

5-2019

## A Citrus Wildfire

Mark Anthony Lopez  
*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/etd>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lopez, Mark Anthony, "A Citrus Wildfire" (2019). *Theses and Dissertations*. 505.  
<https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/etd/505>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact [justin.white@utrgv.edu](mailto:justin.white@utrgv.edu), [william.flores01@utrgv.edu](mailto:william.flores01@utrgv.edu).

A CITRUS WILDFIRE

A Thesis

by

MARK ANTHONY LOPEZ

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2019

Major Subject: Creative Writing



A CITRUS WILDFIRE  
A Thesis  
by  
MARK ANTHONY LOPEZ

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Dr. Britt Haraway  
Chair of Committee

Dr. Cathryn Merla-Watson  
Committee Member

Dr. Robert Moreira  
Committee Member

May 2019



Copyright 2018 Mark Lopez  
All Rights Reserved



## ABSTRACT

Lopez, Mark Anthony, A Citrus Wildfire. Master of Fine Arts (MFA), May, 2019, 195 pp., references, 11 titles.

An American Dream forged through the idea that success comes from money. A family caught in the middle of a race war. A young boy trying to learn how to be a man. A Citrus Wildfire is a fiction novella that portrays a Mexican family struggling to survive in the Rio Grande Valley after their only source of income burns down, and the lengths they must go to in order to get the life they were promised.

A small preface from the author proceeds the work. This novella is inspired by many different authors and educators, as well as the Rio Grande Valley itself. Many writers in the preface call the Rio Grande Valley their home. Learn their voices.





## DEDICATION

The completion of my Master of Fine Arts degree would not have been possible without the love and support of my family. My mother, Margarita Lopez, who first inspired me to write. My father, Diego Lopez, who worked endless hours to provide me with a better future. My sister, Cynthia Guerrero, my first mentor and best friend. To my beloved Karina, your voice kept me going through the journey, and without it, I would have been lost. Thank you all for your love and patience.

And finally, to the Rio Grande Valley. Thank you for shaping me into the man I am today. The sound of cicadas in the summer will always remind me of my home. I hope my writings honor you long after I'm gone.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I will always be grateful to Dr. Britt Haraway, chair of my thesis committee, for all his mentoring and advice along this journey. My first experience in this program was sitting in his class and having my horizons expanded as a writer. This entire process would not have been possible without his guidance and support. This thesis would also not have materialized without the input from my thesis committee members, Dr. Robert Moreira, and Dr. Cathryn Merla-Watson. Dr. Moreira first believed and encouraged me as writer long before I joined the program, and for that, there are no words to explain my gratitude. The advice, comments, and insight provided by my wonderful committee helped ensure the quality of my intellectual work.

I would also like to thank all my colleagues that I have worked with in my time at UTRGV. From my professors, directors, managers, and friends, this journey would not have been completed without their contributions and support. Thank you.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	iii
DEDICATION .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
CHAPTER I. PREFACE .....	1
CHAPTER II. GUANAJUATO .....	25
CHAPTER III. NARANJA .....	37
CHAPTER IV. JESUS.....	39
CHAPTER V. THE FIELD .....	45
CHAPTER VI. HORSES AND LIONS .....	52
CHAPTER VII. ESTRELLA.....	58
CHAPTER VIII. FUEGO.....	62
CHAPTER IX. THE RANGERS.....	69
CHAPTER X. WESLACO.....	79

CHAPTER XI. PADRE .....	91
CHAPTER XII. MASA.....	97
CHAPTER XIII. MIJO.....	108
CHAPTER XIV. FALLEN TREES.....	125
CHAPTER XV. IGLESIA.....	132
CHAPTER XVI. MUERTE.....	136
CHAPTER XVII. COLONIA.....	143
CHAPTER XVIII. A BOY.....	149
CHAPTER XIX. A MAN.....	158
CHAPTER XX. MUD.....	165
CHAPTER XXI. HECTOR.....	170
CHAPTER XXII. THE RIVER.....	182
CHAPTER XXIII. THE GARDEN.....	187
CHAPTER XXIV. THE AFTER.....	191
REFERENCES.....	194
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	195

## CHAPTER I

### PREFACE

My grandfather was the greatest writer, poet, and lyricist that I have ever known. He couldn't speak or write in English very much. I have never actually seen him write anything in English in my entire life. But he tended to a Garden, one that took over the entire acre that his house was placed on. He cared for a dozen or so orange and lemon trees. His house had its own ecosystem. He would get on his knees and pick up the soil with his hands. Every spring he would sprinkle more mint leaves into the ground, pick them for the caldo and other bowls of soup for the fall. He kept them alive, had them create their own stories and worlds. He grabbed a hose and would spray them when the rains didn't come in the summer. And he would climb in the mesquite trees to cut the branches that had slowly withered. He knew every leaf on his acre, every vine, every piece of fruit. When I would visit as a kid, I would often just lay on the ground and smell in and taste all the citrus.

It was because of him that I knew I wanted to write. I wanted to tell stories and create worlds just as good as he did and as he still does. I wanted to write, because in this beautiful area of South Texas, tucked in between two small towns that hover just above the rim of the border, is a garden that every scent of spring leaves reminds me of the taste of citrus from it. He lives in the small town of Weslaco, named for a lumber company that tore down the trees that grew in the area, and my grandpa worked hard every year to try and raise them all back up. He



cared for his garden with a nurturing love. He didn't get mad when some of the oranges died from tree because of fruit flies, or when frogs would jump out of the mud and eat the seeds from the plants. He saw how the world worked. How it lived, how it died. He saw the beauty in the fall and rise of creation. And he let his world function on in its capsulated beauty.

This garden, and the hands of the man that let it grow, is what my thesis is essentially built on. The muddy soil is the foundation of it, and the scents and sounds are what form the veins and bones of it. I wanted to write something that can somehow capture this organic beauty. In my writing, my goal is to try and capture a culture, a culture at a certain moment in time, that have been promised an American dream of prosperity but ultimately live and often times die in their soil, in their own garden that they have never physically left. And in this is not a story of failure of not being something greater, but in reality is something more beautiful than most people expect. There is a beauty in taking care of a soil and piece of land that you have always known, and in some ways the American dream tarnishes that beauty. My grandpa is going to die in his home one day, and the land will continue to grow, and in there is a legacy and story that is not just about a man and his garden, but a man accepting and fostering the beauty in a home he has always known. This is the story I wanted to tell and the idea I wanted to write for.

This American Dream and lack of positive cultural representation in mainstream culture has led to the loss of hundreds of stories in my opinion. The American Dream isn't an evil concept however. The idea that anyone from any culture can accomplish anything they want changed the social landscape from America's inception and led to an established nation. Overtime, the idea just got corrupted and molded to fit the social construct. The dream in my opinion has made a capitalistic culture that accepts only moving and becoming rich as the ideal

American value. This idea has become a reflection of my hometown more than anything else. And in my opinion, it is through a lack of positive cultural representation in mainstream media that has allowed this capitalistic entity to foster.

In Edinburg, Texas, the small town I grew up in, the common consensus among most of my fellow classmates that I had school with was that the Rio Grande Valley had nothing to offer, dead, gone for a while now. It was a discouraging atmosphere that led to me and many other peers to move away at the first chance. This derogatory idea extended from our lack of knowledge in arts that came from our Mexican-American culture. I didn't fully realize this until I moved back and started reading the voices of those who are considered well known "Latino" authors. When I entered my master's program, I started reading different writers that added to the definition of the American dream. I started seeing new contributions from the voices of those were like me, who came from a different country, but still felt they belonged in this one whether the majority of the public believed it or not. One of the biggest voices that inspired me, like most writers from a Hispanic or Latino background, was that of Junot Diaz.

Diaz has been the voice for those from the Dominican Republic for quite a bit of time. He is a Pulitzer Prize winner for his novel *Brief Wonderful Life of Oscar Wao* and has published other critically acclaimed books such as *Drown* and *This is How You Lose Her*. Diaz writes about his cultural upbringing and also about what it was like to come and migrate at such a young age and get accustomed to American culture. He was able to use his memory and a lot of research to create his Pulitzer Prize novel *Wao*. He used his past, his love for comics, and the memory of his home to fill in the pieces for his novel. It was in his short story collection, *Drown*, that he was able to use his past to shape a piece that haunts the reader with the sheer brutality of the subject matter.

While I enjoyed *Wao* and truly see it as a masterful literary work, *Drown* is what really inspired me to create the thesis I wish to write. The fictional short story collection balances on the edge of nonfiction with Diaz tapping into the worst parts of his past as well as creating characters that fit the thoughts that he had while trying to adjust to American culture. One story in particular with a character named Ysrael, who is the subject of the first short story and reappears towards the end, struck me with its sheer violence and haunting images. Ysrael is a young boy whose face is half eaten by a pig as a baby, leaving him to wear a mask and constantly get bullied by children in the neighborhood. Diaz writes of a young boy and his older brother going to Ysrael only to see his damaged face, leading them to smash a bottle across his head and rip the mask clean off. While this story leaves the reader with images and feelings of anger by reading about the cruelty of these two boys, Diaz writes it as if there is also a sense of beauty in this malice.

When I would visit my grandpa in Weslaco, my cousins who lived down the street would always walk over. We would go over nearly every day in the summer and each day we had some new game that played in the backyard, among the garden. We would often go and catch frogs, drown squirrels from their holes using water hoses, kill ants for fun. We would also play with our grandpa's dog Max and have him chase us around in the heat. My cousins, Leroy and Danny, would make us play everything with them, even if most of the games involved in some sort being cruel and tearing apart animals. We were close, shared the same language and enjoyed the same garden, but at the end of the day, we would leave and they stayed behind. They would go back to their home down the street, the one that my mom would always tell me not to visit. My mom told me their mother was addicted to drugs and their dad left before they knew him. We never talked about school, or what grade they were in. Danny was the smart one, quiet, often talked about a

book he saw at the local library. Leroy was playful and louder. I never knew anything more about them other than how they lived down the street and loved messing with animals in the garden. They loved being there at my grandpa's home, loved being in the mud, because even if the house was small and cold at night or the backyard was hot as hell in the valley sun, it was better than whatever they had to go home to. Sometimes, in some places, the world just encapsulates you. Sometimes the city you are in is the strongest character, strongest villain or hero, and more powerful than any human being could ever be. Often times, the towns that are more than just city limit signs, encompass everything you do and you succumb to it. It is in these towns that rules are created constantly, right and wrong is not a concept, and you become part of the environment. My sister and I knew that when we would visit my grandpa that we would leave the garden and go home to our parents where we had a mostly happy childhood, but Leroy and Danny stayed behind there to live out their own rules. In time we stopped visiting as often. We lost touch with Danny and Leroy. One year, when I was a teenager in high school, my parents told me that Leroy had gotten arrested and Danny had moved out of his home and started working at a local pizza restaurant. Leroy left a juvenile detention center after a year or so but ended up in another jail, while Danny floated around from job to job. I don't pretend to know what they look like or where they are at today.

My cousins, if they haven't already, will die here, in this soil. My grandpa will do the same. Their stories won't end up in any type of headlines because they didn't leave this area to come to money and be what most would consider successful in a very materialistic society. But in the summers, they had my grandfather's garden. We had the land that our ancestors looked over. This was enough for me to know that success could lie in the ground we come from.

This is the conversation I believe must be touched upon more in young writers. This is a piece of a conversation that I don't think is expressed enough even in our very own University. I have been lucky to learn from professors that encourage me to use every ounce of my own experience growing up inside the Rio Grande Valley but there will always be other professors that don't express the same mentality. It wasn't until I reached the Creative Writing program that it was a unified response from my teachers and mentors that encouraged me to access my past to create the original work I have always wanted. Every class in which we had to write personal and original pieces, from a workshop to a form and theory, pushed to use every ounce of myself to find my original voice and not come off as a carbon copy of something I am not. In my undergraduate years, especially in a journalism program that encourages us to view mainstream media as our ultimate goal, this couldn't be further from what was taught in the MFA program. If you are a young writer, I learned you must discover who you are and what writers of your culture have said before you to even begin creating a work that will stand on its own. But even in an area that is so heavily influenced by Mexican culture, this is hard to come by.

I have already mentioned Junot Diaz being a big influence to me as a writer, and truly he is, but he is also not part of my culture. As I said before, he is a great voice for the Dominican Republic experience, but to many in mainstream publications such as *The New Yorker*, he speaks for all Latinos. In my own program, Junot Diaz and his work are like buzzwords that show how just how mature of a writer one is. In complete honesty, his work was one of the few "Latino" pieces I've read during my time in the MFA program. I am sure many of my classmates will say the same. In my time here, we were rarely required to read Mexican-American authors, especially those that came from the Rio Grande Valley. If we were required, we usually read

work written by our professors who taught our program. While their work was notable, our horizons were rarely expanded upon.

My first experience with Americo Paredes came from standing in an elementary school named after him. I didn't fully read into his work until a member of my thesis committee recommended him. *With His Pistol in His Hand* by Paredes speak of Mexican legends and life among the Texas border in excruciating detail. He writes of corridos and early life in the region, focusing on the introduction of the Texas Rangers and what their presence meant to the area we now call the Rio Grande Valley. Sadly, his work was not widely advertised in his own home region. It is on myself for not seeking out his work, but like the United States itself, The Rio Grande Valley doesn't seem to do enough to educate Latino culture here about Mexican-American authors.

Writer's like Luis Alberto Urrea who wrote *The Devil's Highway* and chronicles life on the border in Arizona. He writes explicitly about the reality of immigration as many try to cross and die in the dessert, while border patrol agents are treated like kings. Emma Gonzalez, the author of *Field Mice*, chronicles the life of field workers and her childhood in her own memoir. She lives in the town I have grown up in my entire life and never did any teacher speak her name or require me to read her work. And of course, Tomas Rivera, the poet who wrote many collections including *Y no se lo trago la tierra* or translated to *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*. He write of landscapes like how I try to do myself. None of these authors came across in my educational career up until the end of my master's program and while it can be attributed to my lack of searching in the field I want to write in, the educational institutions around me didn't do much in their way to help. These are Latino authors that speak for the region that I have grown up in. One where a border hangs over like a shadow on everything you

do. It is hard to find an answer to why these authors aren't introduced more in the educational journey of students living in the Rio Grande Valley, but part of me believes it's because the answer is the same as everywhere else in the United States.

My parents raised me only speaking English. At the time, and still now, students who only speak Spanish when they enter school get labeled as ESL (English as a Second Language) or LD (Learning Disabled). These labels can be detrimental to the growth of a student. They enter elementary on a second-rate track, one that has its own division and separates a child from the rest of the school. The ramifications of these labels can determine a student's life by the age of five. So my parents made the conscious choice to raise me and my sister in an only English household. The grandfather I admire is one that I have trouble connecting to through language barriers. By making this choice, they helped determine the educational path that led to this moment. They also put us on a path that can have children and adults see Spanish-speakers as second class citizens due to the tracks and dividing lines placed on in school. If education is divided by the language a student speaks, then this affects art and literature and so on. I, along with many other children, were not raised with many Mexican-American authors or inspirational figures, and from the start of our educational careers we were divided.

I was meeting with a professor that I had in one of my previous semesters and we were discussing writing and my future thesis when I asked him if there were any Rio Grande Valley writers that I should read to help get ideas. Professor and author Jose Rodriguez, who had recently published his own memoir, said "I don't usually recommend valley writers for students knowing they want to set their piece inside the valley, I usually recommend writers that have really just found ways to creatively use their environment in their work. If you read too many valley writers, I don't want you to get presumptions what every original Valley work should

sound like either”. That was a piece of advice that stuck and baffled me. The moment he spoke it, he and I both knew that those words could be divisive.

I must aim to not sound like anyone else from my region and keep my own thoughts about it original, but I have already been raised with a lack of previous knowledge of Valley writers. I believe this is where a tricky balance lies for modern Hispanic students that come out of a minority-driven regions. On one hand, I think the advice is foolish. I have seen so many young adults while teaching at the University that have never read any Mexican-American authors, let alone authors from this region. All they see from coming out of the Rio Grande Valley are shows that display “illegal” immigrants running across the land, destroying our livelihood as they do so. Shows like “Border Wars” and what we see on various news stations such as Fox News show a region that is considered “the most dangerous” in the country. Discouraging writers from the Rio Grande Valley to not read authors from here almost seems like a crime to our culture. But I don’t believe he meant it in this way.

I want to believe that Dr. Rodriguez told me this in order to find my own voice, one that is unique, and that is of this region because of my growing up here. I see this double-edged sword play out also when talking with students. A large portion of my job is to try and find the student’s original voice, whatever that may be. If I give them too much literature in one direction, they may get confused and think they have to sound like that person even though they have grown up in different circumstances. The authors I have read in the program from this region such as Sandra Cisneros, Gloria Anzaldua, and even Dr. Jose Rodriguez himself, have grown up in entirely different circumstances than I have. Not just from generational, but socioeconomic and cultural vantage points as well. I want to believe Dr. Rodriguez told me this advice to make sure I didn’t sound like a second-rate version of those great writers. My job as a



writer is to respond to them in my own voice, and not just emulate. I believe he knows how important it is for writers here to read those that came before them from that region, I'm sure of it. But I also believe he knows how easy it is trying to sound like copies of an author that one admires.

