a writer, I find myself utilizing this device often – most often with the letters, “d”, “l”, and “s” for some reason. Maybe because so many different words start with those letters. For example, the first paragraph of states, “were she still alive perhaps the dull and dampness of our lives might be met with an enchanting glow.” Clearly, the letter “d” is alliterated, but you can see how the letter “l” shows up as a consonance – alliteration’s sibling. I had a similar experience with Mrs. Lomas, my reading teacher. Moreover, I found out why my reading seemed slower than others. We were reading the classic *Romeo and Juliet* and I read the lines for Mercutio. Mrs. Lomas told me that she really enjoyed the way I read the lines, and even suggested I join UIL or theater. Again, more embarrassed than inspired, I took it as something encouraging teachers say.

In hindsight, what I had thought of as a weakness – reading slowly – turned out to be a strength, for often the narration of my stories has a calming pensive manner. My characters tend

to give insight into their internal mindset and physical being. Moreover, though, I pay close attention to the way the words sound being read aloud. They have to play like music in the ears of the reader and anyone listening. Don't believe me? Read this little snippet and tell me you don't feel calm – "The air flew gently inward and outward; every inhale and exhale gently touching my lips. The inhaling of the midnight air felt crisp and cool as it entered through my nostrils."

I know, right?

My point is that my experiences as a writer should have started young, but I didn't see it. And I think that might be true to many students, and well people in general. Maybe everyone can write. Maybe they just need to see the passion early on for themselves. The passion and the willingness to read and write and learn and grow.

My past experiences are ironic in this sense. For example, David Rice is an important figure in Edcouch-Elsa. In fact, in preparation, for this introduction, I read – and even alluded to his thesis paper in the title – his critical introduction from his own MFA thesis. I feel like he and I share similar experiences in that he we both discovered our literary pathway later in life – him at 27 and me at 25 – and we both want to utilize Edcouch-Elsa as a setting-character of our stories. Well, in my one of my high school years, I attended a literary festival hosted by the city of Elsa.

I have mentioned this story to him twice before, again simply for the irony of it all. I walked around with my best friend at the time, Robert – the same name as my protagonist's brother, although they share no resemblance in appearance or manner – enjoying the games and snacks available for purchase, and simply hanging out.

On our way to the library to watch a presentation on I-don't-remember-what, we saw him: the man, the myth, the legend. Now, even though I had never seen him in person before, we all knew David Rice. Are you kidding me? The biggest writer of the Edcouch area. Plus, he worked with Llano Grande Center, an organization I took pride in as a member. At the time, I heard – and it has since been confirmed – that he worked with one of my sister's favorite English teachers, Francisco Guajardo. and even had kids my age read and edit his work before the publication of one of his books.

We slowly approached him, not really knowing what to expect. We said our hellos and shook hands, and I'm sure the conversation went something like "I think you're awesome, I can't believe it's you". But maybe not. The only thing I remember for sure was being asked, "Ever think about becoming a writer?"

Now, I know I probably should have said something along the lines of "Heck, yeah! I love writing!", or maybe, "Well, I do like reading", even though that would have been a lie. Or even the innocent, "Gee, mister! I never really thought about it, but now that you mention it, I did write this five-page story in the third grade!" But, and unfortunately this is a problem still, I told the truth.

"I don't like writing."

Stern and sincere, but reckless in the sense that I had forgotten this was being addressed to author David Rice. I remember him giving me this disappointed look. His eye followed the command of his neck and both jerked backward in confusion. I felt embarrassed.

He followed with some sort of pleasantries, I'm sure, then offered an invitation to his event at the local library happening within minutes at the Elsa Public Library. I went to the event, but

sat in the back. Far back. To further the irony of this meeting, David's short story "One Morning Fishing" inspired my own chapter, "Delta Lake." Play close attention, he might even show up with his brother.

I didn't understand the link between craft and literature until my time at South Texas College. After pursuing Mathematics, and failing hard, I turned to history as my subject of choice. You see, I concluded that I loved teaching. This I noticed early on (third grade with Mrs. Salinas) when I stayed during my physical education to help other students with their assignments. I wanted to be a teacher, I just needed a subject, and American history had always fascinated me.

In my last semester at South Texas College, I took American Literature taught by Dr. Evashisha Masilamony, emphasis on the doctor – she refused to be called Ms. or Mrs., insisting she "worked too hard for [her] title." I didn't mind. In fact, when I become a doctor, I want the same respect.

Two of my perspectives on English changed in her course. To begin with, she emigrated from India, and she possessed a thick Indian accent. I thought it interesting, as ignorant as this might sound, that someone from a different country could teach American Literature. But her care and special attention to how literature affects our culture and society really sank in. Again, being a history major meant I focused more on the historical background of the literature being assigned. But another lesson seeped through, one I had not expected.

My professor, Dr. Masilamony, found a way to relate to American literature. But how? She possessed an Indian citizenship and legally became part of our society. How could American literature relate in any way to the specific history or culture of the Indian nation? This is when a

paradigm on literature took place. Maybe the world consisted not of separate nationalities and identities, but of something grand. Dr. Masilamony taught me the importance of universal themes. Humans had a special ability to connect on a level higher. Instead of viewing literature as a collection of “good” stories, I began to see them the way other literary writers view them: as tales of the human experience.

Stories became more than just setting, characters, plot, conflict, and theme. She taught me that readers connect to the stories by relating to the values and ideas of those characters. She taught me how setting can influence a generation and the way they perceive the world. At the time, I didn’t see the importance of this lesson. After all, English became the back drop to history and culture, fields I considered more interesting at the time. But it became an important aspect of my novel.

In *The Taming of the Bull*, I focus on how a Mexican American, teenage protagonist struggles with the loss of his mother. He doesn’t have to be Mexican American, and the story doesn’t have to take place in the small twin city region of Edcouch-Elsa, but it does. And the fact of the matter is, it doesn’t matter while simultaneously mattering. You need not enter the rural world of Edcouch-Elsa to understand grief; at the same time, you must enter Edcouch-Elsa to understand the culture and beauty of the area, and how in the end, the people are just like you no matter where you come from. As Maas puts it in *The Emotional Craft of Fiction*, “Readers recognize the universal human condition.”

Another important lesson I took from Dr. Masilamony appeared in hind-sighted crystal when I took my first Creative Writing course at the University of Texas Pan American. Most of my relationship with English, up to that point, consisted of reading and writing essays. Oh yeah, I wrote it all! How-to’s? Yes, sir! Descriptive writing? You know it! Persuasive? Like, all the

time! So, the idea of taking these words – these phrases, these devices we were taught to recognize, but never understood the meaning behind why we needed to identify them – and using them to create something new, seemed more like a bonus (a rudimentary grade assigned to help those struggling pass the course. In hindsight, I took for granted the fact that creating something out of nothing requires a great deal of energy. Blooms taxonomy comes to mind).

And I don't mean to give the impression that writing is an easy task. I mean, after learning the "rules" to writing, it's a bit more tedious than I would've thought. No, the point I'm trying to make is this: writing didn't have to be formulaic, or structured with an introduction, followed by three short crummy paragraphs, and a conclusion; it could be fun. Writing could create worlds and people and situations and monsters and gods and lands and mythologies. In my own work, *The Taming of the Bull*, I play with this idea. There is mention of La Llorona in the chapter "Legends," and I use the astrological signs to solidify a symbolically significant constellation.

The assignment – which, by the way, I ask of my high school students as well – called for the creation of a new world origins. In my course with Dr. Masilamony, we were to read "The World on the Turtle's Back", an Iroquois origin story, and write a reflection comparing it to another famous origin story.

Obviously, being raised Catholic, I wrote about Genesis. I suppose now I could write about how the conversation about the differences between the Christian origin story and the Iroquois origin story gave me an understanding of why the Iroquois had a different view of right and wrong. How in their culture, and largely because of their origin story, there isn't a simple black or white, but rather a grey, giving full recognition that the world is more complex, and requires us to understand that there isn't a simple answer, and that one cannot exist without the

other. That night needs day. That there can be good in evil and vice-versa. That viewing the multitude that is human emotion as simply this or that translate to quick judgements, harsh punishments, and ignores the fact that anyone, “good” or “evil” can change for better or worse. And I could talk about how this oversimplified, Christian idea has negatively impacted our society, creating a system in which people are criminalized before being tried, and prisoners are punished long after their time has been served in the sense that job opportunities are lacking, now that they have a criminal record.

When reading my thesis, I find myself emphasizing this idea of complexity. “Mexico” is a great example of this concept. In this chapter, I make a point to blend the two worlds, America and Mexico, together so that the reader understands there really is no difference at all. Directly symbolic, the protagonist’s grandmother cannot decide between black-framed glasses and white-framed glasses, so settles on grey ones. And often, the reader will be exposed to secondary colors – purple, orange, green – when reading about someone or something with mix identities. In the chapter “Mom,” it is revealed she is of Mexican descent, but now lives in America. I described the image as such: “...under the vastness of a sky in daybreak, where purple and orange glimmered and dyed the green grass and trees in an intermixing hue of new light and dying shadows, sat a teenage girl, my mother.” Again, colors and words like “intermixing” were used to highlight the idea that some things are not one or the other, but both. Even language and identity are mixed. A great example is my protagonist’s friend, Jesse, whose language is both Spanish and English and even a made up one (You’ll see what I mean later). And his identity, an Americanized Mexican is the pinnacle of the point I am trying to invoke, that an immigrant, brought here at an early age, can be hard to distinguish.

Back to the assignment. Simply put, we had to write a story that took place in the Rio Grande Valley and identify, and glorify, different symbols of our culture. For example, I wrote about a Goddess that sought refuge from her evil father, whose wooden chains rattled. I wanted to emphasize the idea that things that rattle, like rattle snakes, were evil. She cried so much that the tears went southward to create the Gulf of Mexico, and then created humans out of, you guessed it, beans. Now, I don't know if I took the derogatory term "beaner" too literally, or perhaps I unconsciously reclaimed it as a sort of, "I'm Mexican American, I can use it humorously", or maybe I paid little attention to the coincidence and simply sought to write about the importance of beans in our cuisines. Honestly, I don't think I could have pulled on the first two, even in at a "subconscious" level. Oh, and the purpose of the first Valleyites created: to work the lands in honor of our female creator. The crops were corn, oranges, chili, and cotton. As you read my novel, you'll see a few of these reappear, this time as different symbols. And if you indulge yourself, as I do, in the Romantics, there's a good chance you'll notice this in my work. I find tranquility and beauty in nature, and loved the idea of exploring the south Texas region with new eyes. Taking the reader from wherever they are to the very foundation of the Mexican American border.

I learned something, from this experience, though. The second paradigm shift I had with English. Dr. Masilamony taught me that there existed a connection between storytelling and culture. And so, as I thought about my career as a history teacher, I had in mind that maybe – as more of a pastime – I would write historical fiction. You know, writing what-if stories, and rewriting history. For example, there's a book called "The Man in the High Castle" by Philip K. Dick. It's about Germany winning World War II and dividing the United States in half: one called the Greater Nazi Reich, and the other one called the Japanese Pacific States. Well, what if

Mexico had received the Zimmerman Letter? Where would the borderline be? The Mississippi River? I wondered. And I still wonder to this day. Maybe someone out there reading this paper will take up the challenge. But they better do it quickly, because I'm kind of interested in writing this story now.

My land matters. My culture matters. I learned this in her course. Unbeknownst to her, I learned so much. And again, I didn't see that maybe I could be more than just a historian who writes as a hobby. I didn't see that I could chase this goal head-on. I didn't see that I could learn the craft of creating something out of nothing using words. Of building worlds and characters and give them meaning, a purpose. And I know I didn't see this because on the last day of school, after I turned in my final paper, she asked if I had learned anything. And as you might probably be able to guess, the response I gave did little to ensure she made a difference. My inconsiderate answer: "I didn't know I could write so much."

I know! I play it over and over in my head and think about the absurdity of the comment. Really? That's what I learned? "I didn't know I could write so much"? How self-absorbed? I've always wanted to go back and tell her how much of an impact she had on me. I was also mistaken about the amount I wrote, by the way, because the final paper called for maybe two to five pages worth of work. In comparison, I've had to write ten-page papers as an undergraduate; and in my graduate work, fifteen to twenty pages. Five pages? Really? I did not have a clue.

When I finally returned to the University of Texas Pan American, I needed only two semesters to graduate with a Bachelor's degree in History. I took interesting courses in history: World History II; Revolutionary History; and American Religions. But to satisfy my very last core requirement, I had to enroll in one more English course. And so, if I wanted to write as a hobby, I enrolled in Creative Writing I. Moreover, my significant other, Sulema Childs, thought

it would be a great idea to minor in English seeing as it would benefit our family if I graduated sooner. We didn't think I would fall in love with the subject.

I did not know how much fun English could be. Enrolling in this course, and studying under Dr. Britt Haraway, I fell absolutely in love. Our class consisted of in-class workshops following the book *The Making of a Story*, by Alice LaPlante. I learned about the "rules" of crafting pieces of work and I had the opportunity to play with genres, tones, voices, and subjects – just really exploring my writing styles. Oh, and I loved it all, especially the different genres, but I'll get to that later.

Under Dr. Haraway, I wrote three of my favorite pieces. The first one, later published in the University of Texas Pan American's "Gallery: Literary Arts Magazine" No. 33, commemorated the upcoming birth of my baby girl, Hope, in the form of a poem titled, "Last Night I Dreamt of You Again." Another piece I wrote expressed the real, internal struggle I went through with the birth of my first daughter, Heaven.

This non-fiction piece dealt with my hesitation in becoming a teen father. I'm contemplating whether I will be a good father or not, my baby was suddenly being born, solidifying the idea – and becoming one of my most used motifs – that we are small in this world, and nature doesn't care if we as individuals are ready for our destiny. Nature goes on. The last piece I wrote for Creative Writing I came in the form of a twelve-page story. Twelve pages! Do you see the silliness of my early comment to Dr. Masilomony?

This piece, "Antonio and the Showstopper", explored for the first time my twin city Edcouch-Elsa. It also became a sort of attempt at using common folklore to write historical fiction. Parallel to Aesop's story "The Ant and the Grasshopper", the events follow the fictional

situation during the 1940 freeze of south Texas. In the story, Antonio is a farmer who works hard for his community but is unappreciated. The Showstopper is the ring leader of the upcoming circus. At the end, Antonio is taught to reconnect with his passion of playing the guitar, while the Showstopper, and the small community, come to appreciate the time and effort it takes Antonio to grow and harvest the community's oranges.

You wouldn't believe how proud and confident I became after that story. Without knowing it, I had just found my niche. To begin with, my vocabulary, playfulness, and folkloric basis for the story led me to believe that my preferred audience would be young adults. Secondly – and luckily most of my education at UTPA would support me with advice and recourses – I became convinced that Mexican Americans would take center stage in my stories. These characters, however, would not, and should not, come off as archetypes. Yes, they had Spanish names, but sometimes they only had Spanish surnames. And yes, they would speak Spanish, but sometimes they couldn't.

The reality of the Rio Grande Valley is that our names and our language does not mean we are all the same. Some have assimilated so far into United States society that they've forgotten their language. Some have assimilated to a degree that they use Spanish and English interchangeably. And some, like in my story, refuse or simply don't care to assimilate, and so their language, gestures, dichos, values are all established within the context.

You see, the Valley that I know is full of people from all backgrounds. There are families where the children serve as translators. There are families that refuse to listen to programs, televised or radioed, in English. And there are generation too far removed from the Mexican culture that they take non-speaking Spanish courses – this is the group I fall into. But that's just

Mexican Americans in the region. There are also whites and blacks and Asians, and they are all Valleyites, and as such must be represented as well.

Proud and confident? Oh, yeah. But not yet a dedicated learner of language or literature. For the first time I thought to myself, “Maybe I am a writer.”

At the end of the term, I found history to be too individualist. I sat alone, reading and dissecting historical books about the French and American Revolution. There were other books too, about religion in America. But truthfully, I found little meaning. After all, I had my preferences, and they were all in American history. I wrote two essays on two different historical periods, and I did not care for either one.

With a new sense of who I could become, I waited until the end of class and spoke with Dr. Haraway privately. The situation: continuing the path of becoming a historian, which would mean graduating Spring 2013; or changing my major to English to pursue writing, but pushing my graduation until December 2013 – which would be the earliest possible time if I were to take five or more classes in Spring and Fall, and enrolling in both Summer I and II.

“Am I a good writer?” I asked. And I didn’t exactly know what he would say, and I honestly think at the end it wouldn’t have mattered, but at the time it did. I wanted to know, am I accepted? Can I be accepted into this community of wordsmiths?

“I think your work has potential.”

And that’s all I needed. That day I went straight to the Registrar’s Office and changed my major, and my path, forever.

