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## **Between Silver and Glass**

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BETWEEN SILVER AND GLASS

A Thesis

by

CATHERINE V. LÓPEZ

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2010

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BETWEEN SILVER AND GLASS

A Thesis  
by  
CATHERINE V. LÓPEZ

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May 2010

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## ABSTRACT

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The critical introduction explores my stories, as well as my influences, and ultimate desires for said stories. The stories themselves explore a variety of topics. They are stories about growing up. They are stories about being a girl. They are stories about the magical world we live in. They are the sort of stories I'd like to read if I ever have free time again.

DEDICATION

These stories are for my family, who always listened.

These stories are for Andrew, who endures a writer wife.

These stories are for Hero, because I have so much to tell her.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This collection would not have been possible without the input and support of my committee, Dr. Jean Braithwaite, José Skinner, and Dr. Marci McMahon. They helped me to see my writing from the outside in, and kept me going when llama farming seemed preferable to writing.

I also have to thank Sarah for the many time she made the drive into Edinburg from Harlingen to sit with me at table 42. She heard and read every word of my roughest drafts, and would have followed me to the llama farm, where she wouldn't have let me stop writing except to play with the baby llamas.

And finally, of course, my family. Mom, Dad, Noemi, and Grandma who gave me books, magazines, and when all else failed, paper and pen to write my own stories. My husband, Andrew, has always encouraged me. I wouldn't have joined the program if it wasn't for him. My daughter Hero keeps me on my toes, and has given me more stories than I could ever tell.

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## INTRODUCTION

I wanted to write stories about what it's like to be a girl in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. I wanted to write about the Valley I don't see in my colleagues' stories. If someone didn't know better, reading the poetry and stories that are coming out of Valley writers now would give the impression that we all live in barrios and code switch without thinking about it. I grew up near a *colonia*, but never set foot in it. I don't speak Spanish. I'm still a Valley writer. These are the stories of my Valley.

### **Better Writing Through Reading**

My parents never told me to put my book down and go outside to play. Stories have been a part of my identity since I have had one. I devoured books from the moment I learned to read. My poor mother was forced to give up the bedtime story ritual once I discovered I could read the story faster over her shoulder than she could read it out loud. At my maternal grandmother's house, where I spent a lot of my time until she passed away my junior year of high school, my selections were limited to *Reader's Digest*, *Good Housekeeping*, and a hodge-podge of novels and abridged classics. Erma Bombeck never had a younger fan.

I realized I could be a writer the summer before second grade. For some reason I was obsessed with watching *Bewitched on Nick at Nite* at my aunt's house. I was also enrolled in a summer program, the purpose of which I've lost to the mists of time, if indeed I ever knew it. We spent our time in the computer lab, mostly playing typing

games to improve our skills, but we were also given free time. I used mine to write what would today be considered *Bewitched* fanfic. That is, I wrote my own stories set in the *Bewitched* world. Endora, the literal and figurative witch of a mother-in-law character, was often my starring character. Soon I began writing my own shaky stories, branching off of the rules, as they were, of that world.

The first time I looked at a book and made a conscious effort to figure out the “how” of it was in seventh grade. That year I had it in my head that I would work my way through the “classics” and began with *To Kill a Mockingbird*. (I had read *Gone With the Wind* the year before, unearthed from a box in my grandmother’s closet and a downright bodice ripper by eleven year-old standards.) I remember being frustrated that I couldn’t make my own writing sound like Harper Lee. There was a difference that I couldn’t put my finger on. Should I have been able to ape her voice at thirteen? I must have read it four or five times in a row. Didn’t I feel clever and grown up saying that *To Kill a Mockingbird* was my favorite book? The same could be said of the string of favorites that followed in short order: *Catcher in the Rye* (covered in our reading class and quoted repeatedly by my best friend and me), *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Watership Down* (which I chose at a Reading is Fundamental book fair because I had heard of the title, and it had the added bonus of being the longest book there). My enthusiasm failed at Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*. But that frustration of voice persisted through my reading and writing. Eventually I could read something I wrote without wincing at the amateurism of it, but I can’t say when that happened. I wonder now if my obsession with the classics was fueled, in part, by the need to find one of *them* who sounded like *me*.

Was it, is it, possible for a half-white girl from the Rio Grande Valley to sound like these assorted middle-aged and older white male writers from societies worlds away? My junior year of high school I was in AP English, and we were meant to be studying American Literature. My teacher, who told us that if we ever left the Valley we would experience terrible racism, instead spent the semester teaching Mexican-American literature. We read Sandra Cisneros and the biography of Cesar Chavez. But while the stories were more familiar in culture, they didn't feel like my stories. They still didn't sound like me. I don't know what it's like to be a migrant worker. I can't speak Spanish beyond a few clumsy phrases and the ability to order perfectly at a restaurant. I didn't grow up in a *colonia*, though I did grow up near one. I'm not Catholic and I never had a *quincienera*.

Needless to say, I failed the AP test miserably. Not a Sandra Cisneros or Cesar Chavez question in amongst the Thoreau and Emerson.

Reading books in the canon made me feel smart. This wasn't because they illuminated my understanding of the world, or carried some sort of truth; they made me feel smart, because they were what I perceived smart people as reading. I did truly enjoy several of them – *Grapes of Wrath*, *Little Women*, and *Swiss Family Robinson* in particular - but academic ego, not love, kept me reading them then and now.

Throughout my childhood literary wanderings I fell in love with science fiction and fantasy, and always returned to them despite my dalliances in the canon. My science fiction and fantasy books made me feel happy and excited about reading, and still do. I made my way through all sorts of young adult fiction, Greek myths, *Beowulf*, and every page of everything in my dad's collection, including his copies of *The Hobbit* and

*Lord of the Rings* from when he was in college. There it didn't matter that the authors were still, for the most part, white and male and a world away, because everything they were writing about was a world away, often times several worlds away. Imagine my delight when I got to college and discovered that my beloved science fiction and fantasy were being taught alongside the things I had been reading because I felt I should because they had that ephemeral appellation of literary.

A definition of "literary" seems as good a place to begin as anything. Damon Knight once said, "Science fiction is what we point at when we say it" (qtd. in Kelley and Kessel 13). I argue that the same can be said of "literary" works. Right now "literary" seems to me to be regarded as its own genre, and once a work attains literary status, it discards any other affiliations it may have had. *Animal Farm* isn't possibly a fantasy piece, despite the talking animals. *1984* and *Brave New World* are in no way science fiction. Except that they are. No, literary is just another adjective, another word for really good. But what makes something really good? It isn't a matter of looking to see whether it has robots or witches or the tooth fairy or a few gods and if yes, then it's crap. And it's not really a matter of checking for all of those things and if they're absent, then it's boring and horrid. I am aware of the claims my own affiliates are making in the robot-witches-fairies-gods camp, although I often disagree with them; e.g. just because a story takes place in the "real" world, it isn't automatically boring. I'm in neither camp, a nomad of academia, braving the wastes between theories.

So, let's build our definition of the term literary from that middle ground. To throw one to the genre readers, let's keep the word interesting in play. (I say, fully realizing that "interesting" is a subjective term.) And then it really should rely on

character, rather than plot. Readers should come away feeling better for having read it, even if it is about unpleasant things. If not better, they should at least feel they know something more about themselves or their world than they did before. The language itself shouldn't rely on cliché and the characters should go beyond flat repetitions of archetypes. My working definition for literary comes out something like this: an adjective describing a more-often-than-not character-driven work which uses language in new and interesting ways to illuminate and/or speak to the human condition, all while avoiding the formulaic. It's a bit wordy and lacking in poetry, but it is a start.

As a writer I should strive towards the literary appellation. With my handy dandy definition serving double duty as checklist it should be simple. So why isn't it? I think there is a natural talent involved. Writing is art, and no art was ever created through mechanical process.

### **Pulling Teeth**

I wrote "Teeth" because I wanted a story for my daughter, who hadn't actually been born yet. I wanted to prepare myself for the sorts of things I might be facing in a few years. Alyssa is half-Hispanic. My experience growing up half-Hispanic in the Valley is that racial identification is bound up in our fathers. My last name is Lopez, and so it was often assumed that I am "full" Mexican. My classmates who were of relatively similar racial make-up, but with Anglo last names, were treated as though they were fully Anglo and thus in the minority. Alyssa's last name is Stone. I wrote her from the other side, because I wanted to work with that sense of otherness.

Alyssa's genetics are less at issue in "Teeth," much the way I think they are less at play for any of us as very young children. While we may recognize differences in skin color, I don't think there is so much "othering" going on. Maybe this comes from my belonging to the Sesame Street generation where we were taught that everyone is the same, no matter what they look like.

Compared to "The Memorialist" and "Kallisti," the narrative voice in "Teeth" is younger. Even though "Teeth" is written in the third person, I wanted the narrator to stay closer to Alyssa's mindset, rather than feel as though this was an adult telling a child's story. I now recognize Terry Pratchett's Tiffany Aching novel, *Wee Free Men*, which is a part of his Discworld series, as a subconscious influence. Tiffany is a practical girl. "She'd read the dictionary all the way through. Nobody had told her you weren't supposed to" (4). When she and her little brother encounter a storybook monster at the edge of a stream and narrowly escape, she looks the creature up, takes her brother back to the stream, along with a cast iron frying pan. She then uses her brother as bait and the frying pan as a weapon. She was eleven, which is a bit older than Alyssa in "Teeth". I wondered what would happen if I was to take that practical approach to magic and took it from Pratchett's fantastic, satirical Discworld and into my own. Just like Tiffany takes a pragmatic approach to the creature in the stream, Alyssa's choices for her Tooth Fairy costume are all based on practical concerns.

I also wanted to write a fantasy piece that wasn't necessarily fantastic. I wanted something in the vein of urban fantasy, rather than traditional "sword and sorcery" style fantasy. I tried to continue this feeling of everyday magic in "Collision"

and “Between Silver and Glass,” the two stories that, along with “Teeth,” comprise what I have taken to calling *The Alyssa Chronicles*.

### **Becoming the Memorialist**

When I sat down to write “The Memorialist,” I had Ana Castillo’s “The Mixquiahuala Letters” in mind. The letters that make up Castillo’s novel can be read in different orders to create different stories, or individually as short stories. I wanted to play with form. My idea was that the different entries in the yearbook would work together to create a larger story, but also work on their own as flash pieces. I don’t think I’ve quite reached the point of that larger narrative, though. I am happy with each section as a flash piece, and with reading various sections together outside of the whole.

I’ve read selections from “The Memorialist” in public several times. Every time I read it, someone asks if it’s a true story. This might be a function of the fact that I often read alongside non-fiction writers, and poets who are often working from a place of non-fiction, or of the fact that, despite saying that Lydia is the narrator, it is in the first person. Or maybe it is because parts of it are based on my own high school experiences, though less so than might be expected. When I think about the school that they are in, I see the hallways of the original PSJA High School campus, where I started my high school career. “The Memorialist” is the name of the newspaper at PSJA Memorial High School, where I finished high school. (The district lines were redrawn the summer of my sophomore year, when Memorial was opened. Nobody has ever explained what the high school is a memorial to.) When we were naming the school newspaper, the principal shot down every name we could come up with, saying that the other schools worked their mascots into their papers’ names. Finally, out of frustration, I sat down with a dictionary

and started flipping through the pages, looking for words that would work with Wolverines or Memorial. Memorialist jumped out at me, because it seemed so appropriate for what we were doing. I've transferred the title both because of the link to my own high school experience and because this is the function Lydia serves within the story.

This caused me to reach towards the memoir style for this story. I realize that Lydia's memory is perhaps too exact for this to be a memoir. Cat Mazza argues against fictional memoir: "Realistically, no one could remember all the tinges of expression and shades of detail during a scene. Reconstruction of memory –full of uncertainty and guessing –is sometimes, in fiction, called unreliability..." (69). Because this is fiction, despite shades of memoir, I fear the specter of unreliability. While I wrote "The Memorialist", I thought back to my own experiences and based the detail available to Lydia off of the level of detail in my own memories. I then added a little more detail for her, filling in dialogue the way I might if telling my own story.

Here we have the results of Lydia's unreliability and guessing. I'm unhappy with the scene in Denny's. I feel like that is one place where the dialogue is too perfect, where Lydia's memory is too perfect, and the whole thing feels off. My friends and I never really talked about what colleges we would be going to, though we knew we were going. Perhaps it is because we were all sure of what we would be doing, that we didn't talk about it.

As a fiction writer, I see it as my duty to not to rely solely on things that could and would happen. But, this far from relieves me of realism. Flannery O'Connor once said, "Fiction is an art that requires the strictest attention to the real –whether the



writer is writing a naturalistic story or a fantasy. ... I would even go so far as to say that the person writing a fantasy has to be even more strictly attentive to the concrete detail than someone writing in a naturalistic vein –because the greater the story’s strain on the credulity, the more convincing the properties in it have to be” (qtd. in Spark 24). This scene would be far more credible taking place in a classroom setting, perhaps while they’re working on college essays. In the larger scheme of the collection, this story helps to ground the more fantastic in the real.

Lydia operates in the same world as Alyssa and Ellie. Her story has just as much magic in it. The Tooth Fairy is there, La Llorona is there, and more. We don’t see it because Lydia wills herself not to.

### **Collision**

“Collision” is the most problematic story in the collection for me. I wanted a story for all three girls, Lydia, Alyssa and Ellie, that could span their stories. While I think of it as belonging to *The Alyssa Chronicles*, right now it doesn’t feel like an Alyssa story. It is meant to be the lead in to Alyssa’s apprenticeship with Yolie, the *curandera*. The point of view covers too much; it needs to narrow in on Alyssa.

The events here also mark Ellie for her eventual apotheosis. I want to go into how Ellie’s grounding draws Lydia and Alyssa closer together. Alyssa’s apprenticeship begins because her abuela, her mother’s mother, realizes Alyssa’s growing knack with tarot cards.

This is a slice of life story. All of the consequences are off-screen. What we see here is only the catalyst. It is Chekhov’s gun, waved about and loaded, but only fired offstage, and the aftermath takes place in another play entirely.

### **Kallisti**

The largest fallout happens for Ellie. The original version of this story followed a private eye and had too many needless complications. It also never felt like her story. I knew I wanted to make it Ellie's story, but I had a large problem. Ellie was dead.

In several early versions of "The Memorialist" she didn't make it out. In the first few go-arounds she had an off-screen aneurism; it was one of those senseless tragedies that do happen in life. A later draft had her killed at the women's clinic when a would-be-bomber rolled a grenade into the waiting room of the clinic while she was working. The irony of that was, as Ellie herself said, they didn't even do abortions at that clinic. Neither death was a particularly good one, and both were problematic in that readers liked Ellie and didn't want her to die, especially not senseless deaths. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that I didn't want Ellie to die either. She was fun to write and I wanted more for her. It took a remarkably long time for me to realize that I was, in fact, in charge of Ellie's world and if I didn't want her to die, then she didn't have to.

I woke up one morning with a fragment of a dream persistently nudging me. Ellie was charging down a hallway, grim faced and purposeful. Someone called after her, "Ellie, where are you going?" She answered, "To make a bargain." In the movie theater of my mind, Ellie was in the afterlife, fighting to come back. Fine, I thought, I'll take you up on that. And with a few keystrokes, she was restored to literary life.

I realized I only killed her off because it seemed like the literary thing to do. One of the harsh truths about life is that people die, and sometimes they die for no reason. There is something rather satisfying about deciding a character gets to live.

The original version of “Kallisti” was written late at night in a fit of inspiration. I’ve been fascinated by the Discordian movement for ten years. It’s an exercise in the absurdities of the world. What could be more absurd than a rift in the multiverse and apotheosis?

I see Ellie’s rise to godhood as a sort of death. She’s no longer of her own world while being a stronger agent of that world than she was in life.

### **Mirror, Mirror**

This last piece of *The Alyssa Chronicles* finds Alyssa at the end of her apprenticeship. Myth and folklore heavily influenced Alyssa’s stories and my writing in general. I grew up with the legends of La Llorona and Bloody Mary. I don’t remember hearing them for the first time, they are a part of my “white knowledge”, a term coined by Terry Pratchett for “things that you never actually learn but which get insinuated into your brain by some kind of semi-genetic process” (“Imaginary Worlds” 167), or knowledge that is gained through the white noise of the surrounding culture. These are most commonly things like myth and folklore. I can’t say when I first learned that Athena is the goddess of wisdom or that iron and salt guard against supernatural creatures, but everything I have read supports that knowledge.

Alyssa’s world is one of myth and legend. When she and Bobby encounter La Llorona in the park, we see the line between what we know (that there is no La

Llorona) blur with what we believe (she roams waterways, looking for the children she killed). It is a similar world to the one detailed in “Myths Over Miami”, an article detailing the culture and mythology of homeless and transient children in Miami, though much less bleak. Lynda Edwards tells the stories of the Miami children, stories of a benevolent Blue Lady, of Bloody Mary who led an assault on Heaven that left God tumbling to earth and unaccounted for. Most importantly, she tells of how those stories spread across the country between communities at a nearly impossible speed (1).

The most important question in writing, to me, is “what if?” What if these children are right? I couldn’t face that world, but I can take some inspiration from it. For these children, names are power. And that power can bring safety: “But the secret stories say that [the Blue Lady] cannot take action unless her real name -- which no one knows -- is called out” (Edwards 4). This in itself is an old piece of folklore. Bloody Mary is summoned by chanting her name before a darkened mirror.

Mirrors are often portals of some sort. They reveal our souls, which is why vampires have no reflections. If you walk between two mirrors, you leave yourself open to spiritual attack. Looking at Medusa through a mirror is the only safe way to do so. These are all things that reside in my white knowledge. As a child, and even now, mirrors fascinate me. I like to look at them from their edges, trying to see that place where the silver and glass cease their own existence and become a mirror.

This is Alyssa’s coming of age. Her encounter with La Llorona signals the end of her apprenticeship. Her encounter with Bobby brings her over the threshold into womanhood. In a way, all of these stories are coming of age stories, coming to terms

stories. At the end of each, the characters are changed. Sometimes they are changed in large ways, and sometimes they are changed in small ways.