But another question arises from this issue about what a modern Hispanic writer looks and sounds like? I can't exactly say my goal is to stray away from sounding like authors that came before me when I didn't grow up reading their work. But a question can arise of whether or not I can place my work along my contemporaries as an adequate form of commentary on the Mexican-American story of the Rio Grande Valley? And to answer this question, I believe whole-heartedly I can. As detrimental as it has been to not be familiar with many Valley writers that came before me, this does not mean I am not a Valley writer myself. I have been raised in the same region, I have felt the same heat, and have heard the same corridos be played while driving through the same sunsets. I believe there is an interesting dichotomy between the group that says, rightfully so, that you must read more Mexican American authors to appreciate the culture more, and the group that simply says, you are not Hispanic enough. I believe the modern Hispanic writer is always in a clash to one, sound modern enough to please the mainstream American culture he or she has grown up in, and two, sound "Latino enough" to please generations that came before us. The modern Hispanic writer, like myself, may have been raised watching MTV to see the latest pop-punk band play at an awards ceremony one night to going to a Quinceñera the next. The modern Hispanic writer, one born in the "millennial" era, often times from a second or third generation away from a relative that crossed from Mexico into America, has grown up in both cultures and finds their voice in both their ideals and traditions. I may not be thoroughly read in the authors I have previously mentioned due to many different factors, but

I am a brown, Hispanic, writer of and from the Rio Grande Valley. That is not debatable. My relationship to the Rio Grande Valley is from my own specific era and upbringing. I do not need to meet a certain height or measurement to answer whether or not I am “Latino enough” to write about my home.

It’s a spectrum though that can be debated about heavily. The next generation of Hispanic writers from the Rio Grande Valley might be further removed from their cultural upbringing, more heavily influenced by American society. Our job as writers from this region should be about finding our voice in this current culture. We should know of the work that came from this region before us, but we should also not be afraid to accept what the next stage of our culture looks and sounds like. If our work is part of one long conversation, we must then listen to what has been said and make sure not to repeat those words but add our own unique additions. I believe the program has prepared me to enter in that conversation, but like the rest of the educational spectrum in America and the Rio Grande Valley, maybe some focus must be turned towards making sure students from this region know of the work that has come from here. We must not void the soil we stand on, but embrace it.

By starting this thesis, I had to approach the field in the way I knew I could write it. Americo Paredes and Emma Gonzalez were great authors that tapped into the history of the Rio Grande Valley and life as a migrant field worker. Gonzalez herself uses amazing imagery to capture her childhood in *Field Mice*. Her writing helped me understand the point of view of Diego, the younger brother of Roberto. Growing up working in the dirt changes your perception of reality and what it means to have a normal life. Paredes helped me understand how to tap into the history of wilderness surrounding the Rio Grande Valley. These are aspects of my story that are integral. As I read their work, I saw my home, but I also knew I had to construct the version

of home in the story from a very different childhood. My unique experiences growing up in the Valley and seeing the land with my own eyes had to be the driving factor. These authors helped me understand what the sound and voice of the Rio Grande Valley could be, but I also had to make sure to approach the telling from my own childhood. I had to tap into my own past and write in the language that makes me a unique Valley writer.

One task that I had to do in order to shape my characters and their voices was work backwards in my own life to find out what that distinct voice sounded like. This is not to say that I am out of touch with my Hispanic heritage. I have a deep love and respect for the Rio Grande Valley and the traditions that have come from that upbringing. Ultimately, however, I had to peel back the layers of mainstream influence to find the authentic voice that my characters and story needed. There are many writers that have inspired my process in doing this, but also there are many theorists. More than anything, different philosophers and rhetorical theorists have shaped my views on why and how I can accomplish this retracing of steps process.

Ralph Cintron, the writer of *Angel's Town* has been one of the biggest influences during this time. Cintron himself is Rio Grande Valley native. Born in Mercedes, started working in the fields as a young boy, he is able to come at his research with an open mindset. *Angel's Town* details the rhetoric and makeup of a city dealing with a population that is shifting from a small minority community into one with a large influx of immigration. The book goes into the rhetoric of gang life and the everyday living of the community members in this mid-sized Midwestern town. There is one chapter in particular that caught my attention in this book. The non-fiction book acts almost as vignette, with each chapter going into another aspect of the town and the rhetoric behind that aspect. The chapters serve as comments on colonization and the acceptance of minority groups. One vignette in particular focuses on the life of a small child

named Valerio. Valerio is a small Latino boy who is labeled as learning disabled or “LD” because his first language being Spanish. He is put in different classes, given a different curriculum, and put in a whole different social status group due to this label that will follow him for life. In one chapter, going over what his life is like and what his home and bedroom look like, I realized Valerio is every boy I have met growing up and also me.

In the chapter “Valerio and his Walls”, Cintron writes how Valerio has posters all over his room of popular Americanized items. Sports cars, famous superheroes, all of them are not exactly projections of Valerio’s true interests, but the interests that an American mainstream society tells him he should like. Valerio has these images up on his wall to give him the sense that he is part of society and not separated from it, not like how he is with his classmates at school. This is the summary for me and most children growing up here in the Valley. Reading *Angel’s Town* helped drive home the fact that the first thing I had to do in order to form my thesis was tear down the posters off my wall. My novella couldn’t be my thoughts on the American dream through the eyes of a field worker with heavy mainstream influence but had to be the thoughts I had on it before what popular culture told me it was. Popular culture will either tell me that field work is dirty and immigrants who do those jobs shouldn’t be in this country, or it will tell me how noble working in the field is and will ultimately lead to limitless prosperity and great inspirational story. Mainstream American culture won’t tell you about the workers that will either die in the field or not far from it. That doesn’t fit the preferred narrative. To get to the real narrative it was Cintron and other rhetorical theories that helped tear down the new walls and bring the old ones back to the forefront.

It was through rhetorical theory that helped push the forefront the power of translingual identities. It took a long time as a writer to be comfortable experimenting with

multiple languages. I was afraid of losing audience committing too much to Spanish or English. But discovering the power of pushing towards a translingual culture and what that can do to create a more inclusive society helped break down that fear. When I broke free of that fear, I became a better writer. I believe it is my use of jumping in and out of the language that truly gives me my voice. The theory that there is no such thing as being monolingual, and that English is not a constant but evolving language and study helped ease my sense that I had to write to a mold. The only mold I had to follow for my creation was to create something that spoke to my voice and spoke to my interests. An audience will follow as long as I stay true to the creation that inspired me.

In my process of crafting my thesis, I had to find work that did a superb job as using location as a central character. One book I came upon in a class during the program was *Gilead* from Marilyn Robinson. *Gilead* is a novel about a father writing letters to his son before he passes. The family live in a small fictional town called Gilead, Kansas. The novel uses the land as a central character and figure that hangs above everyone. While the Pulitzer Prize winning novel is a showcase of faith and love, it is only this way because the town in which the characters reside make it this way. Their beliefs, devotion, feelings, all stem from this Midwestern town that resides directly in the Bible belt. The ideologies of the characters cannot purely exist anywhere else besides Gilead, Kansas, which is why the name of the fictional town is the name of the novel. This is the power and beauty of creating a piece of work that is so closely tied to a region. The goal and aim for any novel, in my opinion, should be to write about a character or town so specific and unique that you cannot confuse the region with anywhere else. *Gilead* benefits from taking place in a region known for its' conservative values. My novella dealing

with life in the Rio Grande Valley must be so specific that the location of the book cannot be confused with anything else.

Another reason *Gilead* is a brilliant piece is because of its' structure. The book is written in long paragraphs with no chapters like one long letter. There are miniature stories and breaks that can be compared to the parables Jesus would tell his followers in the New Testament. The structure of no clear chapters and long stories within it can be used to show the way in which Midwestern stories are told. The feel of the Midwest is a slow, drawn out pace that is lyrical and reminiscent of religious writing. Throughout the Old and New Testament, history and events is drawn out to pull into effect the power of God at the very end of Revelation. The redeeming power of God is stretched over thousands of years. In this sense, *Gilead*, completely written in one long letter format, is done in the same way. If the structure mirrors the feel of the Midwest so well, I had to find the structure that to me best fit the Rio Grande Valley, which is why I wrote and formed my thesis in the only way I knew how.

The idea, at the very beginning of my novella, came from a dream I had when I was still in high school. The dream serves as a chapter in the piece, one that you will read later on. The end of the dream ultimately left me with one clear notion, one clear idea that I wanted to explore. What happens when the world moves on from you? This question seems like a pretty simple and straightforward question that most have when they think of mortality, but there was something in this that I wanted to explore, especially when thinking about the region in which I live in.

The Rio Grande Valley, in my mind, can sometimes seem like a unique animal that one passes along in the wilderness. Sometimes it can seem as if the animal has been left for the dead and left on its own to survive. Throughout the history of this region, men have come down, discovered the value this region has to offer, and took what they wanted from it. They have

probed the land, stripped the trees from the soil. They manufactured the ground to harvest produce at an unnatural cost. They found the people of the region expendable, made them inferior simply because of the color of their skin that was often only that shade of color because of the years spent here under the sun. Those men would take what they wanted from this region and move on. And in the years that they would move on, the valley would continue to live, heal itself, move on, until the new wave of northern settlers came down again. Over the years this region has been called dangerous, poor, unhealthy, disgusting, by the men that would only come down just to take what they want. The valley is only called derogatory terms when northern settlers don't see any resource left that they can take from the region. And ultimately if this is the consensus truth, then I rather have all these words thrown at me than have men stripping the land away from me. But the Valley continues to be mined and left to recover, and each time it is there is a new story of survival, a new story of persevering after the world leaves you behind.

It is because of this dream that I also wanted to experiment with form in my novella. If the ultimate question that drives my novella comes from a dream, then in my opinion it makes sense to not have my novella come off as a straight forward narrative but be able to change and exist in this dreamlike plane.

This want to experiment with dream form in a novella goes against most usual novella forms to begin with. I chose to do a novella to try to write amore contained story. "A Citrus Wildfire" can easily take many different turns and focus on dozens of different facets. In just a small piece of text, I comment on racial structure, socioeconomic inequality, gender roles, and the idea of breaking cultural traditions. In any number of ways, the story can be expanded on into a full drawn out novel that can easily surpass hundreds of pages of text. While I may take this novella and expand it into a full novel in the future, for this work I wanted to have this story

focus on Roberto and his personal relationships and thoughts within this specific chapter of his life. My initial thoughts on a novella came from the idea that I could work within a smaller amount of words that usually came from writing a novel, but as I thought through the story more, I realized, that at this moment in time, the story of Roberto seemed clearer than other facets of the novella. But the idea of having dream sequences never wavered in my mind, as I felt they told Roberto's concerns and thoughts in unique ways. Novellas are usually straightforward story structures, but I wanted to play with that notion. Novellas, or any other type of work, come with conventions that I believe as writers we are meant to challenge. I believe my story cannot exist in the way I want to without the dreams, and even if they expanded and changed the conventional norms of the novella structure, I had to have them in there to tell the story of the character.

This balance linear structures and turns in chapters also came from multiple short story and essay collections that have inspired my writing. One of my favorite short story collections, one that really first peaked my interest in crafting unique chapters to add to a narrative, came from Tim O' Brien's *The Things They Carried*. There is an interesting background to this collection. Before it was published, O' Brien had published an essay collection detailing his experiences in the Vietnam War and what had stayed with him. O' Brien however felt that his essay collection didn't tell the whole truth behind his experiences. He then began work on *The Things They Carried*, which is considered fiction but still very heavily based on his experiences in Vietnam. Ultimately, the short story collection became a best-seller. O'Brien felt that adding fiction to his experiences, experimenting more with characters and situations, added to the actual truth of his situation. He felt the extreme events that he depicted truly captured the meaning behind the war. While this is a collection of different short stories, there is also a grounded narrative about his experience in Vietnam and his life after coming home. Each short story



focuses in a very artistic way different details and characters that left an impact on O'Brien's life. And when he acknowledges what is truth and what is fiction, and how both are intermingled so closely, it leaves a lasting blow to the reader who is left wondering which parts of the beautiful and haunting collection were real events.

I decided from this collection that no matter how much I want to, I can't write about what the Ro Grande Valley means to me in a non-fiction manner. At least not yet. I can't encapsulate my experience in a memoir at this time. This piece had to be done in a fiction novella form. Maybe this is a self-defense mechanism. Or maybe I am not the writer that possess the skills in order to capture the Valley the way it should be captured. I also cannot write about the Valley in a straight forward narrative structure. This was more of a personal choice. I needed to be able to experiment with chapters and experiment with setting. As I have said before, setting is one of the most important factors in my writing. Being able to capture the meaning behind the land here is crucial to the story I wanted to create. This choice while heavily influenced by O'Brien, was also heavily influenced by Eula Bliss and her essay collection titled "*Notes from No Man's Land*".

*Notes from No Man's Land* is an essay collection that details the writers emerging revelations of her place in culture and her views of race and racism. The essay collection details Biss's thoughts on the different cities she lives in and the history of race in America and how her life intertwines with it all. The collection also carries major themes in every small essay, with each one of the pieces being substantially different from each, but adding to the overall meaning by the end. In my novella, while there is a straight narrative that shows the journey of the main characters, the chapters that diverge from the main storyline don't do so to distract, but to help find the truer meaning behind the story. Dreams don't have a straight storyline. And if the main question to my thesis is "what happens when the world moves on?" I wouldn't expect the answer

to be a straight forward one. Our meaning to this world comes from different directions. There can be thousands of answers and maybe there can also be none. The path to discover the answer though is a winding.

My grandpa immigrated from Mexico when he was only a teenager. There were a lot less buildings in the Valley at the time and more than likely you could see nothing but cotton and fruit fields for miles. He worked in those fields and lived in the homes for the workers for years. He saw people have heat strokes from the sun, saw men struggle to provide food for their hungry families. He picked every single day, no matter the heat, or no matter the cold. One day he earned just enough money to build a small house and in time he got married and started a family. He would travel north to pick different things and took his family with him. The garden in his backyard didn't necessarily start on purpose but just started growing from the weeks that he would leave the home and then return. How he survived those early days and paved a way for future generations comes from a strength that I do not know.

It was this realization that made me want to set my characters in those fields that my grandfather worked in. It seemed the only correct way to tell the story. The makeup of the valley is really due to the hands that pulled it apart and shaped it. When I was a child and we would sometimes go into those very fields, my mother would warn me that one wrong move could send me back here for good. It is only now that I don't see that as a derogatory statement towards field workers, but a warning that all the hard work that had to be done to get me to this point could be undone. It was only two generations ago that my blood lived in that soil, and that at this point it could easily return there. The field is the beginning of all the dreams I have ever had and will ever have. It is only right to explore it.

There is also the dark aspect of what the fields mean. There is a lifestyle my mother was warning me about when leaving the fields. Maybe she didn't mean it as a threat but now I see it in that way. As a worker, you leave the fields to get more money, prosperity, a comfortable living. This isn't inherently wrong. Everyone should support each other in getting a better living and providing a comfortable situation for their families. But often times, the workers in the field, if anything happens or they are let go, they don't have a back-up plan to fall on. In a capitalistic culture, making money is everything. So when you lose your main source of income and can't find another way of providing, you turn to something darker. The system that America thrives on and unfortunately the Rio Grande Valley thrives on as well doesn't cater to those who work in the field. They are forgotten, left to figure it out amongst themselves. My hometown is not immune from capitalism and very few places are. We have created a culture that looks down upon the workers that provide the food we live on. A region struggling with poverty overall hates the image of those trying to make a living, and we do our best to keep them clear from our line of view while we drive by.

This is evil. And I was one of those kids who thought those workers were dirty and that they weren't nearly as important as I was. As a goal in my thesis, I wanted this to be a way to give them a voice. I wanted my novella to provide a detailed account of their life. When my grandpa was a field worker, any thousands of possibilities could have unfolded to where I wouldn't be forming this work today but here I am. And now more than ever in a culture that doesn't value the field workers and actively moves to push different cultures out, they need that voice to push back into a clearer relevancy. It is a vain thought to think my personal creation can do this, but it can help form it and that is enough justification for why I want to form this thesis.

The public, I believe, needs to see the destructive path that can happen to those who are not able to work in the fields and have no other options. I don't believe inspirational stories are bad, and like I said it is great to hear workers have those success stories, but I also believe they tend to that idea that American goal of capitalistic success is meant for everyone. This is not true. And there has and should be a way to make that truth known.

“There is no way to make a pessimistic piece of art. No matter the subject matter, the ending, or how it reads, it is impossible. Art, by its very nature, is an optimistic creation. There can never be a pessimistic piece of art. The only way to do that is to not create any art at all.” This was a piece of advice that was shared to me by Eric Miles Williamson, an English instructor at the University Of Texas-Rio Grande Valley. Now that I read the words back, the advice seems like common sense but it was a truth that was not apparent to me before. This truth honestly made me feel that I could have a lot more creative freedom in crafting my thesis.