The next semester I enrolled in American Literature I and II, Film Theory, Creative Writing – Fiction, and Creative Writing – Poetry. During this term I met two important instructors: Professor Emmy Perez and Dr. Jose Skinner. Although I had never considered myself a poet, Professor Perez reassured me that all would be alright. And after these years, and numerous courses in poetry (I've taken at least four with her), I still wouldn't consider myself a poet. After all, for me, poetry comes with extreme bouts of concentration, anxiety, and emotional struggle. But I did love the way in which poetic devices created meaning. I loved the beauty of poetry.

Still, I would find my genre working under Dr. Skinner. Fiction. The art form called for what Emily Dickinson called “The Truth... But Slant”, without having to dive too deep into metaphoric or poetic language. At the same time, it differed from non-fiction, a form I found too personal. With fiction, I was able to tell my story, share my values, and give people my point of view on topics I thought were important without having to give my life story.

Creative Writing – Fiction played another crucial role in my creative thesis. In fact, my novel, “The Taming of the Bull”, derives from a short story I wrote in Dr. Skinner's course. The short story, “Sounds of a Bull”, tell the tale of Robert, a boy who has grown up too quickly. In the short story, Robert comes off as protective of his brothers, Frank and Charlie. Since his mother's death, his father dived into alcoholism, and so Robert must become the surrogate father figure. He finds a job at a local ranch and finds symbolic meaning behind each animal. The young brothers are represented by playful sheep; in the distance, Robert subconsciously connects with a mare and her colt, and then there's a bull. The bull is described as having “low, tired eyes” and “fenced with others who didn't notice or care to notice”. It ends with the father simply

changing his ways and Robert becoming a kid once again. After workshopping my story, Dr. Skinner found that there should have been more action, or conflict.

And that is exactly the route I took. In a sort of “rewriting history” approach, I changed a few details. The mother remained gone, the father remained a drunk, but Robert changed. He became a griever stuck in-between the stages of anger and depression, with the idea that something so tragic should not be discussed. And Charlie, the younger brother, became a teenage protagonist who not only must go against his brother’s wishes to satisfy his want to connect with his mother posthumously, but he must also find a way to build, or rebuild the relationship with his brother, both of whom are in different stages of grief.

Grief. The story also changed from a young boy would shouldn’t grow up too quickly to dealing with grief. Now, some stories deal with the death of a loved one, and they learn a lesson of appreciation. In fact, during my final semester, I enrolled in Children and Adolescent Literature with Dr. Amy Cummins, and we read such a novel. Before I come off as arrogant reader, I’m not trying to bash any novel, quite the opposite. *The Tequila Worm*, by Viola Canales, included a scene in which her Papa passes away, and the family misses him and the falling action resumes.

But personally, grief took more than a few pages to get over. Grief is different for everyone and could last years after the events of a loved one passing away. The denial. The anger. These emotions can be strong and lasting. And so how do we move past it. Is love strong enough to overcome just forces? Is family loyalty, a quality greatly valued in the Mexican American culture, all you really need? Will the fear subside so that peace may settle in the soul like a butterfly? Will Charlie find a way to reach out to a mother he doesn’t know without causing too much of a disturbance in the unstable household?

Death can be a powerful climax. But sometimes the aftermath is much too lengthy for falling action and resolution. Unbiased grief strikes everybody and in multiple manners as well. And so how does one deal with it? Through denial, anger, or discovery?

I have personally gone through a similar experience in my life. My baby-girl Hope, only three months old, passed away one evening in March. I can't tell you what it felt like. And the truth is, I kind of don't want to. Death is such a powerful climax, but grief is relentless. Grief is the real enemy.

As an idea, I've shared this story with Dr. Amy Cummins. She gave me a book titled, *The Boy in the Black Suit* by Jason Reynolds, and oh my goodness how it parallels! The story is about a boy who has lost his mother and doesn't really know how to grieve. He loses his work-study job but finds another at the local funeral home. I learned a great deal from reading this book so much so, that Love, an important character in the story, makes an appearance in my own.

Dr. Cummins also gave me *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* by Isabel Quintero. The novel is about a Mexican American girl living under the strict cultural based rules her mother has set forth. Aside from the culture, I found the form of dairies to be of great value. And so, I settled on vignettes as the stylistic approach to my novel.

In hindsight, I should have known vignettes would be the best approach. To begin with, I don't really enjoy writing non-fiction. I'm just more of a "too myself" kind of fellow, as you can see if things get too personal, I change the subject. When I took Form and Theory of Non-fiction, I learned about how to use the life you lived and give it meaning. But because of my protective

nature I knew fiction provided the best pathway, as I have already discussed. I guess taking Non-fiction solidified that idea.

But I still had a problem that I had not yet given any attention too. My stories contained a great amount of internal dialogue, meaning, I struggled at writing conversations between people. Now, I had wanted to study under Dr. Phil Zwerling since my undergraduate years (I had enrolled into Playwriting in Spring 2013, but as the new director of the writing program, Zwerling could not offer his course, and I had to enroll in a different course). This time around, I signed up for Form and Theory of Playwriting and years later, his Playwriting course, both to learn dialogue. Along with these courses, I also bought two books to specifically target this weakness: *Dialogue: Techniques and Exercises for Crafting Effective Dialogue*, by Gloria Kempton; and *Writing Dialogue: How to Create Memorable Voices and Fictional Conversations that Crackle with Wit, Tension and Nuance*, by Tom Chiarella. Did you catch the latter title's lack of oxford comma? Me too! The audacity!

But yeah, I took this dialogue dilemma seriously. And I have greatly improved. But the fact of the matter is, I like writing internal dialogue. I like knowing what the character feels, fears, and thinks about. So, staring me right in the face, I picked up "The Tequila Worm" by Viola Canales, and "House on Mango Street" by Sandra Cisneros, and began studying the vignette. In fact, when I told Dr. Haraway about my intent, he sent me an audio of "House on Mango Street", which made listening to it on the drive much easier.

Vignettes just made so much sense to me! When asked why I enrolled in genres that weren't my concentration, I didn't know what to say. I loved all writing. But now, with vignettes, I had the power to be poetic when I wanted to. I had the power to change course and start narrating. I could write long conversations between multiple people, or focus in on my main

character's personal thoughts. Vignettes were freedom. Freedom to be the type of writer I wanted to be at any given moment.

I found this sense of freedom resonated with others as well, most notably, my students of Progreso Early College High School in Progreso, Texas. As a teacher, I thought the classic American novels in my English III – Pre-AP class. But my freshman classes allowed for some experimentation. I taught work from local writers and poets and literature from Mexican Americans, which of course included Sandra Cisneros' literary work. It was this type of literary study, I believe, that sparked an interest in creative writing. I thought about my own experience, the long journey of self-realization from nothing to writing. I also thought about my own high school education, and the lack of emphasis on writing from my own culture or heritage or region. With a small group of students, we started the Progreso Creative Writers Club. These students – Jules Lopez, Aron Cantu, Sarai Gonzalez, Kay and Kate Munoz, Katherine Ortega, and Katelynn Salinas – participated in workshops, readings, and even hosted a school-wide event with the Valley International Poetry Festival's "Poets in the Schools."

Although we were a small, the group allowed me to organize and develop another writers club when I left for San Benito the following year. The San Benito Creative Writers Club now consists of a preamble and a constitution, officers, membership dues and the works. It's legit. My students host two writing workshops a month, and fundraise for field trips to culturally relevant events or places – they enjoyed the McAllen Book Festival and Palmfest, Palo Alto Battlefield, Gladys Porter Zoo, the Historical Brownsville Museum, and will be heading to the museums and locations in San Antonio later this May (2018).

These passionate students – consisting mainly of Jonathan Rodriguez, Melanie Hernandez, Emily Raquel Garcia, Jacky Treviño, William Cepeda, JJ Saldivar, and Aleida Perez

– have bravely bleed on the microphone at such a young age. It only goes to solidifies the idea that organization like these need to exist. I hope to work on the expansion of creative writers clubs throughout the Rio Grande Valley.

“I am not a writer.” Those were the words I wrote when I first started the writing program at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. And those words still echo when I’m feeling a loss of written words. But what is a writer? Is it a third grader choosing words over playtime? Is it a preteen finding his voice or playing with a literary device like alliteration? Or maybe a high schooler who admires a local writer? Or a teacher watching his students brave the art form? Does that make him a writer?

Honestly, I don’t know if I am a writer. All I really know is, I love writing. And I think that is enough. And if you come across my work and decide my book isn’t good, write a better one. Because I guarantee you’ll love the venture too.

CHAPTER II

MOTHER

How I wish I could say what it's like to miss her. But I can't. And all the whispering hush around our home speaks volumes of her nature. And were she still alive perhaps the dull and dampness of our lives might be met with an enchanting glow. Where is my mother? Why isn't she here, watching over us? Surely the angels would follow and bring about trumpets and sparkling wings and caress the broken hearts she's left behind. I wish I could say what it's like to miss her, but it's hard to miss a person composed of shattered memories, old pictures, and that one recording.

Over the span of several weeks, I've spent many nights watching that video. It seems to me nights like these – cold, darken nights in which the lunar lights cast bright shadows upon the falling floor – nights like these are when I need her the most. Maybe because she doesn't know me. Or maybe because I don't know her. Or maybe I'm just trying to find a common thread, a soft string to align myself with. I'm a seed attached to a mother imagined from memories as fragile as cotton. I am a boy with bouts of curiosity in need of a flower bed to which I might rest upon and draw figures of her reality in the clouds.

Patently I watch as she springs in the midst of fantastic pauses, plays, and rewinds. The video is only eight minutes long. Eight minutes and thirty-seven seconds long. But it's enough to capture her auburn hair in the glow and flow of a sunset wind. It's enough to form a swirling

image her loving nature. Imagery, but not nearly enough for anything else. In the whirlwind of a camera in motion, I am there too in flashes, my toddler-self projects onto the ceiling of my bedroom.

Every moment she spends holding me in her Spanish arms, her full and light brown arms. She holds me close to her sunflower dress and smiles like a summer harvest. When I pause there's a spin within, and an illuminating quality in her dark brown eyes. Still I feel without. Sometimes the video it is not enough. Sometimes the frames collide and fall apart in my restless stillness. Sometimes an empty tear will roll. An empty, silent roll. And then I know it's not enough.

I want to feel her warm embrace and kiss her crooked smile and reach into her expanding soul. I want to know the rhythm of her heart and smell her breath and feel her chest against my cheek. The way I did as a kid. The way the video plays. And I want to know more. I want to know what makes her laugh. I want to know how her eyes remain radiantly sparkling when she smiles and why mine squint. I want to feel the sweetness in the air as her voice dances along the gentle waves with her words.

She sings "Happy Birthday to You" to me, and her voice is like a nectarine in ripe, and soft like when a dandelion floats from a child's whisper. She holds me close to her breast and kisses me gently on the forehead. This is my favorite part. My shy mother sings to me. Hardly a word in all the video, but she sings to me. She sings and I'm soothed. Both then and now, I'm soothed.

And the question still lingers in small echoes as my lids become heavy. And my heart aches a little. And my mind rests a little. And I drift into wishing I knew the answer. Where is my mother?

CHAPTER III

THE VIDEO

But I don't remember the last time Robert smiled. Even in my earliest memories, he has always been a stern brother. He's only two years older than me, but he's always been that way. Stubborn. Like a bull. When I turned sixteen, I thought maybe I would finally have some freedom. But that hasn't happened. The truth is he acts more like a father than a brother. And rugged, in all manners of appearance and character. Especially when he's angry. When he's angry, his face turns red with a sort of low bellowing, and his nostrils are so flared you could see smoke from beneath them and I'm no longer "Charlie", but "Carlos." When names change to Spanish, you know you're in trouble.

Ever seen a rough current? He's like one of the stones in a canal. Like the waterfall Jonathan and Matthew showed me. The one by Jesus Flores Road, north of Monte Cristo Road.

Life with my brother can be difficult. But I can't blame him too much for the way he is. He remembers everything. He remembers the accident with great detail. The only thing I know about mother's death is that she crashed right in front of our home. We live in a large, mestique land in Edcouch, TX, close to La Villa. To reach the home, one must go over a steep bridge and down a road of gravel. And we're the first house to the right, the small one surrounded by mesquite. When it rains, it could be a dangerous route. Unless you want to drive all the way around through Mile 17 ½, it's the best way to our reach our home.

Loose gravel and a steep bridge. But for some reason Robert blames himself. He blames himself, and so we are forbidden from talking about her. All of us. See when the accident happened, my dad fell apart. He became a weed, lifeless and swaying in the direction Robert demanded. As Robert learned to navigate our dad, he took his influence to Grandma and myself. And so the memories of mother stagger away.

As the years passed, we all just kind of got used to it. But as I'm getting older, I don't think it's fair him making all of the decisions. Like today in the kitchen, he asked me where was I going.

"Wherever I want to go!" I had just learned that one of my teachers moved in a few houses down the road. When I had seen her earlier, she asked if I wanted a new dog. A blue heeler. I don't know much about dogs, but I like the color blue. And dogs. Still, I didn't have to tell Robert anything.

"Yes, you do, Charlie. I'm older."

"So?"

"Sit back down. Have you done your homework?"

Changing the subject. One of his tricks.

"It's May, there is no homework. And if there is, who cares, school's ending in a two weeks."

"And your grades?"

“I’m not going to fail. Now get out of my way.” I pushed passed him, through the living room, and out the door. I could see his silhouette through the stained glass window on our door so I didn’t go anywhere. And now I’m here.

As I mentioned before, our house in the middle of a forest of mesquite trees. But there’s a small palm tree further down, towards the very tip of our property, but still close enough for my brother to watch me. Robert used to beat his bat against this tree, but now he only beats his words against our own will.

It’s been this way since mother died thirteen years ago. No, fourteen years ago. When I could still look over this palm tree. I like to rest here. Recollect my thoughts. It reminds me of South Padre Island. I’ve never been, but I imagine it’s like the shows on T.V. Like in that one show with the girls, and the guy has to get married to one of them. I would never do that, but whatever.

Sometimes, when I lie against the stem and look up into the sky, the palms and sky is all I see. Palms and sky. And I can escape. And I can almost hear the ocean and taste sand and sometimes there are seagulls. And when I’m looking up, I can touch our soil and feel salty grains between my fingertips. And then I’m at peace. And then I can think.

I found the video in Robert’s room about six months ago. He doesn’t know I have it, and I know he’ll be upset so I made up my mind not to let him find out. And I found it by accident so I don’t think he should blame me fully.

In one of the rarest spectacles of the Rio Grande Valley, our weather forecast predicted snow that dreary December night. Snow, as in tiny flakes that still resemble rain, but snow nonetheless. As usually, Robert worked an extra shift that night, and our dad had been missing

for the second night in a row, so I made plans with Jesus to go to the football game, with Robert's approval, of course.

“Edcouch-Elsa and Mercedes! Robert, I have to go!”

And that's all it took. But I already knew he would approve. He trusted Jesus because he wore a JROTC uniform and always gave me a ride home.

“That kid is going places. It's best you follow his example,” Robert would say. And I would nod.

As I waited for Jesus to pick me up, I ran out to shoot with my slingshot. Nothing special, just a stick, some rubber tubes, and piece of leather. Being one of the only things Robert ever gave me, however, I played with it often.

It started off small. I lined up some of my toy soldiers on the rancher's fence - the one that lived behind us - and began firing. But the little armed men did little to excite. I moved on to shooting a few bottles left over from my dad's drinking binge nights before. And when the rocks hit just right, the bottles would burst in the air and shattered glass flew everywhere. I did this until bird sang. I had a new target.

The small cattle egret, white and in all its glory, stood tall in the branches, with a song in its voice. I loaded up my sling, pulled back, aimed and fired. And it didn't even flinch. I succeeded in startling the little bird with the second shot, but it simply moved to the next tree. And then the next. And with every shot, she hopped over without a care in the world. Taunting my every ability so shoot down its pride.

Then the little heron hopped over to the other side of the ranch, and then hopped further. Well, I couldn't very well let it go away. I jumped over and followed and followed until my footsteps began to creep with curiosity. I lowered my slingshot, then finally put it in my back pocket to see if it would stop moving away, but it didn't. Suddenly it flapped twice and flew away. And I ran after.

And the low, dim clouds lined the surface of the sky and the cold rain started pouring down hard. I slipped a few times over the mess of broken twigs and weeds and mud, but I kept at pace. And when I didn't, the heron seemed to wait or slow for my benefit. I watched as the magnificent bird navigated the brush of thorns of the mesquite. I, in the other hand, torn my way through.

In the end of it all, far into the massive ranch in the back of our yard, I fell to my knees to catch my breath. The heron flew back and over my head until I acknowledged her grace. Then it flew forward, rapidly and impressively so that I would be intrigued.