### **Those Who Can, Should Teach**

The bulk of these stories have been through the workshop process during my time in this program. Was my talent being refined or taught? “To teach creative writing, or to be taught it, is a paradox. ‘Creativity’, whatever it is, must be innate” (Bell 3). This innate creativity is why I joined the MFA program. I wanted to refine the ore of my writing into something stronger, more polished. I believe that MFA programs should take innate creativity and pair it with skill. Students are not being taught creativity, they are being taught to direct it.

Whether or not creativity can be taught is, I think, a moot point. If someone doesn’t have that innate creativity, doesn’t have that drive to create, then they probably will not be drawn to an MFA program. So we can safely set aside the concern of teaching creativity. What we do in an MFA program is create a community of writers who write. Most importantly, it is a community that will carry on with these writers for as long as they care to maintain contact with their fellow writers.

But there is more to the community than our fellow writers. If we relied on only the opinions of fellow students, we probably wouldn’t get very far. The strongest part of the community are the leaders, the professors. They have the experience of writing and publishing under their belts. They also provide a sort of guidepost within the workshop environment. It’s easy to be overwhelmed with criticisms and suggested changes. In fact, these criticisms present a potential pitfall within the community. It is easy, as Bell says, to find ourselves “... adrift in a cloud of conflicting opinions: your

teacher's, your classmates', your own" (3). Opinions, as they say, are like noses. Everyone has one.

A writer can come out of a workshop session with thirteen different ideas on how to rewrite a scene, or even a whole story. We face losing our voice in the pursuit of approval.

What does an MFA program offer beyond community? A push beyond the writer's comfort zone. Lee Gutkind, father of creative non-fiction, says that his ideal student would have equal grounding in poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction because each brings its own strengths (Morgan 10). Most creative writing programs do allow for this branching out, and several demand it through course requirements.

I believe that writers write. We write because we have stories to tell. We have the creative spark. Gutkind talks about his ideal MFA program. I have my own. I would begin with a prerequisite of an undergraduate creative writing workshop of some sort. It is supremely frustrating as a student to begin the semester with teaching fellow masters level students how to write a critique. I find myself wondering just what they bring to the workshop. In this case, it does eliminate the problem of carrying classmates in my mind, as the criticism to praise ratio is low.

On the pedagogical level, I believe it the duty of the MFA program to hone the editorial eye. I feel my own skill lies in that area. I can pick out what is wrong with my writing, I can see what needs to be done, but I feel unsure as to how to enact the changes I need. I enjoy reading my colleagues' work. I enjoy working with them to improve their work.

An MFA should also offer the opportunity to read within the canon, but also within areas that interest the writer. Like Francine Prose, I learned to write by reading books (2). The MFA program has given me a vocabulary to express what I learned from those books. No matter what our own interests, the canon gives us a common background. I would argue, however, that it is useful for writers to read outside of their comfort zone and the canon. I've met too many writers who take a sort of glee in not reading beyond the canon and works they considered destined for the canon. But whose loss is it? John Kessel argues, "I know a hell of a lot more about Herman Melville and Virginia Woolf than the average literary intellectual knows about China Miéville and Gene Wolfe" (100).

Many programs have restrictions against genre writing within workshops, because there is a fear of being unfamiliar with the conventions. I argue that a well formed character is well formed, whether she is a witch, an accountant, or an early Mars colonist. A story that relies too heavily on plot is recognizable, and often objectionable, no matter what that plot is.

Francine Prose says, "The well-made sentence transcends time and genre. A beautiful sentence is a beautiful sentence, regardless of when it was written, or whether it appears in a play or a magazine article" (36). While the genre Prose refers to here means the form of the writing, I argue that the same is true even when we are referring to the genre of the content. A well-made sentence in a science fiction, fantasy, or mystery piece is still well-made. This is even true of the newest form recognized by the academy: the graphic novel.

## Writing in the Gutters

In an ideal world what you are holding in your hands would not be a work of prose fiction, but a graphic novel. That's what it was in my mind when I wrote it. Rather than seeing the words flow together, or my own private movie, I saw each story come together, panel by panel. Before we get to the panels, let's talk about graphic novels. It's a term I love and hate. Graphic novels are nothing more, and so much more, than comic books. I love that the term graphic novel has allowed comics a sort of mantle of legitimacy to wear within the ivory tower. I hate that it still allows for the disparagement of comic books.

What's the difference between them? Most people have an image, an idea, of what a comic book is: short, flimsy, colorful, and cheap. Individual issues do top out at about thirty-two pages. They aren't exactly printed on the heartiest of paper. It's usually a step above newsprint. The colors can vary. Gone are the days of the four color comics, when they were printed using a method that was just as the name implies. Now, every color is represented, sometimes all at once it seems. (Although dual tone comics do abound, especially in the indie scene.) Cheap is relative. Also gone are the days of the ten cent comic. Now, they run about \$2.50 an issue.

But what happens when a story arc from an on-going series is collected into a single volume? Or when a mini-series is collected and bound? That's when comics cross the threshold. The terminology for these collections, when we're not in mixed company - that is when non-comic book fans aren't around- is a trade. This is shortening of the term trade paperback. As in "Did the *Watchmen* trade come in yet?" But when



we're out and about, the term is graphic novel. "Have you read the new graphic novel from Alan Moore? It's a dystopian look at the concept of heroes called *Watchmen*."

I don't want to be misleading, though. There are graphic novels that were originally written as such, that aren't collections of previously released issues. *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang is one example.

My story "The Memorialist" is told by Lydia, looking back through her yearbook. It is meant to have been handwritten on the pages of the yearbook itself. In my mind, each section would begin on a page that looks as though it was directly from a yearbook and the text for that page would be written in "Lydia's" handwriting. This would also have the benefit of putting the first person point of view into context, something I originally attempted within the story. When I tried to convey this context through text alone, it was awkward to write, and read even worse. By putting the story into graphic form, I don't have to explain, it just is. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons do something similar in *Watchmen*, by including ephemera of their world at the end of each chapter, including "photographs".

The advantages of the form go beyond clarifying point of view in "The Memorialist". By creating this collection as a graphic novel, a certain visual continuity is allowed for. There are certain small details that seem superfluous when written, but flow easily as part of the background. Lydia may wear the same shirt in a section of "The Memorialist" as she wears in "Collision". In "Teeth", we may see a young Lydia and Ellie playing in the background of a panel. Maybe Ellie keeps the picture of herself and Lydia in elementary school that is described in "The Memorialist" on her desk in "Kallisti".

I would also love to see mirrors repeated visually throughout the stories. In *Watchmen*, artist Dave Gibbons repeats the motif of the happy face throughout the book. It is the emblem on the character The Comedian, but it also appears throughout the book, taking on a charged meaning of innocence and innocence lost.

I prefer the unobtrusiveness of adding details through the art, rather than explicitly stating them. The ability to have scenes take place reflected in mirrors, rather than looking at them straight on, for example, is something I'd like to play with. To have one panel take place as the mirror, and then to have the panel where a realization is made or course of action decided on would be ideal.

The panel is the place where the action of a graphic novel happens, or rather appears to happen for those who are unfamiliar with the specialized literacy of reading comics. Really, panels are the boxes where the pictures are. Between the panels are what are called gutters. Scott McCloud likens it to playing peek-a-boo as a child. The panel is the moment your eyes are open, the gutter is the moment they are closed. We know something happens in that moment of closed eyes, but we must construct it. "Here in the limbo of the gutter, *human imagination* takes two separate images and *transforms* them into a single idea" (McCloud 66). The action that takes place in the gutters is implied by the surrounding action of the panels, but is totally up to the reader to provide. I feel as though these stories in their present format are my telling of those moments between the panels.

Beyond creating gutters, panels exert their own power over the story. A panel can spread over two pages, or it could be an absolutely tiny patch of space. McCloud says that panels indicate the division of time or space (99). I agree, but it is

important to remember that panels don't necessarily have delineated boundaries. Sometimes, the border blurs, and it is difficult to tell where one panel ends and another begins. In a way, the Valley is the gutter between the frameless panels of America and Mexico. The action is here, but most people have their own image of it.

Throughout his novel, *American Born Chinese*, Gene Luen Yang plays with panel shape and size to indicate action and time passage, as well as drawing attention to certain events. For example, we are told the Monkey King breaks the bounds of reality in his attempt to escape the reach of Tze-Yo-Tzuh. At this point, we see the Monkey King burst through the heavy line of the panel, indicating his escape from the reality of the story (Yang 72). And indeed, while he is operating outside of reality, the images are not contained within delineated panels, but are free floating on the page. On page 77, Monkey King returns to reality by breaking into a panel, and we are returned to the panel format as it has been previous to the break from reality. During fight scenes, the panels go from regular rectangles to sharply skewed trapezoids, such as when the Monkey King fights all of heaven on pages 17 and 18. Jin's reaction to his transformation into blond haired, blue eyed Danny takes place over three full page panels, that are all essentially the same image (196-198). Compare this to *Watchmen's* fairly static nine panels per page format. The decision to have relatively uniform panels highlights those instances when the pattern is broken.

I imagine that my own graphic novel would be more similar to *American Born Chinese* than to *Watchmen*. Yang addresses some of my own issues. Identity is at the heart of *American Born Chinese*. The Monkey King must come to terms with his place in the universe. Jin longs to be typically American. Wei-Chen immerses himself in

his Taiwanese heritage once Jin turns his back on him. Alyssa and Lydia are half-white, half-Hispanic and so experience the Valley in a between way, based on my own experiences. Ellie finds that apotheosis is the only way to save the world, in way that is sadly not based on my own experience.

### **Going Forward**

Given my own background and influences, I will continue to explore the possibilities of form, format, and genre. Writing will always be a priority for me and I will ever turn my editorial eye inward. I plan to keep writing about the Valley and the magic that is found here. I want girls like me to know there is a voice for them. However, I also look forward to finding a place in publishing, either with a university press, an independent journal, or with a publishing house, so that I may continue to work with writers in an editorial capacity.

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## TEETH

Alyssa liked teeth. They were bright and shiny. She loved brushing and the feel of the bristles against her gums. Toothpaste was the first taste of morning and the last taste of the night. The Tooth Fairy was the most interesting person she could think of.

When she was eight, there was a costume contest at school for Halloween. Her mother asked what she wanted to be.

“The Toof Fairy,” she lisped through the new gap where her front teeth should have been.

“A fairy it is,” said her mother.

“No! The TOOF Fairy,” insisted Alyssa.

The Tooth Fairy had visited the night before, trading a shiny silver dollar for Alyssa’s second front tooth. It was tooth magic. It was magic she could see. Not like Santa Claus, whom she was beginning to suspect was a fake, though she still planned to write her letter to him. She was, after all, only partly sure he was just her parents.

“Well, what does the Tooth Fairy look like then?” asked her mother.

Alyssa considered. It was true that nobody had ever seen the Tooth Fairy. What would she look like? A wand, she decided, was a must for poofing in and out of children’s bedrooms. (Which made a lot more sense than coming down a chimney, which her house didn’t even have.) And a bag. The Tooth Fairy would have a bag. It would be a

bag of bags. Each one tiny, and labeled with the child's name and the tooth that had been lost.

The Tooth Fairy, decided Alyssa, would be organized. She would have a another bag, a purse, where she carried the money that she left for the teeth. But what did she wear? A skirt, pearly white, with a fitted top. Wings. Fairies had wings. It was what made them different from elves.

“Okay,” said her mother.

Alyssa cheered and ran off to brush her teeth.

That weekend, after a bout of sewing and a little cursing, Alyssa's mother finished the costume. Alyssa spun in a circle, the skirt flared around her. The wings fluttered. She tapped her mother's nose with her wand. She felt her money purse, it was empty.

“Mom,” she said. “I need money. I can't be the Tooth Fairy without money.”

“Sugar, you're only the pretend Tooth Fairy,” said her mother. “How about we find some pretend money?”

And so they found some metal washers in her father's toolbox. They rattled in her purse, just like coins. Alyssa knew she'd win.

That Monday, her teacher, Mrs. Martinez, lined her class up. Alyssa swayed gently, swishing her skirt, and trying to keep her wand to herself, like Mrs. Martinez had told her. The teacher assistant, Miss Jacobs came down the line with a pen and paper, asking each student what they were, in case it wasn't obvious.

“A gypsy.”

“A witch.”



“Well, I’m a *wicked* witch.”

“A pirate!”

“A pirate captain!”

“Then I’m a pirate admiral.”

Alyssa watched as the boys scuffled, and Miss Jacobs pulled them apart.

Alyssa liked Miss Jacobs. She was loud and sweet and told good jokes. Alyssa was intrigued by her blonde hair, unusual in the Rio Grande Valley. Her teeth were as perfect as the rest of her.

“Arrr! You’re all deckhands, and dirty bilge rats to boot,” said Miss Jacobs. She turned to Alyssa. “What are you, dear?”

“The Tooth Fairy,” said Alyssa, waving her wand.

“That’s nice,” said Miss Jacobs.

The pirates burst into a round of “A Pirate’s Life For Me.” And then, with the whole class suddenly claiming to be pirate witches, pirate gypsies, and pirates in disguise, the class walked in a line to the cafeteria. They sat in the middle of the cafeteria and watched the kindergarteners, and then the first graders march across the stage. Their teacher would call out their name and what they were supposed to be as they walked. Just as the pirates began fiddling with their swords and whispering about mutinies, the principal announced it was time for the second graders to come up.

Their teacher, Mrs. Martinez, called out their names, and they filed across as they were called without incident, until Mrs. Martinez called out, “Bobby Ramirez, pirate.”

Bobby poked Alyssa with his sword and grabbed her money purse, “Ahahaha! I got yer booty!” He laughed as he ran across the stage.

Alyssa shrieked in anger and shock. Without waiting to hear her name called she charged after him, wand waving. “You better stop, Bobby! It’s not nice to steal!”

“And Alyssa Stone, as a fairy,” rushed Mrs. Martinez. “You both stop right this instant!”

Alyssa froze in place. Bobby hid behind his pirate comrades, and all three shook their swords tauntingly. Miss Jacobs came up beside Alyssa, while Mrs. Martinez tried to continue as nothing had happened.

“Bobby,” said Miss Jacobs. “That is quite enough. We do not steal from our classmates, and we most especially do *not* stab them.”

Bobby didn’t move, though he did lower his sword. “Aww... but Miss Jacobs, I’m a pirate. It’s what I do! Besides, she’s just a dumb fairy.”

“I’m not dumb! You’re dumb!” said Alyssa. “And I’m not just a fairy, I’m the Tooth Fairy! And if you’re not nice to me then... then... then the Tooth Fairy won’t come see you anymore!” She jabbed her wand, punctuating each proclamation. He would have to give in after being threatened with no more Tooth Fairy visits. How could he not?

“Alright, Alyssa,” said Miss Jacobs. “Bobby, come here right this very moment.” Her voice had a don’t-make-me take-away-recess tone to it.

The aspiring pirate slunk over, sword drooping sullenly.

“Now,” said Miss Jacobs, “give her back her purse. And apologize.”

Bobby handed the purse over. “I’m sorry,” he said. Then a defiant smile crept over his face. “I’m sorry you’re a big baby who still believes in the Tooth Fairy!”

Without thinking, Alyssa hauled back with her wand and swung. The wooden star connected with a hearty thwack.

“You take that back, Bobby Ramirez!” she screamed, not even noticing that Miss Jacobs had grabbed her up and pulled away her wand. It was only when she went to kick him that Alyssa realized she was being held. She broke into frustrated sobs.

“We are all going to the principal’s office,” said Miss Jacobs. She set Alyssa down, and took Bobby’s sword. “March.”

By the time they had reached the principal’s office, the general redness on Bobby’s cheek had resolved itself into a perfect star shape. Alyssa’s sobs had subsided into the occasional snuffle. Miss Jacobs had them sit on a bench while she spoke to the secretary.

Bobby rubbed his cheek. “It’s all your fault we’re here.”

“Nuh uh. You started it. You hit me, and you took my bag, and then you said the Tooth Fairy doesn’t exist. It’s your fault.”

“I think one of my teeth is loose now.”

“You’re welcome,” said Alyssa.

“You’re weird.”

“But this way the Tooth Fairy will come, and she’ll leave you a coin under your pillow.”

“She won’t,” said Bobby, scuffing the carpet. “My mom says she doesn’t exist. Why should she? They’re just stupid teeth. What would she want them for?”

“She has to keep them safe. Otherwise, they would get lost and maybe broken or something.”

“That’s dumb.”

“You’re dumb,” said Alyssa, automatically.

“Alyssa, my mom *says* she’s not real, just like Santa. And now, because you still believe in stupid baby stuff, I’m gonna’ get a spankin’ when I get home.”

“Bobby, Alyssa,” said Miss Jacobs, “the principal will see you now.”

The pair followed her disconsolately into the office. Mr. Sandoval, the principal, was sitting at his desk. Alyssa’s wand and Bobby’s sword lay before him. Alyssa thought he looked like a grandpa, only without white hair. He had a big black mustache that he twisted between two fingers as he looked at them. They sat in the two big chairs in front of the desk, their feet dangling. Miss Jacobs stood behind them.

“Now, Bobby, why did you take Alyssa’s purse?” asked Mr. Sandoval.

“I’m a pirate,” said Bobby patiently. “It’s what I’m a’sposed to do, Mr. Sandoval.”

“Bobby,” said Mr. Sandoval. “You’re a make believe pirate. You shouldn’t really steal.”

“Make believe like the Tooth Fairy?”

“Ah...” Mr. Sandoval cleared his throat, and looked up at Miss Jacobs, who shook her head. “Make believe like Alyssa is pretending to be the Tooth Fairy.”

“And you, Alyssa,” he continued, “you can’t just hit people because they say things you don’t like. Do you understand?”

Miserable, Alyssa nodded.

“Now, I’ll be keeping your sword and wand. I’m going to call your parents, and they can come pick them up. Is that clear?”

Bobby’s eyes got wide. “Please, sir, don’t call my mom. I’ll be in big trouble.”