I believe it is a common fault in young writers that we feel everything has to come to a neat and happy end. Even among the MFA program most young writers in the program follow the same idea of crafting an idealistic conclusion. There is also a misconception that our characters have to be almost perfect beings. My favorite narratives have always followed troubled protagonists. In my novella, Roberto is a young man with terrible thoughts and ideas on subjects like racial inequality and machismo stereotypes. He sees women not as fully realized human beings, and sees everyone but him as villains. This machismo attitude is flawed and can be seen in all his interactions. I wanted to write his misconceptions on what a boy in this era would think like. I try to believe that I have a great respect for women, especially being raised by my other who I consider to be the strongest woman I have ever met. I wanted to write Roberto however as this flawed child who has grown up with no truly great male role models. I wanted

his vernacular and thoughts to reflect this. I had to come to a realization that there would be thoughts that would make readers despise Roberto. But Roberto could never be a flawless character. With the novella coming from his point of view, every aspect of it had to come through his eyes.

Ernest Hemingway has always been an influential figure in my writing. Not just for his blunt and honest syntax, but how often his pieces ended on an ambiguous note. His novels often leave the reader with a vapid feeling but throughout his stories there is a place of hope. For Hemingway, hope is never on the surface, but woven throughout the current of his stories. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the main characters aim to destroy a bridge to block an incoming army from advancing further. While the bridge leads to debates and questions about the reasons behind they are fighting, they still aim to destroy the bridge and succeed in doing so. This very act costs the main characters their lives. But the novel by no means take inspirational cues but instead shows the cost of what they are doing while not being apparent in the “why” they are doing it. In *Old Man and The Sea*, the fisherman fights for days to capture the biggest fish he has ever seen, but on his way back it is eaten by sharks, leaving only a skeleton behind. These stories are not left without a single piece of hope. They are not considered pessimistic by any means. These stories show that hope is in the battle. For field workers, hope is not the sum of day’s work, but it is in the soil in which they pick their produce. The hope my grandfather relied on came from working to provide a future for a family he may not know.

The path my characters take in my novella is not a pessimistic outlook by any means. My characters make their choices in want of having a future in which physical prosperity rules over all. They try to accomplish this prosperous future by any means necessary. This is the story of many people who live in poverty, especially people of color and immigrants. In a system

turned against minorities and those who lack a steady income, the only way to break through the threshold of prosperity is to often commit crimes and put your future at risk. I want to show how this struggle more often than not doesn't lend itself to this "inspirational" immigrant story. This struggle often leads to people living and dying in a place they have always known. The hope for my characters doesn't live in the end of their story, but during it, in their dreams, and in their subsequent failures.

In my thesis, there will be pages that will challenge you, reader. They will paint a picture of a family struggling to achieve the "American dream" of prosperity and physical wealth and you will see that this dream is often not fruitful, and more often destructive. I want you to see what can happen if this is the only dream you believe in. I want you to see characters that are challenged, beaten, broken. And in all of that, I want you to see hope.

My novella is a story of hope. In all the turmoil, and all the darkness that flows down this path, there is ultimately hope in it. There is hope in a father doing anything to provide for his family. There is a hope in two sons doing their best to navigate life under their circumstances. And there is a hope in a mother struggling to keep her family together. In a world that is not made for them, there is a hope in the struggle they all fight through.

My novella is also a love letter to the home I have grown up in. Even if this home is flawed, hot, and vapid, there is beauty in it. The Rio Grande Valley is a place that doesn't allow you to rest. There is no luck here. Luck is in big cities and prosperous societies, here you do everything you can to make it. In the summer when the sun will kill those that aren't careful to the winters that will leave many dead in the wilderness overnight, you survive here based off strength and determination. But in all of this, there is endless beauty. Beauty in the sunsets, and in the people striving to create something more than themselves. In the natural things that live

and breathe in this one area of the world, there is endless beauty, one that should be recognized and not put in the frame work of a story about making out of this region. The lives in this area should be celebrated, not used as political pawns, or stories to promote an American agenda.

All of the writers, all the books, everything that I have given high regard to so far, have helped shape the piece I have created. They have all shaped who I am. But my thesis is not part of their agenda. To all the professors and scholars that have shaped my education and craft, my ultimate creation is because of you but not in spite of you. I believe this is the ultimate compliment. My words come from the soul under my brown skin. They come from the lips of my grandfather, and from the lips of those he worked along with in those fields not long ago. They are the words of this region, not from some writers who have never been here. So when you read of the sounds of grasshoppers, and the smell of oranges, know you are reading of my home. You are in this world with me.

## CHAPTER II

### GUANAJUATO

Jesús told me that he could knock the shit out of anyone in Mexico, and that he would fight for the best money and pussy in Guanajuato. He told me he lived there all his life until some machismo cartel assholes thought they could shake him up. One night they came to his house, tucked in the base of the mountains, and slit the throat of his dog. They let the old mutt bleed out in the dirt in front of Jesús's home, whimpering softly, no one would hear it. Jesús walked out of his house in the morning and knew his time fighting in the basement floors of cantinas were over. The United States needed some brown meat to pick their white cotton. A honest living, a fighter's end, just across a river border.

When Jesús fought all of Guanajuato knew. He said you could hear his punches echo across town. His favorite place to fight had a small ring outside behind the bar. The people from the villages would come out, get drunk, and throw money on the floor and whoever won got to pick it up from the dirt they fought on. One by one the folks from the neighborhoods would come and watch him beat the shit out of some vato that called him out in the bar. Whoever he fought only had to look at him in a certain way and before they knew it blood would be soaking in their eyes. Sometimes, not often, a kid from the village would get all jacked up and challenge Jesús to a *luchar hasta la muerte*. Either they dragged your body out and threw you in the weeds behind the bar or left you there in their makeshift ring. The bartenders usually went with the



second option. Those that woke up often did so without wedding bands, wallets, or even their gold teeth if they had any. Those fights would be the main event in town. Everyone from poor villagers to rich cartel daughters went to throw their money in the ring and watch the driest fists in Mexico do their job. Jesús could have fought for a living, gone to El Jefe and fought like the real Mexico City boxers do. Instead, he fought for the pesos that fell around his feet and for the women on the edge of the square. He took both home gladly.

The women in Guanajuato at this point knew both Jesús's name as well as his favorite position in bed. He said that he slept with as many as he could a night. He woke up feeling raw, beaten, but always wanting more. The money paid his bills, mostly bottles of tequila and some coca from the kids in the village, but the girls gave him life. The city of Guanajuato, filled with all kinds of people that dreamt of the riches in Mexico City but got tied down among the mining caves, knew the name Jesús only by the echoes of his beatings and the moaning of its' women. Jesús figured he would fight until he died in the ring, a true warrior's death. He vowed to never work scraping the minerals out of the walls of rock, even if every other man in the city did just that. The city lived and breathed off of mining, populated mostly due to the workers that lived there, but not Jesús. No, Jesús fought in the back of the bars and slept with enough women every night that at this point some of his kids had to be working under the ground beneath him. He did this every night of the year, until one day, he found out he slept with the wrong woman at the edge of the boxing ring. One night, Marcella Diaz, daughter of Juan Miguel Diaz, the most dangerous drug king in the whole state, stood in his corner. He said she had the brown thighs that made priests sweat and turn away when she walked by. She could choke and kill a man between her legs. The dead man's family would understand the sweetness of his death. Her chest bounced with every step and on that night the light from the bar made the sweat that fell around

her cheeks glisten just enough that Jesús almost lost his first fight in the ring. Instead, he regained his focus and with one punch knocked the first four teeth of his opponent right into the back of his throat. The eyes from the kid popped out then rolled back and he fell to the floor, gargling on his own blood. Jesús took Marcella home and drowned between her thighs. When he fully woke up from the experience three days later, his dog had bled out on the dirt in front of his home.

So when Jesús died in the field today, and no one knew his age, the stories of his fights seemed to be as useless as the hats we wore to protect our heads from the sun. The old fighter himself, now layered in wrinkles that looked like waves under his eyes. His skin, brown, covered in black dots, stained by the sun. A rustle came from the cotton bushels he fell on and a small cloud of dirt briefly created a shadow over the row. All of us in the field heard the thud, but workers passing out while picking cotton in the middle of June never surprised anyone. In Weslaco, the sun beats down without any care and Texas had enough heat to drain out everything in you. But today, the old man refused to get up. We brought him water from the pipe that stuck from the ground on the edge of the field. One worker tried pouring it slowly into his mouth but then the water would spill out over his lips, falling from his chin onto the red bandana that hung around his neck. It blended in with the sweat that covered his torn jean shirt. Another worker started beating his chest and slapping his face. It turned into punching. And more and more it became clear that Jesús died there picking cotton into his brown burlap, blood draining from his fingers. It dried before we figured out what do with the body.

Hector and Francisco came back with one of the large satchels that we used to hold the cotton we picked throughout the day. They dragged the burlap over his head and the edges of the bag got to just below his knees. They pulled the strings on the bag as much as they could and

they reached to the top of his boots. One of the workers came up to the body and pulled the shoes off his feet and threw his old pair away. No one blamed him. Hector and Francisco tried dragging the sack out of the field but Jesús weighed much more than cotton and had heavy clothes on his body. They could only move him about five bushels and then had to stop.

“What the hell do we even do with the old man?” Francisco said.

“Just drive his body down to the river and leave it,” Alejandro, one of the new workers in the field, said.

“No manches we don’t have time to take the truck down to the river and back.”

“So you want to just leave him here in the cotton and make it smell more like shit?”

“Let’s Just take his body down the road to another field. Leave him there. He will help with the crops.” Hector said. He towered over everyone. He had a voice that sounded like thunder in the rainy season, and could make it louder than those damn storms too. Even Jesús, the world-class fighter and now dead body, felt nervous when speaking to him. If Hector didn’t like you, he would let you know and show you by chewing your ass out until you left the field. He didn’t care who you were, not even me, his own son.

“He was one of us Hector, we can’t just leave him somewhere in the dirt.” Alejandro said.

“His ass isn’t worth wasting time over. We need to finish this row by today if we plan to turn this field by the end of his month. We dump this cabrón down the road, call it a day.”

“He don’t deserve that Hector. What if he has a wife or someone back across?” Francisco said.

“He wouldn’t be here on his own if someone cared. Let’s go leave him.”

Hector and Francisco continued dragging Jesús through the mud. He had gotten a lot heavier than from his fighting days and his body seemed to plow the dirt a whole six inches deeper. Blood started seeping through the burlap by the time they got to the back of the pickup truck. The 55’ Chevy had held few lighter things and the suspension creaked the moment Jesús landed in the bed. Hector and Francisco then drove off, leaving dust that hung in the air. The field became quiet. Birds chirped somewhere beyond the trees that bordered the crops. No clouds covered the sun, no rain fell among everyone, and the same heat that killed Jesús continued to beat on, proudly. The rest of the men went back in between the rows, picking like nothing had ever happened. The truck came back not long after it had left. Only two people this time. Hector saw me staring at the bed of the pickup when they returned.

“Get back to work Roberto. Stop being a pussy and help me and your brother finish the row.”

I bent over and started picking the cotton again. This time Jesús wouldn’t be there for whenever I glanced over the bushes. Diego started picking again, breathing in heavily. Diego had just turned 8, practically born in the field, never knew of any other life besides seeing his family work into the night. He started joining Hector and I a little over a year ago now. He saw us leave the home before the sun came up every day of the year. He would stay behind helping my mom wash our clothes or prepare dinner for us when we got home near midnight. I don’t know if Diego remembers our life back on the other side of the river. It seems so long ago now. Whenever a rooster crows in the morning or whenever a goat bleats from one of the ranches nearby I am sure he thinks of those days like I do. Maybe he will think of those days later on instead of remembering a man dying beside him.

“I am getting tired Robbie. Please tell Papa to let us stop.”

“You know he’s not going to let that happen Diego. Just keep picking and relax okay,” I said.

“The sun is really hot today. I don’t feel so good.”

“Then sit down and pick, there’s not much time left.”

Diego sat down in the dirt and slowly picked the cotton that hung on the bottom of the bush. He used to feed the chickens back on the other side. He would sit in the mud and have them walk around him. He held the seeds in his hand and the chickens would gather and gently pick his palm. Some would flap their wings and in those moments he would giggle as the feathers hit his cheek. I never saw an animal that Diego never loved. Each time a new chicken or goat would arrive he would run around with them all afternoon and hug them goodbye when he fell asleep. I always told him I would get him a horse the moment he became old enough. I never said the age because I never knew how long it would take to ever get one. Every birthday for the last few years he woke up wondering where the horse had been hidden. He would usually cry when he realized that this year didn’t come with it, just some tamales and a candle if we were lucky. We would always have to kill the animals either late at night or early in the morning. We all felt Diego didn’t deserve to see them die.

Our home on the other side, tucked away in a clearing in the monte, retained its’ innocence of life beyond the river. It stood not even teen feet tall and often times chickens would jump on to the tin roof and scare the shit out of us at four in the morning. Hector and Maria, my future mama and papa, bought the small piece of lend for a few pesos an acre and imagined living their life under the stars. It led to two boys, one loved and one fought over. When we lived

there I felt like I knew the sound of the world. The leaves moving in the wind, the rain tapping as I fell in the mud, the cicadas ringing as the fall came in. I felt like I knew the sound of a sunset, one filled with so much orange and blue that even the water reflecting from the ground couldn't capture it. The house still lives there in that clearing. When we left, knowing I would never see it again, I took off a chunk of wood from the post outside the door. I still have it hidden under my clothes in our new home. I always hoped that if heaven existed I wouldn't end up in the white family's heaven with gold on every sign, but back there in that field, listening to the sound of an eternal sunset.

“Diego Antonio Navarro stand your ass back up!” Hector said.

“Papa, I'm sorry I was just tired please I am sorry,”

“Stand up like a man! My son will not be some pussy that doesn't work! You will be a man and get your ass up. Don't fucking be my son and do that in front of me!” Hector grabbed Diego by his arm and in one move yanked him up strong and fast enough that you could hear every little joint give a small pop. Diego started crying but no tears could come out of his eyes. He wailed and screamed, yelling something, not even a word, just a cry. Hector grabbed Diego's hands and started motioning his fingers to pick the cotton. He did it so ferociously that I could see small specks of red start to appear on his palms. I dropped my bag and ran over to them and shoved both Hector and Diego into the dirt. I pushed Diego off to the side and started trying to grab Hector's hand and when he moved I accidentally pushed my hand into his face hard enough that even I knew that this fight would end with blood.

Hector lifted his right arm and jammed it into my neck, lifting my body off his. He grabbed my shirt with his left hand and pulled my whole body face down into the dirt. I could

feel the skin scraping off the back of my shoulder as he did so. He flipped his legs and body over on top of me and that's when the red in my eyes started to appear. I could see him pulling his fist up into the sun and coming down on top of me. I could feel every knuckle as it went into my cheeks and my chest. He beat me just enough to feel the blood drip down my cheek but not enough to get anywhere near killing me. A small mercy for being his son.

“Never! And I truly mean never jump on top of me again or I will kill you. I don't care if you are my son or not. I will beat you until you have no teeth left.”

“I hate you. I truly hate you with every part of me,” I said.

“You fight like a bitch. You aren't my son. I'll teach Diego to have bigger balls than you. Now get up and get back to work,” Hector said. He adjusted his shirt and walked back towards his end of the field. The other workers looked on but didn't bother saying anything. We didn't need one more dead body in the field today.

Hector had grown up in a small village in the state of Tamaulipas. He told me my abuelo drank more tequila than the entire state combined some nights. He took it out on his wife, beat her blind. Hector only got to experience nine birthdays before one day Hector's father punched his mom so hard that something split inside her. She lived another few months with the drunk before she got the release she deserved. His father never told Hector what had happened, but he knew, and the whole village knew as well. When they had the funeral for her, no one from town went by, and Hector's father left back to the bar after a few words. He didn't return home that night, probably found a cheap whore. Hector stayed at the funeral the entire time.

Hector crossed first, a few years before our family made the move. He had gone because he heard they needed someone to plow fields to prepare for the crops in the winter. He left for a

few months and came back to tell us about the riches in the United States. He said he saw cars covered in chrome, being driven by some of the fattest people he had ever seen. Every town had a store that sold the new 56' radios and you could hear music coming out from the buildings. Noise came from everywhere, at no moment was there silence. Neon lights came on every night down Old Main and in the sky the stars hid away and if you stood on a rooftop you would see glowing marks of land in the distance. He had never seen so much beauty, so much money coming out of pockets, so many people driving around with grease left on their mouth. America had the money he always dreamed of and didn't have any part of his past he wanted to forget. His mother, all her life, had never left the small village in which she had grown up and got beaten to death in. His father, who drunk his way to an unmarked grave somewhere in the hills that bordered the town. Hector didn't care for his past and knew he had to be more than a small shit piece of town hidden in the monte of Tamaulipas. His own family would never know that village, and in time they would God-willing forget the entire country and language y todo. Mexico had the worst of his being. He knew he had to come back, and had to drive his own car with his family in the back one summer night down Main.