When it landed, the sky had darkened and the winds blew harder and the rain pierced through my now torn-up sweater. In the distance, I saw the white bird, highlighted by the overwhelming grey hue that dominated the scene, land on a large boulder. My heart beat flew faster and my lungs gasped and gasped. But internally, I felt stillness because the image demanded stillness.

Out of the stillness, the boulder rose slowly, and a beast emerged. I stumbled backwards until I lost my footing, then the beast stomped and bellowed massively against the deluge, shaking his head and thrusting his horns, disturbing the gothic paint. The heron spread its wings,

flew upward and then sped my direction. Confusing the bird for the beast, I ran, convinced the bull against the gate was charging towards me.

I ran sharply through the bitterness. Cold feet and hands and face, but I kept going. I reached the fence at the end of the ranch and jumped over onto safety, but I didn't feel safe. I kept going. When I fell near the palm tree, I saw the heron above the doorway, strong and wings expanded. I caught my breath before approaching the shy bird.

"Charlie, where were you man, we've been out here for like ten minutes. You didn't hear the honking?" And then she flew away.

"No, man." I gasped, still trying to gather myself together, "I think I almost died."

"What happened to your clothes?"

"A bull."

"A bull!"

"No, the trees." More breathe, "I torn my sweater with the trees."

"And the bull?"

"No. Nothing. Nothing about a bull."

The rain, the heron, and the beast were in too perfect a backdrop to be real. And if I dropped it, I knew Jesus wouldn't push it.

"I just need to change."

"You just need Jesus!" And we went inside with a chuckle.

I threw my sweater in the trash and began rummaging through my closet for something heavy, but I knew I wouldn't find anything. I knew I only had that sweater. Although I didn't want Jesus to know, I think he did because...

“Why don't you just borrow something from your brother?”

I stopped “looking” and began searching through Robert's side of the room.

“I'll wait in the car”, but I think he only said that to prevent my being embarrassed. I began combing through the dirty close and then under his bed. When I pulled out his large white sweater, I heard something hit the hardwood.

Underneath the bed frame, the a packaged dangled so I picked it up. I opened it up and that's when I discovered the video tape. The tape that I would come to watch and wonder for months to come. I hadn't thought about that experience in a while, after all this happened a long time ago. Come to think of it, yes, I think I saw an angel that day.

CHAPTER IV

DAD

Grandma used to tell me stories of my dad in his younger years.

“Tu Daddy ere un good persona. Marco siempre haría tiempo para su familia.”

But she stopped years ago. After mother died, he began drinking and isolating himself from us. From everything. I’ve never knew him other than a drunk, except from Grandma’s stories. She said as a kid he carried with him a stuffed frog named El Froggy. He and El Froggy, she would say, would spend most days at the canals by their house. Día y noche, she would say. And then he became a river.

He loved the water, she would say, and chase the glittering flow between the banks and the farmland. Him and El Froggy would take their fishing sticks and hide away under the small canal bridge which would keep them cool from the south Texas sun. He would play in the dirt and throw rocks at the snakes and wait for breakfast or lunch or dinner to bite. But as the story goes, at the age of five, Dad saw a real frog for the first time.

Un bullfrog!” She would say, and her arms would spring from her chest!

He ran to it, but the bullfrog jumped into the water and submerged, with only his eyes visible and staring. My dad squatted opposite of his nemesis and focused his energy on the little creature’s movements. And the little guy croaked, and my dad would get closer. And the little

guy jumped out and towards a rock by the running waters, and my dad jumped and followed. But he miscalculated or tripped over a twig or lost balance with his sandals - probably the sandals because sometimes the story has a sandal stuck in the mud – and he fell onto the rock and opened a wound on his forehead.

The blood, she would say, ran deep into the waters and my dad stayed lying in the canal. Lying and smiling because part of him now belonged to the endless stream that smoothly fed the crops and gave life to the livestock. When the blood and the elements were complete, the bullfrog jumped onto my dad. Still lying, his chin touched his chest for a look. The frog croaked. Satisfaction settled.

There's also the story of his teenage years. It's pretty graphic. My dad, the thug, “un cholo”, my grandma would say, in baggy clothes and slacks and shoes, defended a meek teen. A teen like me.

After school, by the railroad tracks in back of the junior high, when this town had railroad tracks, he saw a boy walking home one day when my dad was heading towards Tio JJ's house. He's not really my tio, but him and my dad have been friends since middle school. They followed a path set years ago near the junior high practice football field and through a hole underneath the fence. After crossing the railroad tracks, the boy went straight towards the What-A-Burger, and my dad went right towards the apartments on East 3rd Street.

Suddenly, my dad heard a commotion. The boy, slender and quiet, became surrounded by two high schoolers with rusting bikes. They pushed the boy's books downward, threw his backpack from his shoulders, and took his wallet. The boy fell to the ground. My dad, not sure

what to do, stood still for a while. The bullies were Joe and Moises, brother who then road off to the hills of dirt nearby, and the dust rose like stampede wind.

My dad ran to help the boy pick up his things from the ground, books, loose paper, and a water bottle. My dad offered him some water, but the boy shook his head no. Then the bullies returned.

“What the hell is this?” Joe, the one with the long, dark hair said, riding back to them with his hand in the air, holding an empty wallet.

The boy began to run.

“Come here, you little asshole!” The younger one - but not by much - yelled, prompting both of them to ride faster.

My dad ran too, catching up to the boy in no time. But the bullies rode on and sped past them, braking their bikes in front of them forcing both my dad and the boy to stop.

“¡Véte de aquí! We don't want any trouble.”

“Mira, Marcos, no queremos pedo!” - which I found out literally means we don't want any fart, but whatever – “Let us handle our business.”

“What business?”

“Antonio, here, owes us some money.”

“For what?”

“For nothing!” Moises interjected and Joe shoved him with his elbow.

“For crossing our street.” Joe looked back at his brother. “The Fourth is our tierra.”

At the time, 4th Street consisted of rocks and dirt, and mobile homes of all types were barely settling in. To call the empty street “tierra”, at that time, would mean they were literally boasting over dirt. Pride in dirt, grandma would say, is the end of all reason. El principio y el final de todo.

But my dad and wisdom didn't always agree. Grandma would say, “No tiene dos dedos de frente.” He walked calmly to Joe and Moises walked back.

“I said leave him alone.”

“¿Y si no lo hago?”

And then my dad punched him in the face! No warning or anything. Just straight up punched him in the face. My brother once told him that when dad taught him to box, he argued against warnings. Felt they were unnecessary. “If you're going to fight, fight.”

Well, Joe fell and rolled around holding his nose, which busted and bled on impact. Moises hesitated before going full force. He tackled my dad through a field of tall weeds and they wrestled back and forth. As far as anyone knows the boy stood in shocked. My dad and Moises went round and round until Joe lifted his brother off and began kicking.

My dad held himself in a fetal position, then he reached for a nearby rock. He reached and reached, but could not find the safety or strength to lift the rock from beneath the earth. Moises must have noticed the futile attempts because he ran to the rock and began uncovering it, digging and digging intensely for the weapon. At that moment, the boy jumped on Moises back and the two started for the ground.

My dad began to cough blood over the dirt and weeds, and so Joe left to protect his brother. Joe pulled the boy, threw him to the side, and landed a right jab. The boy fainted. My dad, realizing that their attention would soon come back to him, quickly sought for... something. Anything. And he unearthed an old mestique branch.

When the brothers turned around, they were met with the thorny sting of my dad's weapon against their shoulder. Thin and long, the tree branch cracked like a whip against their skin. A whip with horns. And they looked over to their old bikes, but to retrieve them meant facing down the bull in all its might. They ran home.

My dad took the water bottle and emptied onto the boy. He washed him to a full wake. The boy stayed lying, and my dad took a bike and left.

My dad, the curious and the conqueror. The boy and the brute. The quiet and the brave and the instigator and the protector. The multitudes.

Two stories of my dad before the accident that took mother. Two, but with some dimension. And now there is only one story. The heavy. The sad. The lonely and neglectful. And it ends with a period because that's all that's left.

CHAPTER V

THE JOB OPENING

“Dude, not the ranch! It smells bad! And you gonna be smelling like poo. If you do it, I’m out. You can find yourself new friends.”

Jonathan had a point, but the time had come for me to get a job. We walked a litter further down our black and gold hallways, peppered with decorations for the graduating class.

“And the ranch is right there! Plus I should help Robert with the workload.”

“Charlie, you know damn well Robert ain’t gonna let you work. And ain’t no way you gonna make money. Even if you do, nobody is gonna want to hang out with you. I know I won’t.”

I knew he still would.

“Besides, who are you trying to impress? Nobody likes you!”

But he didn’t hear the conversation Robert and I had. We needed the money, and our dad didn’t show up last night.

“I just need money.”

“Who needs money?”

“Matthew, thank God you’re here! Please tell him the ranch is a bad idea.”

“What ranch?”

“The ranch in back of my house. They’re hiring.”

“What’s wrong with working at the ranch?”

“Matthew, he’s going to smell! Is that what you want for him? To smell! Tell him!”

“I don’t know. Do whatever you want, man.” Then he turned to Jonathan, “Hey, can I ask you something? Buy me a Sprite.”

And then they walked to their classes. Jonathan and Matthew both lived in Elsa near JFK Elementary and were therefore much closer. Their homes were simple, both designed when white, wooden houses with single colored frames were in. I don’t know. Maybe the fifties.

Jonathan and I met in the beginning of this year in Art I. He had transferred from Philadelphia, and so he had talked with an accent. Days into the school year, he needed to catch up. He sat next to me, and I offered to help him out. At first, he didn’t talk much, but after a few weeks of painting “masterpieces” together, he wouldn’t shut up. And still, I have yet to shut him up. He’s shorter than me, but we both have the same skin tone, a sort of mild brown, if that’s even a thing. Because of this detail - and our dark hair, and our weird mannerisms - people think we’re related. After all, we both kind of look like my mother.

Matthew is different. He’s smarter than both of us, probably combined. I met him in Carlos F. Truan Junior High when we were both part of the basketball team. In eighth grade, the coach had me removed because I never showed up for practice. But it worked out. When they put us in regular gym we were some of the better athletes. Matthew, however, stayed and so he

hovers over us both. Over most students. He's white complected and a bit of a flirt around girls. They seem to respond well to it, though.

During my lunch I made a point to stop by the counselor's office.

"How can I help you?"

"Mrs. Childs, I wanted to talk to you about the job opening at the Grace Ranch. What do I have to do?"

"Alright, let me pulled up the information." She presses a few keys on the computer and then, "I'm sorry, Charlie, but there's nothing online. I think you're gonna have to call or stop by. Would you like the number and address, I've got a flyer?"

"Yes, please," but I knew I didn't need it. "What kind of ranch is it, like what do they do?"

"Let me see here. Well, their mascot is a donkey, so that sounds like fun. They also have chickens, goats, rabbits. There's a picture of a cow."

"Cow? Like a bull?"

"No, no bulls. Just a cow. Oh, look and a sheep."

"And what do they do there?"

"Right. Well, I don't know. Maybe they sell them."

"Thank you, Mrs. Childs."

"Hey, listen. It's Friday, go enjoy yourself! Have fun, be a kid."

"Thank you," I repeated, and then left the office.

At the bus pick-up area, the conversation continued, except this time Jonathan had changed tunes.

“You should definitely work at the ranch. You could be a cowboy! Girls like cowboys.”

“Yeah, it’s better than being an eagle,” Matthew interjected, being a big fan of the Cowboys and all.

“Listen, Philly will crush you!”

“Dude, Dallas has the best quarterback in the league.”

“But did they win the Superbowl?” And then Jonathan begins clapping his hands, “Did they win the Superbowl? Didn’t think so!”

“Can we focus? I asked Mrs. Childs for information, but she didn’t really have any. This is all she gave me.”

“I say do it!”

“Yeah, because everybody loves the Cowboys!” And Matthew points to his Cowboys hoodie.

“I don’t think they have horses. Just a bunch of small animals.”

“Which ranch, I’ll look it up?”

“Is that an Eagles phone cover? Dude, that’s just sad.”

“Listen, I will hurt you! Now, Charlie, what ranch?”

We looked up their website and found the pictures the counselor had mentioned. They were a working ranch that also had a petting zoo for events. On the “Contact Us” page, a black and white photo of the owner so pixelated you couldn’t really make out a distinction. We filled out the information and requested an interview. And then the busses came.

I arrived home, and I saw my dad sleeping on the couch. I tried to wake him, but attempts were always pointless. Robert had cooked some tacos before he left. Egg and beans like always, but I ate it. I ate and watched the sun cast shadows on my doorway. Shadows that began to come alive. Shadows of mares and colts rolling like a current in high winds. Shadows of sheep and lambs bleating together and washing themselves in the ponds. I saw shadows of ducklings swimming and diving and growing and flying. And the shadows hovered above like a rainstorm and fell all at once when my phone started to ring.

“Hello?” I answered, sitting outside on an old defeated lawn chair.

“Are you interested in a job?”

“Yes, I tried to apply, but...” and I stood to full attention before being interrupted.

“When can you start?”

“What would I be doing?”

“Wait, is this the kid that’s interested in the job. A Carlos?”

“Yes, it’s Carlos.” And my legs began to pace unconsciously and on their own.

“When can you start?”

“I’m open to whenever. Actually, I live...”

“Can you come now?”

“Actually, I live near your place.” I started to go back inside to put on a put on a clean faded yellow shirt.

“Can you come now?”

“I’m on my way. Thanks,” and I almost hung up, when...

“Yeah, because I’ve got a kid’s birthday party tomorrow morning, and I need help pushing these fat asses onto the truck. They just don’t be listening anymore.”

“What exactly is my job?”

“You help me get these fat asses onto the truck. I’m old, and these bastards just don’t listen anymore. Can you come?”

And so I kissed my sleeping dad on the cheek and left. The sun turned dark orange in the sky when I aligned myself against the gates. The land ended in our backyard, but that had no consequence. The ranch house stood a mile away in the opposite direction of our home. Over the brushes of forest, a single light shined through. It took fifteen minutes of hard gravel to get there, but when I arrived, the man quickly approached.

“Hey there sonny. I’m Baldemar, but you can call me Bob. Now help me get these fat asses onto the truck.”

Bob wore years of experience on his face. That’s what grandma would say. Son mis experiences. I didn’t notice the facial hair until closer inspection. By that time, the sun had faded away. He gave the donkeys quick slaps on their backside, but they refused to move. With my

assistance, we loaded the four donkeys onto the pens, which were secured in the back of the truck. Loaded them with ease.

“This old man can’t handle it much longer. I need workers. What do you say? This old man can’t handle it much longer.”

“Is this all I’ll be doing?”

“No, sir. You’ll also be helping out in the events we’ve got planned. Summer is coming and I get a lot of calls. They book me for any day now. Not just the weekends. Summer is coming.”

“That’s cool,” but I suppose he knew I still needed answers because he continued...

“Yeah, you’ll be helping with the events. Maybe donkey duty, like tomorrow. That’s where kids get on the donkeys. Or maybe horse duty. That’s when people ride the horse. But that’s if you stay long. This horse don’t follow new ranchers. Maybe petting zoo duty. That’s when kids and people come to pet the animals, like the sheep and stuff like that. Yes, sir. You’ll be helping with the events.”

“My brother says I’ve gotta get a job already. I guess this a pretty good one.”

“Oh yes, everybody’s gotta grow up sometime.”

“I live down the road, so if you ever need anything... I can work anytime. My dad, well, he’s unemployed. Can’t find work.”

“Down the road?”

“Yes, down the road.”

“Glad to hear it. I’m old, and these bastards just don’t listen anymore. And besides, everybody’s gotta grow up sometime.”

“I’ve heard that somewhere.”

And I think he got the joke because I think I saw a smile.

“Let me show you around. It might be important.”

He led me to the chicken coop and told me not to worry about it.

“Nothing, but food. In birth and death. Food. You like chicken? Egg?”

“I eat it, yes.”

“Yeah, well these are nothing but food. Let’s cut one open!” He laughed, and I followed. And then, thankfully, we walked away.

“But if you every want any eggs, just let me know. Need to grow if you’re going to work here. Nutrients.”

Bob led to the open stables where the other animals were kept, all of them either sleeping or lying.

“They’re much livelier when they’re out. You’ll see.”

And then we came across an empty stall.

“Who’s Star?”

“Star? Yes, well, Star is in mating. She’s yet to produce a foal.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s at another location. Hopefully breeding. She’s yet to produce a foal. I need a foal to make sure this place doesn’t go under. People like riding horses, but I’ve only got Star. I need a foal.”

He glanced over to the rest of the field, a vast and fenced cattle pen.

“They’re out there. I just can’t watch over them too much anymore. I’m 68 years old. This old man can’t handle it much longer.” He took a fresh breath, took to the sky, then back at me, “What time can you come tomorrow?”