“I’m sorry, Bobby,” said Mr. Sandoval. “But you made the choice to misbehave and now you have to live with the consequences.”

“But I’ll be good,” Bobby said, a wail creeping into his voice. “I promise.”

“Bobby, this is not a discussion. Now, both of you wait outside for a moment, I want to speak to Miss Jacobs about what we’re going to do with you for the rest of the day.”

They got up and went outside again. Alyssa saw Bobby sniffle and push a hand across his face.

“I’m sorry you’re going to be in trouble,” she said.

“Whatever.”

She thought for a moment, then pulled a washer out of her change purse. She offered it to Bobby. “I know it’s not the same, but I’m only a pretend tooth fairy, so I can only give you pretend money for the tooth I knocked loose.”

“Stop being dumb,” he said, shoving her hand away.

“Please, Bobby? It might make you feel better.”

“I’m fine,” he said. Then he took it from her. “But if anyone asks, it’s a piece of eight and I stole it from you.” He shoved it in his pocket.

“Bobby?”

“What?”

“If the Tooth Fairy isn’t real, what happens to our teeth when we lose them?”

“I dunno,” he said with a shrug. “They get thrown away, I guess. It doesn’t really matter.”

“I think it does matter,” said Alyssa. “They’re a part of us.”

“Alyssa, they’re just stupid baby teeth. It doesn’t matter.”

Alyssa tried to think of a response, but couldn’t. Miss Jacobs came out of the office and gestured to them. “We’re going to the library. We’ll go back to class once the Halloween party is over.”

As they walked, Alyssa couldn’t help herself, she had to know. “Miss Jacobs, do you believe in the Tooth Fairy?”

“Yes, Alyssa,” said Miss Jacobs without pause. “I do. And I think she does an important job. She takes away your baby teeth and keeps them safe so you can grow up without worrying about that part of yourself you’ve lost.”

“Not mine,” said Bobby. “My mom throws mine away. I’ve seen her.”

“I’ll tell you a secret,” said Miss Jacobs. “She still can find them, even if they aren’t under your pillow. The parts of you that you think are lost are still there, Bobby, and she’s protecting them.”

“If you say so,” said Bobby.

Alyssa slipped her hand into Miss Jacobs’ and smiled. She knew the Tooth Fairy would never let her down.

## THE MEMORIALIST

I'm putting these stories down because I already can't remember some things as well as I wish I could, and it's only been ten years. I'm writing them here because I can. Because sometimes I see yearbooks at the thrift store and I wonder who gave up their memories. I wonder what the stories are, because everyone has a story. So here, where we've already been captured, are some of the stories. The ones that were important enough for me to remember, for now. Maybe someday I'll open these pages up and read these and be amazed that I ever forgot that these things happened. Maybe someday I'll have kids and they'll be amazed that these things did happen.

Or maybe I've had a bit of wine and am, therefore, as melodramatic as I was capable of being when I was 18.

So if you're reading this, but you don't know who I am, my name is Lydia Stone. Maybe you found this at a thrift store, or maybe I left it on a park bench somewhere. Or maybe any number of things. But you have it, and I don't, and that's the important part. You're holding an artifact, a piece of history. I don't know if you're going to read it. I hope you do. I think we all want to be remembered. Isn't that why reality television took off like it did?

So read on, please. Remember me. Hell, in these days of the internet, maybe you'll even find me. Or maybe, technology being what it is, you won't. But when you're done reading, take the stories with you, but pass them along as well.

**Senior Ad- Eleanor Ayala and Lydia Stone**

The senior ads were yearbook spreads that seniors, or their parents, could buy. They were whole pages, or significant chunks of pages, devoted to a single student or a group of friends. Our parents had gone in on a page for Ellie and me. There was a picture of us on the last day of fifth grade, grinning, arms around each others' shoulders and holding up achievement certificates of some sort, probably honor roll.

We both had our hair up in side-ponytails. Hers on the left and mine on the right. We looked like strange mirror images. Ellie's hair has always been the same dark brown, while mine was a dirty blond that has only darkened with time. We wore the same blue jeans and Eeyore t-shirt. We used to do that every Friday, coordinate. I don't know how our mothers put up with it. The first time it had been a coincidence. It was Ellie's idea to keep doing it. She said it made us like twins. She had two older sisters and a younger brother. I don't know why she needed me to be her twin. Maybe even then she knew she wasn't like her family.

The high school cheerleaders came to perform at the final pep rally of the year. It was meant to be a big send off for the summer. We had races and epic games of Red Rover and kickball. Ellie's oldest sister, Alma, was one of the cheerleaders who came to see us. Long dark legs under her short maroon pleated skirt, bangs teased up, by the end of the day the boys all had crushes on her and all the girls wanted to be cheerleaders. All of the girls except for Ellie and me, that is.

"You're so lucky to have a cheerleader for a sister," Jessica Vaughn said to Ellie when Alma lined us up to pick kickball teams. "She can teach you all the cheers."



“Nah. She hogs the bathroom so she can look perfect all the time. And anyway, I don’t want to be a cheerleader.”

“Why not? All the prettiest girls are cheerleaders. Don’t you want to be a pretty girl?”

“I’d rather be smart,” said Ellie.

“I guess that’s good, because you’re not as pretty as your sister,” said Jessica.

I don’t know if she saw what was about to happen or if it was sheer luck that just as Ellie pulled her arm back to slug Jessica, Alma called out, “Hey Ellie, Jessica, come be captains.”

### **Ayala, Eleanor**

Ellie had the ACLU on speed dial. Whenever she felt the line between church and state was being blurred she’d wave her phone around, threatening to hit dial unless the administration gave in to her demands. Freshman year, she was the subject of several hurried school board meetings. By our senior year, Mr. Ramirez, our principal, would just roll his eyes and say he’d be happy to meet with her lawyer.

On days that were slow, when we couldn’t be bothered to pay attention, our government teacher, Mrs. Yates, would antagonize Ellie. There was one day in particular, probably in the spring when we would have all rather been outside, Mrs. Yates asked us all to stand so she could lead us in a prayer. Everyone stood, except for Ellie. I will never forget that look of indignation on her face; she was practically sputtering.

“Eleanor,” said Mrs. Yates. “I said please stand so that we can ask our Lord and Savior for inspiration for today’s class.”

“Yeah, Ellie,” said Jessica Vaughn. I can still see her pink polo shirt, so crisp her maid must have ironed it that morning. “Or does it burn when you try to pray?”

“I don’t know. Does it still burn when you pee or did you get some pills for that?” shot back Ellie.

“That’s quite enough, both of you,” said Mrs. Yates. “Eleanor, I said please stand.”

“No, thank you, Mrs. Yates,” said Ellie, pulling out her cell phone.

“Perhaps you were misled when I said please. That was not a request. Stand up or you will receive an F for today’s daily grade.”

That did it. Jessica smirked as Ellie’s jaw dropped.

Ellie snapped her phone open. “You can’t do that! One phone call and you’ll be paying my college tuition.”

“Put the phone away, Eleanor, you know I don’t allow them in my classroom.”

“I have rights.”

“Yes, but nowhere are you guaranteed the right to cell phone use in my classroom,” said Mrs. Yates.

“But I am guaranteed the right to freedom of religion,” said Ellie. “And that means freedom from religion.”

And just like that, Mrs. Yates had us off on a lively discussion of first amendment rights. Even though their relationship often seemed antagonistic at best, we all knew Ellie was Mrs. Yates’s favorite.

**Martinez, Luis**

My first boyfriend. He was quite the cutie. He's not wearing them here, but he had these old-school black-framed glasses. When he dressed up for debate, I told him he looked like a Mexican Clark Kent. We met in freshman geography. He sat next to me. That smile and his voice. He had an amazing voice, strong and somehow past the squeakiness most of the other boys were still conquering.

And I couldn't bring myself to talk to him. How could I? I didn't think I could have anything in common with him. After a month of hearing my wistful sighs, Ellie took matters into her own hands. She stole my pen right before class.

"Ellie, give it back," I yelled after her as she ran off to her class.

"Sorry, I need it. Lots of notes to take. Guess you'll have to borrow from someone." She grinned and disappeared into her classroom down the hall.

I weighed my options. I could follow her into her class, make a fool of myself demanding she give me the one pen back, knowing she wouldn't, and be late for my own class, or I could ask Luis. It really didn't occur to me to ask anyone else.

"Hey, you coming in," said a voice, the voice, behind me. "Or do we have a sub or something?"

I about jumped out of my skin. "Yeah. I mean, no, she's here. My friend just ran off with my pen, and I don't think I can catch her and not be late."

He raised an eyebrow. "Some friend."

"No, she's great; she just has a sick sense of humor."

"I've got an extra. You can borrow it, all day if you need to."

I can still feel the blush that spread across my face. I'm an uncontrollable blusher. It's horrible. I can always feel it, but I can't stop it. "Thanks."

And that's how it started. Soon he was waiting for me before class, and then he just happened to be going in the same direction for the class after, until finally he kissed me after school one day in October. Then we were nearly inseparable. The only problem was that Luis and Ellie didn't really get along. She said she could never put her finger on what bothered her about him. He thought she was too loud. Sometimes I think if they had been able to get along things would have been very different for Luis and me.

My sister, Alyssa, says that the big choices we make spin off into other worlds, that all paths are taken, we only perceive the one we're on. The whole thing makes my head hurt. Sometimes I try to think about the possibilities, and I almost feel like I can see the other me, the one who stayed with him. She's happy, most of the time.

### **Debate Club L to R: Eleanor Ayala, Luis Martinez, Hector Gonzalez, Maria**

#### **Sandoval**

I never understood why Ellie disapproved of Luis and me as a couple. She worked with him well enough in debate. But socially, it was more like she had a wary tolerance.

We had a Saturday routine. Once they were done with their debate tournament, those weeks when there was one, I would pick them up from school and we'd head off to a movie, followed up with hanging out at Denny's, drinking too much coffee and talking. Actually, Luis never drank coffee.

"It's so harsh," he said.

“But that’s why it’s so good,” said Ellie. “It keeps you alert. It’s like life. If it’s too sweet, too smooth, you get too comfortable. A little harshness keeps you grounded in reality.” Ellie’s always been the more philosophical one.

“What do you think, Lydia?” he asked.

I dumped a fourth creamer into my cup. “I think that even harsh things can be tempered. Anyway, with coffee it’s not just the taste, it’s the smell. The whole thing is stimulating.”

Luis laughed. “I guess there’s hope for you, Ellie. Assuming someone finds enough cream to temper you with.”

She threw her napkin at him. “I’m not harsh. I’m honest.”

“Could have fooled me. So is that what you’re going to tell your patients? Some bedside manner that’ll be.”

“That’s totally different. And at least I have a plan. What’re you going to do?”

“I’m going to UT. I’m sure I’ll figure something out.”

“Come on. I’m going to be a doctor. Lydia is going to do journalism. How can you not have a plan at all?”

I sipped my coffee, trying not to get involved. So, of course, they both turned to me.

“What?” I asked, trying not to sound defensive. “Ellie, you’re totally driven. Hell, you’re working how many hours a week down at the clinic now? I’m amazed we even got to see you today. It seems like every week you’re doing more hours.”

“It’s not my fault. People have been quitting because of all those bomb threats we’ve been getting, which is totally stupid because we don’t even do abortions,” she said.

“And Luis, I don’t believe you have no clue what you want to do. You love arguing. I can’t believe you haven’t thought about law school someday,” I said.

“Well, yeah, but then I wouldn’t have time for anything else.”

“So, you’re both doing what you want to do.”

“Any idea where you’re going, Lydia?” asked Ellie.

I shrugged. “Applications are out. We’ll see who gives me the best deal.”

She snorted. “Deal. You should come to Rice with me.”

“I thought you wanted to go to Baylor,” I said.

“I decided that Waco is lame.”

“You could always leave Texas,” said Luis.

“Nope. My college fund, small as it is, gets passed down to my little brother if I leave,” Ellie said. She wrinkled her nose. “Mommy and Daddy want to keep me under their thumb.”

“But you’re working down at the clinic, that’s making you some money.”

She shook her head. “All volunteer.”

“What? Ellie, that’s crazy, even for you. Lydia, tell her.”

“I’ve already told her. It doesn’t do any good.”

“Look, they need me, alright? That’s the only family planning option a lot women around here get. And when I say women, I mean girls, girls like us, Lydia. Girls who maybe don’t want their parents to know what they’re getting up to, but need birth control anyway. Sure it’s just filing papers and answering phones, but it loosens up the budget a bit to help more people.”

“Okay, okay. Sheesh,” said Luis.

“It’s fine, really. Rice is a good school. It’s not like they’re making me go to Pan Am,” she said. “Oh man! Did you guys hear about Janie? She got offered a full ride to Harvard, and her dad isn’t letting her go. Since her mom died, he needs someone to help around the house.”

“What? You’re kidding,” I said.

“Nope. And I guess she doesn’t have the guts to tell him she’s eighteen and a free ride means she doesn’t need him.”

“He’s her dad,” said Luis. “She’ll always need him.”

“Please, he just doesn’t want to lose his free housekeeper. He’s not really looking out for her. And now she’s going to end up just another stupid Valley girl, working some nothing job with a bunch of kids before she’s twenty-five.”

We were all Valley girls just because of the fact that we were from the Rio Grande Valley. Stupid Valley girls is what Ellie and I called the girls who gave in to the culture, who didn’t want to get out and do something with their lives. Stupid Valley girls bought into the patriarchy and it was all too easy to become one. Ellie’s big sister Alma was a great example. Pregnant at seventeen, she gave up on all hopes of going to college and at twenty-three she had three kids and was a manager at a fast food place. She had been an honors student. Now she was just another stupid Valley girl. Looking back, maybe it was a little harsh of us, but if we said it was okay, if we accepted it, then it would be all too easy to end up like them. We used her not as an object of ridicule, but as a warning.

**Stone, Lydia**

Look at that. I can't believe I thought I was fat. The irony of being a teenage girl, you think your body is terrible, and that your clothes are amazing. Of course, the clothes aren't exactly my fault; that's what everyone was wearing. It's what a few of us were wearing, anyway. I thought I was so awesome, looking the part of the grunge scene that was happening in Seattle. Being in South Texas, it may as well have been a world away. The flannel shirts and Doc Marten boots that actually made a certain sense beyond sartorial concerns in the chilly northwest were borderline absurd in a place where the temperature regularly tops out over a hundred in the summers. If it was good enough for Kurt Cobain, it was good enough for me.

I remember the day this was taken. When I got to my locker after school, Luis was waiting for me, leaning against my locker, smiling that smile. It's been ten years, and the thought of it still makes me feel warm all over.

"Hey there, pretty," he said. "Pre-cal treat you well?"

I leaned against him. "I think my brain is about to fall out."

"Let's go to the tree. It'll make you feel better." He kissed my neck. "I'll make you feel better."

The tree was a large oak behind the gym. It was huge, and near an odd little corner, creating the perfect nook for sweethearts to slip away to. It was our spot. I don't know if anyone else knew about it. We certainly never met anyone there. That day was no different.

The ground in the shade was cool and a little damp. No grass grew there, I suppose because it never got much sun. We sat, entwined, against the cinderblock wall.



“We could, you know,” he said, brushing back a lock of my hair.

“We can’t. Someone might see.”

“Nobody’s going to see.”

I leaned forward, and flicked an ant from my shoe. “Luis, I told you. My parents.”

He put his hand on my back. The warm outline of his fingers pressed between my shoulder blades. “I know,” he said. “The fight, and it’s how they make up, but I don’t see why you won’t.”

“Because I’ll just be thinking of them, of the yelling. I hear it every time I smell it. Look. I promise, someday I’ll smoke out with you,” I said. “But for today, can’t we just have sex?” I looked back over my shoulder, and used my eyelashes to my best advantage.

His smile was sad, but he slid his hand down and then back up, under my shirt this time. He laid me down. The ground was cold, but he was so warm.

Afterwards, he wouldn’t look at me. I knew what was coming. Sometimes I think breakups have a life of their own. You feel them on the air, and you can either face them, or hope the other person doesn’t feel it, hasn’t noticed that it’s all over.

“So, want to grab a shake?” I asked.

“Lydia, I think we need to talk,” he said. The words of someone who feels the breakup. “I don’t think I can do this anymore.”

“You’re breaking up with me because I want to have sex with you?”

“No.” He paused. “Yes. Sort of? We go see the movies you want to see, we have sex when you want.”

“Which is like always. Most guys would dig that.”

“But we don’t do the stuff I want.”

“You’re breaking up with me because I won’t smoke pot with you,” I said.

He got to his feet. “Don’t make it sound like that.”

“Sound like what? Stupid? That’s because it is stupid, Luis. You said you loved me and now you’re breaking up with me because I don’t do drugs.” I threw a pebble at him, at the breakup. I didn’t know how to stop it, so I went with it. “Fine. Go on. Call your dealer. Maybe he’ll want to go see a movie you want to see.”

“Nice, Lydia. I knew you’d be a bitch about this,” he said. “Look, just call Ellie, tell her how much I suck and you two can go on one of your coffee benders and come up with some crazy revenge scheme that I won’t ever have to actually worry about, because you two never follow through on your crazy ass plans.”

And that’s how it ended. Three years, gone and done. He walked off before I could come up with something to yell at him. I sat and cried for an hour under that damned tree, wishing and hoping he’d come back, say it was a mistake. He didn’t, of course. We didn’t speak to each other for the rest of the year.

All Ellie could say was, “I knew I didn’t like him. Now I know why.”

### **Stone, Alyssa**

My little sister. She was a freshman my senior year. Even though she dressed like a prep, it was mostly to keep our mom happy. Alyssa could be devious, and too clever for her own good. There’s one story that tends to get told at family gatherings to illustrate this.

It began when Mom took her roller-skates away. They were white with pink wheels, Alyssa would glide in small circles in the kitchen on the faded linoleum floor.

Eventually, Mom would go into the kitchen for a drink or a snack or because it was time to make dinner. Alyssa would stop, as though she thought standing very still would mean that Mom wouldn't notice she was wearing her skates in the house.