The sky started to turn purple and a corrido blasted off from somewhere in the distance. The men picked up their bags full of cotton while a line of dust exploded off the road. A truck with wooden rails parked next to the field.

"An de lay you wetbacks! Put the cotton in back! Let's go," The rancher said. Hector called him Miguel. I didn't know his name beyond that. I didn't care about anything but his skin. "Move your asses or you get no dinero."

I helped Diego put his bag in the back and got water to wipe the dried blood off my face. We jumped into the bed of another truck, this one much older and more heavily stained, and



began our ride back home. Diego, Hector, and I sat in silence, as did the rest of the workers that had jumped along with us. The truck would take us to the edge of the colonias that bordered the edge of town. The truck rode heavy with the eight men in back of it, but the weight drowned out the sounds of the tires as they pressed against the gravel. A sunset streamlined over the sky, shooting off the hues of a childhood I barely remembered. We all stared somewhere into it all, barely breathing but never mentioning a word. Enough had been said, and maybe on another ride on any other day more words would come naturally.

“Jesús just didn’t know when to fucking quit.” Hector said. “It’s his fault, simple as that.”

No one said anything back. We all knew there would never be a funeral for Jesús. On Monday, the field would still have cotton, and the body of a famous boxer from Guanajuato would rot a mile over and feed into the crops for next year. Cotton, strawberries, oranges, they grew no matter who died. They just appeared, and we had to be there to get them off their leaves and make sure they ended up in stores we couldn’t afford. But in these moments, on a quiet truck full of heat-beaten men looking at a June sunset cascading every color in the world, the promise of our dreams seemed clearer, attainable. This funeral was more than enough for Jesús. Maybe it was the best that any of us could ever hope for.

The sun had been gone for an hour by the time Hector, Diego, and myself got off the truck and walked through dried mud to get into our home. The house had one lantern inside but that carried enough power to have the entire home well lit. The smell of oil fried tripas came out from the one window on the right side of the door. We now had one less goat in the backyard. I could see some clouds in the distance beyond the house barely hidden in the night sky. Rain had the effect of washing all the dirt left from the fields but the house took the smell of it all and held it in front of our faces day and night. The screen in front of the door had been torn for years and

the water always left the wooden floor beds soft for weeks after. The orange and grapefruit trees in the backyard rustled in the wind and it had the sound of a small wash, or the sound that the river made when at full strength. The heat from dinner mixed in with the darkness in the night sky and somewhere in there I found peace if only for a small moment, small enough to breath in it, and just enough to miss it after.

“Roberto, don’t tell your mom about what happened today. She doesn’t have to know. Okay?”

“I am not going back into the field Hector.”

“Mande?”

“I won’t tell her, but I’m not going back out there. I can’t.”

“Diego go inside. Now.”

Diego walked into the home with the wind closing the door behind him. The world seemed small behind Hector’s shoulders. He stood there with a cool air blowing across his face, and the silence drowning out the leaves and life behind me. His presence had always been suffocating, and now his breath controlled my air.

“I’m not raising a man that won’t work. You will go out into the field with your brother. He is younger than you and a harder worker already.”

“Diego doesn’t know you.”

Hector stayed still for a moment, letting the anger settle into his face. On this day though, he did nothing. He pounded his fist into his cap and walked through the door, leaving the warmth from the kitchen crawl out behind him. He had beaten me for a lot less. One time as a kid, I ran

so fast around the home that when I tried to stop I tripped and fell face first into a cabinet holding the finest and only real plates we had in our home. One had been passed down from my mama's abuela, one of the last things my mother had to remember her by. I crashed into the frame that held the hundred year old plate, covered in ancient grease stains, and shattered the memory of the food my great abuela once had. The ceramic spread over the entire floor the way roaches run away when a light shines on them. The moment I saw the pieces fly across the wood I knew that I had just sealed my death. I almost decided to end my life right there and do the job of Hector for him. My mom let out a cry, a wail that called upon abuela to come back, maybe even save me from him but it didn't work. Hector had his belt off before all the pieces even stopped spinning. He whipped me so hard that night that my whole ass bled for days. Specks of blood came down in my shit. I couldn't sit normally for weeks. Every snap of the belt reminded me of the neck of the chickens we killed for dinner, crack, snap, release. The plato de abuela incident of that year had the sound of the fear of my father.

So when he walked in, with nothing but the wind beating against his back and sweat still dripping down his forehead, the world became still, more ominous than facing anything at all. His hatred could not be confused for love, and I knew that, but his willingness to just walk by and leave me in a lonely atmosphere that smelled of dirt and boiling fat, felt emptier, quieter. I walked towards the screen door, feeling warmer the moment I stepped on the wooden deck of our home, but by the time I walked in I felt the anger that radiated from Hector, and heard a muffled cry that floated just above the silence that seemed to strangle the air in the home. A hollow word, *home*, whatever that might be, maybe doesn't exist, not here on the outskirts of a small town, in a house being swallowed by mud.

## CHAPTER III

### NARANJA

An orange tree grew once in a small strip of land that bordered a rushing river. The sun beat so hard upon the ground that it had no choice to come out of the soil or burn there among the worms. The tree grew thick branches and hundreds of leaves, sprouted juicy oranges, they fell on the ground and rolled all over spreading out further as the wind pushed them across the dirt. One by one the oranges fell and then rotted, feeding the flies that landed on them, splitting open and leaving the suckling juice roll over the backs of beetles and other insects. The rot, the death of an orange, left the smell of citrus dance in the breeze, and be carried over for miles. The seeds that fell on the ground became entrenched in the soil. The rain and the wind came and soon more trees appeared, all dropping their fruit, all rotting with the winter.

One summer, a man appeared, looked at the land, called it home. He came back with wood, the orange trees saw the monte disappear. The man started digging in the dirt. He pulled out weeds, cut down a lemon tree in the center of the field, started a fire and cleared the ground of the bugs that sucked on juices. He made noise, a lot of it, bang and crashed the pieces of wood together. He built in the summer, stopped in the winter and came back after the frozen rains left. The trees saw their oranges had died, the man stepped on them, dug out more weeds that got in the way of the house. The shack went up, not much to see, hid behind some of the leaves at the

tops of branches. The man left one day, in the middle of a warm morning, the orange trees felt the dew drop off them.

Then, one day, a small child appeared. He ran out amongst the trees, a woman stood behind him watching, tears in her eyes, alone at the edge of the home. The boy jumped and fell and rolled with the oranges that had fallen the night before. An older boy came out and joined with him, calling out to him, running with him under the trees. One summer, in the middle of beating heat that sucked the air out from the ground, the boys ran among the oranges all day. They ran until their breath became heavy and the sweat created small puddles in the ground. When they got tired, they spread out under the shade, looking up into the cloudless sky that only had small strips of jet-streams. They looked up, in between the green leaves that flickered the sunlight on and off, in an umbrella of citrus fumes, they could taste the summer on the edge of their tongues. The bugs buzzed and the birds chirped along, creating a mixture that felt erratic and yet belonged there, in that afternoon, in the sun under the shade of an orange tree.

If they had the chance, the boys wished that the world could stop right there. Maybe it could live in one of those frames they had in town. It should have been painted, photographed, sealed in a case that could capture the sounds, the warmth, and the shade of the trees. In cool of the leaves, in this citrus refuge, the idea of hope and promise lived freely. It never would again. They didn't know when their last breath ended, when the final second came and went, but every minute after that afternoon slowly progressed into a home that lived off fading dreams. The boys never truly ran among the trees and bugs ever again, and now, at the end of their love, they never went out at all. The trees still stand, will probably live longer, fuller...

## CHAPTER IV

### JESUS

Today is Sunday. In the mornings we pretend to get along with everyone at church and worship God, or Jesus, or Mary, or whoever the dead person of the week is. I don't remember the last time I prayed. It may have been for something silly, like rain for the fields or for food. I don't hate God, or religion or any of it, but maybe he isn't for me. God exists only for the rich people that sit in the front of the church, the ones that arrived there in their new 57' Thunderbirds, wearing their new white clothes, all laughing at how much money they have and how white their skin looks. God doesn't work for my family, but every Sunday we wake up and put on the only nice clothes we have and walk to the basilica in center of town. Diego and I fought over who would use the water first, usually I let Diego win only because his body only took a few minutes to get clean, but we couldn't let the water we had go to waste so the moment he felt clean I would have to jump in right after and rinse off too. The whole process took around ten minutes. We could be ready sooner but my mom had to cook breakfast for the family before we left and with the way the gas worked on the stove, either you cranked the thing and set a fire to the colonia or slowly raise the temperature and watch the eggs boil slower than sunrise.

When we first moved I spent the entire first month in a catholic school for us Mexicans. I had to learn English, and more importantly I had to learn how to talk to God in English. I learned on this side of the river, God only hears you if you pray in the right language, the one all the

bibles are written in. The first Sunday here at the basilica, before all the other kids knew I came from across the river, I said Cristo instead of Christ which meant you got whipped like how the poor brown guy did when he got put on the cross. The other kids would laugh, their perfect teeth shining the whole time, and before long they called me the names that Hector heard in supermarkets. I didn't want to pray to a Jesus that looked like them.

A bus sometimes took our family and others from the edge of the colonias to the center of town. It was the only one designated to pick up "brown folk". The basilica towered over the rest of the town square and rows of shiny, bright colored cars led to the church. Most of the town could just walk but Sundays were about more than just praying. On this morning, everything was about showing your status, pushing your money into the center table. If you had the power, Sundays mornings provided the outlet to use it. New cars sped past the bus, revving their engines, chrome shining through the dirt stains on the windows. Families walked by wearing their pressed suits and silk dresses, hats with flowers on the brim of them, all members smelling like the department store at the mall we couldn't go into.

We got dropped off by the same grocery market every Sunday morning and had to walk the mile over to the Basilica. By the time we arrived, the choir would already be singing and we already smelled like sweat and the grass outside. Our clothes already had stains in them so before we went in we made sure to flap our arms or try and rub it all out.

The white kids that sit near us in the back snickered at Diego and I whenever we walked in. The brown side of the church sat near the door, away from the newly installed air conditioning vents near the front of the altar. The rancher that owns the field that our family worked in sat in the front, and he knew better than to come back and say hello to Hector, even if tomorrow morning he will be there watching over in the comfort of his truck.

“Mama, please can we go? I’m tired.”

“Callete Diego, we just got here,” Mama said.

“I’m not feeling good, please?”

“Diego shut up, come sit with me. We’ll look at the pictures in the book okay?” I said.

Diego sat next to me at the opposite end of row from my parents. Mama never seemed too worried about us being on our own because every few minutes or so she would give that look that only Mexican mothers could, the one that causes your soul to ask for forgiveness without knowing what you did. Other than making us feel repentant, she just stood there and sang along when the choir sang, and sat quietly when the priest spoke over the church. She had never missed a communion and always went up when “Father” asked the church who needed to be forgiven. I think more than anything she saw how the other wives were. All of them, next to their husband, always so quiet, so still. She must have thought that maybe, in that one afternoon, if only for a moment, she could reach their wealth under the eyes of God, or Mary, or a lamb, or whatever else looked down upon us.

Diego and I liked flipping through the pages of the bible to look at the secretly dirty pictures. Some pages had people dying, others burning in Hell. One page even had a picture of a woman with her tit out while she held a baby and looked up towards an angel. Angels, they were the best of all to laugh at. All of them were always so fat and white, looked like the kids in the front row. Angels must have been rich too. We giggled in the corner of the row until the Priest said that the kids can leave for the children’s portion of the service. We both slowly walked towards the hallway that led to the rich kids from town. The children’s portion of church was held in a room that smelled like fresh strawberries.



“When as the last time you all took a shower?” One of them asked. He held his shoulders high knowing he had power over us. I saw him in school a few times when I used to go. He had classes in the hallway that I wasn’t allowed to step into.

“You all smell like the field”

“Do you all even wipe? You all smell like cow shit.”

“Both of you are just poor Mexican trash.”

Insults from white Christians are never extremely creative, but they are effective. Diego hasn’t cried this time, but he refuses to talk for the rest of the class and I don’t know which is worse. He heard more when he attended the elementary school that is down the street from here and close to the stores downtown. Before he started going, he never noticed the smell of his clothes but after the insults he takes the time to sit down by himself and secretly put his nose to the edge of his shoulder. The Christian kids usually backed off after their best lines are down, and also they know that I’m not afraid to beat their teeth into the back of their heads. I never tried to show how afraid I am hitting them because the moment they mentioned how Sunday school went to their parents, my family and I would end up on the first bus back to Mexico, or hung in the city square for all other field workers to see.

“Diego, you don’t smell like anything. If anything, you smell like all the soap mom puts in the tub when she washed your shirt last night. They are just being mean.”

“What is special about Mexican trash that I smell like it Robby?”

“It just means you smell like something they are afraid of. Okay?”

After service ended the kids went back to their parents to tell them all the great things they learned about God, like how he drowned the world when there were too many sinners, or how he helped David chop the head off a giant. The families in the front talked about cookouts at their homes after church, and how they have so much money that they just had to make a pool. I dreamed of what they cook every Sunday night. Diego washed his shirt with the bowl of holy water in the front, and Mama yelled “aye Diego!” which caused some old women to look at her and gossip between them. One time Diego had diarrhea the night before we came to the church, so by the time we got here he couldn’t feel any saliva on his tongue, so he went right for the bowl of holy water and dunked his hands in there to scoop the holiness in his mouth. He said it tasted like the water from the hose outside the church. He also said he was now clear of any sins for the rest of his life. I told him he pissed out his holiness later that day.

Mama turned her head in my direction, but her eyes looked over my head. Diego did the same. I turned towards the front of the church and at the altar, the man that owned the field we work in talked to Hector. The man had boots that looked like they were peeled off the bones of a snake just yesterday. He was about a whole foot shorter than Hector, but I had never seen Hector look so small. The man, wearing his cowboy hat, silver belt, and white button down shirt placed his finger into Hector’s chest. He didn’t flinch and stepped back a bit to give the man room. Mama closed her eyes and said a small prayer.

“Hector, what did he tell you?” Mama said.

“It’s not important.”

“Was he mad daddy?”

“No Diego. Come on, let’s go back home.”

“Well what did he say Hector? Why did he touch you like that?” Mama said.

“All he said was to pick as much as I can tomorrow. That’s it. Just pick as much as I can.”

## CHAPTER V

### THE FIELD

Diego woke up long before the colonia rooster ever knew. He sat up on his side of the bed and just stared out through the window, looking off into the night at the remaining stars. I could feel, his toes wriggling around under the cotton sheet, his hands tapping by the side of my ribs. I felt them even with my eyes closed and half of my thoughts in somewhere distant, far from here and anywhere I have known. Diego and I have shared a bed for all our lives, as an infant I held on to him to make sure he never rolled off or ran away from a dream. Now at 16, I had to sleep knowing my younger brother, who knew nothing of life past his eight years in this small world, had more love from Hector than I have ever known. He didn't have to wake up before dawn, eight year olds usually don't, but Diego had a job to do today, one that required him to sweat and feel his bones ache, and all he could do now was embrace the smell of dew as it fell on the trees outside.

I had dreamt of music. In the dream, I stopped in front of one of the fancy stores downtown and listened to a bright red metallic radio as I smelled the world around me. I heard the sound before, saw it once on a television in a window. The man in the suit called it jazz and the moment he introduced the musicians a sharp light came on behind him and a man with some horn started playing. The music I heard in my dream sounded just like it. In the dream, all I could do was stand there and listen. I couldn't see anything else, no other stores or people around me.

There must have been clouds, or I must have been standing in long sunset, because no sun beat down on my back like how it usually did. It sounded beautiful, even if I didn't know what true beauty looked or felt like. The smooth melody carried along with the faint scent of cut grass and breathing trees. In the moment I felt I could see the sound dancing along in the sky, and I tried my very best to hold it in my hand. But every time I reached forward in my dream, all I could feel was the cold glass in front of the radio. No matter how hard I slammed or pressed against it, nothing moved, but the sound kept playing on. Eventually I hit the glass so hard that the radio stopped working. The music faded out and the world became quiet. Everything started to feel cold and then I realized that my dream began to fade and I could smell the orange trees outside. Even in my own dreams, I could never reach the music I wanted.

“Robby, come with me, please,” Diego said. He pressed his fingers into my side right below my ribs. I heard his voice trembling and felt the cool outside. I could barely open my eyes.

“He wouldn't want me to Diego, just trust me on that.”

“But I need you Robby, please. I'm too scared to go out there without you.”

“You need to stop being a baby Diego. You're too old to be afraid of this. I'll go this time. But next time I tell you that I am not going out there, don't be a scared little girl and ask me again.”

Diego looked down and stayed quiet as I got myself out of bed too. He put his clothes on slowly. He usually asks for help tying his shoes but today he didn't even look up in my direction and just made a knot with the laces. He walked out of the room before I could say anything. When I walked out the door and saw him waiting on the outside of the home, I could tell the

world today felt different to him. Hector saw me the moment he stepped out of his bedroom and mama had already been in the kitchen for an hour or so preparing his breakfast.

“You are being a man today after all?”

“Yes sir.”

“Go wait outside with Diego, I will be there soon,” Hector said.