“What time do you need me?”

“Nine. No! Eight-thirty! I need someone to fill up Old Betsy,” and he nodded over to the truck, “Can you come at eight in the morning?”

I agreed, and he sent me off with a cup of water.

“Too old to drive at night,” he said.

When I entered, my dad had fallen from the couch to the floor, and two more bottles were rolling around. I walked over to him and his eyes flickered back between asleep and awake.

“Dad,” I said to him, “Dad, guess what?”

But the bloodshot eyes and trembling lips mustered nothing at all.

“Dad, I got a job.”

And then he nodded to sleep. It would be the longest conversation that weekend.

Robert still hadn't returned from his night job, so I sat outside by the palm tree. I honestly didn't know how he would react. Trucks had been a one of the subjects we were forbidden to talk about, and now I would be driving one.

CHAPTER VI

THE PALM TREE

Safe.

As a child, nobody would play with me. Silence. Quiet. The only sounds I knew. In first grade, a group of boys and girls would play Capture-the-Prisoner, a game in which all the boys would run from the girls and the girls would have to catch them. When touched, the boys were led to a “cell” underneath the slides. The slides looked like a tower. Like the ones Tio JJ uses to hunt deer.

The palm tree reminds me of the fire truck in the playground, the safe base you can touch to avoid being imprisoned. But Robert said I shouldn’t touch any trucks because that’s how mother died. And I stay out late sometimes thinking about the stars and the number of possibilities. The number of chances I’ve had to lead my life in a different direction. And the first pathway would have been the time I played the Capture-the-Prisoner game.

The little girl with the long hair and accent invited me to play. She said, “Run, kid, and I’ll try to catch you,” in her broken English. “Run.”

But I didn’t do anything. Not at first.

“Go. Run.”

And I looked over to the big, red fire truck.

“Don’t you dare get near a truck,” I heard my brother’s whispering in my head. “Don’t you dare.”

But I didn’t listen. I smiled at the little, brown girl.

“Go. I’ll chase you,” she said, and I ran.

She called to the rest of the them and soon a storm of girls darted after me like rain. I ran faster. And I felt myself breezing through the wind and dashing through the boys who ran away and the girls who ran towards me. I ran so fast that the group started to fall away, slowly, and then slower than slowly.

They started going for the slower ones, and so I stopped to catch my breath. And then they came for me. Just one, then two, then four. And they decided to take a corner and close in on me. Slowly at first, to align themselves, and then sped in for the capture. I managed to break out between a small crack of their wall and caught the image of the fire truck, which flashed like a traffic warning. I went for it.

I remember thinking What would Robert think. But I also remembering not wanting to be tagged and sent to the tower. So I sharpened my palms and gave it my best shot. I flew. I flew fast. And when I looked back, the girls were gaining. And when I looked forward, the truck grew. And so it went back and forth, like snapshots. Snap. Snap. Snap. And the truck grew, grew, grew. And so it went until, crash.

The boy told the nurse I did it on purpose. Everybody believed him, but only because the blood convinced them. Worst of all, Robert believed him.

“I told you, stay away from trucks!”

“But I didn’t want to be tagged,” I told him. But his angry, clenched fist wanted nothing to do with excuses.

“I said, ‘No!’”

The kids said I ran into the boy on purpose. They didn’t want to talk to me afterwards. For a short while, I didn’t want to talk to them either because they were stupid. But then, for a long time after, I didn’t think they were stupid. For a long time after I believed I did run into him on purpose. And I didn’t blame them for not talking to me.

Safe. The palm tree. The only safe base I have. I come here to get away. To stay in the dark, like tonight, and listen. I listen to the crickets and the creatures and the leaves blowing and things dipping into the canal. And the trees swoosh and the moon rings and the clouds whistle. And there is no silence. No quite. All talking or singing or calling to me. And I’m safe. Safe from everything, thanks to the palm tree.

CHAPTER VII

THE CAROUSEL

“Look! ‘bout time you’d show up!”

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t sleep last night?”

“Fine excuse. That’s a fine excuse.”

“Excuse?” And then I realized the sarcasm in his voice.

I walked to the old, orange rustic truck, engine already humming and ready to go. I hadn’t noticed before, but Bob’s facial hair overwhelmed his large, balding head. A balding head which he quickly covered with a cowboy hat. He looked heavier in the sunlight. The buttons on his flannel shirt appeared tight, barely holding their grip and preventing his belly from busting through. He’s orange too. Dark-orange. Like a sun-dried chile. And the poor guy dripped in sweat, with patches of wetness down his back and a little on his chest.

“Well, get on in, or we ‘bout to be late. Couldn’t sleep?” He repeated with a wave of his hand. “That’s a dumb excuse.”

“Where is it?” I hesitated, “I can’t get in the truck.”

“Can’t get in? That’s a dumb excuse.” And another disregarding wave.

“No, it’s not an excuse. I’m not allowed.”

Bob then lifted his head upward and gave me his full attention. The beads of sweat continued to speeding and raining from under his hat.

“What do you mean, ‘Not allowed’?” He said.

“My brother... I’m just not allowed.”

He looked around for an undetectable sibling. Then, instinctively and unknowingly, my eyes followed knowing very well they searched in vain. Bob turned to an old bench on the porch and said, “You got some secret, do you? Well, we’ve all got stuff were hiding.” He finally said, then turned back to securing the cage which the donkeys were already loaded.

With his permission, I climbed onto the rear of the trailer overlooking the pens. Robert is not here. And the rule is illogical. But I still did not get in. I think it’s a testament to how much effort my brother placed in creating the nonsensical rule. I shook my head, disappointed in myself for allowing Robert to control me. Plus, it smelled back there. Bob put on his cowboy hat, and began to drive.

We arrived at the house and expected a small gathering of early partygoers. Instead... Fiesta! Evidently we were late, for the people had half of Ester Street blocked off and the conjunto band blasted. It felt like a quinceañera, even though the kid had barely turned five. Old people, like my grandma who could barely walk, moved their “hurting” hips to the sounds of the accorcians and bass. And with each thump and blare of the trumpets, the women spun and their dresses blossomed like wildflowers of all colors. And when then the saxophone began to whistle, the young men tapped their boots against the street in rhythm to the beat. In their tapping they slowly approached the women and they were wooed.

The kids ran around with watermelon slices and pouches of juice in their hands. They ran towards the inflatable bouncy castle. And the girls my age were holding cups of elote, but the smell of chile and mayonnaise always grossed me out. Men, maybe my dad's or Bob's age, stood around the barbecue pit and the grill smelled of smoky brisket. I inhaled and anticipated a tasty lunch.

"Let's set it up and get 'em out!"

From the back of the truck, Bob began removing some equipment and asked me to place them in a pile in back of the pens.

"Ponies!" The little birthday girl with the plastic crown and "Princesa Elizabeth" pink sash said.

"Not ponies. Donkeys," Bob said.

"Ponies!" And her dad removed her. And they both went to the castle.

"Where's her mother?" I looked around into the crowd.

"They're donkeys!"

"No, I asked, where's her mother?" I kept searching, bobbing my head up and down and searching from left to right.

"Huh? Inside? I don't know. Let's set it up."

After several attempts, we finally set up the circular carousel. And then we went for the donkeys.

"We need to pull these fat asses from the truck."

“I know.” And then I hopped off the trailer and began unloading the donkeys.

“Yeah, just get ‘em out and hook ‘em to the pipe right there.”

“And once they’re hooked? How do you get it going?”

“The carousel? Just a little push and starts going. Just one big push. One big bang. Then the carousel goes. And then it’ll stop when it wants. We have little control after the push. But watch for all that crap because it happens. Just clean that crap up before the whole carousel is covered in it.”

When we finished, Pricesa Elizabeth rushed to the gate, leaving her father behind. The others followed.

“Ponies!” She screamed.

“Ponies!” The rest of them echoed like a royal battalion following their fearless leader into battle.

“You deal with them,” Bob said.

The little birthday girl lent out her hand gracefully, and so I carried her and mounted her on her “pony”. Then she waved to her subjects. The next kid, with a tip of his cowboy hat, marched over to claim his knighthood. He looked older than the little birthday girl. Maybe ten or twelve. He looked into the eyes of his trusted steed, petted the mane, lifted his big Texas buckled belt, and saddled up. Then he looked around, caught my glance, and nodded, indicating his readiness. An elderly man and a baby mounted the third and final “pony”. As the carousel began, he gently follow, placing his hand to the baby’s back and holding himself along the circular pipes meant to protect the rotation.

“Go, ponies! Go!” The little birthday girl demanded with her right hand rising and whipping. She smiled. She commanded. She powered through the cavalry and faced her obstacles head on. The plastic crown on her head sparkled in the gleam of the bright morning sun.

The little boy held a different demeanor. He strolled along gently and displayed his stern eyes to the public, shifting them from one side to the other. For the most part, he held the leash. But sometimes one of his hands would wonder to the side of his belt and hovered over his plastic revolver.

The elderly man and baby held no disillusion. Their donkey clicked and clanked against the pipes and both did their best to hold themselves upward. The baby squirmed and drooled and made bubbles with his mouth. Bubbles that wouldn't last. And the elderly man whistled gleefully an old Mexican tune. I attempted to whistle as well, but only air blew. I couldn't press my lips like he did. Circular and piping with music.

When their turn ended, the little birthday girl kindly thanked the “pony” and took off, back to her domain in the bouncy castle. The boy hopped off and patted his ride in the backside then spat out to the side before walking away.

“Gracias, burro,” said the elderly man. Then he lifted the baby off and went on. The baby came back a few times during the next three hours, but I didn't see the old man again. He had gone away, and he did not return. And the boy and birthday girl continued with their day careless towards the rotation of the carousel.

When the three hours were up, we disassembled the pipes and placed them in the passenger's side of the truck. And then I led the donkeys back onto their pens. Bob sent me to

clean the carousel area, but since I had been cleaning, the task simply involved loading the hay of donkey feces onto the trunk. We were about to leave when the father of the little birthday girl came to us with a plate of brisket, rice, bread, and of cup of charro beans.

“No, thanks. We’ve got to get these asses back home.”

But I suppose he saw a sort of pleading or objection in my conduct because he then said, “You wanna stay? Eat? We’ve got to get these donkeys back home, but we can stay if you want. Them charro beans look pretty spicy.”

As we ate on the outdoor picnic table, a certain song began to play. It prompted the individual men and women - even dissembled dancing couples – to get into groups of four or five or six or eight. These groups then lined up in to a row of people all facing forward, and each individual group faced the same direction. Then the band picked up the tempo and the groups started moving. Round and round, they moved to the beat. And then sometimes they would all move backwards. All groups, moving backwards at the same time. And then all groups moving forward together. I had never seen anything like it. Then again, I had never been anywhere like it. I had heard stories of mother and dad going to dances and I imagined that’s what they looked like. But now, dad dances with the bottles.

Bob and I threw our plates and began heading out when in the midst of the strumming of the strings and the thumping of the boots. Surprised, I saw Jesus in his army uniform tapping away with two elderly ladies. When we finally caught each other’s glance, he jerked his head sideways, indicating I should join. I asked Bob if I could stay and then the man paid me fifteen dollars and headed out.

I strolled over to the dance floor and waiting for his row to rotate towards me. As they kicked right in front of me, I joined in, fully embracing the conjunto. And we danced in a carousel of many. Danced and gave way to the spin without a care in the world.

CHAPTER VIII

JESUS

I had only known the guy for a year. We met sophomore year in English II Pre-AP, a class full of know-it-alls, jocks, and kids with parents who hovered and complained over every A-minus. And of course, the teacher display the classic quirkiness you'd expect of a Pre-AP course. Batman posters and memorabilia filled the classroom walls, and he always wore a black pea coat, even if the sun beamed fire, which seemed like a possibility in the Rio Grande Valley.

Jesus didn't really talk much. Very quiet. Very stern. Super smart. He had a dark complexion. Very dark. We were partnered to edit each other's essay. He wrote his on why he wanted to join the Navy. He wrote elegantly about how he proudly lived outside Elsa along Monte Cristo Rd. "Every time I pass by Monte Cristo," he wrote, "I see an old black bus in front of a house. It reads, 'America's Last Patrol: Honor Our Dead, Help the Vet, Never Forget', and I am reminded of the sacrifices others have made. I would be honored to do the same for this great country of ours."

"You really like wanna fight for this country? That's kind of scary, isn't it?" And asked, staring between him and almost mark-less paper I had in front of me.

But he just handed my paper back to me, covered in red ink.

"And the assignment only asked for one page." I said.

“Okay?”

“Well, why did you write three? It just goes on and on.”

“You used the wrong ‘your’.”

“What?”

“Look, it’s the wrong ‘your’. You do it quite often.”

I went back to the sentence and found myself a bit embarrassed.

“Well, I guess Batman’s not feeling too well,” alluding to a silly poster that hung on the doorway to remind us that “When you use the wrong ‘your’, you make Batman cry.” Jesus chuckled.

“Seriously, though. You’re not scared?”

“Not really.”

“I mean because you’re really smart. You don’t have to join the military. You could become, like a doctor instead of just a medic.”

“I want to.”

“And what about your family? They aren’t scared?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you asked? Or do they know?”

He shook his head “No”, but I didn’t know to which question. He remained silent for the rest of the period, and I would’ve never guessed we’d be friends afterwards. His paper intrigued

me, though. He had his entire military life planned out. Jesus was going to join the Navy and serve as a GMO, which stood for General Medical Officer. After two years, the essay stated, he planned to join the Marines. But it didn't end there. After time served with the Marines, he wanted something extraordinarily special. He wanted to train to become a Navy Seal.

“My ultimate goal as a military personnel would be to become a Navy Seal until I could no longer serve. I would like to retire as one of the prestigious forces the United States has to offer. To become a Navy Seal would make my parents proud,” he wrote.

After many group and partnered assignments, his walls cracked, and I snuck through to become a close friend. The next two years proved his commitment to his English II essay. While in JROTC, he moved up in rank swiftly and by junior year served as company commander. He has also been training outside of school so that when the recruiters come, he'll be ready. I'm just glad he'll be fighting on our side.

CHAPTER IX

THE WATERFALL

When the little birthday girl's party ended, the sky turned purple and the half the sun peeked out behind the horizon. I asked Jesus if I could have a ride home, but I had already known the answer. Robert trusted Jesus for a reason.

But sometime between the short distance of Ester Street and Mile 3 W, we lost ourselves in the playlist blasting from the car's scratchy stereos. We turned into Santiago Garcia Elementary School's parking lot and headed south listening to bands like 30 Second to Mars, Green Day, Blink 182, System of a Down, and even the artistically talented Amy Lee. On West Adkins Ave, we entered and headed to EL PARK. Once in elementary, I skipped the bus ride home and went walking with a group of my friends to EL PARK. They lived nearby so I didn't think it was going to be a problem. The entrance welcomed guest with a dingy sign in which the shadows of a B and L were clearly missing. For many years after, I called the place EL PARK. After driving with Jesus through the neighborhood, the park shines brightly in the evening sun. The place filled with parents and kids and basketball players and skaters. And the sign at the entrance, with a gate to protect it as well as the rest of the place, reads as it always should have: BELL PARK.

We passed by a water plant then turned right on Fredrick Street, where an enormous pine tree protected humble homes by the road. One of the homes housed Jesus' ex-girlfriend, but

driving through gave him some solace. He didn't date after they broke up. And he didn't want to talk about it.

"Let's pick up something to eat," I said, and then we drove into a drive-thru convenient on the corner of Fredrick and 107. Eager to spend money well earned, I offered pay of Jesus' snacks.

"Dime," the elderly lady said, and waited for our order.

"Tell her I want a Mexican coke, and Hot Cheetos with cheese," I said loudly from the passenger's seat.

"You know that clashes, right?" Jesus warned. "Like, that doesn't even sound good."

"And water, too."

"Una Coca Mexicana, Hot Cheetos con queso, y un agua," she ordered, and the girl inside flew to gather each item. "¿Qué más?" She asked us.

"¿Tiene copas de fruta con chamoy?" Jesus asked.

"Si."

"Buena. Uno pequeño.

"Fruta con Chamoy," she ordered, and the girl inside started cutting up fruit. "¿Qué más?"

"Es todo."

"Siete, cincuenta y ocho. Adelante."

We drove up to wait for the fruit cup to come out. And the music was blasting still, until...

“Dude, is that country?”

“Hell, yeah!” Jesus said. Then he turned the volume up.

“Why?” I accompanied my question with an over the top facial expression that articulated my concern.

“Dude, this song is good. It’s sad, though.”

“What’s it about?”

“It’s about a soldier that gets cheated on. Then he kinda loses his mind and starts drinking. Then he kills himself. Then people started blaming her. See, hear, ‘The rumors flew, but nobody knew how much she blamed herself.’”