“Hey Mom, how's it going?” Alyssa would say and, if she was in a good mood, Mom would answer as she grabbed Alyssa and began tickling her. If Mom was in a bad mood or just tired, she would tell Alyssa for the hundredth time, it was always the hundredth time, to take off those skates. One day, Mom was tired enough and in a bad enough mood that she heaved Alyssa up onto the counter and began untying the pink laces.

“I've told you a hundred times,” said Mom. “No skating in the house.”

Alyssa pouted when Mom pulled the skates off. She cried when Mom hauled her off the counter, gave her a smack on the butt and sent her to her room.

The next day Alyssa was sliding listlessly around the house in her socks when she noticed Dad had all the dining room chairs turned upside down.

“Whatcha' doin', Daddy?”

He smiled. “I'm putting stickers on the bottom of the chairs, so they slide better on the floor. See?” He held out a small brown circle. It felt a little rough but soft, and it did have a smooth paper back just like her stickers.

“Can I do one?”

“Sure! Here, this chair just needs one more. Can you put it on for me?”

“Yup!” She pulled the paper back off of the circle. She stuck her tongue out in concentration as she carefully lined up the circle with the bottom of the chair leg. Finally, she had it just right and pressed down firmly.

Dad flipped the chair over and sat her down on it. "There we go." He pushed her back and forth. "See how smooth that is? No more scooting around and scuffing the floors." He patted his stomach. "I'm hungry. How about I go make us some lunch?"

"Mac and cheese? With hotdogs?"

"With hot dogs," said Dad.

Once he had gone into the kitchen, Alyssa grabbed two packs of the little slider things. She had an idea. She ran to her room and dug out her old tennies. They still fit, but were greyed with age and ripped in some places. They were her play shoes which had once been school shoes. She scuffed them along the bright throw rug to be sure they were clean enough for her plan to work. Pausing only to be sure she could still hear Dad in the kitchen, she ripped into the packages of sliders. Tongue out again, she carefully put four stickers on the bottom of each shoe, two in front and two in back, just like her roller skate wheels.

Now it was time to test her invention. She pulled her slider shoes on and went into the nice long hallway. She pushed one foot forward, then the other. She frowned. It wasn't working as well as she wanted. She tried again. She thought maybe if she had more stickers.

"Alyssa?"

She looked up. It was Mom standing at the other end of the hall. Alyssa stood absolutely still. "Hey, Mom. How's it going?"

"Why are you shuffling your feet like that?" Alyssa didn't answer. Mom didn't sound angry, but Alyssa knew she shouldn't have taken the stickers. "Come here, let me see your shoes."

Alyssa sighed and did as she was told. She waited for Mom to be angry, but instead Mom started laughing. “Kevin! I found your missing sliders.”

“Where were they?”

Mom was still laughing. “Your daughter has them.”

Dad came into the hallway. When he saw what Alyssa had done, he started laughing, too. He ruffled her hair. “Well, that’s my clever girl.” He knelt to look her in the eye. “You know you should have asked before taking those.” Alyssa nodded. “You’ll ask next time?” Alyssa nodded again. “Okay kiddo.”

“Come on,” said Mom. “I have an idea.”

She took Alyssa into the craft room. Mom helped Alyssa take off the slider shoes. She pulled out a whole rainbow of felt and told Alyssa to pick a color. She chose pink, like the wheels on her skates. Mom helped her carefully trace the bottoms of her shoes onto the felt and then cut the pieces out. Then they glued the felt to the bottoms of her shoes. Alyssa put them on and slid easily around the room.

“Can you live without your skates in the house now that you have these?” asked Mom.

Alyssa threw her arms around Mom’s waist. “I can!” And she slipped off to the kitchen to show Dad.

Where was I when all of this happened? I don’t know. But I’ve heard the story so many times that I can tell it like I was there. Maybe I was there. I love Alyssa, but sometimes it feels like I was the test run, and she’s the kid they really wanted.

**Cool Kids, Hot Rides: Seniors Ellie Ayala and Lydia Stone, and Freshman Alyssa Stone leave school in Lydia's blue Corolla. Students' rides are as varied as they are, but all of them definitely come with personality.**

This picture could have been one of a million days. I gave Ellie a ride home all the time, and of course I was stuck with Alyssa by default. Alyssa and I got along better in high school. It was then that she started shedding the good girl prep act. She's wearing one of my flannels in this picture. Our classrooms were always freezing for some reason, and yet she managed to forget a sweater about once a week. I always had a spare shirt in the car for just such emergencies. I had a spare everything in that car. Notebooks, pens, tampons, clothes, it was like a giant extension of my backpack. Her name was Baby. When I turned fifteen, my parents told me they could either throw me a big quinceñera with a band and everything, or I could have a car when I turned sixteen. I think I said car please before Mom even finished making the offer. The only people I could think of inviting to a quinceñera were Luis and Ellie, I would have been an idiot not to go for the car.

If you look really close, you can see a crack in Baby's windshield. That happened the summer before senior year. Ellie's parents sent her off to spend the summer with her grandparents in Laredo. They must have been getting antsy about her. She was about the same age Alma had been when she had her first kid, and nearing the age when her next eldest sister, Vanessa, had had hers. If their two good church-going girls got pregnant, you can imagine how worried they must have been about their liberal loudmouth daughter, especially since she hung out with me. I think they blamed me for the crazy things Ellie came up with. Of course, every parent thinks their child is the good one, little

did they know that Ellie was the one who always drug me along. That summer wasn't any different, except that time she managed to do it from 3 hours away.

She was exiled in Laredo, and my parents were gone away on a trip to Mexico that my mom had won in some contest. Since Mom and Dad were only going to be gone for a week, and our grandmother was only a few minutes away in McAllen, they left Alyssa and me home alone. They had only been gone a couple of days when I got a call from Ellie.

"You have to come get me," she stage whispered over the phone.

"Where are you?" I asked. She couldn't possibly want what I thought she wanted.

She did.

"You want me to come to Laredo?" I don't know why I was all that surprised.

Alyssa had been the one to answer the phone, and was still in my room. She made frantic hand gestures. "Lydia, no!"

I waved her out of my room. When she didn't budge, I shoved her out.

"No matter where I go in this house, Jesus is watching me," said Ellie.

"Does he know when you've been sleeping? Does he know when you're awake?" I asked.

"Lydia, I am being completely serious. There is a holographic Jesus picture in the damned bathroom."

"Ellie, I can't come get you, your parents will kill you, and then they'll tell my parents and they'll kill me."

“No, I’ve got a plan,” she said. There was always a plan. “you can drop me off at the bus station and I’ll catch a cab home from there and tell them I took the bus home. Foolproof!”

Her plans were always foolproof. Luckily, most of the time the resources for carrying out these perfect plans were out of her reach. My driving to Laredo, though, that was attainable for her, no matter how I felt about it.

"Lydia, I will owe you so hard. And you know I'd come get you," Ellie continued.

I was already looking for something to write directions down on, but she didn't need to know that. "What happens if I don't come?"

"You will have missed out on adventure, Lyds." She had forgotten the stage whispers, and was really talking it all up now. I could almost see her pacing, sweeping her arm grandiosely. "Don't you want to have some stories to tell? Or do you just want to sit around, doing what you're supposed to do?"

"Doing what I'm supposed to do doesn't cost me anything in gas money."

"I can't believe you'd be so mercenary about our friendship," said Ellie. "But if that's the way it's got to be, fine. I will pay for the gas."

I hadn't expected her to go along with it. I told her to give me the directions. She did, including that I shouldn't pick her up in front of her grandparents' house, but honk three times and wait around the corner.

When we hung up, I realized there was something Ellie hadn't accounted for: Alyssa. I did have a twinge of guilt for shoving her out of my room. But her fretting at me on one side while Ellie wheedled on the other was not something I really enjoyed. I went to her room to see what I could do about her keeping her mouth shut.



She was sitting on the floor, shuffling through her tarot cards.

"Hey, sorry about that. Ellie was really freaking out and I couldn't deal with her and you at the same time," I said.

"You're going," she said, without looking up from her cards. "I want to go, too."

I tried talking her out of it, pointing out how long the trip was, that I was going and just turning around to come back, but she just looked at me until I stopped talking. Then she told me she was supposed to go. Alyssa's always been a bit odd. And not just flighty, new age odd. She isn't either of those things, and never has been. She knows things she shouldn't. Like if you're going to the store she'll tell you to say hi to so-and-so for her, and sure enough, you'll run into them, even if it's someone you haven't seen in months.

Then she sealed the deal, "Plus I'll just tell Mom and Dad if you don't let me go with you. If both of us go, you know I can't rat you out without getting into trouble myself."

The drive up went pretty quickly. We didn't really talk, just sang along with the radio. We did sort of get into it over whether or not I have the same sort of talent for weirdness that she does. She said I did, but that I've talked myself out of it over the years. I've never noticed it really. I think I'm just good at reading people. This is an argument we still have. Sometimes I wish I could believe that she's right.

It was sunset when we hit Laredo. Sunsets don't linger around here. The sky was tinged purple when I honked in front of what I hoped was the right house. The last orange was fading when Ellie rounded the corner. Once she threw her stuff in the trunk, she hopped in the passenger seat Alyssa had just vacated.

"Let's go! Let's go," she said. "I want some miles between us and my grandparents before they get home from their church thing. I'm supposed to be at a lock-in at Peter Piper Pizza, but if television has taught me anything, it's that if I dawdle, something will go wrong." She looked to the backseat. "Hey Alyssa, I guess we'll make a delinquent out of you yet."

Alyssa said something about learning from the best. She never exactly approved of Ellie, but always tried to stay on her good side. She said it was because the cards never wanted to talk about Ellie. And that was true, every time Ellie tried to get Alyssa to do a reading for her the cards would come up all the same suit, or all the same number. I only know a little from Grandma Stone trying to teach us to read, but I know enough to see that what Ellie does to tarot cards is just weird and statistically impossible.

Ellie and I chattered while I drove. I could tell from the silence in the backseat that Alyssa was falling asleep. I can't tell you what we were talking about. I couldn't pinpoint the bit of road we were on, just that it was the remarkably empty bit near Zapata. It was breathtakingly dark, and then, for a moment, it wasn't. My vision filled with white light, and there was a sharp crack. And then it was all back the way it was, a slight after burn in my vision my only clue it had happened.

"What the hell," said Ellie.

"What was that?" Alyssa asked from the backseat. I guess she hadn't been asleep after all.

I don't remember who said it, but it was suggested that it had been a rock. We were the only car for miles. Ellie suggested a stray bullet, either from drug dealers, hunters, or coyotes bringing illegals in. I do remember that Alyssa shot that one down, saying that a

bullet wouldn't give off light like that on impact, and, more chillingly, a bullet would probably have come through the windshield.

"Maybe it was a fairy," said Alyssa.

"Right, Alyssa, that makes sense," said Ellie.

"It wasn't a rock. It wasn't a bullet. What else could it have been?" said Alyssa.

"Knock it off both of you," I said. "Well stop at the next gas station and check it out."

It seemed like forever before we made it to a gas station. We piled out and looked at the windshield. I don't even know what we were looking for. There was a small chip in it, over the passenger's seat, about the width of my smallest fingertip.

"Well," said Ellie, "any pixie dust? A wing maybe?"

"Nothing," I said.

Ellie prodded the chip. "What'll you tell your parents?"

I shrugged. "The truth. I was driving and something hit my windshield. Probably a rock or something."

Alyssa hung back, and seemed more interested in a bathroom break than in trying to figure out what hit us. Maybe she just didn't want to put up with Ellie.

We got back on the road. The drive was quiet. Alyssa fell asleep in the backseat, and snored. I'm sure she snored. She has snored her whole life. We got in so late that Ellie's parents would never have believed she'd gotten in on the bus, so we decided to just do it in the morning.

Sure enough, Ellie's parents grounded her for the rest of the summer. We managed the occasional phone call, but didn't get to hang out until school started back up. I missed

her terribly. Ellie was like a sister to me, but the good kind, the kind you choose. Because she spent so much time with me, she was like a sister to Alyssa, too. Alyssa never chose Ellie.

### **Vaughn, Jessica**

We had six Jessicas in our class, but she was the one who was just Jessica. The others were relegated to combinations of shortenings and last initials. Only her best friend, Jessica Zamora got to break out of Jessica-dom and go by her middle name, Anne. Some of the others had middle names they could have used, but Jessica like keeping them reduced. It was a power game she had been playing since we were in elementary school. I wonder about those girls, now and then. I wonder if they reclaimed their names once they got out of here. I hope they did.

But Jessica. To put it nicely, she had a strong personality. That's probably why she hated Ellie, and, by extension, me. When you have two strong-willed girls in one place, they either become best friends or worst enemies. Who knows? Maybe Jessica and Ellie could have been friends if it weren't for the whole cheerleader thing.

Senior year, Jessica was the cheerleading captain. Technically, she was co-captain, but a "mysterious error" with the printer left her uniform reading captain, while Anne's read co-captain. Somehow their sponsor never got around to fixing it. At any rate, Jessica kept all of those girls in line. JV cheerleaders had to carry varsity cheerleaders' books. Varsity cheerleaders had to wash Jessica's car if they were late to practice, or if her car was dirty. These days, it'd probably be called hazing, but back then it was just how things were done. It drove Ellie crazy.

“It’s ridiculous,” she said one day, after hearing about Jessica taking away water breaks because someone wasn’t up to her standards. “Don’t they know they don’t have to do this? The student handbook—“

“Ellie,” I interrupted, “the handbook means jack and you know it.”

“It means plenty when it’s being used to stifle us. Why shouldn’t it mean something when I’m trying to keep those idiot freshmen from killing themselves over a short skirt, synchronized yelling, and what basically amount to stripper lessons?”

“Nobody’s forcing them.”

“Like hell, Lydia. Jessica has them terrified.”

“Look, if they’re not smart enough to realize she’s an utter bitch, maybe they deserve it,” I said.

“I still think we should do something.”

“So put some itching powder in her pom poms.”

“Not bad,” said Ellie, “but I think we can do better.”

A week later, she handed me a single-page homemade newsletter. The masthead read “The Susurrus.”

“Get it,” Ellie said. “Because we’re the whispers in the wind.”

“Oh is that what that word means?”

“Well, not exactly, but it’s the basic idea.”

I don’t remember the main headline anymore, but it was a story about a fascist regime on campus. The thinly veiled Mussolini character was, of course, Jessica. The other features were crazy horoscopes, an advice column, and a few classified ads. All had

bylines of famous, but deceased authors. At best the stories were mildly insulting to various school figures and organizations. In some cases they were downright offensive.

“Ellie, you can’t do this,” I said. “It’s libel.”

“Actually, it’s satire,” said Ellie. “It’s totally okay.”

“And you’re what? Just going to hand these out? What happens when they find out it’s you?”

“They won’t. I’m just going to leave a few stacks on the shelves in the library and slip a few into some lockers.”

There was no talking her out of it, and that Monday “The Susurrus” was the talk of the school. Sure enough, everyone knew it was Ellie, but she put on her best face and denied it. She even went as far as wishing she could meet the person who wrote it, saying she hoped it would turn out one of the boys had been hiding a brain all those years. We were walking out to my car that afternoon, when our English teacher, Mr. Garza, stopped us.

“I assume you girls saw that sheet that was going around,” he said.

“Yeah, someone slipped it into my locker,” said Ellie.

“Well, there are some rumblings among the faculty about the sort of action that should be taken,” said Mr. Garza.

“Action?”

“Unauthorized student publications are against the student handbook,” he said.

“The term suspension has been brought up. Do I make myself clear?”

I don’t know how Ellie looked so calm. He knew, he had to have known. The byline for the Jessica story had been George Orwell, and Ellie had done her midterm

paper, practically a love letter, on *Animal Farm*. Thank god he was watching her for signs, because I'm sure if he had given me a more than cursory glance it would have all been over.

"Gosh, Mr. Garza, I didn't know that," said Ellie. She knew that handbook better than most of our teachers.

"I'm sure this will blow over in a couple of days, as long as there is no follow up issue," said Mr. Garza. "Just remember, it is possible to be too clever, Ellie."

"Yes, sir," she said. "I'll keep that in mind."

"You girls have a good day," he said.

And that was it.

"That went well," said Ellie, when we were safely in the car.

"Well? Ellie, he knew," I said.

"Yes, but he warned me, instead of going to the principal. Besides, he basically said they have no proof. Just like I told you," she said. "Besides, the seeds are planted. That's all I wanted. People just need to think for themselves."

## COLLISION

Alyssa would always remember it as the summer they killed the fairy, though Lydia would always insist there had to be some logical explanation. Lydia and Alyssa's parents had gone to Cozumel for a week, leaving them home alone for the first time. Lydia's best friend Ellie had been taken to Laredo to visit her grandparents and called Lydia nearly every day to tell her how miserable it all was.

Alyssa answered the phone one afternoon only to be ordered by a stage-whispering Ellie to hand it over to Lydia right that moment. Alyssa, rolling her eyes with the force only available to fourteen year-olds, knocked once on Lydia's door to fulfill sisterly obligation, before walking in and dropping the phone next to Lydia's head.

"It's Ellie," she said. "She's whispering."

Lydia put aside her book and picked up the phone. "Hello?"

Lydia scrubbed at her face. "Where are you?"

"What does she want?" asked Alyssa.

"You want me to come to Laredo?" asked Lydia, dismissing Alyssa with a wave.

"Lydia, no," said Alyssa, even as she watched her older sister roll out of bed nodding, and reaching for a pen.

"Alyssa, out," said Lydia, scribbling down directions.



Alyssa stomped out, scowling, and slammed the door behind her. She considered eavesdropping, but instead went to her own room. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor, flipping through her tarot cards, when there was a knock at her door.

“Come in,” she said.

“Hey, I’m sorry. Ellie was losing it a little bit,” said Lydia. “I have to go pick her up in Laredo.”

“You can’t,” said Alyssa. “Mom and Dad will freak.”

“They don’t need to know,” said Lydia. “You’re not going to tell them are you?”

Alyssa pulled out another tarot card and wrinkled her nose. “I don’t know. Can I come?”