Mama would usually give us a tortilla with butter or Crisco on it. A meal meant for field workers. She always lathered the tortilla on both sides, and when she had it, left us a strip of bacon or tripa to fight over. Diego and I never complained. The taste of butter or Crisco on a tortilla in morning saves lives and would change the whole world if everyone knew of it. But for Hector, he demanded a plate of eggs and whatever other meat we had. Even if it meant leaving his family without solid food for the rest of the week, he demanded his meal, and let Diego and I sit outside smelling his food while he ate it.

My mama left behind a whole different lifestyle in Mexico. She came from the center of San Nicolas in Guanajuato. Cobblestone lined up the haciendas her whole family lived in. She once told me how the streets looked like gold when the sun shined down on them. Every morning her own mother would give her a few pesos to go get some fresh eggs from the market down the road. The city of San Nicolas hides just under a giant mountain, and sometimes the clouds rained down over the side of it like a waterfall. The town existed on constant hills so a cool breeze and fresh air lived there year round. She never had a dad but knew of the man that had knocked up her mama. His name was Jose Lope Portillo, a wealthy licenciado. He sent checks to the family every few weeks, sometimes showed up himself inside a nice car driven by a man with funny hats. Every once in a while a new check showed up and the family smiled and

drank for the rest of the evening. Her entire life, from the moment she came out her mama's tummy to when she turned 16 and married Hector Antonio Navarro, looked like this perfect neighborhood in which money came and went like the sunset. But then one fall evening, not long after Dia De Los Muertos, she told me of how she saw a young man walking along the edge of the town square, and something about how his hair carried in the breeze and how his jeans, stained with oil acrylic, fit just right. She knew she had to have him. Against her mother's wishes, she left the city of San Nicolas with the man and never looked back. She now cooked breakfast for him every morning, and washed his shirt every night.

The sun felt hotter and the field felt lonelier. No sound came from in-between the bushes. Usually someone sang or whistled corridos but today everyone just dug their hands into the dirt and plucked away every piece of cotton they could. Hector told the men what the owner of the field had told him and for the entire morning up until now our faces had been listening to the soil fall off our fingertips. I had been listening and moving my hands according to the heavy breathing of Francisco who stood across from me and we moved in rhythm all morning. My sweat fell into the dirt until Francisco stood up and casted a shadow over my forehead, and soon I saw shadows appearing up and down the row. I rose up along with them to see a line of brown clouds racing towards us, being kicked up by one of those massive new Chevy pick-up trucks, fitted with a chrome front that had been stained by the mashing of bugs. The truck stopped abruptly right on the side of us, blowing more dirt onto our faces. The man that put his finger in front of Hector's face yesterday got out, dressed in hat, boots, every rancher piece of clothing you could think of. His friends must have told him what to buy from the clothing stores downtown. He had sunglasses that reflected the world behind us, the rows of white that elevated up into the sky.

“I am going to get right to the point. We found a body in one of the fields nearby. We know he worked with us before. The state is cracking down on this shit, so as of today, if you do not have any papers, we are letting you go.” The white man said.

“Mande?” One worker asked.

“We don’t speak Ingles senior,” said another. In truth we all knew just enough English to make it by in the States. We knew exactly what the rancher meant. Maybe he would get frustrated enough to leave us be in the sun.

“If you don’t have papers, and no speak English, then as of right now you are fired. You don’t work here anymore. I don’t need any more Braceros. If you stay, I will be back and this won’t end easily. Comprenday?”

“Sir we have nowhere else to go. Our homes are here we can’t travel to other fields. “

“We need this field. We need the money,” Hector said.

“That isn’t my problem. Right now I am trying to figure out whose body is it I found. Now get off my field.”

“Aye puto, you can’t get rid of us. You need us to work these fields!” Francisco said.

“Hey! I’ll say it again so you can understand me boy. I don’t want any of you damn wetbacks here if anyone stops by. So no papers, then no money. Adios. Goodbye! And fuck you for speaking back to me.”

“Sir, please, I have my family here with me,” Hector said.



“Get off my field hector and get your dirty family out of here too. All you fucking animals have to get outta here. I’ll be back in an hour to pick up the remaining bags. I better not see any one of ya’ll”

The rancher got back in his truck and took his hat off in an awkward manner, not used to the way the brim covered his face. We stayed quiet as he drove away. A small rumble of thunder rolled off in the distance, and miles away dark clouds appeared to be raining life. Diego started reaching back into the cotton, but Hector grabbed his hand. The rest of the men picked up their bags and started heading towards the edge of the field. Hector told Diego and I to do the same. He just stood there in the middle of it all though, looking off somewhere. Maybe he saw home from here, or his past from here.

“Andale, let’s move out,” Hector said.

The thunder continued, rolled into silence. We rode in the back of the truck like every afternoon before. Felt the ups and downs of the gravel. Rocks or splashes of mud occasionally hit our face and we let it stay there. No one said a word, couldn’t decide what to say. For the second time we had no voice to give. This seemed like a death to come, a slow stab, a laying out in the sun.

“He killed us, the fucking bastard killed us,” Hector said.

“There’s other fields Hector. They all need workers, everyone does.”

“You all don’t understand. He will tell the others, that’s what he meant. For now, everyone will know, and we won’t make it past winter. That is what they want. For us to die, or to get the hell out of the States.”

“They will let us work.”

“We buried Jesús, we should have just buried ourselves too.”

When we got home my mama rushed out to see why we had shown up a few hours earlier than usual. She started apologizing about dinner not being ready before she looked around and saw the sun not lower in the sky. Hector walked her inside, and I took Diego around into the backyard to sit and listen to the trees. I hoped they could cover everything around us. I heard hints of yelling, and some words being let out like a fire striking out into cedar. The deep waves of Hector’s voice went along with the thunder the hummed from the storm miles away. It had moved closer. Mama’s cries broke through the sound of shaking leaves. Her gasps of air sounded wet. Her tears smelled like the scent of rain.

## CHAPTER VI

### HORSES AND LIONS

That night Diego had a dream. When he woke up he couldn't shake it. He just kept talking and crying, trying to get it out as quick as he could, before it faded, before he couldn't go on. No this didn't seem like any sense of action, nothing world creating, but he saw it in his eyes and could look upon details like eternal memories. He saw it, and it sang to him a constant song as I reached over to try and shake him up out from where he was. He saw it when his eyes opened, and I saw him fall away from it. He played it in his head as he adjusted to the dark blue ceiling above him. It was dawn, and his dream looked a little something like this.

He saw leaves, the autumn kind, the ones on white TV shows. They were falling like crystalized rain all around, flurrying in the wind as he rode along in an old school bus. They bordered both sides of the road, and in the distance, he saw hills that looked like sunsets. The road glimmered ahead of them, sparkling, shooting into your eyes at such an intensity that tears formed in the corner of them. The leaves lightly tapped like a million dancers across the roof. There was light with the warmest of hues, illuminating everything around them, the trees, the moisture in the air, the small drops falling down on the window. Not one cloud appeared on the horizon, not one sense of disturbance, just light but no sun.

The bus smelled like mold waxed over with fabuloso. The old, toxic smell mixed with the multipurpose lavender, masking it well. The seats were torn and stained and every window had

years of condensation permanently on it. The bus creaked along at a steady speed. Every curve around the road had the axels on the tires screaming, harmonizing with the wind. Diego rested his head on the faded glass, shook with the beat of the bus, putting his world in a constant rattle. No matter how far they seemed to drive, or how many curves they went around, the trees never ended, and showed no sign of it.

Diego's father drove the bus with Roberto and mama sitting right behind the driver seat. He couldn't see their faces, not clearly, but he knew. Their uncle Danny sat across them. Diego hadn't seen Uncle Danny in a long time. He used to see him just about every day, but when they fled Mexico, Danny stayed to watch over the land. They hadn't heard from him since, figured they never would, but here he sat on the bus that kept going further and further into the trees.

And then there were the lions. Two of them, fully grown. They were sitting side by side and their fur glowed across their backs. They breathed heavily, almost creating a small roar. They were here to guard the horses. The family had three of them in the back of a small trailer being pulled by the bus. Diego felt like he had known every animal his entire life. The two lions on the bus sitting side by side, the three horses in the trailer, he recognized them. Diego had the notion in his mind that the lions protected the horses from the coyotes that would run wild on the land his family owned back home. His father had gotten the lions when they were just cubs, probably somewhere out in the mountains, and trained them to keep the other animals safe.

"How much longer Hector, the lions are getting restless and I bet you that horse trailer is all full of shit now," Uncle Danny said.

"Just a few more hours, now shut up, pendejo"

"Just saying, drive faster before the one of those horses heats up and dies."

“You two stop fighting already.” Mama said. She had dealt with Hector and Danny fighting the moment she had met them. She loved it. Danny would always tell her how she saved Hector. The moment he saw her he swore he had seen a whole new universe. Danny saw it in his brother’s eyes, he looked like a child, like a person seeing the shores of a beach for the first time. Hector could never describe her, or the future he saw in her when he laid his eyes on her smooth brown skin, because he had never seen such promise in his life.

“These horses are going to die if we don’t stop soon Hector, and I am not pulling those damn things out of the trailer,” Uncle Danny said.

“We don’t even need the horses where we are going.” Hector said.

“So then why do we need the lions?”

The bus then pulled over on the curb, driving over piles of leaves. Hector instructed the family to get off. When Diego stepped outside he felt a cool wind then a spread of warmth move across his body. The road kept winding forward with no end. Roberto sat and picked up a stick and started drawing in the dirt. Diego’s mother went over by Roberto’s side while Uncle Danny and Hector dragged the two lions off the bus. The lions roared and shook their fur and you could see the wind flow through the hair like silk.

Hector then went to the trailer and unloaded the horses. They got off and trotted around the leaves, embracing the feel of earth under their hooves. They pranced around as if they were feeling the warmth of spring. He then led them over to where the lions were standing and told Uncle Danny to help him take them out into the woods. The lions moved reluctantly, as lions do, but went along once they saw the horses heading in front of them.

Danny and Hector moved slowly through the sea of colored trees. The lions sniffed in the air and suddenly a shower of leaves began to fall among the men and the animals. The raining leaves colored the air with a mix of orange, brown, and red. Neither the animals nor the men became distraught by the downpour. The wind swirled the leaves around, creating a dance-like ritual. The sound of the wind passing through created a soft tone, singing and chanting as the men entered into the wilderness. They then reached the end of the swirling leaves and came into a clearing. Everything stopped. The trees formed a wall around them and both men could only look up to see an incoherent sky above them, as if they landed in the eye of God. No shadows were around any of them, there was only pure, radiant light. Diego walked behind the group and now sat upon the edge behind one of the trees.

Hector and Danny took the ropes off the necks of the animals and then stared right at them. Their journey ended here in the clearing. They looked upon the animals and saw a past, one that had bright shades of green and the scent of gulf water breaking through the hills, a home that seemed further away now more than ever. They ran their hands through the mane of the horses one last time, and stooped down to hug the necks of both lions. Hector grabbed a fallen stick that laid by his feet and held the oak firm in his hand.

“Go on and leave.” He said. His voice laying a deep harmony under the sound of the woods.

He then hit the back of one of the horses and the two animals shot off into the trees. One of the lions went after them. They galloped away faster than the men had ever seen, racing against the wind, embracing the sensation and taking in the full smell of the crisp autumn air. The lion ran right behind their hind legs, feeling the power of their steps. Diego watched from the trees and hoped they would run together for the rest of their lives. Tears started streaming

down his face as he saw the other lion head into the woods on his own. Diego turned and ran towards the lion who was now making his way in-between the trees, but he couldn't catch up. The lion never looked back to say goodbye. He just ran forward and disappeared. Diego fell to his knees and cried thinking of all the times he would wake up early, run up to the cats outside and place his forehead against theirs. He felt a trust, a love that that made him understand emotions that he never knew existed at the time. He wanted one more look into their eyes, a proper goodbye, but he got nothing.

One of the horses remained standing still in the clearing, looking into the woods. He didn't budge a bit. Hector began hitting him with the stick harder and faster, yelling "get out of here, move, go!" but the horse never did. He hit the animal harder and harder until he started to see small specks of blood appearing from the leg. The animal stayed there, taking the hits, just looking into the eyes of the man he had known his entire life. Finally Hector stopped and looked at the animal and pleaded.

"Please leave, please just go. I can't hit you anymore," He said.

"Let's just leave him here Hector, he'll go," Uncle Danny said.

"But what if he doesn't?"

"He will, they always leave."

Hector then dropped the stick and started walking away. The men left the horse in the clearing, standing there, bleeding from behind his right leg. The horse just stared at the men as they went into the trees. Diego watched from where he fell to his knees in the woods, the horse stayed standing in the center, light shining across its' back. The wind started picking up again and soon the leaves were falling all around Diego, almost blinding his view of the animal. He

wanted to say bye but knew had to catch up to the group. Diego stood up and walked back through the trees, never turning back again. They didn't need horses where they were going.

When Diego woke up he saw only my face in front of his and traces of the blue coming through the bottom of the door. He wanted put on the shirt he wore the day before, buckle his jeans and put on his boots to head out for work. I had to remind him the field wasn't there for us anymore. The sun would slowly come up over the land like the day before. The humidity would stick to our arms and face. He knew the smell of dusk more than any other scent in the world. He knew the dream would fade in the heat as the day went on. He would embrace it while it lasted, and then let it burn away under the sun, let it burn away in the field, burn away with the rest of the Earth, like the skin that burned away off of Jesús who now rotted in roots of cotton, burn away like how it always did, and always would. Everything always burned away here at the bottom of the Valley.



## CHAPTER VII

### ESTRELLA

The next Sunday we didn't bother trying to go to church. We grabbed some oranges from the backyard and snuck into the groves a mile away from home, put them in bags and went to go sell outside the shops that the town would visit once service left out. I learned awhile back that rich white people love buying oranges from us poor brown field workers, especially after service. They either felt guilty, or wanted to show off to their friends just how charitable they were and catch the eye of Father Sanchez. Maybe he would give them less Hail Mary's in their next confession, or forget about the time they told him that they slept with the neighbor next door while their children cried in the next room. We usually sold out within the first few hours.

Today though, multiple families had the same plan and without notice the entire road looked like a functioning fruit market. I had seen some of the other men and their kids from the other fields spread out on the other side of town. They had bags of grapefruit and boxes of strawberries with them. I felt bad earlier for stealing a few oranges from the trees, but these families must have cleared whole rows to get the boxes they had.

The church bells had just start to ring. We lined up our oranges, tried to make them look more appealing than the fruit from all the other families. We even put Diego in front of them, the face of the family, easily the cutest of all of us. But before we could do anything, a cop car came rolling down the road with its' siren blaring louder than the bells that rang out in the air. One

brown family selling oranges never caused attention, a whole market downtown looked like an invasion, a call for war.

Before my family could start yelling “Naranajas!” Hector jumped from behind the table and started pulling in the oranges back into the bag. Mama ran to the front and grabbed Diego, swinging him onto her back. She looked at me, with fear filling in the brown shades of her eyes, telling me in no words to run, with them, or anywhere. I scooped up an orange that fell on the floor, maybe trying to protect it from the white man too, and ran around the corner, fast enough to keep up with my family, but not enough to fear the idea of being caught.

As soon as I turned around the corner, I stopped to look back. The church had dismissed, one by one, in all their nice clothes, the rich families came out and looked over to see all the chaos happening across the road in their corner of the town. They saw a family that had been laying out strawberries crying wildly, yelling in the air, and had nowhere to run. They saw a brown father get thrown onto their pristine concrete. It probably felt softer than falling on the dirt in the backyard. In their bright Sunday dresses and gleaming leather boots they gasped, looked disgusted upon the sight of the world they never knew, each one of them with the same expression, except one of them, the most beautiful of them all.

Estrella Cazares had the shade of brown in her eyes that I wanted to swim in. They had the scent of fall. They blended in with the gleam of the sun. When the afternoon hit the perfect hour I swear you could see her eyes shine and glow stronger than the end of winter. Her lightly curled black hair dropped perfectly on top of her chest that I wanted to sleep on. Today she had on the yellow and white dress that she wore for the spring dance, a month before I had to leave school. I still remember how she smelled that night, like rain mixed with maple from sapling trees, filled with warmth. The dress danced around her body and moved in the wind, throwing

the colors into the air, but even in the beauty of a perfect breeze mixed with the brightest of suns, none of it compared to her smile. Even when I sat behind her in English every day, I could see her cheeks rise up on her face, looking soft enough to jump on. I could hear her voice from here, the southern sound on the back of her tongue. It sounded sweet and innocent. I wanted to see her smile, live in her breath, but instead she looked onwards like the rest of them.

She stood behind her parents. Senior Cazares had made his money owning the very fields his shade of people worked in. He wore his suit with pride and a full understanding of what it cost him. Just the shade of grey on it looked like it cost more than whatever our plot of land was worth. Everyone from the field hated their name. They hated especially when he drove his light blue Cadillac around the edge of the strawberry fields he owned. No one truly knew how, but he got a lot of money from somewhere and right before he had Estrella, he convinced one of the white men that owned the field to sell it to him. I always wondered how much money that freedom cost.