“Did you just sing country, man?”

“No! Well, yes, but listen to the song. See, she became depressed and started drinking also. Then she killed herself too.”

“That’s pretty sad.”

“Yeah, but look at the video. They end up together in the afterlife.”

“I don’t want to know anything about afterlife, man.”

We stopped talking and the music continued playing. Then the fruit cup came and we took a left on 107 and headed towards Elsa.

“What happened to that raspa stand?” I asked, jerking my head towards a small, empty food truck. “It used to have lines so long it would reach the post office next door.”

“They moved. They bought a building in the other side of Elsa.”

“I heard you the wait was like an hour, I think.”

“I heard it was worth it, though. And now they’ve got Ice Cube painted all over it, I think.” He stopped for a moment and hesitated with his next words. “You know I don’t have my mother with me, right? I mean, she hasn’t died, like yours, but I still don’t have her.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“I’m living with my uncle right now.”

Another moment of silence. I drank my coke and hot Cheetos. It did clash.

“Let me show you something.” He said. Then we drove through Elsa and turned right at the old H-E-B building. We continued north until we hit Monte Cristo then turned left carefully. The intersection had taken many lives and so it had a bad reputation.

“You live nearby, right?” I asked, but Jesus did not respond.

He drove took a right at Jesus Flores Road.

“Oh! I know where we’re going!” I said.

“Where?”

“Are we going to the waterfall?”

“How do you know about the waterfall?”

“Mathew and Jonathan.”

Then he made a clucking sound with the roof of his mouth.

“What was that?”

Then he did it again.

“I don’t get it.”

“It’s just something Isabella and I do.”

“What does it mean?”

“I don’t know. We just do it when we’re shocked or surprised.”

“Like your own language?”

“I guess.” We drove through the lane with houses of all sizes to the right of us and a fields of farm dirt ready for cultivation. We passed Rubio Trucking, over the dwindling bridge, and quickly steered left onto the dirt road. “Oh. And yeah, we’re going to the waterfall.”

We drove straight through the weeds and brushes and branches, and then the dirt road took curved right and we parked.

The waterfall consisted of lifted concrete bank and a white plastic pipe right above the flowing water. The lift made the water fall into the bottom and run through 19 concrete blocks. And slabs of concrete slide steeply down the side of the canal, and writing from couples to egotists to gangs marked the steep sideways. We exited the car and sat down on the grey slope and tried not to fumble downward.

“I always go here to remember. This place reminds me of my mom.” Jesus said.

I inhaled deeply and you could taste the crisp greenery that surrounded that special place. The humid air felt heavy on my shoulders, but as we slid closer to the center of the canal, specks of water sprinkled against our body and face.

“Wanna go to the other side?” I asked, shifting my smile from Jesus to the 19 blocks, and back at Jesus.

“Sure.”

The 19 concrete blocks were slightly above the water and aligned diagonally from each other, so we hopped from left to right towards the other side of the canal. When we reached our goal, we saw more writing on the slope.

“I like how blocks,” Jesus said. “They’re like a wall. Then the water comes from one direction, leaps through the waterfall, and easily passes through, naturally flowing from one area to the other. Society’s not like that, you know. Too many walls. Not enough passages for nature. Not enough passages.”

“Where’s your mom?”

“Far.”

“I miss my mom too.” I said, trying to pass a white lie.

“Yeah?”

But I couldn’t.

“No, not really,” I confessed. “I didn’t really know my mother. And Robert doesn’t want anyone talking about her. So nobody does.” I waited for a response, but Jesus didn’t say anything. He stayed staring quietly at the waterfall.

“I wish someone would talk about her. I want to know more about her. I don’t know how to go about finding anything out. Especially since Robert controls everyone, and my dad is a drunk. Kinda sad, huh?”

“Yeah, kinda.”

We watched the stream roll steadily through the blockade. And we took what we needed from the scene. Our worlds were filled with concrete blocks, and we only wished for fluency. Because that’s what nature demanded. That’s how nature worked. Miles and miles of running waters clash against adversity and keep on moving. The water doesn’t stop. Just rolls and rolls. Everlastingly. And then the moon rose to the center of the sky.

CHAPTER X

LEGEND

“No, you didn’t. Tell me you didn’t actually go to the waterfall in the middle of the night,” Jonathan said.

“Well good morning to you too.”

“Charlie, did you go or not?”

“You were the first one to take me there, what are you talking about? You and Matt. What’s with you?”

“Yeah, but not at night! Nobody goes at night! Did you see anything? Please tell me you did. Or didn’t. I hope you didn’t see anything.”

“Just the waterfall.”

“And you’re okay?”

“What are you talking about, like gangs or something?”

Matthew had his across from us so we waited by outside ours until he arrived.

“No, not gangs. Worse! That place is connected to the waters of 2812.”

“Where?”

“2812. South of Monte Alto. That’s where La Llorona drowned her kids.”

“What? No. I’ve never heard of that.”

Then Matthew appeared from the corner of the hall and, “Hey, guy!”

“Matthew, tell me you know about La Llorona from 2812.”

“I’ve never heard of that.”

“How am I the only one who’s heard of her? I’m not even from here. Well, you know about La Llorona, right?”

“Yeah, a woman drowned her kids because her husband was leaving her. And now she roams around looking for them,” Matthew spoke for both of us. “But that’s in San Antonio. Not here. They even have a creek named after her and everything.”

“Yeah, Women Hollering Creek. I’ve heard of it,” I interjected.

“Look, all I know is that some people have been talking about a woman in white floating late at night. She wanders the waters and every and all connections. The story is that she killed her kids in a long time ago in a house between Doolittle Road and 2812. And she was actually spotted a few years back floating along the banks of the canals of outskirt Edinburg, including north of Elsa.”

“Get out of here,” I said. “We didn’t see anything.”

“No, it’s true. My teacher in seventh grade told us a story about a woman in white floating around Mile 19. But she wasn’t La Llorona,” Matthew said.

“It could’ve been,” Jonathan continued. “The sighting a few years ago said she didn’t make any noise. Just a woman in glowing in white in front of their car. The driver flashed the lights at her, and she didn’t say anything. But she did start walking towards them. The driver

would reverse, then flash his lights again, and she just kept coming. Over and over, until finally, she went away, howling.”

“Yeah, but you said she floated, and in the story, she was walking.” I said.

“What?!”

“That’s true. Just because she was wearing white, doesn’t mean she was a ghost. She could’ve been a crazy person,” Matthew stated.

“Guys, it’s La Llorona! She’s floating around the canals at night!”

“But she wasn’t floating!” Matthew continued.

“And she didn’t even cry. Face it, your story sucked.”

“It doesn’t suck. It’s real. You know what, you guys didn’t even know about this story and you live here.”

“So?” I asked.

“So y’all need to learn your own history.”

“It’s not history, it was a crappy story about a ghost that doesn’t even exist,” and Matthew started for his room.

“Okay, first of all, where you going?” Jonathan asked.

“I’m going to class!”

“Second of all,” Jonathan continued in an elevated voice, “It is a real ghost, and it is a real story and just because it sucks doesn’t mean you shouldn’t learn about it. It’s supposed to be

part of your region and you need me to come and tell you about it. This is what's wrong with this city!"

Matthew took off without another word. Without even an acknowledging nod. But it made sense. I had never heard that story, but why? What other stories have I never heard of? When I thought back to that night, shivers ran up and down my back, but eased when I remembered I didn't see anything. But I wondered, if I had paid attention to the roads or the banks or the breeze, if I had paid attention, what kind of story would I be able to tell.

CHAPTER XI

THE NIGHTMARE

The bull dug his horns deep against the dark and dingy night that spun dry, dead leaves into a maroon-covered moon. His grunts shook the earth beneath him and the kicks threw black dust upwards and in circles, and he would disappear and reappear into the revolving air that twisted lights and shadows and darken colors of brown, green, and embers. Then embers – only embers – and a light glow along the hooves.

The hooves pounded the coals and raised the flame to a fire. He lowered his head and his stout, ivory horns were traced in red. He exposed flared nostrils and focused eyes. Then he caught my glance. He bullied the ground with his right leg and prepared to charge.

I turned around looking for a place to run, but a fence made of wood and wire – with spaces in-between, but not nearly enough for an escape – encircled and entrapped us both. He grunted some more. He grunted and twisted and kicked and fired and charged. And he charged pushing back hot coals and ashes and the ashes flew to the sky and sky turned bloody red. The ground beneath him caught fire and blazed and the blaze traced the lightning movements in rapid flashes.

I looked back to the fence, but the fence grew upward and crooked against the backdrop of old mesquite branches piled on top of each other. I started climbing up the wires, but the steps and reach rotated and buried the fence further into the ground. Still I tried.

When I looked back an illuminated white bird swung swiftly from side to side over the rushing bull. It clicked and clacked and soared through, expanding its wings, then swooping down to the bull and up into the air. The illumination faded and the sky darkened again, with only the full moon shining through. I started panicking as the only sense of security flew from sight. The bull, oblivious to the happenings above his head, continued its fiery charge. I rolled on my back and held my knees to my chest, waiting for impact. Then, clash!

With a loud, metallic bang the beast's body bounced and lifted the ashes from the ground. He rose again, pressed his chest over the moonlight, and charged. Clash! Then Clash! Clash! Clash! Clash! Clash!

Clash! against my bedroom wall. I awoke in the middle of the night and ran to open the trembling door.

"Get out of here!" Robert stood above my fallen dad, who had trouble lifting himself, let alone answer to Robert's plead.

"Get up and outta here!" Robert continued, "We don't need you bumming around her no more. We don't need you so just get out!"

Tears and saliva drenched Robert's face and attire. His unsteady arms pointed to the door and everything turned red. Face. Eyes. Even his breathe seemed to flame. His chest rose and fell like a heavy heartbeat. And he looked at dad as if he could charge at him at any given moment and leave him hurt and bloody.

My dad stayed sitting with the walls holding his back. His heavy red eyes shifted back and forth between Robert and me, and his head bobbed all around. His bare chest poured heavy

sweat all around and soaking the ground. He opened his mouth to speak, but only grunted. Then he began dry heaving, held his stomach, and laid on his back.

“Get out of here!” And then Robert reached down to my dad’s arms and began dragging him.

“Robert, wait!” I said. “Robert, stop!”

I ran over to Robert and tried to reason, but Robert didn’t want to listen. He struggled to drag my dad from his position and dad fought back by holding his position.

“Robert! Stop, man!”

“Charlie, get the out of here! Go back to your room!”

“No, Robert,” But my appeals where lost to the fire inside of Robert. He could no longer hear me.

“Robert! Robert! Quit it!” And then I rose to the air and jumped on his back.

“Get off me, you little jerk! Dad’s gotta go!”

“No! You get off!”

“Get off!”

“No!”

And then I felt Robert’s elbow on my lower jaw and saw myself fall slowly to the wooden floors. Blood.

“Oh, crap! Charlie, are you alright? Charlie? Charlie?”

My jaw pulsated and blood spilled and slid across the living room floor.

“Charlie?”

“Yeah,” I finally said.

“You alright?”

“Yeah, I’m find.”

“Find?”

“I’m fine.”

“Charlie, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

I tried to sit up, but kept slipping back down. My brother hovered and watched over me. In the back of Robert’s wondering eyes, I saw dad crawling to his couch. When he arrived, he placed one arm over the cushion, lifted his chest for a bit, and then fell to the ground.

“Charlie, you alright?” When I tried to stand up, I felt a little rock prick my palm. I lifted my hand, and a little white tooth faintly pieced my skin. My eyes became heavy and everything started to blur.

My glance fell back to the tooth, but now it resembled a small bird. A smile white bird inserted in the palm of my hand.

“Charlie, y-o-u a-l-r-i-...”

CHAPTER XII

DREAMING

The wind blew. A cold, damp wind. I saw myself sitting on the concrete banks of the waterfall canal. As each trickle tapped against the water below, music played. Not music, but keys of some sort. Something like piano keys. And with each keystroke, a twinkling occurred. The wind blew again. A cold, damp wind. And I stayed silently still with my back up against the concrete bank.

I felt my chest rising and falling. The air flew gently inward and outward; every inhale and exhale gently touching my lips. The inhaling of the midnight air felt crisp and cool as it entered through my nostrils. And the exhale – a warm, soft breathe – breezed smoothly over my tongue. An effortless inhale and exhale. And then deeper. And deeper. And deeper.

I felt the rays of the moonlight warming my body. And it complimented the droplets well. Warm body. Cool droplets. And then the cool breeze came through again, causing the weeds to tickle the right cheek. Still I stayed sitting. My body could not move.

I saw the moonlight, engulf my chest and heart and head and hands, and expanded my internal self. The warm light passed through my shoulder and legs and hands and feet. Warmth. So warm, I began to see myself glow. And with each breathe, more and more light penetrated through my skin. Glow.

My body began to vibrate lightly. And I became weightless. Warm and weightless. Like a cloud of smoke. The kind that blows when the sugar fields are set on fire. Heavy, light, weightless cloud of smoke. And I saw the stars sparkling in the dark sky. The stars began to sparkle and traced the Taurus constellation.

My body lifted from the ground, and then I felt myself enter my body. My shoulders lowered and fell to the twinkling music and the trickling waterfall. And then all of my muscles fell. My calves and thighs and arms and shoulders all fell. The more they fell, the lighter I felt, and I gradually floated higher from the ground.

I saw the top of the hills that surround the waterfall. Over the hills, large fields of cotton, were growing and glittering, reflecting in magical patterns and sound to the light rays of the moon. I flew higher and the 107 lights could be seen. Neighborhood houses lit up and schools and shops and restaurants all lit up all of Elsa.

I looked to the sky and saw a meteor shower gracefully overwhelm the dark sky. They danced across the world and they flew in waves and rolled like a river. And then they began to jump like flying fish and more music played on. When the shower ended; darkness.

The clouds covered the moon and stars. They passed quickly, but took everything. Everything, but the constellation. The plain pattern developed quickly from horns to head to body. The Taurus appeared in form traced by the stars; I did not fear it.

It moved gently towards me, so I approached, floating curiously and quietly. As the bull and I became closer to each other, I could see a calm and tender demeanor. This was not the same bull as the one that haunted my dreams earlier that night. At least I didn't think so. But I couldn't know for sure. Just a starlit trace of a bull, nothing more nothing less.

When we reached each other, he nodded and so I began to pet him. The horns lit the brightly and we were still in the sky. He nodded again, but I couldn't decipher his message. Finally, he lowered his stance and laid in the sky on all fours and nodded once more. This time I hopped onto his back.

In a dash, the bull stormed straight now faster and faster breaking through the freezing winds and heading for the canal, which still gleamed with light and music. Frightened, I jumped off onto the grassy side of the waterfall, and the bull dived and disappeared into the stream without a sound or a splash. I stood up hastily and almost stumbling and ran to where the water rippled. I did not see the bull.

Still searching, I placed my face closer to the waters. Then closer. The ripples did not stop. No, the opposite happened. The ripples became more apparent, more demanding of my attention. And I paid. The ripples started vibrating, like the smooth vibrations of musical waves. Yes, like visible musical waves.

I reached to touch the cool bubbling waves, hoping to balance the glowing warmth within me. My fingertips led the rest closer to the ripples. When my skin met the waters, I felt another sensation. The sensation did not feel wet, but solid. I peeked over and saw myself reaching back to me. A reflection. A solid reflection.

Quickly, I reached for his wrist. I moved rapidly to save him, but he didn't appear to need saving. He did little to project any sort of panic; still, I rushed. I reached his forearm with my other hand and kept pulling.

"Just let go!" He said, still under the waterfall.

"Just let go?" I asked.

“Tell them to just let go.”

“Just let go?” I asked, still holding on to his arm, but holding back from bringing him up completely. “Just let go?! How easy for you to say to ‘just let go.’ How easy, when you have no idea what we’ve been through.”

“Yes, just let go.”

“Just let go? Just let go. Just let go.” And then I let him slip back into the ripples.

When I awoke, I did so with a jolt, my body covered in sweat and already placed in my bed. Robert must’ve brought me in. I laid back down on my soaked pillow and blanket. I could hear the music from my dreams still playing in the background. And the wetness that surrounded me that night smelled crisp, like the waterfalls.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CREEK

“What’s with the bull?”

“Huh?”

“The bull... in the back of the fields. There’s a bull back there.”

“You’ve seen him, huh?”

“Yes, sir.” The question had been burning within me since the day I became a ranch hand. Bob didn’t say anything for a long while, so I continued shoveling hay onto the back of the truck.

“This here is dry alfalfa. Good for the protein. That’s what the book says.”

“Right,” I said, accepting the fact that we were going to ignore the question.

“And when is Star coming back?”

“I told ya, she’s out breeding,” he said with a tone indicating irritation. “She ain’t coming back... anytime soon.” And he continued shoveling.