“It’s three hours to Laredo, through pretty much nothing. I’m picking Ellie up from her grandparents’ house and then turning around. She doesn’t even want me to get down from the car. I’m supposed to honk three times and wait at the corner.”

“Then you’ll need someone to keep you company on the drive up. And I can be quiet on the drive back,” Alyssa said. “And anyway, I think I’m supposed to go with you.”

“I suppose the cards told you that?”

Alyssa nodded.

“Mom hates those things, you know.”

“I know, but I feel like it’s something I’m supposed to be doing. You have to admit, I’m right a lot of the time.”

“You were right a lot of the time before you started playing with those things.”

“Yeah, but they help me focus.” Alyssa’s expression lost some of its defiance as she slipped her tarot deck into its bag. “I tried explaining that to Mom. They’re a tool. They can’t hurt you. Anyway, they were Grandma Stone’s and she wanted me to have them.”

“Fine, fine,” said Lydia. “I’m leaving in half an hour, with or without you.”

Alyssa cheered.

A half hour later, they were on the road. Green Day blared from the speakers. Lydia wore a pair of cheap, red plastic sunglasses, which did little against the glare of the South Texas sun. Alyssa’s hair was in two braids, which she had knotted behind her head. The car’s air conditioner struggled against the heat which, if the bank’s marquee was to be believed, had hit 108 degrees. They didn’t speak, just sang along with the tape.

Finally, after it had turned over twice, Alyssa hit eject. “What next?” she asked.

Lydia shrugged. “It’s all my music, so I don’t care.”

Alyssa began sorting through the tapes, most of which were hand-labeled. She came upon one that simply read “ska” and slipped it into the tape player. Brassy trumpet notes filled the car and Alyssa kept the beat on her thighs as she sang along.

Lydia slowed as they came into Rio Grande City. “Stupid speed traps,” she said.

“I don’t see any cops,” said Alyssa. “Why bother slowing down?”

“Because you never know and I don’t feel like explaining a Rio Grande speeding ticket to Mom and Dad.”

“Oh.”

“Look, Alyssa, if you’re going to go sneaking around, you have to be careful. It’d be dumb to get caught over a tiny detail,” said Lydia. “Besides, then I would be in trouble

for the speeding ticket and for going to Laredo, or whatever I came up with as an excuse for being in Rio Grande. This way, if we get caught for going to Laredo, then fine, at least we were safe about it. If we get a ticket, that shows not only were we disobeying them about staying home, but we were reckless about it.”

“I get it,” said Alyssa. “Sort of like when I skip school, I just stay home all day instead of just skipping one class.”

“When you what?” asked Lydia, sounding shocked.

“Go skipping,” said Alyssa. “It’s stupid to just miss one class, when obviously you were there in the morning, and then you’re there after whatever class you skip. May as well just be out all day and say you were sick.” She grinned at her sister. “You’re not the only one who can sneak, you know.”

Lydia let that slide, and they rode in silence. Soon they were out of Rio Grande and back up to what Lydia considered an acceptable speed.

“So where do you go when you skip?” asked Lydia.

Alyssa shrugged. “I stay home mostly. I don’t do it that often, just when I really can’t stand the idea of going to school.”

“You skip school and just stay home? Really?”

“It’s not like I can drive,” said Alyssa. “And we live too far away from anything interesting for me to walk.”

Lydia felt an uncomfortable sisterly obligation. “You’re not, like, doing drugs or sneaking from the liquor cabinet are you?” She coughed. “I mean. I won’t tell. It’s just that I -”

“Lyds,” interrupted Alyssa, “I’m not drinking or doing drugs or having sex or whatever. I watch cartoons, and I read up on magic stuff, but that’s as far as it goes with stuff Mom and Dad would hate.”

“Good. I mean, not that there’s anything wrong with sex or drinking, but you’re my little sister.” She glanced at Alyssa who was shuffling her cards, almost absentmindedly. “So what’s the magic stuff like?”

Alyssa shrugged. “No big deal. Sometimes it’s like super crazy déjà vu, and I can only get ahead of what’s happening right then by a minute or two. Sometimes, though, I just know stuff is going to happen. Like of course I’m going to run to a certain person at the mall, or that time Dad was going to surprise us by coming home from that work trip a day early, and I set his place at the table. I just knew he’d be there.”

“Yeah, I remember that. It really weirded Mom out.”

“I try not to let her know about stuff anymore. I know she gets creeped out, which is weird since she’s got her own touch. But I guess she doesn’t think about hers.”

“What?”

“You never noticed how lucky Mom is?” asked Alyssa. “She wins at least a dollar every time she buys a scratch off. And how many door prizes has she won? Hell, she won that trip she and Dad are on now.”

“Alyssa, luck isn’t the same as what you do.”

Alyssa bit her lip. “I don’t think it is luck exactly. If you ask Mom she’ll say she’s blessed by Jesus, and it’s cause she goes to church all the time. But I’ve noticed, she sort of changes things. Like she’s so sure about something, the universe sort of slides around for her. She wins because she knows she’s going to win.”

“So you’re special, and Mom’s special, and Dad and I are just muggles?”

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s from this book that just came out. They’re people who can’t do magic.”

Alyssa decided it would be better not to pursue that. “I don’t think you and Dad can’t do stuff. I think you just have forgotten it. Like I know you used to see things.” Alyssa thought back. “Remember Miss Jacobs? The teacher’s aide? You’re the one who told me she was the Tooth Fairy.”

“I also told you that Mom and Dad bought you from gypsies, and the only reason they kept you is they lost the receipt,” said Lydia. “Kids make stuff up.”

Alyssa ignored the gypsies comment. Even though there was no question now that they were sisters, it had taken Alyssa years to grow into the resemblance. “You made it up?”

“I must have. Fairies aren’t real.”

“See? You’re doing it,” said Alyssa. “You’re telling yourself you’re wrong. Of course you won’t see it if you don’t want to.”

They argued the point until they were both yelling. Finally, Lydia declared a no talking zone, and turned the stereo up. Their mother had invented no talking zones to try and keep the peace during road trips to see their grandmother in Indiana. Once someplace had been declared a no talking zone, the first thing anyone said had to be an apology and a compliment. Alyssa crossed her arms across her chest and slouched in her seat. There was no way she was going to apologize.

The sun was beginning its rapid descent as they hit the edge of Laredo.

“Lyssa, grab those directions out of the glove box.”

“That’s not the rule for ending the no talking zone and you know it,” said Alyssa, still looking straight ahead. She was sure it was bratty to demand that Lydia follow a rule they hadn’t used in years, but, she told herself, that’s what Lydia got for declaring for the zone.

“Fine. Lyssa, I’m sorry I yelled at you,” Lydia paused, groping for a compliment. “You’re super smart and I’m glad when I get to talk to you. Now, could you please grab those directions? I read them about fifteen times, but I don’t want to mess up. It’s going to get dark real quick, and lost in Laredo after dark is not my idea of fun.”

“Was that so hard?” Alyssa asked, grinning. She grabbed the directions and read them off to Lydia.

Soon they were pulling up in front of an older brick house with a manicured, if dried out looking, lawn. There were no car in the small carport. Quick-eyed Lydia noticed a curtain twitch. She shook her head as she honked three times, and then pulled away, parking around the corner.

“Ellie’s sort of dramatic, isn’t she?” asked Alyssa.

“Sort of. Now get in the back seat.”

Alyssa grumbled, as she reached back and unlocked the door. The backs of her legs stuck to the seat a bit as she slid out of the car. She stretched, not realizing how cramped the car ride had been until she was out. She jumped up and down a couple of times, and started stretching again until Lydia hollered at her to get back in the car already. She gave some consideration to arguing, but instead just clambered in the backseat and set about

making herself comfortable. At least she had the foresight to throw a pillow into the backseat before they had left the house.

She heard a click as Lydia pulled the lever, releasing the trunk. Alyssa turned and waved at Ellie through the back window even as Ellie was raising the trunk lid to throw a heavy looking duffel bag in. Ellie slammed the trunk, and soon swung into the passenger seat.

Ellie drummed on the dashboard. "Let's go!"

"Seatbelt," was all Lydia said, as she pulled away from the curb.

"Sure sure, I just want some distance before the grands get back and realize I'm gone," said Ellie, clicking her seatbelt into place. She looked over her shoulder at Alyssa.

"Hey kid. How ya' doing?"

"Good enough."

"I'm amazed you two made it all the way to Laredo without violence."

"Well, I was tempted to leave her ass at the Dairy Queen when we took a bathroom break," said Lydia.

"But you didn't, and that's called progress, Lyds," said Ellie. "Now, I figure we've got about forty-five minutes before the grands get back from their church thing. But I'm supposed to be at a youth group lock-in anyhow, so they aren't even expecting me home until tomorrow morning."

"They didn't know you were leaving?" asked Alyssa.

"Nope. I'll give them a call when I get home, but they would never have let me go otherwise," said Ellie. "I'm supposed to be spending my summer finding Jesus and getting away from your sister's lousy influence."

“Please,” said Lydia. “Your parents wish I had an influence on you.”

“If they stopped to think about it, they might. But they’re too wrapped up in being afraid of being grandparents again to notice anything else I’m up to.”

Ellie’s sister Alma had her first son when she was seventeen. Her next eldest sister, Vanessa, technically had hers when she was nineteen. Looking in the nursery window at the hospital, Ellie said she hoped Vanessa liked her birthday present, since there wasn’t much of a return policy. Nobody else laughed.

Alyssa listened to Ellie and Lydia iron out the plans for when they got back to McAllen. It was getting too dark to read in the backseat, so she settled for leaning her forehead against the window. The glass was warm, and she had to look past her own reflection to see the stars. In her science class they had talked about how bright stars are once you get away from the light pollution of even the small Valley towns, but she had never really been able to wrap her mind around the idea of a sky that was blacker, stars that were brighter. Now she wished she could get Lydia to pull over so she could look up into that perfect darkness littered with the hard light of the stars.

An hour or so later, when they were well into the middle of nowhere, Alyssa felt a heaviness in her eyes, and her shoulders slouched. She struggled up, not wanting to miss the conversation in the front seat, or the stars above. Just as she thought of giving in and trying to find a way to lay down comfortably in the back seat, there was a loud crack and a flash of light. Later they would argue over which came first, or even if they had been simultaneous. What all three of them agreed on was that the flash had been pure, blinding, white light.

“What the hell was that?” asked Ellie.



“I don’t know,” said Lydia. “I’d say a rock, but where would it have come from? We’ve got to be the only car around for fifty miles. There’s no way we kicked up a rock that hit our own windshield. Anyway, rocks don’t come with light.”

“Maybe it was a bullet,” said Ellie. “Someone out jacking around with a gun. Maybe fired up. Bullets can travel pretty well.”

“But they don’t come with a flash of light, either,” said Lydia. “The explosion of a bullet is when it leaves a gun, after that it’s just a slug traveling through the air.”

Ellie raised an eyebrow at Lydia. “How do you even know that?”

Alyssa spoke up from the backseat. “Grandpa Stone was a cop. He took us down to the shooting range a couple of times when we went up to visit. Flash aside, if it was a bullet, it would have come through the windshield.”

“Okay,” said Lydia. “Not a rock. Not a bullet. What was it?”

“A fairy,” said Alyssa.

Ellie snorted. “Sure, Alyssa. That makes more sense than a rock or bullet.”

“But we already decided those didn’t make sense,” protested Alyssa.

“Nobody’s decided anything,” said Lydia. “We’ll stop at the next gas station and take a look at it.”

It was a silent fifteen minutes until they pulled into a well-lit but devoid of cars gas station. They piled out of the car and looked at the windshield. Lydia ran her fingertips over the new chip in the glass. Centered over the passenger seat, it looked no different from any of the other chips that she’d gotten by being stuck behind a gravel truck on the expressway. Those traveling asteroid belts ensured a thriving windshield repair industry in the Valley.

“Any pixie dust?” asked Ellie. “Maybe a tiny wing fragment?”

“Nothing at all,” said Lydia. She pulled the windshield wiper up and peered under it. “Nothing. I don’t know. But it does look like you were lucky it didn’t make it through, whatever it was.”

Ellie leaned over and probed the crack with a fingernail. “No kidding. So what are you going to tell your parents?”

Lydia shrugged. “The truth, mostly. That I was driving and something hit the windshield. It’s not like it looks like a bullet hole or anything.”

After deciding that there wasn’t enough evidence to come to a decision, they took advantage of the bathroom break opportunity. Bladders empty, and fresh caffeine in hand, they got back on the road. Alyssa tried curling up with her pillow, and wished she was still small enough to lie down comfortably in the backseat of a small car. Ellie and Lydia’s voices from the front seat were low, muffled by the stereo. Alyssa closed her eyes and tried not to think about how much longer the drive would be. It seemed like only moments later that she heard the car doors slam. The door at her feet opened and Ellie shook her.

“Time to get out. Unless you want to sleep in the car all night.” Ellie left the door open, and went to grab her things out of the trunk.

Alyssa grabbed her pillow and trudged into the house. Her shoulders ached and her back felt like it had developed a few curves.

The next morning, Lydia dropped Ellie off a block away from her house. Ellie’s parents were furious, and wanted to send her back to her grandparents. Ellie said simply that she would just come home again. She never made any threats about running away or

leaving forever, just steadfastly refused to go back to Laredo. She stayed home and was grounded for the rest of the summer. When they asked how she had gotten home, she told them she had taken the bus.

Lydia and Alyssa's parents came home a week later. It wasn't until just before school started that Lydia mentioned the chip in the windshield, just in passing, to their father. He grumbled along the lines of these things happen and didn't think twice.

## KALLISTI

When Connor came in from lunch, he was carrying a golden apple. It was the size of my fist and it shone brightly. Its shine wasn't gaudy or cheap, but shone like only those things that carry age and value shine.

"Check this out," he said, tossing it to me. "Some dame was handing 'em out in the park."

I caught it without thinking and drew it close. "Connor, what have I said about calling women dames?"

He sighed. "It's not retro and suave, it's sexist.."

"Good boy." I hefted the apple in my hand. It didn't feel any heavier than an apple its size should be, and the skin was smooth and firm. I resisted the urge to bite into it. It may have felt like an apple, but it still looked awfully metallic. Besides, only a fool would eat a piece of fruit given to him by a strange woman in a park. I tossed it back to Connor, who had been watching my inspection closely.

"Well, Ellie? What do you think?"

"I think solving the case of the crazy produce lady isn't going to help us get any real work done. Look, it's probably just a part of some viral marketing thing. Next week they'll announce a movie about golden apples or a new iPod or something."

"I don't think that's it. It seems more important than that."

I shrugged. “Connor, not everything is significant. Sometimes things happen for completely mundane reasons.”

“You have no sense of adventure,” he said, clearing a place by his monitor for the apple. Flanked by a troll doll with bright blue hair, and a small bowl containing a red betta fish named Curtis, the apple seemed absurdly in place.

“It’s called being a grown up, try it some day,” I said, turning my attention back to the case file in front of me. Working with runaways hadn’t been my first choice of work, but it’s what made me happy. Which is good, because I discovered in my first anatomy class as a pre-med student that I really wasn’t cut out to deal with the human body on such a direct basis.

Her name was Amy Reed. She had just graduated from high school and was slated to head to a pricey university in a couple of months. The photos I had showed a happy-go-lucky girl with white blond hair that fell to just above her tiny waist. She had a tendency to wear peasant blouses with ratty jeans and a pair of Birkenstocks. Her parents said she had always been the new age-y sort, but, right before she ran off, she’d gotten in with an especially odd crowd. Not the type that dressed in black with lots of silver jewelry, just odd. They smelled of patchouli. Amy dyed her hair pink, and took up the tambourine and went to drum circles in the park. A week ago, she took a backpack with her and didn’t come home. I spent my afternoon combing the social networking websites for information on the people she’d been associating with.

The Helen House didn’t just take in runaway girls, we tried to find them before they fell too far with the wrong crowd. We gave them options, to the extent we could. If they were running away from a bad situation, we’d get the authorities involved. A lot of

the girls we worked with didn't know they had options. Then there were the ones who weren't so much running away as running towards. Sometimes they wanted to be actresses, or models, or musicians, or maybe they just had a romantic notion of striking out on their own.

Looking at the pictures of Amy, I had a feeling I was dealing with something different. I didn't get the vibe from her family that there was anything to run from, though I knew enough to realize that the veneer of normality could hide some pretty nasty things. But she didn't seem the run-to type, either. Her parents said she had graduated a year early. She wanted to be a veterinarian. So where was she?

By six o'clock, I had discovered nothing really new. She had very little online presence. I had found a picture of the drum circle group that meets down at the park. It was a group of scruffy hippies. I had gone to their last meeting, but she hadn't been there. The girls, and some of the boys, wore long, flowered skirts. The boys, and some of the girls, were in faded jeans. Most of them were holding drums, a few had frisbees. Amy was standing just behind a tall guy with dreadlocks and a happy looking mutt dog. Her smile, what I could see of it, seemed shy. Her hair had fallen, or been pulled, over most of her face. Finally, I saved the page I was on and shut down my computer.

I had the same drive home. I checked the menu I had made for myself on the fridge, and made the dinner I had decided on three days before. I watched my usual Tuesday night shows. The jokes were the same as they ever were, and the laugh tracks all blurred together. As I washed my face before bed, I looked in the mirror.

"I don't know about you, but I'm ready to run away myself," I said. The image in the mirror nodded.

That night, I tossed and turned. I saw Connor, carrying the golden apple. He was offering it to anyone he came across, but nobody wanted it. He tried to give it to me. I tried reaching for it, but couldn't. My arms were bound to my sides with paper chains. Then there was someone else there, as well. She was tall, but shorter than me. She pulled away the chains. She was thin, but she held me and she felt warm and soft. I looked into her eyes.

“Who are you?”

Her eyes were blue. Her eyes were green. Her eyes were the tawny yellow of a lion. They were brown. They were violet. They were black.

In a voice that seemed to echo, she said, “I am everybody. I am nobody. I am you.”