Estrella's mother tried to turn her daughter around to not see the cops tackle a sun-beaten man trying to sell fruit on the side of the road, tried to stop her from seeing my family flee around the corner of the street, but she couldn't. Estrella saw me run and dip behind a parked red Firebird. She saw my eyes get stuck to the colors of her dress. Estrella never turned around. I wondered if she remembered me as the boy who tried talking to her once after class but smelled like mud after rain falls in winter. An organic mold stench that stuck to every line of cloth in my shirt because the night before it fell off the wire it hung on in the backyard. I saw it in her eyes and her quiet response that she could barely breathe around me. When she walked away, I heard her laugh with the other boys who had better clothes. I didn't talk to her again after that day. I had to leave school not long after to work in the fields with Hector.

I wish I could show her the backyard in the fall when the fireflies glow and shoot like falling angels. Or show her in the winter how light flakes of ice formed around the edges of leaves and when they melted you could taste all the flavors of a Rio Grande winter. I wanted to show her these things but that meant taking her to a colonia that had no street signs or lamp posts. It didn't have grass that stopped on the edge of a paved road, or kids racing their bikes up and down every day of the year. She wouldn't understand it. I wondered if Senior Cazares wanted her to be lost among the outskirts of orange fields. Maybe he sold his color to make sure his daughter never knew a backyard like mine. Estrella could never go past the Weslaco city limit sign that stood a mile past the railroad tracks, the sign that I had to run towards.

I turned towards the colonia. If I squint hard enough, I can make out the sign just beyond the tracks. My family and I don't get home until later in the afternoon. We can see the sun starting to get closer to the edge of the monte. Tonight we will eat the oranges we didn't get to sell. Maybe mama could find enough flour and water to make a few tortillas. We made no money so the backyard wouldn't see any animal killings during the sunset. I hoped to see the blood, taste the meat, but instead I felt empty. The breeze smelled like burnt sugar cane. My life tasted like the peeling of ripe oranges.

## CHAPTER VIII

### FUEGO

Hector once took me fishing back when we first crossed to this side of the river. I remember there had been heavy rain the day before so the dirt had been breathing and you could smell the worms moving in the ground below you. We walked deep into the monte and had found a clearing with a still pond just right next to a canal. He reasoned that since the rain had just come in the day before, maybe some fish came in through the canal waters when they overflowed and were now trapped here in this circle of dirt-filled water. “We could have dinner for the week now” he told me. I didn’t care about eating, or happiness, just wanted time with the man I didn’t understand. So we walked into the dirt, and felt the mosquitos steal our blood.

We walked through still moist grass, soaking up our socks and the bottom of our jeans. A few dragonflies came by and told us not to destroy their home. We would anyway. The pond reflected the sky above and the voice of God sounded clear. It had the sound of frogs jumping in and out of a still world with the splash of crickets ringing around it. I saw fish swim just under the surface of the water. I could see their scales and felt them in my throat. We had two rods, a few beers in an ice chest, and a pack of sunflower seeds. I felt like I had a father.

We tossed in the lines and one by one we started bring out fat suckers that had red and green stripes across them like ripe pears. The lines caught the moment they hit, and soon we had ran out of bait so we dug our hands into the dirt to find more worms. One handful in and out and

soon we had had all the fish in the pond in our chest. The weight dragged down into my arms. I held one fish across my body and it moved and hit its fin across me so hard that I felt the spine digging into my skin. But I held it there because Hector gave me a look I only saw once before back home across the river, the day I killed my first goat. He had a son for once.

The sun beat and the world shook and in that moment, with God filling in my ears with the sound of his voice, I wanted to confess all my sins because I had never felt his love before. I could see it in everything now. I saw it in the sound of the water as dragonflies landed on top of a perfectly still pond. I felt God's love in the scaling of fish, grinding their skin with a blade while sitting next to a man I hardly knew. I felt the world create a perfect moment, allowing itself to exhale around me and swirl in the sounds of a soul that I could connect with. And when the sun beat hard and the leaves became greener, I felt the warmth of a love longer than time and the moment I lived in. A heat that felt like an open flame, a blaze that burned just outside a window, a wildfire in the land of citrus and cotton...

When Diego woke up in the morning the first thing he told me was that he couldn't see the sun and the world smelled like the inside of a bonfire. I didn't understand what he meant but everything around us had a haze and the air seemed harder to breathe in. I felt the heaviness the moment I opened my mouth. The taste of burning wood had filled the entire home. The smoke had slipped through the cracks between the walls, slowly oozing in, floating to the ceiling, creating storm clouds in our bedroom.

Diego had tears in his eyes and he started rubbing them faster and faster but the water kept coming. I heard running in the home and yelling coming from outside, sounded like a woman, yelling louder and further away from me. And with a thunder roar to my chest I heard Hector scream "Cover the ground with water now" and I thought the heat came from his voice. I

ran out to the door and saw a wall of black and knew this is the Hell Father Sanchez wanted me to believe in.

The smoke had already risen into the sky and I couldn't see where it stopped and the night began. Usually in the dawn the sun is barely visible above the edge but the world had never looked darker. The smoke had already covered everything and small ashes had fallen on the orange trees covering it like the snow back in the mountains of Guanajuato. I saw an orange glow across the ground and hoped the sun had started to rise but I could see the flames, and heard a yelling that sounded like the soul of someone burning. I felt the scream in my throat, felt my hands burn with theirs. The smoke extended in every direction. I turned everywhere I could and saw the wall just surround and choke the sky. The only stars I could see hovered over the direction of town. No smoke hovered in their part of the world, and then suddenly I knew why. A white figure came running out of the smoke, yelling in my direction and reaching for my chest. I could make out the blouse but blotches of black covered every part of it, and the face of the person had been covered in ash. "The fields are on fire, all of them, everywhere." It was Mama, and with every word, ash puffed off her lips.

She walked past me, stumbled though the smoke that moved and broke with every step. I heard Diego calling out behind me, his voice traveling, reaching past my ears and into the wind that carried burning leaves. It had a sting that sat in my throat. I felt the fire at the top of my lungs and I wondered if among the taste of burning soil that landed on my tongue, if the burning body of Jesús landed there also.

I wondered if on the drips of my saliva I could taste the remains of his burning flesh, the bones that endured the rot and the crawling of worms. Maybe the taste reminded me of carnitas. His body had melted wherever Hector had buried him, but now it had risen in the flames and laid

over us, looking down upon us. Father Sanchez always said God's son looked over us whenever we did something wrong, so before we ever made a choice we knew he wouldn't like, to just think of that image. I could never see it, and I never cared. But knowing now the body of the man who fought for a life, stood for something once, and now carried in the smoke around covering my face, it meant more than some white bloodied man on a cross.

Sirens started wailing off somewhere beyond the smoke. Some of the ranchers who lived in town must have smelled their money burning away in mixed citrus. Once the firefighters and cops got involved, they would be down in the colonia within hours, beating down doors to find anyone they could pin it on and display in the town square. All they needed was a brown body, preferably someone who didn't speak a word of English, and dumb enough to never question why he had been chosen. Hector came running out of the smoke, coughing, trying to see home. He lunged at me and the second his hands touched my shirt his eyes became wider, realizing who it was he landed on.

“Roberto, get back inside. They are going to come. You need to get back inside.”

Hector said, coughing, spitting up into the dirt between breaths.

“What is happening? Did you do this?”

“Francisco and some of the other workers got together. They set fire to half of the fields. I couldn't stop them. The cotton field is all gone. All of it.” Hector coughed. “They are going to come for us. Fuck, they burned it all. This wasn't supposed to happen.”

“What do you mean? Is anyone hurt?”

“They were going to bring us back. They needed us to leave, just for a while. But now it's gone...all of it.” Hector said. He walked towards the home with the smoke following in



with him. The clouds reached into the stars and soon even the sky would taste the smell of burning sugar cane. The crackling from the fire sounded like dancers when they perform up and down on caliche streets. Birds flew in and out of the smoke. They must have been looking for fallen eggs, trying desperately to return to their homes, but it was too late now. I could see small jack rabbits running across the floor. The thuds from their feet sounded like dropping fruit. The fire had now towered over the colonia, looked down upon the hands that had cared for it and now burnt it all away. There was no more sky and I wondered if there ever would be.

I returned back inside to see Hector holding Mama. Diego had a bucket of water and he continually dipped in his hands to wipe his eyes. The smoke had taken over every corner and had now reached into the glass cabinets that held our old porcelain plates. Inside everything felt warmer, almost like the wood had already started burning along with the world around us. Mama hadn't been crying. I would have been able to see the tears stained on her cheeks from the layer of ash on her face. She just sat there in Hector's arms, looking off into the small holes in the wood frame of our home. I could see burning rabbits run across her eyes. Hector had sweat stains all across his head that looked like dried rivers. They swirled and moved like the Rio Grande. Diego kept washing water into his face and softly crying. He wouldn't stop so I picked him up before he could drown himself. I did him no favors.

“Hector, go throw some water on the roof por favor. Take a few buckets with you.” Mama said. She had no tone in her voice, and her eyes didn't move in any direction.

“The fire won't reach here. It is too far out and there is nothing here for it to cling on to.” Hector said.

“Please Hector, go put some water on the roof. Just please do something to protect this family.”

“Mama will we be okay?” Diego said. “Are you okay?”

“We will be fine Diego. Give you’re the dad the bucket and go lie down. Can you do that for me mijito?”

“Yes mama,” Diego nodded. He handed his bucket of dirt-stained water to Hector, who took it outside with and threw the water on the roof without care. Hector kept filling the buckets and continued to throw it on the roof over and over. It made the sound of heavy rain and yet everything around me reminded me of the fire that took over the sky. I kept thinking of Jesús.

I wondered if he looked down from heaven and saw the men who set fire to the field. What if in heaven he was hoping that somehow his remains would make it back home? Wherever home for him was. He might have wanted it returned to the mountains of Guanajuato. Maybe he wanted his ashes to be scattered in the wind so it could float around the hills outside the capitol like clouds, instead of falling here on burnt cotton. He never spoke of a family, never once mentioned any primos or tias. His family line could have died with him here in the dirt, without any type of special moment, just with a collapse among fieldworkers. A whole history of people, lifetimes of dreams and wants, now spreading over a small group of homes filled with families going nowhere and struggling to survive. Jesús now lived forever here with every one of us, and I couldn’t shake the sound of his last stand of life being choked away in the sun. Maybe I had to stop thinking of a man that died an old fighter that fled a country for money. But I couldn’t and maybe he was my only real God.

The fire would never reach us. The inside of our home dripped with water for a few hours. The smell of wet wood lived longer. All the fire trucks from town were able to hold the fire down within a few hours and by the time sunset came around, all that was left were burnt sugar cane stems that flowed in and out of the wind. The ashes fell between the trees in the backyard and Diego and I spent an hour or so pretending to play in black snow. We made ash angels and threw burnt stems at each other's faces. Once night came, Hector called us inside and told us to not to go out there. He never told us the full truth. Apparently the man that fired us all would hire Hector again in a few weeks or so. He needed everyone to gone until he made sure no one remembered the body found in the strawberry field. But that was over now. The town would remember the morning the fields burned away. They now wanted to make sure that those left in the colonia would remember too.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE RANGERS

The next few nights, I slept maybe a total of six hours in three days, and three of those were made up of dreams of crying corn. I dreamt I ran between the stalks, trying to escape an endless field, and all of the husks kept trying to reach out and grab my shoulder. They pulled and tripped but I kept running. They cried out “Roberto!”, and sung out my name like sad mariachi songs. Their voices rose and rose and soon covered the sound of my own feet running below me. They sounded like voices I’ve heard before. Some of them reminded me of the two brothers that sometimes worked next to us in the melon fields last summer. They talked to Diego and I on and off and made our days workable. Some of the stalks had the same lisp as the younger one that especially liked playing and talking with Diego. The corn with the lazy tongue grabbed at my neck. It whispered in my ear, the voice sounded like a melting death.

I never escaped the field. I ran for forever and never found the end, and never knew the beginning. Diego’s arm was on top of my throat when I woke up. I heard later that day that Rangers had started going to different neighborhoods, knocking down doors to “ask questions” about the fires. They wanted to evaporate us. They always have. The fires only gave them a reason to go home by home. Their talks ended with missing brown daughters and sons.

Mama told me about the Rangers once. Big white men that rode on horses, had money, and had guns because of their money. Not long ago they went into the colonias and made their

presence known by setting fire to the first homes they saw. They waited until the families came running out and the moment they did they shot at the kids first. It didn't matter if it was a small girl holding the only doll she had, or a boy with pee all over himself, they shot and left the bodies there. They let their parents feel the pain for a while, and then they shot the rest of the family before their homes could fully burn down. Sometimes they took the bodies and laid them out in the mud, let the sun rise on them so the rest of the colonias could see them on the way to the fields for work. The Rangers rode on their horses like how their elders did, mama told me, just this time they didn't have robes, but instead had badges, and were paid well for what they did. They wanted to make sure our skin color either left, or laid dead and became food for the grass that grew for the town. Once a few major cities up north heard about the raids, the dead bodies, the burnt homes, the Rangers got ordered to stop the raids and killing brown kids. Instead, they were told to just let them work in the sun and let them die that way. But now the money for their guns had burnt away.

Hector is a strong man. I couldn't deny that. I hated him, and wanted nothing to do with the man whose blood is in me, but he will always be the strongest man I've ever known. But even Hector could do nothing against the Rangers. He knew that too. When the first word came out about the raids, Hector told us to never leave home after the sun went down and if we did he wouldn't open the door to let us back in. Diego would never run away or anything like that, but he liked to go into the backyard at night when he couldn't sleep to look at stars. He fell asleep there a few nights. Hector didn't want my brother's body to be laid out in front of our neighborhood. He cared less about me. I never went out at night but I am sure if I did Hector would barricade the door the moment I stepped foot outside. And Mama never left our home without Hector by her side. The only store she was allowed to go alone to was the carniceria and

we had no money to buy any meat this week. Once night came we had no other option but to stay inside and stay quiet. Hector kept the lights dim and kept his ears towards the door. For first time in maybe my entire life, I saw Hector look something close to weak. He knew that no matter how hard he fought, or whatever he tried to make our home safe, none of it mattered. They would kill us in a matter of seconds, and we were lucky that they hadn't done so already.

Stories started spreading in the morning after the first night of the raids. One night, Francisco walked over to our colonia with blood all over his shirt. He didn't seem to know who it belonged to. I hadn't seen Francisco since the cotton fields last. In the fields he usually kept everyone light and feeling happy. He sang corridos while picking and often made jokes about the cotton being softer than the tits of the girl he slept with the night before. He didn't have any kids but got along well with Diego and I. We couldn't recognize him at first when he came out from the dust and into our colonia. It looked like a scene from the old cowboy movies, the ones they showed in town, when the head cowboy walks into the center of town and gets ready to cause trouble. Francisco walked in with silence behind him and a swirl of dirt moving across his feet. I went out with Hector and a few other men from the colonia to meet him and the moment they reached for his shoulder he collapsed and tears fell down like the river.

"The Rangers came last night." Francisco said, crying through his words. "They drove down in some big truck. Some woman was washing shirts outside. Four assholes got out walked towards her while she scrubbed the shirts. They asked her something but she only stared. I don't think she knew English. They kept asking her again and again and pointed at the shirt. A few of them started laughing and saying the "hoo!" and "yeehaw boys" that those gringos usually say. She tried stepping back into her home until one of them, a tall blonde one, grabbed her. He held her hand and started moving it around, playing with it like a toy until he looked at his friends and

then placed her hand on his piece. He dug her hand all over him, rubbing it against the bottom of where his balls were beneath his jeans. The men around him laughed and laughed and then one grabbed the woman's other hand did the same. The third man started grabbing her tits and squeezing them as hard as he could. The woman couldn't hold it in anymore and started crying out. She screamed and screamed and finally her husband came out. The fourth Ranger then ran and jumped on him. He started yelling, saying "watch us fuck your chica wetback, watch us do it real good". He held him in the dirt while the other rangers started tearing away the woman's clothes. But then a child cried."

Francisco wiped his face and let his snot fall into the dirt. He tried standing up but fell back again into the floor. He choked and then let out a large moan. He looked back into Hector's eyes.

"A small girl came running out and banged on the legs of one of the Rangers holding her mom. She started hitting real hard, crying, yelling to let her mommy go. The woman started trying to fight back and so did the man whose face had been dug into the mud. The Ranger on top of the man started punching into his head and trying to dig his face deeper, but the man kept fighting back. A Ranger then yelled something about taking the girl back inside, and to get rid of her and get out of there. The woman kept yelling and screaming, trying to get free with everything she had. The Ranger grabbed the little girl and took her inside. Her crying stopped. The woman cried even more, and by now everyone had started peeking out of their homes, but making sure to not even crack open the door. I kept praying for it to be over. But then it was. And I swear I prayed harder trying to take it back... The puta that took the girl came out carrying something in his right hand, dangling it like a pig. The Ranger had the dead body of the girl by her ankle. He laughed and said "we're done here boys" and then threw the body of the little girl

into the ground. The Ranger pulled a gun from his back pocket and shot through the man's head. The woman started yelling and gargling. Her body shook so fast and hard until the same asshole put the gun against her head and fired. When they left they set fire to the home. They drove off back towards the town."