I thought I would change the subject. I had been wanting to talk to someone about the happenings of last night. I tried to tell my friends earlier this school day, but I didn’t. I didn’t

want them to think I was going crazy or anything. But something in Bob's sadden heavy eyes urged me to keep company.

"You know, I had a crazy dream last night."

"Yeah," and he kept shoveling, but I didn't know if he actually heard anything.

"Maybe you could tell me about it."

"I don't know anything about dreams and such," he said. Now I knew he was paying attention.

"Well, let me tell you then."

"Yeah, go on, but I don't know anything about dreams."

"Actually, there were two dreams. One of them was about the bull in the back of the ranch."

"Aldebarán?"

"What? Is that his name?"

"Who's name?" Then he stopped shoveling and looked up at me. "The bull?" He turned back to the hay and began shoveling again. "Yeah, that's the name of the bull."

"Aldebarán?" I struggled with the accent, and Bob must've noticed.

"You can call him Baran. We calls him Baran."

"Who's we?"

“Nobody.” He looked into the evening sky, removed his cowboy hat, and wiped the sweat off his forehead. “Maybe you should take over. I’m feeling kinda tired. This old man can’t handle it much longer.”

He left to a nearby bench and rested his elbow on his lap and his forehead on his palm. His breathing became more and more evident, and his eyes seemed to be on the verge of tearing over, but they didn’t.

“What’s with all the questions today?” He asked loudly so that I could hear him. “Why all the questions?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? You’re the one asking all the questions.”

I continued loading the trunk with hay, careful not to touch the truck.

“I mean,” I finally continued, “This is my second time here.”

“Third. This is your third time here.”

“Well, yes, I guess. I mean, the first time it was dark.” I stopped shoveling for a moments. “What are we going to do with all this stuff?”

“More questions?”

“I’m just trying to learn,” I said. I place my shovel to the ground and then sat next to him. I could smell the grass stains on his white t-shirt and blue jeans. Large stains that covered sweat marks, but barely.

“We gotta another party this weekend. A car show in Delta Lake.”

We stayed for a moments silently letting the sun set before our eyes, a crushing orange hue. We let the crickets chirp and the humid air rest on our tired shoulders. A few breezes blew by, but their warmth did little to alleviate our simmering selves. Bob kept his head low and didn't say anything for a long time. When the sun reached twilight, Bob stepped up and went back to the truck, so I followed.

“How much do we need?” I asked.

“You wanna leave?”

“No, I was just wondering. I want to stay. Finish up.”

“You can leave if you want to.”

“What's with you?” I asked, finally matching his tone.

“What's with me? What's with you and all the questions? I've never heard a man ask so many questions.” He stood up and threw the shovel to the ground. “Why don't you just go? Get on outta here?”

But I couldn't take it any longer. I grabbed the shovel and took one hard swing to his rusting truck. And before I could see his reaction, I ran. I didn't know where I was going, but I ran. My legs took me north on across an empty farmland waiting for the plants to mature. I rested when I reached a creek with low running water passing through. Once I caught my breathe I sat on top of an old mesquite trunk and watched the flow.

Suddenly, I heard a rumbling behind me. I climbed up the bank and saw the truck turning the dirt upwards and driving towards me. I went back down to the creek and sat quietly. Then the

truck parked right over my direction. Bob came out and slid down the bank and crouched beside me.

“It’s not your fault, you know?”

But I didn’t. I hadn’t the slightest idea of what he was talking about. Still I listened, curious to know where this was going.

“The ranch, I have no idea what I’m doing.” Then he passed over a book on raising and selling cattle.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you mean, ‘what do I mean’? I’m saying I have no idea what I’m doing. I don’t know how to run a ranch.”

“Then why do you own a ranch?”

“Ugh, all the questions.”

“Well, you brought it up. Kinda.”

He looked up to the purple sky, and then back to the rhythmic current. He grabbed a few rocks and rotated them in his palm. Then he started throwing them one at a time into the waters, trying to cause a skip.

“I bought the ranch in an auction from the bank. When we met, she was riding a horse and wearing a crown. She was a runner-up to the Miss Texas Onion Festival. But I don’t understand how. That woman was the most prettiest woman.”

I stayed silent and then picked up some rocks to skip them as well. He continues doing the same, but neither of us succeeded. The trees began to sway, and the fresh gentle wind cooled and sent chills throughout my skin, but still we stayed. Cooler and cooler, and then colder and colder, and still we stayed.

“Yes, sir, the most prettiest.”

“What happened?”

“She rode through the parade in her tall, white horse, and her long, black hair rolled with the wind. Kinda like this river here. Just rolling. Me? Well, I was just watching in the side of the road. Nothing special. Just me in my auto body uniform smelling like diesel and motor oil. And she looked at me. The prettiest woman looked at me.

“I didn’t know what came over me. I waited at ‘till the end of the pageant, when her named was called, and she didn’t win. Now, being the prettiest girl I don’t care what you say deserves a crown. And, hey, onion blossoms kinda look like crowns. So that’s what I did.

“I went up to her and I said, ‘mam, the prettiest girl deserves a crown, and this here onion blossom kinda looks like one. Here ya go.’”

“Oh my god!” I said, “Did that actually work?”

“Well, I got her didn’t I?”

“How? It sounds so cheesy.”

Bob began coughing up a laugh. “I don’t know,” he said. “I guess she couldn’t resist an onion blossom.”

We moved further down the bank following a branch floating with the current. The purple began to fade and night fell fast. The breeze fell under colder temperatures. And the mesquite trees resisted, but eventually moved to the wind's drive.

"The prettiest girl wanted a ranch. I knew it, but I still spent my time working for the city. I fixed buses for the schools. You know, work for the city. I spent twenty years working for the city, and no matter how we tried, I couldn't find the money to buy a ranch. I should've tried sooner.

"When she passed away, I didn't know what to do. I walked around like a cow or something. Just there going on with my life, but not really thinking about it. I'm not too good with the words. I don't know if I'm making it any sense. But I was moving. Just moving and doing what I had to do without thinking about it.

"Twenty years, and she didn't get her ranch. Then my friend told me about this ranch here. He said to me, 'Bobby, you gotta get this ranch. It's going on auction and you gotta get it.' He showed me the notice and he said, 'You gotta get this ranch.'"

We reached a small concrete bridge and fought through a few thorny bushes and twigs and branches and weeds. We sat under the darkness that now engulfed this side of the earth. And the moon cast shadows and protected scurrying critters and swimming fish from view, and only their sounds played as backdrops to the cricketing and swaying trees and brushing grass, which dominated the waves, both air and water.

"You see, I don't know what I'm doing with the ranch there. I figured if I had some company, or someone to talk to, I would figure it out."

We watched the reflection of the moon on the creek, and we saw fish rise up and touch the surface, and then swim back down.

“I lost my mother.” And the creek kept going. “I don’t know why I’m telling you this. But I guess maybe we can relate.”

“What happened?”

“I’m not quite sure. I was too young. Almost a baby.”

“Do you remember her?”

“No. I was way too young.”

We paused for a moment. I guess we didn’t really know what to say. The bridge locked out the moonlight and it became awfully cool. I noticed Bob shivering and then my body followed suit.

“You wanna head back?” He asked.

But I didn’t, so I didn’t say anything.

“You dig a hole.”

“What?”

“Dig a hole. Right there on that ground there.”

And so I did as he said. He wandered out from under the bridge, and when he came back he had some twigs and dry leaves and grass.

“Didn’t I tell ya to dig a hole? Dig a hole.”

“I tried. You just came back too quickly.”

“Dig a hole.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m going.” And I continued digging with my bare hands.

“Here, move outta my way.” He took a knife out, loosened the dirt, and started digging himself. When he finished, he called for the twigs and leaves and grass which he had placed a few feet away.

“You know how to make a fire? Like, with rocks and stuff.”

“Son, I can’t even raise them cattle over there. I’ve got matches.”

He proceeded piling up the flammable items into the hole and then searching for his matches.

“You got them?” I asked.

“They’re here somewhere.” He emptied his jean pockets and patted down his shirt. He even checked his sock.

“It’s cool.” I said.

“I think I left them in the truck.” But the truck parked a far distance away. Well, far enough that neither of us wanted to go get the matches.

“The ranch is named after her, you know.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah, Grace Ranch. It’s named after her.”

“That’s nice. That’s a really nice gesture.”

“Oh yeah, had to name it after her. Need to hold on to her. Grace Ranch helps me do that.”

“That’s just it. The dream. In the dream, I saw myself in the water and it told me to ‘let go’. To ‘just let go.’ And I thought, why should I left go. Even then, I have nothing to hold on too. Unless it was about the video. Maybe I need to tell Robert about the video.”

“Let go?” He asked while looking for a rock to “light” the fire with. “That’s the last thing you should do is let go.”

“Actually, no. He told me to tell ‘them’ to let go.”

“Tell who?”

“I don’t know,” I stopped talking and stood wondering about. Bob rubbed a rock against one of the sticks, but nothing happened. “Aren’t you suppose to use two rocks? Like, to create a spark or something?”

“I don’t know, I can’t even raise them cattle.”

“Here, let me try.” I searched the ground and found a smooth rock and took it to Bob. He handed me his rock and I began striking one with the other.

“You sure that’ll work?”

“I don’t know,” I said, but I continued striking.

“Maybe I should go for the matches. I can’t even raise them cattle,” and then he made way against the thorny bushes, clearing a path for him to pass through. And then the rocks sparked. “What? Is it working?”

“No. Not yet.” And I kept going. Bob came closer and... spark. Then another. Spark. Then another. Spark. And this one caught a tinder.

“See, this is why I need you youngin’s. I can’t even raise them cattle and you want me to raise a fire. I didn’t even know you knew how.”

“I didn’t. I just kept trying.”

“Well it worked. Sometimes things just work out.” He came closer as I held the fire in my palms, shielding it from the winds, and blowing gently at the flames, the way I saw others do in the T.V. shows.

“You know Aldebarán? Baran? How?”

“I live close to you. Like really close. Your fence lines up with my backyard. I jumped over once chasing a bird.” I stopped, a little embarrassed and afraid he would object to my trespassing. But he didn’t say anything, so I continued. “I ran deep inside your property and at the very end, I saw him. I saw the bull.

“I haven’t seen Baran since I bought the poor thing. Got him half off. Didn’t know he was old. Didn’t even know he wasn’t castrated. Poor thing.”

By this time the fire picked up and rose higher, and then higher with each branch we threw.

“When I brought the bull in, he escaped quickly into the fields. I haven’t seen that poor thing in about two years. I mean, I see the poor thing, but only through the damn forest. The damn and dense forest.”

“You haven’t tried calling to him?”

“No. Poor thing runs away and hides. And boy, can he hide. With that dark brown fur of his, he can hide anywhere in those fields. When I bought the ranch, I didn’t know how wild the property was. Damn thing was a forest. I would need to clear the trees before being able to hold a bunch of cattle. I don’t know how to run a ranch.”

“How did she die? If you don’t mind me asking.” Which I thought he might’ve, because he stayed silent for a long moment.

And then, “Heart attack. Happened right outside on the bench.”

“The bench we were sitting on?”

“Well, yeah, it’s the only bench we’ve got. Haven’t you noticed? I brought it from our old house and placed it right there on my patio.”

“I’ve noticed, but doesn’t the bench remind you of her? Doesn’t it make you sad knowing that bench is where she died?”

“I suppose I never thought of it that way. I guess, it’s more about the memories we made on that there bench. Memories that can’t be erased. Not even a heart attack could replace the memories.”

“I wish I had some memories. I don’t remember my mother at all. I don’t know anything about her.”

“We should’ve brought some food. This fire is looking good.”

I couldn’t tell if he was ignoring me or not. But I continued, “I only have the video.”

“What’s the video about?”

“It’s just her. Singing the Happy Birthday song. I’m a baby almost. Like a two year old.”

“Don’t nobody else know about your mother?”

“Well Dad and Grandma. And my brother. But my brother has convinced everyone to not talk about my mother. So I don’t have any other information.”

“Your brother might be hurting.”

“What do you mean?”

“You gotta find out about her. Tell him he doesn’t have to be hurting. Tell him to let go. And when you find her – when you learn about her values, be them. Honor them. Just like my Grace Ranch.”

We stopped again and started at the fire. It pushed its heat to all around and casted shadows on the roof of the bridge. The fire debris floated and intermixed with the fireflies, which I don’t think either of us noticed before. And everything rested. The crickets’ chirping simmered and the wind subsided and the current slowed. An almost stillness seized the night and even the clouds in the distant were outlined by the reflection of the moon.

“Yeah, he doesn’t have to hurt anymore.”

My eyelids started for a heavily fall and then a permanent close.

“And we ain’t seeing Star anytime soon. She up and ran away. She came with the ranch, and I struggled with her plenty. But she up and ran away. But you know what, she up and ran away two weeks before Grace’s birthday. I’d like to think she went to see her. Not like she’s dead or anything, but just left up to heaven to visit and then stayed. Gracie always wanted a ranch. And the prettiest girl deserved it. She really did.”

CHAPTER XIV

RIDE

I woke up to the rumbling tires on the rocks and bumps of a midnight dirt road. The dust soared and surrounded the ride, but the gust and gathering of the particles in the sky fell victim to the moon and the stars that transcended such greyness. Have you ever seen the moon and the stars in a wide open south Texas sky? You should. Each flicker can be seen, felt almost. Heard. The gently stroke of each star and the light humming engine play along the slow moving gleam of the night sky like musical waves of a soft, romantic accordion.

As I laid on the hay in the bed of the truck I wondered, with such a direct view, was she watching me? Did she see how I longed for her presence? Did she cause the wind to speed and stir to let me know she was holding me? And when the dry weeds fell upon my cheek, did she want me to feel her kiss? Where those her eyes just then? Up there. I thought I saw her eyes sparkling.

Upon full realization of the truck I shouldn't have been touching, I decided to stay mesmerized within the moment. I didn't want to move. And when straws of hay began pricking the back of my neck and intrusively making their way under my shirt, I stayed put. In recalling what had happen earlier that night, I remembered drifting off over Bob's coat between the fire and the water, near the croaking bullfrogs. I vaguely remembered any conversation past "the prettiest girl", and any words I did recall were too few to complete sentences.

But I do remember snapshots of Bob, keeping himself busy by casting sticks into the fire and tossing rocks into the creek. I remembered him lifting me up and placing me over the hay, then closing the back of the truck before driving off.

And then, the sky. The vast open sky. And in the middle of the universe, which spun and lifted and croaked and warmed, I felt safe. Safe. Opened and safe. And then home.

CHAPTER XV

MEXICO

It must have been a decade since I had been there because Mexico played in my head like a vintage video in sepia. And when Grandma picked me up from school, that's exactly where we went. "Para medicina" she said, "Y los lonches." On Mile 3 Road West, we took a right, past the elementary school, past El Park, and headed towards Weslaco. We drove straight south through vast farmlands, houses – both grand and poverty-stricken – and running businesses with a falling air that surrounded them. Drive-throughs with flashing lights and hotdog stands cluttered sporadic neighborhoods throughout the path. More than one tire shop offered used materials, including rims for every size of vehicle. And the restaurants were painted in patterns appealing to the spicy taste buds of the Valley.

We drove under the expressway and continued on Mile 3, which changed its name to International Boulevard somewhere along the blending borders of Edcouch and Weslaco. There were a number of RV parks, which were still quite full considering the Winter Texans had already made their way back north. In a curving motion, the road slid past Estero Llano Grande State Park and then curved back to reveal the small town of Progreso.

After the gas station on Military Highway, Progreso became a town of farms and ranches. In fact, it seem to blend its boundaries with another town called Progreso Lakes. But no matter,

the two merge with a resemblance of one another. Life. Both springing with grains and vegetables. Both wrangling with the livestock.

A few palm trees touched the communal air and lined the road right before the bridge. We turned right and into a parking lot, which charged two dollars to enter.

“Dos dólares,” said the lady in the booth, and we could swear we were in Mexico already.

On the corner of the parking lot and next to the bridge, a straw hut shaded a steep walkway, and so I helped Grandma stagger upward. We came to the turnstile, dropped in our fifty cents each, and then set foot on the paved and concrete Mexican-American arch. The wind blew casually on our faces as we walked by the right side and next to the traveling traffic. In the center of the bridge, Grandma set herself on a nearby bench to rest from the walk, and so I peeked out onto the open scenery. On the southern banks of the Rio Grande, I saw two men fishing with their makeshift rods buried in the ground and drinking something from a Cowboys-themed canteen. They did this as they laughed and sang and sat on buckets and at the edge of the water.