When I woke up the next day, the world seemed to be going slightly mad. Horns and sirens were blaring, but they were nearly drowned out by the voices. Somewhere near my head *Particle Man* by They Might Be Giants began to play. I groaned and groped for my cell phone. I would have to hurt Connor later, after figuring out how many of my ring tones he had swapped to nerd music.

“You suck,” I said, not yet ready to open my eyes.

“Oh good, you're up!”

Goddamn morning people.

“I don't know if you've noticed,” he continued, “but everyone's gone kind of batshit.”

An official-sounding bullhorned voice ordered everyone off the street.

“I am becoming aware of that,” I said, sitting up and peering out my blinds. The street was packed and a few cops were ushering people along. “What the hell is going on?”

“Everything, it seems like. Let’s start with the Loch Ness monster sightings.”

“Oh come on, you can’t be serious. The Loch Ness monster?”

“Hand to God! Clear photos by a news crew who were doing a story there.”

“Hoax, Photoshop and CGI,” I said. “Anyhow, all this over the Loch Ness monster?”

“It’s not just that. A cruise ship fell off the edge of the world.”

“Connor, have you been drinking?”

“Fine. Mock away. Just turn on your tv and then call me when you’re ready to apologize.” There was a click as he hung up before I could protest.

I pulled on my worn flannel robe as I went into the living room. I turned on my usual local news station.

“—press conference will be held this afternoon at the White House,” said the young brunette anchor. “The United Nations will be taking action to investigate the extent of the weapon caches that have been found in Iraq. Now let’s go to Daniel Ramirez who is downtown taking a look at that massive traffic jam. Daniel?”

There was a cut to a young, handsome reporter standing in front of gridlocked traffic. I could see people waving their arms and screaming. Cops were trying their best to direct the chaos. “Thank you, Samantha. As you can see I’m here at the corner of Broadway and Main and traffic is at a standstill. There has never been such a traffic jam



in the history of the city. Police are advising people to avoid driving if at all possible, and to especially avoid coming downtown.”

“So, Daniel, any idea what is causing this?” asked Samantha in a concerned, though still perky, voice. “Was there an accident of some sort?”

“Police are saying that there’s been no accident. It has been speculated that the timing of the traffic lights became out of sync, but so far that claim is being denied by the Department of Transportation.”

The tv cut back to Samantha in the studio. “Thank you, Daniel. We’ll check back in with you later. Now, in the strange but true category, sightings of the Loch Ness monster have been verified. A Scottish news team was shooting a story on the shores of Loch Ness when the creature surfaced directly behind their reporter.” There was a cut to the footage in question. A large head at the end of a powerful looking neck came up out of the waters of the lake. It swam in toward shore, seemingly intent on investigating the crowds there. Samantha’s voiceover continued. “The incident occurred on a sunny day in front of hundreds of witnesses.”

I changed the channel, thinking the whole thing had to be a hoax. The next channel was talking about the cruise ship that had seemingly sailed off the edge of the giant waterfalls that had appeared in the oceans. Satellite images were confirming that the world was now a giant disc. They were also showing a previously undocumented village at the North Pole. Every channel, every newscast, was the same – confusion and chaos. Legends were true. The WMDs were there. The world was flat. No one knew how. No one knew why.

They Might Be Giants sang from my robe pocket and I answered. “Connor, quit changing my ring tones.”

“Yes, fine. Did you see? What are we doing? Are we doing something?”

“I saw. I don’t understand, but I saw. I don’t know what we can do, though.”

“C’mon, Ellie. This is a real true mystery. We’ve got to do something.”

“You need to lay off the comic books. Look, I’ll meet you at the office in an hour, and we’ll figure stuff out from there, okay?”

“Uhm, I’m already here, but I’ll see you in an hour. That’s fine.”

I decided a shower was in order. The hot water pulsed down over me, comforting and washing away my headache. Images from my dreams the night before came and went. Every time I tried to focus, the image would slip away like quicksilver.

Twenty more minutes and I was out the door in my usual t-shirt, jeans, and boots, messenger bag slung across my chest. The streets had cleared out a bit, and I made it to work with relatively little incident.

I passed the same bum, Harold he said his name was, every day on my way in to the office. Harold always claimed to be a Vietnam vet, though his ragged BDUs, all emblazoned with different names and insignia, came from thrift stores, not a diminishing cache of clothing that had been with him since the war. In the past I had thought of suggesting to him that he change his story up, say he had been in Iraq, cut out the stories he told the teen boys about going whoring in Saigon, but he always seemed happy talking about old days he was too young to ever have seen, so I let him be. Today, however, he was slumped in a doorway, rocking back and forth and sobbing. As I got closer, I could hear him.

“Charlie, Charlie’s on our tail.” He shuddered. “Lieutenant, I don’t think we’re getting out of this one. Where are the medics? Randall, no!”

Randall was usually Harold’s partner in crime in the crazy stories he’d tell, but he’d never mentioned anything worse than an STD in his stories. I got more confused as I got closer. I had always taken Harold to be about my age, somewhere in the latter half of his twenties, but his hair had gone gray and he seemed to have aged. It looked like he really was having some sort of flashback. Hitching my bag up to a more comfortable position, I quickened my pace, not wanting to be on the streets any longer. The madness the world was going through hadn’t seemed real until this moment. Now I knew Connor was right. We needed to try and do something.

Connor was glued to his computer screen when I got into the office. After what I had just seen, it was actually a comforting sight, all of our clutter, him practically plugged into the computer himself. I dropped my bag next to my desk chair and went to pour myself a cup of coffee.

“This is crazy, Ellie. If I’m right this is just amazing,” said Connor, waving me over.

Having dumped cream and sugar in my coffee, I perched on the edge of his desk, careful not to disturb the piles of paperwork. “So you’ve got an idea of what’s going on?”

“A theory. It’s like everything is coming true.”

“What?”

He ran his hands through his thick blond hair and looked up at me. “The Loch Ness monster is real. The weapons of mass destruction are really there. Satellite photos

discovered a small village smack dab at the middle of the North Pole. But it's not just the out-there stuff. People are making incredible recoveries in hospitals everywhere."

"How does people getting better mean stuff is coming true?"

"How many of those people have family members telling them they're going to be okay? That they'll be home in time for little Billy's birthday party or whatever? That whatever it is, doctors are wrong all the time, and they'll beat it? But people don't make miraculous recoveries, they don't make it home for Billy's birthday. Until now."

I thought of Harold, of the years he'd spent telling people he was in Vietnam. I thought of him shaking and muttering, gone grey over night. It was then our door opened. A tall, slender woman, with loose curled black hair piled on the top of her head strode in. She was wearing a simple grey silk dress that slid gracefully over her minimal curves. I swallowed hard and got to my feet, wishing I dressed a little better.

"You," she said, "are Eleanor Ayala." It wasn't a question. There was nothing questioning about her. "I've come to seek your aid, and perhaps give you some in return."

"I'll do what I can, Ms. ..."

Her grey eyes sparkled. "You may call me Pallas. I think that will do nicely. But that is really of no consequence. You are the one I need."

"Me?" I asked. "Why me?"

"You were marked, years ago." She looked at me. It felt more like she was looking into me. "What do you know about the possibility of the multiverse?"

I shook my head. "It's something Connor rambles about when he's trying to tell me about comic books. I think. Isn't it like there are lots of worlds just like this one, but a little different. I think he also calls them parallel dimensions."

“Yes. Certain choices create new worlds. Not every choice, but some. Years ago by the timeline of this world, there was a choice that fractured another universe. Those splinters spread themselves across the other universes that are and have been and that will be.”

“But what does that have to do with me?”

“As a splinter pierced this world, it impacted a vehicle you were in with two of your friends. While you and the elder sister reached for answers that were logical, the younger sister saw that there was no earthly answer,” said Pallas.

I tried to think of what she was talking about. Then it came back to me. The summer before my senior year, my parents had shipped me off to my grandparents’ house in Laredo. At the time I volunteered at a women’s clinic, and they thought the only reason for me to do that was to have easy access to birth control. They sent me away to hopefully find Jesus and lose interest in whatever boy I was obviously sleeping with. There was no boy, there never had been. I managed to talk my friend Lydia into driving up to rescue me. She and her little sister, Alyssa, made the drive up. On the way back, something hit the windshield of the car. We were in the middle of nowhere at the time. There was a loud crack and a flash of white light. No matter how many times we talked it over, we never did figure out what hit us. Alyssa remained adamant that we had hit and killed a fairy. I don’t think Lydia and I ever settled on an answer that worked for us.

“So it marked us? All of us? Then why am I the one you’re looking for?”

“For the sisters, it strengthened their abilities beyond this world. The younger is a strong oracle, and the elder sees more than she realizes,” said Pallas. “But you had no abilities to build on. So it increased your potential and that is why I am here.”

“That makes no sense,” I said, shaking my head.

“Yes,” she said with a sad smile, “I get that a lot. But perhaps a walk in the fresh air will make things clearer. Fare well, Ellie. I trust that I have chosen wisely.” And with that she turned and left.

The door closed and I turned to Connor. “Can you believe that?”

“Ellie, I wouldn’t have told you my theory if I didn’t believe it.”

“No, that woman, Pallas.”

He only stared at me.

“Just now,” I said. “In the grey dress? Told that I have the potential to fix all this?”

“I’m sorry, Ellie. I didn’t see anything. It’s just been you and me here. Look, don’t take this personally, but has anyone told you you’re delusional today? Maybe late yesterday?”

I felt lost and sick, and I guess Connor could see that.

“You know what? You’re totally not delusional. You are calm and rational and completely in full control of your mental faculties.” His voice was calm and strong. “Feel better?”

I did, and I told him so. But I wasn’t sure why I did.

“Because I told you the truth,” he said, looking smug. “Well, a truth anyway.”

“And that’s what made me feel better?” I don’t know why I was questioning him. My stomach had calmed down, everything was familiar again, and I had a sense of confidence I hadn’t had in ages. “How much could be done with this whole truth thing?”

“Well, it made the world flat.”

I felt like my brain was in overdrive. “But that’s a big one. People believed the world was flat for a long time, and even today there are nuts who still believe it.”

“So you’re saying changing the big stuff takes a lot of people believing it, but the little stuff is easier?”

“Yeah. We need to test it, though.” I looked around the room, until I caught sight of myself in the old mirror that hung over my desk. “Tell me my eyes are blue. Tell me I’m not a brunette. Pick something that’s not true about my appearance, and tell it to me like it’s the truth.”

“You’ve got huge boobs.”

“Connor! What the hell?”

“What? I didn’t want to make you ugly or anything. That was the only improvement I could think of!”

I put my hands up to my chest. Everything still felt the same. “Well, I don’t think it worked.”

“So what does that mean?” he asked.

“I think it means that you can’t just say something and have it be true. I think you need to really believe it.”

“And that Pallas dame, I mean lady, that you talked to told you that you were going to fix everything?”

“Yeah,” I said. “You believe I talked to her?”

“I have to, don’t I? You’re perfectly sane, so it wasn’t a hallucination. Honestly, even if you weren’t sane, you believe you saw her, really believe it, and with the whole truth effect that’s going on that belief means you did see her.”

“I’m still trying to wrap my head around this whole thing, but okay that sounds reasonable.” I got myself another cup of coffee. “But anyway, yeah, she told me I’d find a single truth that gives me the power to make everything right, and by doing so I’d be doing a service for her.”

Connor started playing with the golden apple he’d gotten in the park. “So you’re the key to it all? Huh. Did she say anything else?”

“Not really. She told me a bit of fresh air might make things clearer.”

“Maybe you should take a walk then.”

“How are you being so calm about this? This is all so crazy.”

He shrugged. “Comic books. You’re always ragging on me for being a nerd and reading comics and playing role-playing games, but really, it’s just prepared me for things like this. Hell, I’ve been waiting for something like this! Ellie, this is our chance to really be heroes. We get to actually, literally save the world.” He paused. “Okay, you get to actually literally save the world, but I’m right here at your side, helping.”

“So the books say that when the lady only I can see who is giving me cryptic advice tells me a walk might be a good thing, I should take a walk?”

“Pretty much.”

I shoved my cell phone in my pocket as I headed out the door. “Then who am I to argue?” Suddenly I had a hunch. “While I’m out, work your internet magic. I think you’re right, that apple may have something to do with this.”

“Only if you take it with you.” He tossed it to me. “For luck.”

“You’re the expert,” I said, catching it. “Give me a call when you find something.”



I decided to start with the park. It was only a couple of blocks away, and if you want fresh air in the middle of a city, it's a good place to start. The walk was almost enjoyable. The sun was shining, but it wasn't too hot. The sort of summer day you hope for, you know exists, but somehow rarely happens. My mind was easing. When I got to the park there were a few parents there with their kids, a couple of them were even flying kites.

"Are you okay?" The voice was that of a young woman.

"I've been better," I said. I looked up and did a double take. A cute face was framed by pale pink hair. It was a face I had only seen in photos. "You're Amy Reed."

She grinned. "Caught me. You're the one my parents called. I'm sorry. I don't know your name."

"I'm Ellie." I was at a loss. What do you do when the person you've been searching for walks up and says hello? "How did you know your parents called me?"

"I just know things." She winked. "Plus I heard you came to the last drum circle."

She was right, but it had been fruitless. Just a bad flashback to my college years. "Amy, your parents are worried. They'd be really happy if you came home."

"Oh I'm sure they would." She stretched. "But I'm doing something important just now. I'll be home when it's done."

"What exactly are you doing?"

"Oh I've joined the Corps."

"Shipping out to a third world country? Going to dig some wells? I'm pretty sure you can tell your parents that. Lots of kids do it."

She wrinkled her nose and laughed. “Not the Peace Corps, the Golden Apple Corps. We’re out and about, doing the work of the Goddess.”

Great, I thought, she joined a cult. At least she hadn’t shaved her head. “So what exactly is the work of the Goddess?”

“Oh, you know,” she waved her hand, “making the world just a little weirder. Reminding people that chaos is key. Spreading the truth.”

“Yeah, I noticed there’s a whole lot of truth going on.”

Amy pointed at the apple in my hand. “You’ve got the biggest one right there.”

“What?” I hadn’t thought I could get more confused. “Some woman gave it to my friend yesterday. He told me to carry it for luck.”

She shook her head. Her earrings were small golden apples that made a soft tinkling noise. “Apples are for eating.”

I ran my fingers over the golden skin. “But it’s metal.”

“It’s also an apple. Just because one thing is true, doesn’t mean another thing isn’t. There’s room for a lot of truth in the world.” She looked at her wrist, as if checking the time, even though she wore no watch. “I’m going to go now.” She patted my shoulder. “If it makes you feel better, I’ll call my parents tomorrow.”

I wanted to call after her. I should have tried to convince her to call her parents now. She was so at peace, so sure, that all I could do was watch her walk off, humming something that sounded an awful lot like the Battle Hymn of the Republic, long pink hair drifting in the breeze. I had been wrong about her. She wasn’t running away or towards. She just was.

My cell phone rang; it was Connor. “Ellie! I looked up the golden apple. You’re not going to believe this but I hope you do. It’s connected to the goddess Eris.”

“Eris? Never heard of her.”

“She’s kind of obscure, the Greek goddess of discord. The story goes that Zeus invited everyone up to Olympus to celebrate the wedding of a couple of favored mortals. Eris was off the guest list, ‘cause really, you don’t want the goddess of discord hanging around a party. So she threw a golden apple into the party. The apple read, *Kallisti*, which means for the prettiest. Well, Hera, Athena and Aphrodite all claimed it. Zeus chose a mortal named Paris to choose who it would go to. The three goddesses tried bribing him. Hera offered him power. Athena offered him wisdom. Aphrodite offered him the most beautiful woman in the world. Paris chose Aphrodite, and she gave him Helen, wife of King Menelaus. And that started the Trojan War.”

“But what does that have to do with what’s going on now?”

“I’m getting to that. In the late fifties a couple of guys founded a religion based on Eris, and called it Discordianism. It started as a parody of organized religion, but it’s gotten huge. And in addition to a bunch of anarchy and psuedo-zen stuff, they believe that everything is true.”

“That everything is true? Like what’s going on now?” I asked.

“I think it’s supposed to be less literal than this, but yeah,” said Connor.

“I don’t suppose there’s anything in there about the Golden Apple Corps.”

“How’d you know? It’s what some of the sects call themselves. It’s all actually kinda’ fascinating,” he said. I could picture him, huge grin, shoving his glasses up on his nose as he talked.

“Glad you think so,” I said. “Amy Reed found me just now. She’s joined up with them. She says they’re busy doing the work of the Goddess.”

“This does seem like something the Discordians would get off on.”

“You think they’re behind this?”

“It seems possible, though I have no idea how.”

“Well, put that big ol’ brain to work. I’ll be back in a few,” I said.

“Sure thing, boss.”

I shoved my phone back in my pocket. The apple was subtly glimmering. I’ve never seen fruit look so inviting. This must be how Adam felt back in the garden. I rubbed the apple on my shirt. Nothing to lose, except maybe a tooth. The apple skin gave way with just the perfect amount of crunch. It was sweet, though with a hint of bitterness. As I ate, I began to understand the world. I began to laugh. I laughed at how serious I had become. I laughed at how I had given up on so much, and settled into routine and order. I laughed because Connor had always been right. By the time I was left with a golden apple core, all seemed right in the world. Then I saw her.

She was sitting on the edge of the large fountain in the middle of the park. Pigeons fluttered at her feet. She looked soft and happy. Her hair was black, but shone with the colors of the rainbow, like when sunlight plays off of an oil puddle. She wore a simple white dress that fell in soft folds, and fluttered in the breeze. And then I knew. I got up and went over to her.

I decided to go the direct route. “You’re her, aren’t you? Eris.”

“I might be. I might also be just a lonely girl sitting in the park and feeding the birds.” She scattered a handful of breadcrumbs and looked up at me. Her eyes were

green, but also blue, but maybe black or possibly violet, all at once. “Of course, it’s just as possible that I am who you think I am.”