Francisco said the colonia came out in the morning to see the bodies still lying there, bugs now crawling over them. The fire had gone out when everything had finally burned. The Rangers didn't say so, but they made it clear that they would come back, and they didn't care who saw or who would come out to try and stop them. They had no problem killing anyone and leaving their homes burnt and families gone. They just drove into neighborhoods and killed whoever they saw first. Francisco cried heavily and stayed in the ground until he fell asleep there. When the sun started to get lower, another man woke him up and offered to let him stay the night in their home. Francisco wouldn't die tonight, but we all wondered when the Rangers would drive into our road, and who they would find first. Before getting settled for bed, I made sure I stayed awake long enough to see Diego fall asleep. The dim light from the living room came from under the door. I opened it expecting to see Hector looking out the window, but instead I saw Mama sitting in a chair, knitting a small tear in one of his shirt's back together.

Mama could stay up entire night and not show any sign of being tired in the morning. I always thought it was weird to see her sleeping on a chair in the kitchen or whenever she stayed in bed when she got sick. I could count the times I had seen her asleep. Maybe I just had more memories of her being awake cooking, cleaning, or sowing to forget all the moments where she had a chance to sleep without something in her hand. I wondered if this power came with age, or if she had been born with the ability to never rest, and whenever I asked her something close to this she just laughed. I truly wanted to know the answer though, and maybe she never



understood that. She had been knitting and humming for a few minutes until she turned in my direction and without speaking told me to go over to her. She had a small candle next to her and it made the room smell warm and alive. I saw her knitting with a determination that I didn't know. I sat down on a chair next to her and saw the flame in the reflection of her. I saw myself for the first time as well.

“Is Hector going somewhere tomorrow?” I asked.

“He said heard something about a possible job. He is going tomorrow to find out more,” Mama said.

“That's good, we could use the money.”

“He also said he may need your help if he gets it. But yes we need money.”

“Mama, you know I can't go out there with him anymore. You see it, he hates being around me.” I said.

“He doesn't hate you Roberto, just doesn't know you. I barely know you.”

“But you still love me.”

“También. I always do miyo. And I always will. Just like Hector,” Mama sighed.

“Making you food and cleaning your clothes is a lot easier than asking you to work.”

“But you tell me, I can't remember the last time Hector said anything about love to me.”

“Well now we both share something. But his love is there. He's just never been one to say it.”

Mama looked down to make sure the stitches in the shirt had been done correctly. She trusted her fingers, told me once how she learned from grandma. She made her stitch different clothes all afternoon until they were perfect. Mama enjoyed the quiet that came with it. She enjoyed how when life was quiet enough, you could hear the threads move and bind under each other. Somehow this brought her peace. Each thread I thought brought her closer to being back home.

“Do you still love Hector mama? You don’t think about going back?”

“Aye Roberto. Of course I love Hector. I do miss home sometimes. And maybe some afternoons I wish to be there as a child again. But I don’t wish to be there now. You and Diego, both of you aren’t there. You’re here with me. And I love you more than anything back then. Hector can be a burro, but without him, I don’t have any of this.”

“You had a beautiful home though, and the neighborhoods with nice roads, and the mountains. You had money and food. We don’t have any of that here.” I said.

“Mijo, all those things are nice, but they don’t make up love. My family, we never talked about anything, just had parties and clothes. Mí mama and I were close, but even she couldn’t make me feel fully happy. When I met Hector, we were both so young, and didn’t know we will be here, but he made me feel something that I didn’t feel at home.”

“I don’t know if I love Hector anymore. I am not sure when I did. Or when I stopped. I’m afraid of him. But I don’t know about love anymore.”

“Let me tell you something, love is not a thing that 16 year-old boys know about. They shouldn’t really. I remember one time you followed Hector around all day in the summer when you were just a small peanut. You constantly asked if you both could go fishing. He would go

outside and feed the animals and you would be there. He would be trying to fix the door, and there you were. When he finally went to sleep after working all day, he kept thinking of how sad you were when you figured that he wouldn't take you. So the next day he decided you wake up extra early and take you out to the pond for a few hours. Do you remember that day?" Mama asked.

"I think I remember parts of it."

"Well he remembers the whole thing. He talked about it last night while he looked out the window while you two were asleep. He talked about how happy he was to see you catch a fish. And how proud he was when he saw you throw further than him. He tells me those stories over and over, I know every word. But I just like to see him talk about it. The love is there Roberto. I saw it last night."

I heard Hector snoring from behind the door. We got quiet for a while, so much so that I could hear the wax melting under the candle. We didn't hear any noise outside other than crickets and wind blowing through metal tins hanging by the door. The quiet didn't make me feel any better though. At any moment the sound of an engine could break through the sound of nothing. The sound of crickets meant we were still alive, if only for now.

"Are you afraid of the Rangers coming mama?"

"No mijo, they are just some men. Bored and dumb like most men are." She said.

"But you heard about what they did last night. And about the things they have done before. How are you not afraid?"

“Back in Mexico, some men used to drive around, shooting homes, taking children. They had some name for their gang. We just called them the bad men. And then one day, a new cartel showed up. They said they were the biggest and meanest around. And a few fights later they got rid of the other gang. Every other year or so, new men would come and kick the others out. It was always the same. There are always bad men Roberto, and once those Rangers leave, some other men will come. No one can control that. But it is good to know who they are.”

“So we don’t get killed by them?”

“Yes mijo,” Mama laughed a bit before putting down the shirt she had been knitting. “But also if you know who the bad men are, then you also know that you aren’t part of them.”

Mama got up and folded the shirt, placing it over the chair with care. It reminded me of how she used to hold Diego in her arms. I used to watch her sing and hum in his ears, bouncing him up and down, smiling every time he giggled. She held him through everything. Making dinner, wiping down the home, watering the plants, all while holding him carefully and singing like birds in their nest. I wondered in those moments if she held onto me like that as a baby. I wondered if she had the same smile and love. I still wish I could relive those days where she held me. I wanted to hear her hum again, have it move through me until my eyes closed and didn’t open until the morning. Maybe only in there would I remember love, or something close enough to pretend to be love for however long I needed it.

“Get to sleep mijo, tomorrow is another day with more work to do.”

“Will you sleep soon Mama?” I asked.

“Of course, now go on. Go rest with Diegito.”

I saw Mama turn off the candle with her fingertips. They had years of hard skin on them. She moved from the table over to the small couch that had been placed against the window. One winter Hector borrowed a friend's truck and went to pick up an old, mold-stained, two seat couch that had been thrown away in town. He saw it leaning against a dumpster when passing through one of the alleys. He knew it had a home with us. I remember crying the moment I saw it, thinking about how we had just reached a new level of money by having a couch in our home. I slept on it for a week and refused to leave. Hector had to grab me by the arm to pull me off. When I went back to my bed with Diego, I thought about those mornings on the couch. I thought about how I used to wake up without being afraid. I wanted to know again what it meant to wake up feeling happy. I already knew that wouldn't come in the morning. When I woke up the next day, Hector had already left the home and Mama was tending to the trees outside. I saw the birds flying in between them and could hear the flaps from their wings. I pushed Diego over and over until his eyes started moving underneath his skin. I wanted to wake him up by telling him that we were still alive. I wanted him to see the sunlight. I needed him to hear the trees with me.

## CHAPTER X

### WESLACO

Hector had been leaving every morning for the last few days now. He snuck out before sunrise and walked as slow as he could so we wouldn't wake up to hearing the thuds of his boots in the dirt. I asked Mama where he would go, but she never told me and did something else instead of trying to come up with any answer. One night when he returned, I asked if he found a job and he responded by taking off his boots and handing them over to me, telling me to make sure they got cleaned by the next morning. He hadn't really spoken to me for nearly a week now, and in that time I swore I felt peace once or twice.

Diego asked me one night where Hector had gone to, and I told him that not asking leads to less arguments. This truth I had found out a long time ago. One of the first years we were here I asked him something similar. He had been leaving almost every night and returning only a few hours later. He went through the backyard and walked between the trees until I couldn't see him anymore and sure enough he would return before the sun came up and go back to the room with Mama. I am not sure why she hadn't asked before me but when I got the courage to ask him why he went outside during the night, he dropped his fist into the table with such a hit that I swore would smash the wooden legs in half. The table held together, but Mama started crying and ran into the room. I heard them yelling and screaming for the rest of the night. Diego had only just turned six and I thought me and him were about to be sent back across the

river to live on our own. I never found out exactly what happened, but after the fight Mama always turned her head away whenever we passed a certain neighborhood not far from our colonia. I heard rumors back in school that some women on that street would do certain things for money. I stopped asking Hector questions about where he went after that day.

One morning after he left, Mama came up to Diego and I asking if we wanted to go into town. She told us Hector had come home with a few dollars and asked for something special for dinner now that the summer season had started winding down. Mama usually made caldo de pollo every year to bring in the fall. To us, the feel of warm soup and taste of fried tripas brought fall and winter in by their very power. The smell of cilantro melting in a mix of boiled chicken and potatoes had the ability to start or end wars, even the war of seasons. Winter came the moment the first leaf wilted.

Going into town after the fires came at a cost. We weren't allowed to feel safe, not that we ever were. The illusion of it had ended though. Mama told me and Diego to find any caps or hats we could in order to hide our face and that if anything happened, to run as fast as we can and never wait for her. She sat us down and said that they would look at us, and would do all they can to make us feel unwanted. Some men there wanted to make sure we felt it. She tried to laugh through it, telling us that her ankles don't work as well as they used to so just to leave her in town if anything happened, but when she told us this she choked a bit in her throat with her eyes glistening in the sun. I knew that she saw a future in which none of us made it back home. Diego had a hard time finding his old cap, and when he left for a few moments Mama grabbed me by the shoulder and looked me in the eye with her heart at the center of it.

“If anything happens Robert, you grab Diego by the hand and you never stop running. You hear me? You don’t stop, you run. The moment you look back is the moment they get you. Promise me you won’t look back.”

Diego came back with his cap and we left the home and walked towards town. I had never felt a longing to stay home. Today the air felt a little lighter, the birds chirped and their sound carried so far I couldn’t tell where they all came from. It sounded beautiful, and like a new moment in time. The birds didn’t sound like they were from here, wherever here was.

I saw the scorched fields for the first time. Nearly a month later and they still had no signs of life. I didn’t fully understand just how many fields were burned but when we walked by, the graveyard stretched far and wide, enough to where the monte met the edges of the fields and even the trees showed signs of fire. I reimagined that night and remembered a faint smell of mesquite underneath the smell of cooking sugar cane and now I knew why. The burn had no reason behind it. Parts of one field had been completely destroyed and other small patches of vegetables remained. It seemed as if someone just threw a bottle of tequila with a flamed cloth at the end into it all and watched the fire grow into the death of everything we knew. We walked between miles of scattered ashes. They all looked on and still smelled somewhat like the fields I remembered working in. It all seemed long ago now. I felt almost free walking past them, but also felt like I lost someone that I could never replace. I saw why the ranchers had been so upset. They lost a lot of crops and money in these burned fields. Our lives burned away with it.

As we walked into town a chrome plated car slowly drove past us and then sped forward, kicking up dust all the way up until the town square. I would have thought nothing of it, but the car seemed like a warning to everyone in town that colonia workers had gotten brave enough to walk past the other side again. The town wasn’t going to have this, not one bit. I could



feel the eyes shifting towards us from windows and door entrances. I wondered if they smelled us, smelled the brown on our skin again, and smelled something other than clean for the first time in a long while.

Mama didn't hesitate and continued walking straight towards the grocery store. The store looked only a few blocks away but as more cars started driving by I started to think about how fast I could run back home with Diego on my back. I wondered how much he would slow me down, only 85 pounds, but that had been enough to usually leave me feeling tired every time I carried him before. Maybe mama knew I wouldn't be able to make it back with him, but to die altogether seemed a lot better than us dying separately. I hoped I wouldn't have to run, but I knew that hope went away the moment we walked past the city sign on the outside of town.

Families started walking past us. At first no one looked our way, but then that turned into mom's turning their children's faces away from ours. One mom even picked up her daughter when she saw me coming in the same direction. She must have seen how dirty my clothes were, field soil walking in with me from the fields, and the stains told her that I would steal her kid away from her. Some families started to turn towards us and give us glances even from across the street. I heard whispers. They sounded like cicadas escalating in the summer. The rich and the especially white had gotten word now that some family from the colonia walked towards the grocery during the middle of the afternoon. We saw cars speeding in that direction. The buzzes all came from that central point, building and growing in rhythm. We reached the store, and discovered a bee hive. One exploding in defense. Families from town usually just turned away when we entered but now they sprinted into the store. Mama continued moving forward, but even her steps had a small pause, a sense of doubt. I grabbed Diego's hand and held it as hard as I could.

When we entered the grocery market a thousand eyes shifted in our direction. The cashiers looked our way and one left his station and started walking towards the back of the store. Mama had us follow her towards the vegetables first, bumping into different people along the way. No one would move for us. We just walked and if another mom or old man stood in our way they just stood there and dug their shoulders forward. I knew the move from the kids at school when they wouldn't let me walk in the line in the cafeteria. I wanted to hurt them then, and the feeling started coming back to me now. I could hear small whispers moving throughout the store with the same words I heard over and over, mixed with some new ones. Words like "wetbacks" and "coloreds" but now mixed with "beat the shit out of them". I wanted to leave with every part of me. I knew we only had so many more minutes until we had to run, but mama just stood and walked past everyone that she ran into. She kept moving forward and giving us that look of "keep up or else" and when she gave that look I swore I would move through fire for her. I couldn't stop, but then I saw the man that wanted us to leave more than anyone there. The rancher that owned the field we worked in before the fire saw us from behind the wooden crates holding the tomatoes. He knew who we were. He had seen us with Hector before at church, knew Mama well, and also recognized our faces without the sweat and dirt from those afternoons spent working on his land. He had lost most of his crops in the fire, lost out of more money than my family could ever be worth, and looked like he wanted to have that same fire flow over our entire bodies.

"You all fucking dare to show up here. In this god damn store! You must have some nerves!" The rancher said. He dropped his tomatoes and took his new cowboy hat off his head. I could see some leftover string from the price tag still hanging from the brim.

“Don’t look Roberto, just stay quiet,” Mama said to me. A few families stopped and the store became quiet. No one came forward. The town wanted our bodies.

“I know who you all fucking are. All of Weslaco knows who you are. You are that piece of shit Hector’s family. I should kill you all right now for what you all did!”

“Please, sir, we didn’t do anything. You have the wrong family. Please,” Mama said.

“I know you all were there!” The rancher turned to face the rest of the store. “These wetbacks were the ones that set the fires! They are the ones that attacked this community! All of them!”

“We didn’t start the fires, please we didn’t.”

“You all better leave, or all your fucking bodies will be buried out there along with my crops.”

“Please, we just need five minutes for a few things, please.”

“If you all are still here in ten, I will come back with some friends. Go, now.”

Mama grabbed my hand and told me to go towards the aisle that had the Crisco. I walked towards the tubs of fat with a million eyes over me. They saw every move and heard every step I made while walking over the polished linoleum floor. I tasted the plastic coming from out of the aisles and I could smell the air being manufactured in and out of vents and for that reason I never felt natural or alive whenever we came to the market. Maybe for this reason I’m not meant to have money in the future either. The supermarket looked and smelled like a

whole different world and one that I had never been invited to, and now with a hundred eyes watching, I felt somehow outside of it altogether.

I only looked up to make sure that I had been heading to the right aisle but the moment I entered I looked up to see her, and only her. It had been almost a month since she saw me outside her church, running away from men in nice cars like a coyote out in the monte, but in this moment she stood in front of me, and looked up with her eyes that I wanted to sink into and drown my lungs in. Estrella had blocked out my view of the world, even if around here were only the tubs of Crisco and different oils. I wanted to think that I walked past her like any other person would but my feet stopped and my tongue fell in the back of my throat. She had on a thin checkered dress today, slim enough to move around her body. The dress showed the perfect curve on of her lower back moving into her legs, and outlined the small bounce of her stomach as it moved up to her breasts. She looked up to see me standing in front of her, and in that moment her eyes rose enough to see through me, and in the reflection I felt naked and dirty, a kid covered in mud. When I saw her breath move from the top of her neck into the back of her mouth, I knew I had to speak, but every word seemed to fade away before I could say it. When one finally lasted, I said the only collection of words that I had been afraid to say since the moment I had met her.

“Estrella, how are you?”

She looked almost like the deer I would come across in the monte back in Mexico. I felt the same chill in my body as I did in those moments. The feel of a cool wind moved up and down my spine. Her eyes didn't have fear in them, not even any hint of it, but I saw her looking through me, with confidence I hadn't know. She knew that I saw her as the most beautiful creation in the world, she saw it in me, I figured any girl like her could notice it, and in

that moment she seemed to question if I was worthy enough to talk back to. I wanted to tell her that I wasn't, that she didn't have to talk to me if she decided not to and that I would understand. But she did say something back, and when she did her voice sounded just how I remembered. It had the sound and feel of a fall morning.