And then suddenly they hushed. They hushed, and the rods shook. The white complected-one reached for it and started gently tugging, and the water rippled. More back and forth, back and forth, until he yanked some fish out of the river! They laughed again and then the brown one reached under for the bucket he sat on, collected some water from the river, and then they tossed the fish into the bucket. They nodded their heads like communicating a job well done and continued with their day - as did Grandma and I.

Once we passed the center and the bronze plaque of a manmade boundary with a gold line dividing the two countries, the bridge changed. The view – the men and the water and the fish – distorted itself from behind a maroon shading that prevented most images, but small slits of sun, to pass through. When we reached the other side of the border, Mexican soldiers could be seen from afar near their checkpoint. They stood alert and armed, but in a calm and casual manner. Near the entrance to the other land, tourists lined up and snapped photos of themselves in front of a bronze eagle which sat on a cactus and clasped a snake within its jaws. It greeted them and us with a message in stone and it read, “Mexico – Puente Internacional – Nuevo Progreso.”

As soon as we pasted through a glass passage, vendors of... everything approached.

“Dentist!” said one of them with an accent.

“¡Óptico!” Said another.

And then another, “Medicina! ¿Qué medicina buscabas?” and then he followed us for a bit, “Prozac? Amoxil?” He said in perfect English.

We did need glasses and medicine, but Grandma already knew where to go. We stopped a little past Calle Coahuila on the right side of Benito Juarez Avenue in a small shop with clear cases of glasses in the windowsill.

“Sarita, how have you been?” said the shopkeeper with an accent, and then she hugged and kissed Grandma in both cheeks.

“Muy bien, muy bien. ¿Y usted?”

“Es un buen día.”

“Thanks to God,” and Grandma sounded like the shopkeeper.

Grandma went to the back room with the lady to get her eyes checked, and I sat in a cushioned bench and waited. Outside, I saw a mother and her daughter in the street next to a stand and ordering an elote. The mother paid the older man and so he proceeded to add the mayonnaise, sprinkle the grated, white cheese, and then drown the cob in red, hot chile. Then the older man grabbed a cup from the side of his cart and poured corn from a crock pot onto it.

“No, chile for her,” said the mother, but I heard it through the glass as a murmur, and then the older man scooped mayonnaise and sprinkled in the cheese. Then, he handed a spoon to the mother, and she stirred the mixture deep into the corn before giving the cup to the little girl. The child must’ve been five years old.

When Grandma came from behind the see-through walls, she went for the glasses and started trying them out. She tried on black frames, and then white frames, but she couldn’t make up her mind. She eventually settled on grey frames, and so she had both. The lady hugged her and told us to come back in an hour.

About a few minutes down Benito Juarez, pasted Sonora, but not further than Tamaulipas, we walked across and into the shopping center, Galerias. Once entered, the store boomed with merchandise. The shopping center merged any and all of the street vendors. Wooden toy trucks, dolls, tops, and wagons filled most of the selves in the very left of the store. Piggy banks resembling characters in American pop culture, like Mickey Mouse, Winnie the Pooh, and others. On the left corner sunglasses dotted the cylinder display with many looking to keep the burning sun from their eyes. Hats stacked over each other, and Grandma tried on a few before selecting the purple one with the long, fancy brim.

I loved venturing off to the right of the vast and crowded center, however. Mexican candies lined two rows, and off to the far right of them, more candies. Bags, large bags, of sandia and mango lollipops, both with chile, of course, fascinated the buds on my tongue. And for two dollars and twenty-five cents, Grandma said yes, and I held them tightly in my arms, until I saw the tamarindo flavored lollipops at the same price. And as anyone with good tastes will tell you, Mexican candies were often a mix of sweet and sour. Both. Like harmony. That's why my final decision had to be a large bag of gummy bears and a bottle of chamoy.

Next to the lanes and lanes of candy, a counter top stretches from the midpoint of the right wall to the front of the store. Grandma spoke to the pharmacist, naming multiple medicines, but she spoke to him much too quick and with too many syllables and accents to understand what she said. No matter, the man in the white coat danced to and fro and all around the back, picking and suggesting and ringing and bagging up the small boxes and bottles. When the medicines filled the black bag, Grandma took the bag and hat and candy, and we paid with our green money.

Even though the thought of gummy bears with chamoy tingled on the tip of my sweetest tastes buds, lonches were the best reason to have a Mexican trip. After the Galeria, we walked south along Benito Juarez, and the crossed over on Sonora, right in front of the Angel Plaza. Now, there are more than plenty of taco stands most of which are lined in Sonora and Calle Coahuila. But Grandma always to the one across Angel Plaza because it's the only taco stand that rents an indoor space for its customers.

The indoor space is small and looks more like a storage area for the two stores that surround it. The space is about ten feet long and if you lay on the floor of the entrance, you could almost reach the width of the two walls. From the entrance to the back, however, the walls begin

to close in and so the back ends are at about four feet wide. There are no tables. Instead, customers eat on a countertop with a bottles of chile and salt shakers and sit on bar stools and are protected by the Virgin Mary and a picture of Christ with blue eyes and blonde hair and his arms reaching out to you, peacefully.

We eat there, Grandma said, because there are no street vendors. Because the streets of “Bordertown”, Mexico are full of the sellers and the beggars, the persistent and the desperate, the hopeful and the hopelessly devout. Because in Mexico, Americans are consumers or sympathizers, or both, or neither. And Grandma is both. She likes to sit in the space in-between and order her lonches and eat them in peace. And when the day is done and the sky is turns orange and we gather our things to go, she orders another six. And then the owners know what to do and gives them away.

And before we left, she went for her grey glasses. Her vision cleared, and my perception of all people had altered.

CHAPTER XVI

DELTA LAKE

I knew I few people who had been to Delta Lake, but they were rare and spoke only of the burned grass, or the murky, dark green of the water with reed that protect people from swimming or playing in its shores. Still, and in the front seat of Bob's truck, I excitedly awaited arriving as he drove through the farmlands north of Monte Cristo Road, and past the small city of Monte Alto, both appropriately named after the forests of small bushes and trees that surrounded and engulfed the street that took us there and through many other places.

I had only know the twin cities of Edcouch and Elsa, and had never been as far as Monte Alto, which took only ten minutes to pass. So the fifteen minute morning drive to Delta Lake seemed to offer a world of clear and untainted nature, of the smells and sounds and taste of the wind between the leaves of unknown trees and waters and people and dirt.

When the twisting roads came to a curve, a small store painted like a mural in the blue of the lake and a sun setting behind palm trees. A scene I had hoped to find once inside the park. As we turned in, a blue signed greeted us with a "Have a Nice Day", and palm trees lined the right side of the street, with a small river-like section of the lade to the left. We came across a booth with a \$2.00 entrance fee, but nobody manned it, so we pressed on.

On the right side, after the palm trees guided the way, a larger, still river-like section of the water offered fisherman of all ages the vastness of the catch. And on the left, much farther

ahead, the pavilion hosted the car show Bob had scheduled in as one of the events on his end-of-May list. We must've been a bit early – which is always a plus, considering the amount of time it took to set up the donkeys – because only a four cars had shown up.

Although the pavilion presented itself in a straight left road, a “Do Not Enter” sign forced us to drive around the entire park before reaching the car show. But we drive did not dishearten the fifteen minute journey. The first noticeable aspect, even before the road with the demanding sign, took the form of moralistic bathrooms. The first three bathroom building, which stood individually and a wooden bridge away from the small guests at the pavilion, highlighted the work of many in the Delta Area, including Bob and myself. Farm animals grazed the fertile land. Two persons and a horse, and a coyote and a boar presented themselves to the many who had traveled here, and will travel here, as the wilderness one should expect from such a remote and natural section of what we have called home. Realistic. The second bathroom had scenes of a fictional sense. The waters, which Bob had already warned of its dangerous waves, had sea life. It felt as though the muralist of this building had the expectation of a child, for not even I conceived the idea that Delta Lake had a whale lurking deep inside.

And although the lake itself lacked the comforts of a watering splendor like that of the life that exist in the canals and drying creeks and other river-like sections of the lake, but not the lake, life flourished on the land. Through the drive and through the bathrooms and past the imagined scenery of the mural with a whale, children played in the swings and slides and merry go rounds. At the edge of the lake, right before we turned to make our way back around the pavilion, a large family gathered to play kick ball while the older men and women attended to foods from the grill and conversations.

In the traffic circle, in which the road now fell between the people and the lake, the tables and land both resembled an emptiness. Nothing. Concrete tables fell and crashed like a monument to “wishing for more” in ruins. And the rumors of the reaching reeds proved true and the lake faded so much so that were it not for the slivers of glimmering waters, I might not have believed its existence.

“Here we are,” Bob said, and we parked in the left curve of the pavilion’s circular road. By the time we set up the carousel, more cars had arrived. Classics, all of them, but one green stood out.

“This one? This one here is a Ford Galaxy 500,” said the owner, “it used to be my father’s, but now it’s mine.”

“Well, it’s ours,” said another gentleman, “Dad gave it to both of us. Besides, you live too far.”

“Austin’s not that far”

“It’s far, Dave.”

“Can I see the interior?” I asked.

“Check it,” said the “owner”, and opened the door. “Leather. Tan. With this sea-blue exterior? What do you think about that, my man?”

I placed my hand on the seating and immediately withdrew it. The leather absorbed and reflected the heat to the point I thought a palm reader would have nothing to predict.

“Hot?”

“Yeah!” I said. “By a lot!”

“Hey, little man,” said the other, “How about some pudding?” and a chocolate pudding presented itself. “Come on, little man, its tradition.”

Bob stayed in the side of the carousel. Little children approached, but he pretended not to notice them.

“I need to go. I need to get back to work.”

“Well here, take it. Then later, we’ll go fishing.” I noticed his name tag read “Roger” and assumed his name.

“I don’t like fishing.” I said.

“You don’t have to like fishing to fish,” said Dave, and then I went back to tend to the donkeys.

At ten o’clock, the car show started with a parade around the park and people lined the sides of the streets to hear the engines thunder and music blast, and to see the low-riding cars bounce up and down to the rhythm of the music or to the rhythm of the beat of the crowds that cheered and hollered them on.

The large area extended so much so that the blasting music eventually died off as the cars reached the furthest curve of the park, and when it turned to make its way back to the pavilion, everybody could hear it. And the sea blue Ford Galaxy 500 could be seen miles away. And Dave, the “owner”, drove. And his brother, who I still presumed to be named Roger, bobbed his head to the beat and extended his hand outward from the passenger’s side and into the wind, which

Families stood with their plates of fajitas or chicken or lamb, or whatever caused the smell to rise and engulf the space between their grills and ourselves. Children, most not all, ran

from the slides or swings or merry-go-rounds and stopped themselves by fences made of rotting wood pieces and two long hanging wires – thick, so that people could see them and hop over them if they wished. As the cars drove towards the pavilion, the crowds followed, and I had work to do.

Bob stayed in the front of the truck and away from the children. Every now and again he would come to help with the clean up or to tighten a loose bolt. Or when Skinny Legs became thirsty, and so Bob came quickly to give it water and then fed them all watermelon rinds.

I could tell he loved them, even though they didn't have names. He stroked their hair or scratched the side of their belly when they needed attention and gave them treats when he thought they were hungry or happy or whenever. But the nameless creatures did little to deserve nothing. And so I called them generic names like Skinny Legs, the tallest one with the brown coat and skinny legs. Then Blacky, he had a black coat. Then the little one with that walked with a limp. I called him Little Limps-A-Lot.

And so they we fed them, and bathe them, and loved them just as we should. And so let it never be said that the man did not love. He simply had another way of showing it. A little distant, yes, but love. Love in action.

A breeze came and brought with it two little boys racing against each other and using the wind as an equalizing boost to their speeding feet, although the smaller one was falling fast behind. Then the face of the smaller one crinkled and his mouth opened up to grinding teeth and his steps became wider, but still he fell behind. Then his steps became wobbling hops. And then he stumbled downward and fell.

The older boy stopped and turned around. Then, even faster than when he was racing, sped over to the boy on the ground and screamed, “Brother!”

He ran like a rain storm, suddenly and without warning. And his feet shot downward like raindrops, like a stampede. He picked up his brother and started removing the espinas, these thumbtack-like seeds that grow low to the ground and stab upward and attaches to anything that comes into its path. The smaller boy sat and cried. Then the older boy stopped and directed his brother with his finger to stop crying. And so the little one took a breath and calmed to a quiet quiver.

Robert worked too much. He had two jobs. One at the Texas Star Mart on Llano Grande Street, the same one he has been working in since his fifteenth birthday. The other one, wherever. Sometimes he could cut grass with this used up lawnmower Tio JJ would lend him. Or sometimes he walked around the Edcouch neighborhood near Santiago Garcia with a pail of soapy water and rags looking for cars to wash. Also, sometimes he worked as an extra hand at the local burger place. The one with the graffiti type letters across the Edcouch pool, across Highway 107. And sometimes he cooked or waited or ran the cashier if the people packed the place. Most of the time this only happened after a Yellow Jacket football victory.

My brother, like Dave who lives too far away. Like Bob who loves from a distant. Like the older brother who runs back to sternly watch over the little one. My brother, protector from afar. Like a watchful bird. And I, like a lonely bull.

CHAPTER XVII

ISABELLA AND THE PALM TREE

“You’re Jesus’ friend, right?” She said, “I noticed you from his profile pic.”

I didn’t know what to say. So I said nothing and kept at the carousel.

But she waited with a smile and a dimple. She spoke lightly and fluttery like a spring butterfly, like the movement of a daisy in the air. Her dark hair, short hair waved over and around and a strain curled in from of her right eye. It covered a light skinned complexion with blossoming eyes and rose petal cheeks.

And then her lips parted, “I’m on break right now. I’m working the raspa stand and saw you over here. You’re Charlie, right? It’s nice to meet you.” And then she extended her petite hand.

I shook it, but had trouble looking at her. And I didn’t know why, but, “You remind me of a bird.”

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

“You said, ‘You remind me of a bird.’ What does that mean?”

“I honestly don’t know. I think... We’ve been reading the Great Gatsby, and I think there’s a similar line.”

“It’s, ‘You remind me of a rose.’”

“Right,” is all I could think up of, and then a stillness.

“Right,” she said after an obviously awkward pause.

Right.

“Well, I saw you from the other side,” she said, and pointed towards a small, blue and trailered cart with windows and pictures of different snacks sold.

“No, I saw kids with raspas, but I didn’t really know where they came from.”

“Well, yes. That was me!”

“Cool.”

“And you work here? It’s pretty slow now isn’t it? I guess all the fajitas are ready.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“You want a plate? I think I can get one. Well, if I offer a free elote or something.”

“No, thanks,” and then I chuckled under my breath. “I appreciate it, though.”

“Ugh, this place smells!”

“I like it. It smells like fish.”

“I know! How can you breathe?” And she started laughing.

“I don’t mind. It smells like freedom.” I thought it might have sound ridiculous to her, so I continued with, “I mean, I don’t really get out much. So to me it smells fresh. Like natural. Like, I wonder what other smells I’m missing out on.”

“I get it!” she said with an enthusiastic bob. “Like the first time I tried a Frappuccino,” and then she forgot her point.

“Sure,” I said, trying not to sound rude.

“Anyway,” she continued, “Did Jesus tell you? You’re his best friend, right? Did he tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“About the outburst? He didn’t tell you?”

“No, I guess not.”

“Well you must have heard it on Facebook.”

“I don’t have an account.”

You don’t have a Facebook account? Why not? Here, I’ll help you set one. Where’s your phone?”

“I don’t have a phone.” I felt embarrassed, but without any hesitation she continued.

“Oh, that’s okay, I’ll set you up with one at school.”

“Isn’t it block?”

“Oh, there are ways around that, my friend.” And suddenly we were friends. “Anyway, Jesus, you didn’t hear about the outburst? The teacher didn’t even know what to do!”

“What happened?”

“Well, Mr. Z was doing his Verse-Day Thursday and showing the class a few poems. Then, he put on this poet named Leticia. He said she was from the Valley, and we were all impressed that she was on Def Jam Poetry.

“Well, the poem was about these women in Mexico that were disappearing in larger numbers. In Juarez, Mexico, I think. The poet, Leticia, or the speaker as Mr. Z says, starts saying how it’s sad because the women that are missing look like her. Pretty much, she was saying that she got lucky that the lines were drawn where they were because she might have ended up in Mexico. But she also says that it’s, like, important to speak for the missing women because if she had lived on the other side of the border, who would be looking for her.

“Anyways, it was really sad. Then Bernie opens his big, fat mouth and says, ‘Maybe she should cross back!’ I mean, that didn’t even make sense. It was a stupid comment. She wasn’t even talking about crossing over. But then it happen! Jesus exploded!

“He got off his desk and started yelling at Bernie! He told him something like, ‘You don’t know how hard it was to cross over! You don’t know how much my family struggled to get over here!’ I even think I heard Jesus call him a piece of crap.