I thought about what Amy said. “Just because one thing is true, doesn’t mean another isn’t,” I said. “You’re a lonely girl, sitting in the park and feeding the birds, but you’re also the goddess of discord. You’re the one responsible for all of this. For everything coming true.”

She laughed. “No, not really. People are. I just gave them the truth. I didn’t force any one to do anything with it.”

“But why? Nobody’s ready for this much truth.”

“Weren’t they, Ellie?” The pigeons cooed hopefully at her. “It only worked if they really wanted to believe. Or if they had an apple. I have to admit the apples gave it an extra boost. Anyway, why believe in something if you don’t want it to be true?”

I wanted to tell her that it was because we’re human. We’re frail and weak. Instead I only asked, “What does a goddess believe in?”

“Oh nothing, really. I don’t have to. I know things. I don’t believe them.”

And that’s when I knew what my truth was. The apple had reminded me of nights as a child when I cried myself to sleep, homesick in my own bed, or all the times I had known I was meant for something other than what I was. I looked into her eyes, now a clear steady blue. “Then I have one last truth for you.”

“What is that?”

“I am Eris,” I said. And I believed it. I believed it with every ounce of myself.

I don’t know what I expected. It wasn’t for her to laugh and say finally. It wasn’t for the world to shimmer around me, as she stood and kissed me deeply. I had never been

kissed like that before. She held me, and I felt her power. It washed over me, through me. When she pulled away, her power was mine. I could feel it pulsing through me. She twirled in a circle, her dress flowing out around her. The pigeons all took to the air, fluttering around us. I felt feathers brush my cheek.

“What happened?” I asked, even though I knew the answer.

“It’s all yours, sugar,” she said with a mischievous grin. “I had my turn, now you’re up.”

“All of this? The truths? The chaos? Because you were tired of being in charge of it all?”

“I was never in charge of it. I took care of things. I watched over people, but they’re the ones who did it. You know that.”

And I did. My head spun with memories and knowledge that weren’t mine, trying to reconcile them with what I knew. “So now what happens?”

“Lots of things. Nothing. Everything. Personally, I’m going to go get in on that game of frisbee over there.”

I looked where she was pointing. I could see a group of scruffy looking twenty somethings throwing a disc around, as a dog tried catching it. Amy was with them. I raised an eyebrow. “You’re joining the Corps? You stopped being the goddess of chaos to go join the Golden Apple Corps?”

She laughed. “Nah, I just want to play frisbee. See ya’ around, Eris,” she said as she went off, skipping. I was almost envious as I watched her go.

“I see you found your truth,” said a matter-of-fact voice behind me.

“Hello Pallas,” I said without turning. “Or should I say Pallas Athena? Or Grey Eyed Athena? You have a name for every occasion it seems.”

She stepped up to my side. “Athena will do well enough.”

“Well, goddess of wisdom, what do I do now?”

“Your job.” She gestured broadly. “Chaos has been wrought, mostly in your name. She had her fun, now I think it’s time to put it all back. After all, how can everything be true?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t do it.” I heard Amy’s laugh as the dog grabbed the frisbee before she could catch it. I flexed my fingers. I thought of Connor. “But you’re right. They’re not ready for it all, not yet.”

“I’m glad you see it that way.” I felt her presence fade. “Welcome to the fold, Eris.” She was gone before I could tell her the first Eris hadn’t been welcomed on Olympus, and I didn’t plan on behaving all that differently. Well, they’d find out soon enough.

Still unsure of my power, I decided to start with the small things. Traffic was never as bad as people thought. I began sorting out the knots and sending people smoothly on their way. The frustration wasn’t doing them any good. Reaching out, I found Connor. He was eagerly reading through *The Principia Discordia*, a half-eaten sandwich beside him. Connor who always believed in me, who had given me the apple; there was someone who was deserving of truth. He wanted to be a hero. He believed he could be. So I believed in him. This city could use a hero.

I went on like this for a while, fixing small truths. I returned Harold to his storytelling self, stripping the away the post traumatic stress disorder that had never been

his. Finally, I had a feel for what I could do. I spread my hands and smoothed them through the air, shaping a ball, and making sure it was spinning just right, mentally returning the lost cruise ship to its place in the Pacific.

With the world operating at what I felt was an acceptable level of chaos, I headed over to where the Golden Apple Corps was still lounging about. Eris had kept herself distant from her followers, and that was something I could not live with. Chaos and truth must be constant. They must be felt. They must be real. The Goddess is here and She is real. That is one truth I will not let go.



## BETWEEN SILVER AND GLASS

Teeth were hard and sharp. Teeth were strong. What was an old man, teeth gone through ill care? He was weak, carrying teeth in his pocket, a talisman of youth. But, for all their strength, teeth were vulnerable. Soft bundles of nerves lurked just beneath the enamel shells. Alyssa liked teeth.

The bell on the door clinked as Alyssa walked into the small shop. The smells of manzanilla and sage mingled with patchouli incense in a comforting jumble. The visual cacophony of piles of books strewn with candles and talismans was less comforting. Alyssa put her cardboard cup of coffee down on the counter next to a burning candle, green for increased income, and ducked under the partition separating the front of the yerberia from the back.

“Yolie,” she called out, “I’m here.”

A woman came out of the back room, shuffling and wrapped in a black shawl. Her thick black hair was pulled into a bun and pierced with silver hair pins. Her faded house dress must have been a vibrant pink at one point, but now only the embroidery showed its true colors, a smattering of flowers around her neck- and hem-lines.

“I was starting to wonder. You’re late.”

“Sorry, there was a line at Coffeezone.”

Yolie looked Alyssa up and down, eyes narrowed under thick eyeliner. “A line at Coffeezone? Are you sure it wasn’t because you were busy putting that new hole in your head?”

Alyssa touched her new nose ring, her nostril still tender from the piercing the night before. “Lunch hour, Yolie, they’re always packed.”

“You shouldn’t keep me waiting. I’m an old lady! I’m already teaching you as a favor to your grandmother, you know.”

Alyssa pulled her hair up into a messy ponytail and started the litany of apology that she recited at least once a month. You’re only 45. I appreciate the opportunity. Won’t happen again. Somehow, she managed to refrain from rolling her eyes. Yolie snorted and waved her hand.

“Fine, fine. Three herbs for curing a broken heart.”

Alyssa closed her eyes and answered. And she answered the next one as well. She managed ten questions on herbs before Yolie asked what crystal protected from baldness.

Unsure, she went with what she thought was a safe answer, “Quartz.”

“No. You haven’t studied at all,” said Yolie a note of smugness in her voice.

“That was the first one I got wrong,” protested Alyssa.

“Feh. Those others were easy.”

“Fine. What’s the answer?”

Yolie cackled and shrugged. “It’s in one of these books somewhere. Go ahead and look for it while you finally get them organized.”

“I suppose you’ll be watching your stories while I do this?”

“You are learning,” said Yolie with a wink as she went through the curtain that separated the backroom from the rest of the small shop. “I’ll check on you after *Guiding Light* is over.”

Yolie had only moved the yerberia into the storefront a month ago. Before that she had told fortunes from her living room and made candles at her kitchen table. Now, with help from her children, she was able to expand to selling books and some jewelry. When Alyssa’s grandmother had insisted that Alyssa had a gift and needed teaching, Yolie had taken her on. Now most of Alyssa’s training involved organizing the store.

Alyssa started picking through the different piles of books, looking for those relating to gem and crystal magic. May as well get those shelves set up, she reasoned, since she would be looking for a baldness prevention. There was an eclectic mix. Glossy, bright covers slid easily between the older, somber looking volumes. The bells on the door handle tinkled merrily as the door swung open.

“Hello,” she said. “How can I help you?” She looked up to see a guy with messy black hair falling into his face, wearing a Ramones t-shirt. She quickly smoothed back her own hair, glad she taken the time to redo the purple streak at her left temple.

“Yeah, my mom sent me to pick up a candle.” He smiled and dimples appeared. “She wouldn’t tell me what it’s for, but her name is Yesenia Gonzalez.”

“Okay. Let me check if Yolie has it in the back. One sec.” She ducked behind the counter and through the curtain. “Hey, Yolie, do you have a candle for Yesenia Gonzalez?”

“Is she here already? I told her it wouldn’t be ready until tomorrow.”

“No, her son is here. So what should I tell him?”

Yolie shook her head. “It needs the new moon, but she wants it so fast. She’ll get it fast. You can go ahead and do it. It’s just to bring love for her sons.”

Alyssa ducked her head back out through the curtain. “This will just take a couple minutes. I’m going to do it right now.”

He looked up from the book he was flipping through. “No problem. I can keep myself entertained.”

She looked at Yolie. “I can’t believe she needs a candle if all of her boys look like that.”

“Looks aren’t everything. Now just make the candle and quit bothering me.”

Alyssa pulled a red pillar candle out of a box, and then snipped a bit of white ribbon, long enough to go around it twice. Finally, she grabbed bottles of rose oil and thyme oil. She held the candle, smoothing her hands over it, until it was warm. Breathing deeply, she closed her eyes and concentrated on pouring the idea of love into the candle as she rubbed the oils into it. She wrapped it with the ribbon to keep the love pure and to bind the energy to the candle. When she was done she wrapped it in white tissue paper and put it back in its box. She stepped out to the front of the store with it.

She watched him for a moment, running his fingers over the spines of the books she had just shelved. A chill went up her own spine. She cleared her throat and was a little delighted at the way he jumped.

“It’s done,” she said, holding up the box. “She should light it tomorrow night under the new moon. Tell her to concentrate on what she is looking for while she is lighting it. It should burn straight through until it goes out on its own. But you know, make sure it’s

somewhere safe. Not near any curtains or flammable stuff, not where it's going to get knocked over. It's still a candle, after all."

He grinned. "Thanks."

While Alyssa rang him up she couldn't shake the feeling that he wasn't just looking at her, he was trying to figure her out. As she was handing him his change, he blurted out, "Alyssa." He looked embarrassed for a moment. "I mean you are, aren't you? Alyssa Stone."

"Yeah," she said. "I'm sorry do I..." She stopped and really looked at him. "Wait, Bobby? Bobby Ramirez? I haven't seen you since elementary."

He rubbed his face. "Yeah, I left to live with my aunt in third grade. But, my stepdad just died, and Mom is having trouble dealing with my little brothers, so I came back."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He saw the look of surprise on her face. "He wasn't that great. Believe me, it's better."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry; that went wrong," he said, fidgeting with a pendant that hung from a short dark cord around his neck. "Let's get together for coffee or something and we can do the whole childhood reconnection thing right. No awkward dead stepdad comments. I promise."

Alyssa smiled and said sure. They exchanged phone numbers and he left with a promise to see her later that night. The rest of the afternoon passed in a blur for Alyssa. Somehow she managed to get all of the gemstone books onto the shelves in a semblance

of order. She was starting in on a display of necklaces to go with the books when a voice boomed from behind her, “Well?” Alyssa jumped, knocking the necklaces to the floor.

“Holy shit, Yolie. You scared the crap out of me,” Alyssa said.

“Y que? You should have been paying attention,” Yolie said, arms crossed. “Did you find the answer, or were you too busy thinking about that boy?”

Alyssa scooped up the necklaces, trying not to tangle them up as she did. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’ll see you at the Starbucks on South Tenth. Great, I’ll see you then.” Yolie made kissy noises. “You don’t even like Starbucks. So don’t tell me that you weren’t thinking about him.”

“He’s been gone. He doesn’t know that we have actual coffee shops around here.”

Yolie waved her hand. “Fine, fine. Now answer the question.”

“I don’t know.”

Yolie snorted.

“Look either I can shelve the books or I can read them.”

“You weren’t shelving, you were putting up the necklaces.”

“And that needed to be done, too. Yolie, I want to learn, but the store needs to be set up.” She sagged against the counter. “I don’t want to see this all go away when it’s just starting.”

“Ay mijita, it will be fine.” Yolie took the necklaces out of Alyssa’s hand. “You know that. What’s wrong?”

“Mom wants me to quit.”

“She never wanted you to start.”

“Yeah, well now she’s really on me to get a real job.” Alyssa ran her finger over the spines of the gemstone books. “She says this isn’t going to get me anywhere in life. She wants me to go to college up north. She says it will be good for me to get in touch with my dad’s side of the family.”

“I see. And what do you think?”

“I think she wants me away from all of this. She wants me to be white, like she couldn’t be.”

“Alyssa, you are what you are,” said Yolie. “What is a mirror?”

“It’s a thing you see yourself in.”

“Chiflada. What it is it really?”

Alyssa shrugged.

“It’s silver and glass put together. You can see yourself in silver, but it’s not clear. Glass makes things clear, but it doesn’t reflect very well. When you bring them together, you get a mirror,” said Yolie.

Alyssa hopped up to sit on the counter, kicking her feet at the boxes in front of her.

“Okay. So?”

“So think about mirrors.”

“That’s it? Think about mirrors?”

“Meditate on mirrors,” said Yolie. “Whatever you want to call it. That’s your homework.”

“Does this mean I don’t have to find the herb for baldness?” asked Alyssa.

“No. Give me the necklaces. You start reading.”

Alyssa handed over the necklaces and grabbed a book that looked interesting and started reading. When closing time rolled around, she had browsed the indices of most of the herbalism books, taking time to follow up on things that seemed interesting for their own sake, but felt no closer to an answer.

“Yolie, this is impossible. There’s nothing. The Greeks thought maybe anise would help, but there’s nothing else on it, especially not crystals.” Alyssa put the book she was holding back on the shelf. “And anyway, if that were true licorice would be a lot more popular.”

“Not anise.”

“Yes, I know that.” Alyssa narrowed her eyes. “There is an answer, isn’t there? This isn’t some sort of trick question to teach me something both obscure and obvious at the same time?”

Yolie laughed and kept playing solitaire next to the register.

“You’re impossible,” said Alyssa. “And it’s six, I’m heading out. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Yolie glanced at the clock and started shuffling her cards back together. “Fine. Fine. Tomorrow you’ll have it. Don’t forget about the mirrors.”

Alyssa gave an non-committal grunt as she grabbed her bag and headed out the door. When she got in the car, she automatically reached to adjust her rearview mirror. She caught sight of herself and shook her head. The drive back to her apartment was uneventful, if slow. Drumming away on her steering wheel, she let her mind wander a little. A broken mirror was supposed to be seven years bad luck. Vampires avoided mirrors because they had no reflections. Don't stand between two mirrors, because they



created gateways and your soul could get lost. Don't look in a mirror in the dark. Cover the mirrors in a house where someone has died. If you say Bloody Mary's name in front of a mirror three times, she'll appear and it won't be good.

Alyssa smiled. When she had been in first grade, some of the girls had tried the Bloody Mary one in the cafeteria bathroom during breakfast. It hadn't worked, but she remembered the thrill of standing in the dark with her friends, the murmur of the cafeteria crowd coming in under the door along with the smell of canned pineapple juice and industrial pancakes.

She wasn't sure what she was going to do about Bobby. She hadn't given him any particular thought over the years. He had just always been in her class and then he was gone. She remembered, with a pang of guilt, the scuffle they had in first grade where she had knocked one of his teeth loose with her tooth fairy wand. He had teased her quite a bit, but so had most of the boys. It had been frustrating at the time, but never felt malicious. Looking back, knowing what she did about girls and boys, she couldn't help but wonder if his pulling her pigtails was of the figurative in addition to the literal sense. She thought of what he looked like now, and thought maybe she wouldn't mind having her pigtails tugged just a little.

Soon, she was home, with disturbingly little memory of the drive. As she let herself into her apartment, her cell phone rang. The screen flashed Bobby's name. She wondered if he was already calling to cancel. She hit talk and said hello.

"Hey. Look I know this may sound a little lame," he started.

"But something came up," she said.

“Sort of.” He sounded embarrassed. “We’ve only got one car, and my mom doesn’t want me taking it out too late. And she doesn’t want me missing dinner either. So coffee is either going to have to be very abbreviated, or happen another night. I’m sorry. I know this is completely lame. I’m the guy who lives with his mom and can’t stay out late because she says so. And I understand if you –“

“Bobby,” she interrupted again. “Is the problem that you can’t stay out, or the car can’t stay out, or you don’t want to go out?”

“I want to go,” he said. “It’s the car. She’s worried that something will happen and she’ll be stuck.”

“How about I pick you up?”

“You can do that?” he asked. “Shit. That came out wrong. I mean, if you don’t mind, that would be great.”

She laughed. “I don’t mind.”

They hashed out the details, and Alyssa scribbled down directions to his house. They decided she would pick him up at about 8:30. When Alyssa hung up, she was surprised to find her heart was racing. She had never talked to a guy like that before. Usually they seemed like they weren’t sure what to do with her. Bobby didn’t seem to know what to do with her, either, but he at least seemed like he wanted to figure it out.

She heated up a cup of noodles, and ate quickly before realizing she wanted to look nice for her date. Was it a date? She wasn’t sure. Should she change her clothes? Would that make it seem like she was trying too hard, since he had already seen her in what she was wearing? She took a deep breath and called her sister.

“Lydia, I need a favor,” said Alyssa when she finally heard her sister’s voice on the phone.

“Alyssa? What’s wrong?” Lydia’s voice had an odd echo to it.

“I think I have a date tonight,” Alyssa said. “Not that that’s a problem, except that I don’t know what to do.”

“Is that all? I thought there was some sort of emergency.” There was the sound of water running in the background.

“It is an emergency. I haven’t been on a date in ages. And maybe I’m not going on one now, but if I am I’d really like it to go well,” said Alyssa. She listened for a moment.

“Lydia, do you have me on the phone in the bathroom?”

“You never call! I thought something was really wrong.”

“Oh gross. Call me back when you’re done.”

“I’m done. Tell me what’s going on.”

Alyssa sketched in her meeting with Bobby, and the phone call. “So do I change? Do I have to put on makeup? I don’t own makeup. Oh wait, no I have some eyeliner and some glittery stuff from Halloween.”

“You can change. Lots of people change their clothes after work,” said Lydia. “No makeup, especially nothing glittery. The way you sound, you’d probably put your eye out with the eyeliner. Take deep breaths. Be yourself.” She paused. “But feel free to tone down the weird. Although, that might not matter since he met you at the shop and still asked you out.”

“Okay, you were helpful up until that last bit,” said Alyssa.

“Sorry, Lyssa, but really this is what you’re going to do with your life?”

“Hi Mom, I thought I called my sister.”

“I just care about you,” said Lydia. “Are you at least still taking classes at Pan Am?”

“Yeah, I’m part-time. Still majoring in psychology.”

“It astounds me how you can be majoring in psychology and doing what you do.”

“You’d be amazed how much psychology goes into magic and vice versa.”

“Says you.”

“More things in heaven and earth, Horatio,” said Alyssa. “I gotta’ run.”

“Hack,” said Lydia. “I love you, Lyssa. Call me later and let me know how it went.”

“Sure thing. Love you, too, Lyds,” said Alyssa.

Alyssa rummaged in her closet for a clean pair of jeans and a clean t-shirt. She pulled on her well worn red Doc Martens. She was brushing her teeth when she realized she needed to be walking out the door. She spat the glob of toothpaste out, and grabbed for a towel to wipe her mouth off as she rinsed out the sink. One last look in the mirror revealed nothing more than what she always saw. Round face, long dark hair, streaked with purple in the front. The nose ring was new, but felt like it belonged. As an afterthought, she slipped a compact mirror into her pocket on her way out.

The drive to Bobby’s house was relatively simple. He lived in an older part of McAllen. It was a small, well-kept house. Even in the summer heat, flowers bloomed in neat squares by the front stoop. As she hesitated, wondering if she should go up and knock, the screen door banged open, and Bobby came down the steps. As he walked up,

Alyssa leaned over and unlocked the passenger door. She ignored the way her breath seemed to catch in her chest.

“Hi,” he said, sliding into the passenger seat. He shut the door and buckled his seatbelt. “Thanks for coming.”

“No problem,” said Alyssa. “You sounded like maybe you needed a chance to get out.”

“Yeah, it’s been a while since I lived with her and the boys,” he said. “I’m used to having my own space.”

“Siblings are rough,” said Alyssa. “My sister and I get along much better now that we’re 250 miles apart.”

“Oh she’s in San Antonio?”

“How’d you know?” asked Alyssa.

“I just came from there,” said Bobby. “There’s not a whole lot else that’s exactly 250 miles away from the Valley.”

Starbucks was packed when they got there. They made their way to the counter and ordered. Attempts at small talk were lost in the dull roar of the blenders, music, and chatter. Bobby motioned for Alyssa to order first, and smoothly gave his order after hers, sliding his debit card across the counter.

“I asked you,” he said when Alyssa protested. “You can get the next round if it really bugs you.”

“I do have this modern girl image to uphold,” she said as they made their way to a semi-quiet corner.

"Says the apprentice curandera. I'm not sure how well that meshes." He was leaning in close, and smelled faintly of sandalwood, mixed with something else, spicy and dark.

"It's like any other job. I'm good at it and I like it. So why not?"

The barista called their names. Alyssa put her hand on Bobby's elbow. "Hey, let's get out of here after we grab those."

"Trying to get out of buying the second round already?"

"No," she said. "I just want to talk somewhere where the conversation isn't half lip reading."

He nodded. They grabbed their drinks and made their way back out into the parking lot. Once they were in the car, Bobby asked where they were going.

"I figure if we're talking about old times, we may as well head for a playground. There's a park not too far from here," said Alyssa. "And we've still got some time before sunset, so we probably won't even see any drug deals going down."

"Probably?"

"There's always a chance."

"Is nonchalance about drug deals another modern girl thing?"

Alyssa laughed. "No, just a Valley girl thing."

"I thought maybe that would have changed," said Bobby.

"Not really. But this place is in a pretty good neighborhood, and we'll just keep our eyes open," she threw a sideways look at him as they went through an intersection. "I'll keep you safe."

"That's what they all say, and then next thing I know I'm in a skirt and heels and dodging beer bottles."

"This happens a lot?"

He laughed. "Just the one time, actually, but that was enough."

"So you can run in heels. That's good to know," said Alyssa.

They bantered until they got to the park. Alyssa found herself giggling more than she did in usual conversation and fidgeting with her hair. Finally, frustrated with this sudden girliness, at a red light she grabbed a hair band from the ones she kept on the gear shift and pulled her hair up into a messy bun. That only made her more aware of her neck and of the tickling of stray hairs. The sun was starting to set when they got to the park. There were still a few people on the walking track, taking advantage of the slight relief from the summer heat.

"What do you want to do?" asked Alyssa.

"How about the swings?"

"Sweet. I bet I can swing higher than you," said Alyssa as she led him to the swings.

They juggled drinks and pushed against the hard packed dirt, talk suspended as they swung their legs pushing higher and higher. The chains were still warm, and creaked almost alarmingly. When Alyssa swung up, feeling parallel to the ground, her drink slipped out of her hand. The lid popped off as it hit the ground, and iced coffee splattered in a wide radius. She slowed down, heart racing, breathing hard. She noticed Bobby was sweating from the exertion, and he slowed as well, dragging his feet.

"I think you won," he said.

Alyssa made a face and gestured at the remains of her drink. “Yes, but at what cost?”

They were both slowed to a gentle sway. Bobby held his drink to her. “You can share mine, if you’d like.”

She told herself the flutter in her chest was from the swinging, not from the idea of sharing a straw. “Sure.” She took a long drink and handed it back. “Okay, so you can run in heels and have a sense of humor. But what’s up with that? You disappeared in third grade. How’d you escape all of this to grow up in San Antonio?”

His face grew serious. “It wasn’t working out with my stepdad. So my mom sent me to live with my dad’s sister.” He shrugged. “She and my uncle wanted kids but couldn’t have them. My stepdad wanted kids, but wanted them to be his kids. He was pretty hard on me. And she was even harder on me. I think in her mind she was protecting me.” He stopped, obviously wrestling with what to say. “It went too far one day, and away I went.”

“I’m sorry,” said Alyssa. “When you said it was okay he was gone, I didn’t know. I’m so sorry.”

Bobby swirled the ice in his cup. “You couldn’t have known. It worked out okay anyway. I came back to visit in the summers. Sometimes they’d come up to San Antonio to Six Flags or SeaWorld and I’d see them then. My aunt and uncle are pretty awesome, and it hurt my mom to have me around, I think. My aunt says I look a lot like my dad, and that couldn’t be easy for her.”

Alyssa twisted the chains on her swing, unsure what to say.



“He died when I was little. I don’t really remember him.” He kicked the dirt. “And now she lost another husband, and here I am, back to help finish raising my brothers. They’re okay kids, but we don’t know each other very well.”

“It’s like you’re in a house of strangers,” Alyssa blurted out. She blushed. “I’m sorry. I meant, you’ve been away. It’s amazing you’d come back to this.”

“Mom needed me,” he said. “I was just doing my basics at UTSA anyway. I can do that just as easily at Pan Am.” He squirmed in the swing. “Let’s walk. I’m a little wider than these swings were designed for.”

“They are cutting in a bit, aren’t they,” agreed Alyssa.

Bobby hopped off of his swing and offered his hand to Alyssa. She took it, and he pulled her off her swing. She rubbed at her hips.

“Those were way more comfortable when we were kids,” she said. “Let’s go walk along the canal. We might see some fireflies.”

Bobby nodded. They walked towards the section of walking trail that hugged the canal bank. He easily lobbed his cup into a trashcan as they went. Alyssa laughed and applauded his athletic prowess.

“What about you,” Bobby asked. “How’d you end up with the witchcraft gig?”

“It’s not witchcraft,” said Alyssa. “It’s just helping people with what they need, or think they need. My dad’s mom read tarot cards and did palm reading and stuff. Mom’s mom didn’t do any of that, but she was a big believer. She’s the one who noticed I had a knack for knowing things before they happened. When Dad’s mom passed away, she left me her tarot cards. Abuela’s the one who wanted to make sure I learned to use them. She

started taking me to see Yolie when I was about fifteen. I've been doing odd jobs for her and learning the ropes since then."

"Wow. So your family's really into this, then."

"Not really. Mom is only tolerating this because I'm still going to college. She grew up hating all of this. I think that's because Abuela did maybe go overboard with it sometimes. Every time Mom got sick as a kid, Abuela thought it was the evil eye and would do the whole rub her down with an egg and crack it thing. She always wanted Mom to take us to the curandera before she took us to the doctor. Hell, this is what I'm doing for a living and I think she took it too far."

As they reached the canal bank, the sun fell completely below the horizon. The sky was illuminated with the city lights and only the brightest of the stars shone through it. A few security lights flickered to life around the park, but not enough to do more than create more shadows. They were both silent. Alyssa wasn't sure what to say or do. She wished he would take her hand.

A voice seemed to come from the canal itself. "Ay, mis hijos." It was woman's voice, wailing, full of pain.

Alyssa and Bobby both jumped, startled.

The voice came again, "Mis hijos?" From the surface of the canal water appeared a woman. Or the form of a woman. She wore a tattered white dress. Her hair was long, wet and stringy. "Mis hijos."

Bobby grabbed Alyssa's hand and pulled. The apparition moved towards them, appearing at the edge of the canal in what seemed like an impossible moment. Bobby managed to pull Alyssa backwards a few steps.

“Alyssa, run,” he yelled.

Alyssa shook her head. “It won’t work. Follow my lead.” She took a deep breath, hoping she was right. “Llorona, we’re not your children. They’ve moved on.”

The space of a breath brought Llorona face to face with Alyssa. “Mis hijos,” she wailed, though no breath brushed Alyssa’s face. “Mis hijos.”

“They’re gone, Llorona,” said Alyssa. “They moved on to the other side. They’re waiting for you. You’ve suffered long enough. Go to them.” She felt Bobby’s fingers tighten around hers, and she squeezed back. “We forgive you, Llorona. Go to your children.”

Llorona reached towards Bobby with long fingers, dripping water. “Mi hijo.”

His voice cracked. “I’m not your son.”

“Tell her,” hissed Alyssa. “Tell her or we’re lost.”

He stood up straight and looked the creature in her dark eyes. “Llorona, I forgive you. You’ve suffered long enough. Go to your children.” A tear slipped down his cheek.

Llorona’s fingers brushed the tear away. “Mis hijos.” The wail had a hopeful note to it.

Alyssa put all the authority she could into her voice. “Go, Llorona, cross over or not, but be gone from this place.” When Llorona made no move, Alyssa began the Lord’s Prayer. “Our father who art in heaven.”

Bobby’s voice joined hers. “Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Llorona withdrew to the water’s edge.

“Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

Llorona’s image began to dissipate into a fine mist over the water.

“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

As the mist sank into the water, they heard once more, “Mis hijos.”

Alyssa sagged against Bobby for a moment. “Okay. Now we run.”

He kept ahold of her hand as they ran back to her car. They both hit the side of the car with a solid thump. Alyssa finally pulled her hand back, massaging it to try and get feeling back in her fingers.

“Was that really? Did we just face down La Llorona?” asked Bobby, breathing hard.

Alyssa nodded, not trusting herself to speak just yet.

“I have never been so thankful for my aunt dragging me to mass at Christmas and Easter every year,” said Bobby.

Alyssa laughed, and kept laughing until her shoulders shook and tears streamed down her face. She had fleeting irrational thoughts that she was glad she had skipped the eyeliner, which only made her laugh harder. Bobby wrapped his arms around her, and she rested her head on his shoulder, trying to catch her breath. She smelled sandalwood again, now mixed with and nearly overwhelmed by sweat.

“I don’t know about you, but I could use a drink” said Alyssa, reluctantly pulling away. “Want to go back to my place? Or I could drop you off at home.” As she said that, she saw two possibilities: he went home with her, and stayed or she took him home and never saw him again.

Bobby looked at her, and then in the direction of the canal. "I don't really drink," he said.

Alyssa nodded, and tried to say that she would just take him home. He reached up and wiped away a line of her tears. His hands were warm, and his fingertips callused.

"But for you, I might start," he continued.

Alyssa giggled and clamped a hand over her mouth.

"Oh man," he said. "I promise I don't always sound like an idiot."

"I just bring it out in you?"

"Yes! Wait. No." He rubbed his face. "Alyssa, I'm glad this part of the evening is over, but I'm not ready for the whole thing to be done. So if we could go back to your place and talk or watch a movie or do whatever you want, I'd like that."

She grinned. "That's all you had to say. Let's go."

Neither of them said much during the drive back to Alyssa's apartment. She did a mental run down of what it looked like at the moment. There were a few dishes in the sink, a pile of books and DVDs on the coffee table, bathroom was clean, and unmade bed and pile of laundry in the bedroom. She tried to remember how clean her sheets were, and then wondered if it mattered. Suddenly she was very aware of the sweat drying on the back of her neck and of the fact that she hadn't put on fresh deodorant since early that morning.

When they got there, she fumbled with her keys for a moment before unlocking the door. She flipped all of the light switches on as she led him inside.

"Couch is over there," said Alyssa. "Can I get you anything, Mr. Not really a drinker?"

“Water’s fine,” he said.

“Why don’t you pick out a DVD? It’s mostly anime and movies from the 80s, but there should be something there that’ll work.” Alyssa contemplated a whiskey and coke, but found her nerves had steadied considerably since they left the park. She took a couple of glasses of water into the living room, where Bobby was studying her DVD collection.

“This is pretty impressive,” he said. “But I’m not sure I’m in a movie mood.” He sat on the couch next to Alyssa. “I feel like I’ve been a big dork all night. The only time I managed to get the right words out is when we were faced with near death. So instead of waiting for the right moment, or trying to make the right moment, I just want to say this: Alyssa, can I kiss you? I know that’s not necessarily why you brought me back here, and I don’t want to be the guy who automatically assumes that the whole want to come back to my place is an invitation to bed. Really, I just want to kiss you. It doesn’t need to be more than that. It doesn’t need to be more than once, although I’d be happy if it was. And if you say no, that’s fine, too. We can watch a movie. I’ll go back to my place. I’m leaving it up to you, but I thought you should know.”

“Are you going to talk all night, or are you going to kiss me?” asked Alyssa.

“Is that a yes?”

“Oh, so you’re going with talk all night?”

“No, kissing is good,” said Bobby.

He scooted closer to her, and slid his arm around her shoulders. Alyssa felt warm all over, but goosebumps prickled her skin. He leaned towards her. She leaned towards him. He pulled back.

“You’re going to hate me,” he said.

Alyssa's heart sank. "What's wrong?"

"This feels mechanical. I was wrong. I do want the right moment. I want to kiss you right. If it's the only one I get, I want to know it wasn't because it was something you felt like you needed to do. If it's the first one of a whole lot more, I want you to be able to look back at the first one and be happy. I want it to set the bar."

"Bobby, you think too much," she said. "Or not enough. I can't tell. You want a kiss? I'll give you a kiss. Close your eyes."

He started to protest and she laid a finger across his lips. When his eyes were closed, she took a deep breath. She wasn't sure if what she was about to do was bravest or stupidest thing she had done all night. Slowly, deliberately, she straddled his lap. She pulled his arms around her, and slowly leaned her head towards his. At the last moment, she stopped and licked her lips, and then his. She heard his breathing quicken, heard him swallow hard. And she kissed him. His arms tightened around her waist. Her fingers twined in his hair. It lasted forever and not long enough.

"How was that for setting the bar?" she asked, leaning her forehead against his.

"I don't think it could go any higher," he said.

"That sounds like a challenge."

Bobby laughed and kissed her again. They stayed like that, kissing and flirting until Alyssa winced.

"Okay, hip joints starting to ache, and legs falling asleep. I need to move," she said.

She slid off of his lap. She put her head down on the arm of the couch and stretched her legs out across him. Bobby started massaging the feeling back into her legs. Alyssa squirmed.

“There’s something I can’t figure out,” said Bobby. “Why did La Llorona come after us? I thought she only took little kids. At least that’s the story my aunt always told me. That she drowned her kids and herself after her husband cheated on her. So now she stays anywhere there’s water and takes any kids who are out on their own where they shouldn’t be.”

Alyssa pulled her hair out of the bun she had put it in earlier and shook it out. “I don’t know. Maybe in a sense we’re both lost kids? My mom is pissed at me for the life I’m choosing. Although, my dad doesn’t really mind since I’m happy. He just puts up a front for Mom.” She looked at him closely. “Your mom sent you away. But she did that to protect you, didn’t she? So it’s not like you were abandoned.”

He shook his head. “In the end she was protecting me from herself as much as from my stepdad. She thought if she hit me hard enough, he wouldn’t. It never worked, but she just kept doing it more, for every little thing.” His voice sounded cold. “He turned her. Sending me away was the last thing my mother did. Now she’s their mom. I’m just around now because he taught them not to respect women, so they don’t do a thing she says. But they don’t listen to me. I don’t know what I’m supposed to be doing.”

“The best you can, I guess,” said Alyssa. “How old are they?”

“Raul is fifteen and Santos is thirteen,” he said. “A little old for me to come in and be their big brother. And too old for me to get Mom to ship them off to military school, not that she could afford it.”

Alyssa swung her legs down and slid next to him. “You’ll figure something out. Right now, though, it’s late and today was long. Do you want me to take you home?” She put her head on his shoulder. “Or do you want to stay here?”



She heard him swallow hard. “Stay here? Are you sure?” he asked.

“I’m sure. I’m not promising anything other than cuddling, but I’d like it if you stayed. And to be honest? I’d feel safer. I think I’m going to see La Llorona every time I close my eyes for a long time.”

“I will stay here as long as you want me to,” he said, kissing the top of her head.

“Days, weeks, months, as long as it takes.”

“Years?” She said it before she realized what was coming out of her mouth.

“Years.”

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Catherine V. Lopez was born and raised in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. She is a proud product of the public school system. Cathy received her bachelor's degree in English from Trinity University in 2003. She spent some time in the corporate world before deciding academia was her preferred environment. Thus, she returned to her hometown and enrolled in the MFA in Creative Writing program at University of Texas Pan American, specializing in short fiction. She received her degree in the spring of 2010.

She prefers to write urban fantasy as well as science fiction, but has a strong interest in graphic literature, as well.

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