“Everyone was shocked! I mean, both about him yelling because Jesus is always quiet, but also because I don’t think anybody knew he was an immigrant. Did you know?”

“No, actually I didn’t. So what happened?”

“Well, nothing. After he yelled at him he ran out of the classroom without permission, and Bernie looked scared. He should be scared. Jesus looked pretty angry.”

“And did anything happened to Jesus?”

“Well this was on Friday, so so far, no. But I don’t know if Mr. Z will write him up. He was also in shock I think. All he did was turn on the lights and say something like, ‘I think that’s enough poetry for today.’ Oh, and Jesus didn’t return. I think he signed out of school, because I didn’t see him the rest of the day. Or maybe he stayed in the library. That’s usually where he goes.”

Jesus became a palm tree. Strong against the winds. Standing tall against the sky. Protection from an unrelenting sun. Palm trees are a staple of this region. They tell the story of the tropical nature of our lands. They span the Valley and truly represent our lives in this amazing part of Texas. But people forget they are not from here. Like the palm trees, Jesus came from another land. And like the palm trees, he symbolized the definition of American citizenship.

CHAPTER XVIII

ANOTHER LOOK AT ROBERT

Robert's car light beamed brightly to the back of the house where I had been pondering and thinking up ways to thank him for stepping up and taking care of me and my dad. As the palm tree swayed I looked up into the breezy, humid air and sun-setting sky. In late May the weather tends to break itself into multiple identities and so like it is often hot and then cold and then windy and then not. And sometimes the weather exist as it did that day, a heavy, warm breeze. An oxymoron. A mixing of two different things like language or anything else.

"I haven't seen you in a while," I told him when I entered from the back door.

"Well look quickly, I got graveyard." Robert said, barely entering and already pushing closet doors. He threw his tired shirt on the ground and headed for his side of our room. His attired shrieked of sweat and dirt, and there were clear grass stains on his "white" shoes. Well, fresh green stains on top of older dingier stains.

"Hey, how 'bout you don't work so much? I've got a job now." And I followed him in.

He was changing into cleaned clean pants and switching his t-shirt to ones that weren't soaked. "That's great, but use that money for yourself," then he headed to the kitchen cabinets and opened a can of spam. He sliced the block of meat into chunky pieces. He did this in with the quickness and elegance of a torero.

“Carlos, start cleaning.”

“I don’t need much. Just want to help with like the bills and stuff,” I said. And I reluctantly started for his wet, white shirt. I picked up the rest of the clothes, most of which were Robert’s dingy laundry.

“I know, but you shouldn’t worry about money. Worry about being a kid. Worry about the grades you get in school. Worry about being a good friend. Tell me about Jesus.” He tossed the slices into the pan and started for the bread and toaster.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Tell me,” and then the toasted popped and he put in some more bread. Then he reached for another frying pan and greased it with cooking oil. And then he opened the box of rice and poured it in.

“Don’t you ever just want to sit down and talk?”

“Don’t try getting out of your chores.”

“I’m not,” and picked up clothes faster to prove it.

“Pick up the trash,” he said. And then he flipped the slices of Spam, removed and loaded more toast, opened the can of tomato and drizzled it on the rice.

I went for a few plastic grocery bags and began filling up with my dad’s empty bottles. I would always start with the bottles because there were always so many. Because after they were picked up the place looked and smelled better. And then it felt like a home. A home with normal mess. And that made the rest of the trash easier. Like taking care of something loved.

“Where’s dad?” I asked

“Who cares?”

“Robert, I wanted to tell you something.”

“Say it fast,” and he handed a plate with a Spam sandwich with cheese and a side of rice. It used to be beans, but I got tired of them. So now, they’re rice.

He grabbed the keys with one hand and stuffed the sandwich in his mouth with the other.

“Say it fast,” he repeated.

“Right, Well, I wanted to thank,” and then I stopped. “Where’s mom?”

“I’m outta here.” He sped faster to the door and walked out. But I followed.

“No, I want to talk about mom. I want to know about mom.”

“Go do your chores.” He demanded. He opened the door and sat himself before the car hesitated, then sputtered to a start.

“No, tell me about mom,” but he drove off anyway. I stood and watched him drive away. I didn’t know how to feel because I felt all of it. Anger. Hate. Love. Gratefulness. All of it. And in the greatness of the winds and the warmth and the stars that glistened over the moon and planets and darkness, I stood standing outside the universe. Outside, because everything spun, but I didn’t belong to it.

And then he returned.

The car lights shined brightly on my face. They revealed falling tears I didn’t know I had shed. Robert stayed in the car for a moment. The lights turned off. He stepped out.

“Just tell me a little bit about her,” I said.

“You have the video. I hear it playing when I get home at night. You weren’t supposed to take it.”

“I didn’t know you...”

“Of course I knew. It’s not like you’re the best at hiding secrets.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because it doesn’t matter. Because the fact of the matter is she’s gone and nothing can bring her back. There’s no point. We have to move on.”

“How? It doesn’t make any sense. How can you just move on?”

“You just do. Simple.” He waited for a reply, but I didn’t have one fast enough. He inhaled then exhaled, and then his shoulder sloped downward. Before he could enter the car again...

“Wait! No! It’s not simple! It’s simple for you, but it’s not simple. Not for everyone. Not for Dad who is gone every day. Gone and drunk. Not for Grandma who can’t even talk about mom because you won’t let her.”

“I won’t let her?” He yelled from the

“No, you won’t! It might be simple for you, but it’s not simple for me either!”

“Simple for me?”

“Yes, simple for you. You just said it was simple for you, so it’s simple for you!”

“Simple for you because you didn’t even know her! Simple for you because you didn’t see how dad watched over her. Having food ready before she got from work. Washing the

laundry and cleaning the house. Simple for you because you don't know how much you remind me of her. Because she was observant like you. Because she would write her poetry on that damn palm tree you're always around. Every time you smile your cheek goes up to the right of your face. Crooked like hers. When you complained about the beans it reminded me of the time she decided not to like them, just like you. She's just like you."

"Okay, so I remind you of her. So what? At least you knew her. At least you have stories to tell. I've got nothing."

"You got the video, don't you?"

"I'm tired of the video. I want something real, don't you see. It's not real enough anymore."

"Play it again, I have to go to work."

"No! I need to let it go. I need to let the video go. It's not enough, and I'm tired of pretending it is."

"I've got to get to work." And then he went back inside the car.

"No," I fought back. I ran quickly to the back of the car and stood, knowing Robert would have to reverse into me if he wanted to leave.

He stuck his head out of the window.

"Get outta my way, Carlos!"

But I didn't move.

"Get outta my way you little jerk!"

“No!” I said. “Not until you tell me something real about Mom.”

“Get outta my way before I kick your ass!”

“No!” And then he darted out of the car and went for my position.

I immediately took a stance like a boxer, but forgot about Robert’s strength. He tackled me against the trunk of the car and pinned me down. He then adjusted his arms from my back to my face and held it.

“Get outta my way,” he said again.

“No!” I muffled. And then he pressed harder.

“Get outta my way!”

“No!” I struggled to say again.

“Stop!” He finally said. And then tossed me aside and so I fell to the ground.

I held myself in a fetal position, expecting kicks or punches, but nothing happened. When I gathered the courage to look up at Robert, he held his head in his hands and leaned against the back of the car with his elbows. I thought I had imagined tears running down his arms and flooding the trunk of the rusty, old vehicle.

“Robert?” I asked.

Between sobs and hiccups he mustered a, “What?”

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to talk about it”

“Robert, you can tell me, man.” And I slowly picked myself up. He looked at me and then the red, swollen eyes settled any uncertainty that remained, he had been crying. I didn’t know what to do or say. So, I kept my distance and focused in on his movements. But all the aggression of the evening had succumbed to the overwhelming exhaustion he felt from something deep inside.

“You can tell me,” I probed again.

“Carlos, I need Mom too.” He finally said. “I need her too. I try and I try, but I can’t work enough to stop thinking about her. There aren’t enough shifts in the day, or enough avoidance to keep her out. I see her everywhere. In the faces of strangers. In the gestures of women who care too much for their babies. She’s everywhere, man. Everywhere.”

“Can you tell me about her?”

“I’m gonna be late,” he chuckled.

“Please.”

“They might fire me,” he smiled, a gesture I hadn’t seen since we were children, “But I suppose it doesn’t matter anyway.”

CHAPTER XIX

MOM

Born of Mexico and arriving in America at age eleven, Mother only knew the language of her nation. And she held on to them even after learning English. Her words mythologized the mountainous region of her city. The caves and valleys and ravines and people with ancient languages and crumbling homes. And she wrote about the golden cathedrals where priests talk closes to God and of sturdy, brick Spanish roads. There were pyramids too. Pyramids that spoke in ancient tongues and held ancient people with ancient prayers.

And when the memory of Zacatecas faded, she wrote of otherness into a white-feathered notebook. Placed on a pedestal, America sang to her. The light brown girl with birdlike carols, sang with the brushing rhythm of a broom. Sang with the stirring bowl of flour and the rolling of a pin to compress batter into tortillas into tacos with too much beans in them. Sang lovely lullabies to a baby brother and sang sadder when he was sent away. She sang with happiness too rare not to notice. Sang with the bosses of Edcouch- Elsa ranches, the ones that fled after the '68 walkout. She sang too in the kitchen, like others before, but without the laughter. Sang because she knew too America would see her beauty.

Years later, under the vastness of a sky in daybreak, where purple and orange glimmered and dyed the green grass and trees in an intermixing hue of new light and dying shadows, sat a

teenage girl, my mother. She sat in an infinite field of daisies and a brilliant background of sunflowers reaching tall as one expects from such a hopeful stem. And the scent of the scene filled richly and lightly indefinitely. Sweet and floral and natural and bitter at the same time. She sat with her hair tied up in pigtails, and her legs crossed and keeping her upwards. And she wrote a poem about a boy who would come to be my dad.

From the east rising sun, he rode like a silhouette and with the whistling wheel of a rustic bike. She wrote about a dusky boy with defeated clothes. When he noticed her, she wrote, he rode faster and the air converted into a kaleidoscope of dim lights and brown and yellow and green. When the bicycle stamped against the ground and grass harder, he remain with an unbroken glance. And with an overwhelming confidence he rode, she wrote, and right below his excited eyes a boastful smirk emerged. Then a snake's hole forced him to the ground.

Laying and grinding his teeth, she ran to him against the wind, which gusted her white dress against her legs and she flew with her flowery, cotton wings. She flew, then quickly fell to her knees to tame the bull – a red, huffing teenage boy, she saw a gash like a red cape spewing from both knees so much so the boy couldn't get up. He hid his pain as best he could, she wrote, but more than one restless tear slid slightly by.

An image of the two materialized and solidified in my imagined memory which frames itself with a glowing white, sparkling film or fog or mist or cloud. The image, a boy and a girl a few year younger than I, surrounded by the remedy of a thousand daisies and the sunflowers still dancing in the high winds to the music of the birds singing and the fading stars tuning and turning the air into violins against the violey-orange sky.

She brushed the yellow daisies around her with her finger tips and gave a reassuring look to his mad-red glance and glaring nostrils. She laughed gently and playfully at his insecurity and then picked selected daisies from the sun-colored field around. When a bundle laid heavy and wet in her hands she began crushing and rolling them into poultice. She did this twice, once for each knee, and both times the poor boy winced. And then he winced harder when she tied the paste with the ribbons in her hair.

She held out a hand, but he held on to himself, refusing any further assistance, but she persisted. She held out a hand again, and when he rebutted a second time she put on a hard frown. She stood up with an immovable stance, and the white dress gusted back like a heroine. He looked up to her, and when he saw that her permanent figure standing tall and calm like a palm tree, his dark red face faded. She reached out once more and he ceded. With his arms wrapped around hers, he walked. Scraped and limping and holding on to her arms, pushing along his bike, he walked and the sun rose faster and in their mind, forever.

“She’s buried in Anahuac,” Robert said.

North of Edcouch in the corner of Mile 3 and nowhere at all, a deserted cemetery crumbled before our eyes and the souls that laid did so in lots long forgotten by their loved ones or perhaps of loved ones too old to keep up with the weeds that grew tall enough to shield the plots from a sun determined to cast a burning hue on the gravestones.

Two displaced metal poles guarded the graveled road and a metal fence, with an advertisement to a funeral home preying on the broken-hearted, lined the community cemetery. Robert and I drove in and parked near the exit of the mourning sanctuary. And when I walked I

did so with a conscious effort of avoiding the wild flowers – the celebratory decorations nature herself devoted to the spirits without.

“There! Right there where that little bird is sitting.”

“The egret?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Sure. That’s where... mom is.”

Mom. The word hesitated and then slipped from his lips like a secret he meant to hold on indefinitely. And with the soft, silky breeze the word spun in the air like a seedling and then planted itself internally. It blossomed in my chest, for I came to realize the weighted word had long disappeared from our category of enchanted things to say.

“Mom.” I let the word sweetly pass through my lips, but couldn’t bring myself one step closer to the humble plaque. I felt a flush of a red, unnamable emotion press against my face and my upper lip began to shiver and then the bird perched as the cooling wind brought with them grey, calming clouds.

“Well,” Robert said sternly.

I held my lip tighter and shook my head opposite of him. But when I turned to see him, the sharp, retaliating words vanished to the point of never-had-existed. I saw a man with a stiff chin and short of crumbling to the floor.

“Robert, can you go with me?”

“Go!”

“Will you go with me?” But he shook his head no. “We can go together.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“Robert...”

“Look, you wanted to see her, now go and see her. This was your idea, Carlos. This was your idea.” He shoved his chin to the air and away from my glance and started pacing the ground and digging his feet into one of the many patches of dirt.

“This was your idea.” He said once more.

“We both need her, remember. I need you to do this with me.”

“Carlos...”, but I stopped with a rush and held on to him tight.

Years of the confusion and loneliness and missing her and him and Dad swelled forth in my eyes and the grey clouds began to gather. In my arms, Robert fell. With a heavy release his shoulders dropped, and his swelling tears rushed and I held his sobbing body.

“Mom!” He screamed aloud in a compulsive yelp before falling again into my arms. I held him tighter and he covered his mouth.

“You don’t have to be brave.” I said, and the cascade overwhelmed my eyes and cheeks and speech. “You don’t have to be brave.”

He pressed his hands around my back and screamed heavenward, “Mom!” before collapsing through my hands and onto his knees. I grabbed under his arms to lift him to his feet, but Robert pushed himself away from me. He started trembling and his eyes and breath scattered and puffed among the remedy of a thousand daisies.

“Robert!” I screamed.

“Robert!” He repeated.

“Robert, I’m here,” and I reached out for his hand.

“Robert! Where were you? Why didn’t you do anything?”

“Robert, what’s the matter?”

“You did this! Get out, you worthless piece of shit! Get out! Get out, you worthless!”

“Robert, what’s going on?”

Exhausted and shaking and gasping for air, Robert lost all ability to keep himself on his knees and his head tiredly hit the grass and he wept without end and the clouds hid his tears with their own. The egret whistled and flew over his fatigue and howling body.

I through myself onto him screaming, “It’s not your fault, Robert! It’s not your fault! Get up!”

“Get out!” He shouted again, “Get out!”

“Get up!” And I began rocking him back and forth and the rained poured harder and the thick mud spread and splashed and overwhelmed us both. “Get up!”

“Worthless!” and then a whispered, “Worthless.”

“Robert, I love you. Robert, listen to me. Thank you. Thank you for everything. I love you.”

“Worthless.” And his palms covered his face.

“No, not worthless. Robert, look at me,” and I reached for his hands, but he dug them deeper into his drenched eyes and face and over his hair, “Not worthless,” I repeated, “Not worthless.”

I began to gently place my hands under his arms again, and his defeated body allowed it. I dragged him through the mud and started to lift him up.

“Not worthless,” I repeatedly whispered to him.

And then his heavy head nodded in agreement.

I placed him under my arm and we lugged together forward. A slow step forward and then wind carried his whispered “Mom?” from his heavy breath to my ears. The white bird flew overhead again and the rain poured harder and the mud and the tears and the weakness and sadness washed slowly away.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mark Zavala (Esperanza) holds a BA in English from the University of Texas – Pan American, which he earned in 2013. He graduated with his MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in May 2018. He proudly grew up in a region of writers, the twin city towns of Edcouch-Elsa. A great majority of his experiences are drawn from this special part of the Valley. Zavala (Esperanza) is a Texas Certified teacher who is currently employed in San Benito Consolidated Independent School District, where he is the sponsor of the high school’s Creative Writers Club – a group of misfits that inspired many of the his stories. He is also the current Program Director for the Valley Byliners, a local writers group set in Harlingen, Texas. Zavala (Esperanza) lives with his wife and daughter in Heritage Square, Edinburg, TX.