"I'm sorry, your name is Roberto, right?" Estrella said.

"Yeah, I'm sorry. It's me Roberto, we go to the same school."

"I haven't seen you there in a while. Did you get sick?" She asked. Her voice had genuine concern layered in it. I felt safe in her warmth.

"No, some stuff just happened. It's really nice to see you. I've been thi--"

"Roberto, I am sorry, but I am going to have to leave right now."

"Oh. Is everything okay?"

"No. I'm sorry. I can't be seen talking to you."

"Why not?"

"My dad told me I shouldn't be talking to anyone from the outside of town. We saw you a few weeks ago. I'm sorry. It was nice seeing you."

Estrella walked away and with her so did my safety. I felt all the heat of love and care flow out through the air vents and circulate throughout the store. I grabbed the Crisco and walked out of the aisle into the million eyes wishing for my existence to fade away. I saw Mama dragging Diego by the hand to pay for the different vegetables and meat they both held. Diego carried the beef and chicken with a pride as if he had killed the animals themselves, not noticing the look of everyone around him. Mama stopped in front of the cashier but the man, white, with

moles and wrinkles all over his face, refused to look at her. She tried handing over the money to him but he never moved, so she put it on top of the counter in front of him and only then did he reach for it. I brought over the Crisco and for a second the man looked into my eyes, but in them I only saw myself and none of him. The man turned away, bagged our food and looked off towards the door. The rancher that knew Hector, and wanted his body in front of him, motioned us out, looking straight towards us in his new jeans and designed bolo tie.

When we left I felt light rain drops falling on my face, not hard enough to feel it seep through any of my clothes. The sun had broken through the clouds and the roads shined brighter and longer, making a street of gold leading out of town and back towards home. I lived for these days that rain fell through rays of sun. I could smell it in the air, the humidity, bugs breathing and flying over the ground. But in this moment all I could feel was the pressure of Mama's hand as she dragged me out by the shoulder, watched her stop the blood in Diego's arm from getting to his hand. She pulled us with a beat in her heart that sped faster than the water falling on top of us. We ran away faster than rain could fall. We heard more yelling, the sound of the rancher's voice saying more words telling us that we were only colonia trash, and they seemed to skim over the road flying on top of us. Their anger felt as intense as the sun. Not even a light breeze and cool presence of water could take away the burning of it.

I remember one specific afternoon right after we came to this side of the river. We hadn't gone into town as a family yet. Diego and I usually kept busy exploring the fields and the canals that ran in and out of the colonias, but on this one afternoon we stayed home and just had the door open, and looked out as far as we could into the blue sky. We saw how clouds stretched on until they faded away, and how others looked so tall that we wondered if another world could exist on top of them. I wanted to know how far into world I could look in to, if every part of the

air sounded the same, and I wanted to be in the place where the sky sounded different. Diego whistled and told me of animals he saw in the different clouds, and I wanted to tell him that I wished I could fall into them and never return here and rain down somewhere else far away. I figured he wouldn't understand, maybe I didn't either, and in my confusion I just looked out into the rabbit and lion shaped clouds that he had already named. He told me of Oscar, a rabbit running around to save his children from an evil creature that wanted to eat their insides and hang the intestines around their neck in a show of force. Diego didn't add the blood but when he told me the monster wanted Oscar I figured Oscar's head would crack and flow open on the tongue and teeth of whatever that ate him. He told me of the lion named Leo that wanted to kill Oscar and his family, but how Oscar always escaped. This one afternoon, with the smell of leaves blowing in our face in the heat, existed only in this one place, a shack built on dirt, with only Diego by my side. I couldn't remember or even picture where Mama and Hector were that day. They walked somewhere but I don't remember their return. I remember for dinner that night I tasted something warm and mushy in my mouth, and to me the day felt complete. I don't know why I remember this day, or why I thought of it while holding Mama's hand hard as the skin of my feet slowly tore off in my shoes. Maybe I wanted to fall into the sky and appear somewhere there in the dirt and mud.

The last look Estrella had in her eyes appeared every time I closed my own that night. I saw the fate of my life appear in the glimmer of brown, saw it in the white that showed her soft veins falling behind her perfect skin. I wanted to forget her, and wanted to stop seeing her in my dreams or in the corners of dark in my room, but I only saw the look. Her eyes in this one moment of the afternoon told my story. I saw the smell of the colonia coming off my shirt, and I saw how it would stay there until the day I died. I saw the house crumble with years of

rain, with Diego and I inside looking out into the same garden and the seeds of the trees we laid under as kids. In her eyes, my life grew like the corn in the fields and withered away in the seasons, never moving, always torn away and raised up to life again. My body stayed in the dirt and decomposed under the ground the house stood on. My children would live there and die with me. For one brief moment in her eyes I imagined my life with her, saw her washing clothes with the sun above her head like mama did, saw her cooking food for an angry husband every night. If our lives truly did combine together, I saw how the worms in the colonia would welcome the bones of our body. They would crawl among our ribs and make it a city. Estrella would fade into the night of my future, and she knew just as much, so she made the choice that guaranteed her something looking like a life that people dream of.

I wanted my future to be in one of the houses with the picket fences in front of it, the ones that were dug so deep in the ground that not even the winds from the hurricanes could knock them over. Those houses lined up the neighborhoods just off the center of town, and I am sure Estrella had lived on one of them since the moment she came into this world. Those houses had two floors, each taller than my current home, and had fireplaces and chimneys for when the air got cold enough. I wanted Estrella and I to grow old in one, age in the light of the fire, hearing music on record players that sounded prettier than the birds outside. I never wanted to think of the reality of the dreams of my future. I knew deep down Estrella would never come to my home, never meet Hector or Mama, never sit with me in the backyard and look at the sunset. I would never be invited to hers, never find the right shirt to wear for a dinner, never be invited to listen in on the talks that rich people had. My future with her ended in a grocery aisle. I couldn't stop my dreams from venturing into the sound of her voice.



Hector came home in the middle of the night again. I felt his shoes move through the house. I heard Mama tell him something when he went into the room, which was odd because she never usually stayed up to wait for him to get home, but tonight she did, and she had words that sounded loud and fast. Hector did his best not to yell but he always sounded louder and deeper than the world outside. I heard him say the word “family” and somewhere in the mix of it all my eyes got heavier and I saw Estrella appear in the corner of the room again. Maybe I could never dream of anything without her, or maybe she only appeared when I needed a God. I only prayed when Hector came home. Maybe he was my God, or maybe I just didn’t understand anything about faith in the first place. Seeing Estrella in my dreams distracted me from the words Hector said to my mother, and maybe this was my only understanding of heaven. I went to sleep that night wanting to live there in my lie of the future. Maybe Religion made sense to me after all.

## CHAPTER XI

### PADRE

The winds blew over the home faster than the nights before and because of that they invaded my dreams and I could feel the cool leaves moving across a landscape that only grew in the dark and under my eyes. I felt cold laying under a knitted blanket that had holes every few inches due to the years of rolling around in it. Diego and I used it to make ourselves look like ghosts and spirits whenever Mama laid out the candles and ofrendas in the fall. In my dreams I saw a piece of land that hadn't burnt away yet and the sugar cane looked like green waves swaying over and under each other. I thought I could swim in it, and wanted to jump in feel the different stems move around my body. I had seen this field before somewhere, maybe in another part of the Valley, and at some points every field seemed connected to each other. When the cool wind came in, the dream got darker, and the sky with no sun turned into night and I had become surrounded in it. I didn't see any stars or the moon above me but I knew that the darkest part of night had come and that the sun wouldn't come around again, not in this life.

Each blow of wind grew and grew until the night sky seemed to be full of nothing but that heavy air, and in the distance I swore I thought I saw the lights of fireflies form to become headlights of a pick-up truck. My bad dreams became nature. My fear came from the monte. The winds started slowing down and became steadier, becoming a beat, a heavy pulse. They started to sound deep and labored, and before I knew it the winds in my dream became the

winds of Hector. When my eyes opened, and all I could see was the light coming from under the door, and the sound of Hector's breath seemed to move the house up and down. His chest lifted and dropped the foundation we slept on.

I went into the living room to see him drinking coffee and looking out the window into nothing. He stared dead straight out into the night, focusing on the road that led way back into town. I wasn't sure if he had noticed me watching him, or if he noticed anything else around him during the hours he looked out the window, but he heard the wood creak under me as I moved closer. He turned his head and for the first time since he returned home, he looked away from the road, and his eyes were full of the things that made up the night.

“Roberto, turn the candles off on the table. We shouldn't have lights on right now.”

“How long are you staying home this time?” I said. I am not sure why but tonight seemed like the best time to make up for the fights we had missed out on each other.

“I'm not visiting some whore in the barrio. I found work. I've been needing to tell you about it.”

“I already told Mama that I'm not going to go with you. You threw me in the dirt last time.”

“This doesn't have to do with any field.”

“The job doesn't matter Hector.”

Hector stayed quiet and looked down into his cup of coffee. He never added anything, always told me he drank it straight, and that was the only good thing he got from his

father. I tried it once and it tasted like the gasoline that I would suck out of cars back in Mexico. Hector made his coffee over fire every chance he could, told me the taste was better, and that's how the shine of the beans ended in the cup. He must have looked down into his mug hundreds of times and saw himself in the darkest of mirrors.

“I used to fight before I met Maria. I've always fought. Always,” Hector said.

“What?”

“This is about Jesús isn't it? I can still feel the weight of him. I feel it every night. I've always been a fighter, just like him, but I didn't die in that damn field. He chose to die there. You didn't die there either.”

“This isn't about Jesús. This is about you and me. You don't know me, and you hate me for that. And I don't know you either, and I don't think I ever have.”

“Pinche Roberto, you are still a boy when this family needs you to be a man. You don't work and when you do you are never there. I see it when I look at you. This family needs another man, Diego needs another man, and you still don't care.”

“What do you know about what this family needs? I need a Papa. Not some man that sleeps with some whores when me and Mama are here taking care of everything.”

“Maybe you should get your dick sucked by one of those whores? Maybe that's what you need. You're still some dumb boy who's never been with any one, so yeah maybe that's what you need. At your age I was hitting up every girl with some fat tetas in the neighborhood. I was getting ready to leave town and fucked every girl left in that damn barrio. I

met your mom and got us a home two years after that. You think you're a man because you picked some oranges? You're just a kid. I didn't raise you like this."

I started to stand up and next to me I saw a candle that I wanted to use to smash his head in. I wanted to see his blood in front of me. I wanted to push the melted wax in through his eyes. I knew he would live, and I knew he would kill me after. But I wanted to see him bleed. I wanted to know that someone as strong as him could scream in pain. I only stood up to walk back towards my bed though.

"Don't you dare walk away from me!" He said. His voice shook the house, but no one moved or came out of their rooms. In this state, I didn't blame Mama for staying in the room.

"I need you to do this job with me. I need you to do this job for the family."

"I'm not going anywhere with you, Hector."

"You can leave. If we do this job right, if we do this together for the next few months, you can save enough money, and you can leave. You can take Diego with you, or leave him here. With this job you can get enough money and leave as far away from here as you want. I promise you that."

Even before Jesús died, I wanted to leave the fields with every part of me. I didn't want to smell oranges on my hands as I slept. I sat back down in the chair and saw his eyes glancing back towards the window. I saw a future away from the colonia, in a town with trees that change colors and a sun that didn't kill. He didn't want to look in my direction, and I saw his fists clench his cup tighter. He knew he had yelled louder than what he wanted. He swallowed the rest of his anger, and when he breathed out I felt it fall on me.

“What’s the job?” I asked.

“I’ve found a group of men that help families cross the river. It pays 40 dollars a head. It’s easy and quick money Roberto.”

“You’re a damn coyote now? That’s what you’ve been doing every night, coming home and dragging in mud?”

“I’m not a coyote, Roberto. I don’t pick the families up or charge them myself. I just go to the river and meet with a man and help him get them across. And then ni modo, we come home.”

“If we get caught we all get sent back. Why couldn’t you just find another field?”

“For what Roberto? To work 16 hours a day in dirt again for not enough money to even get food for us? I find another field, and nothing changes. We work and we bleed and we kill ourselves for nothing. The moment something goes wrong, they get rid of us. We are nothing to them. We are just hands. With this job, we get the chance to do something. We can get back at those fuckers in town. You can leave. We can change something for once. Why should we stay in the fields?”

I heard crickets singing outside and Hector turned back towards the window. Not often did the sounds of crickets cause fear, but anything that wasn’t silence made Hector turn into the night and clutch his fists a little tighter. I walked away from him after he turned, and in the morning when I woke up his boots were gone. I didn’t feel his breath in the home anymore. He didn’t bother to wake me up for me to join him, but we both ended that night knowing what was to come. I didn’t want to accept the answer, but maybe turning into a man meant that not wanting didn’t mean anything.

I thought of the days when working the field, not long ago now, when I would sit on the edge of the bed and hope that somehow the Earth would devour us and I wouldn't have to walk between cotton rows. I wanted to be entrenched so deep within the worms and mud that no scream could escape to the sky. Every morning I wished and prayed that I would be surrounded by darkness before heading out, before the rise of the sun, to see a piece of land that I wanted to burn away. When it did burn, I felt the release of it, but I still didn't feel free. Part of me knew I would never truly be free of it.

Hector had just offered me a chance to leave this stretch of land without dying. An opportunity that had escaped Jesús and mostly everyone else who had worked in the fields with me. To leave without dying seemed like a fantasy as far-fetched as the American dream itself. He knew I would take it. Only then, maybe I could find freedom.

## CHAPTER XII

### MASA

The skies had turned grey, and a light rain bounced around in the air. It was the time of year that the crops usually died because the winds had gone cold and kids from the colonia finally felt air for the first time. The water caused everything on the floor to be damp and for the soil to feel soft to our feet, but it never turned into actual drops or caused puddles. I could never find the word for this floating water and I am sure if I ever met anyone not from here I wouldn't know how to tell them that sometimes in the Valley the rain just stayed there in front of your face and danced around you, but never fell to the actual ground. It floated like a mist painted into the sky, and your hair and clothes never actually got wet, but the water lightly stayed on you like how drops did when we fed the fields. The wind chilled our lips, and I could feel my fingers go away from my hands.

Every year when the first sign of cold came, mama busted out the masa to make tamales. They were the talk among everyone because she made more than any family could ever survive to eat so she would have us pass them along the other homes for free. I always asked her why she never asked for anything in return and she would always say that providing warmth shouldn't be returned.

Mama made tamales like how some people practiced religion. The steps she took she learned over years and years from her own mama, and abuelita Rosa learned it from her own



abuelita and so on. The tamales my mom made had been alive longer than any of us had, and she wanted to make sure they survived long after our bodies were gone. She always started at the same time in the morning. She said the masa woke up at a certain hour and you had to start it just right in order for the flavor to stay in the grains.

She made Diego and I sit with her every time she started making the first couple dozen. We had to wash our hands and take a deep breath before joining her because she once heard from her own mama that you need a clear mind in order to listen to what the masa was saying. Every piece of masa had a voice, and it came out in scents and pats and you had to listen carefully enough in order to know when each of the tamales were done. She wanted us to know that voice more than anything else, and in this I understood that the sounds of the world came in the exhales of natural things.

Mama had grabbed some corn husks from the store and snuck them out under the jars of Crisco. She thought she might as well since no one from the town really cared for the simple things like dried husks for tamales. The rich people from town cared more about fresh meat and potatoes and herbs that you don't find here. She had opened the pack and started soaking them in water so they could get moist enough to fold over the masa. I liked the way the grooves of the husks felt on the tops of my fingers. I thought I could feel the lines of the field, and see how the air moved in-between them to create streams like clouds in the sky. The husks in the end would have a hint of the dryness that remained from the soil, but when done right you could feel the pressure of the tamale within it. Husks tell the story of where your tamale came from, and to Mama everything needed to have that story.

“Roberto, make sure Diegito washed his hands. I saw him playing outside last night. That boy can have his hands covered dirt for days and never care.” Mama said.

“Is this the right time to even make these tamales? After everything.”

“People need food all the time, no matter the year Roberto. Now get your brother.”

I saw Diego playing with the brown water that had been left in the sink. He kept squeezing his hands and making bubbles appear and pop in front of his face. He never seemed to care for anything around him, only the task in front of him. He always looked forward to tamale day because that meant it would get cold and sometimes when it got cold Mama would get him a present. He always wanted a new wooden truck or wagon from one of the stores in town, but most of the time mama made him something just as good with leftover toys from around the home. I told Diego to make sure his hands were clean and he just responded with shaking the water off his hands and running past me to sit in the closest chair to mama. The masa called him.

“Can I make my own tamale this year Mama? I want to make my own pack?”

Diego asked.

“Not this year mijito, but soon.”

“But when will I be ready Mama?”

“You already are Diegito. Your mama still needs something to do though. But next year you can make them all on your own I promise.” Mama said. She looked at me and in them I could see the love she had for Diego. I wondered how much love in her eyes remained for me.

Mama made sure we always started with the next step too. She made us dip our hands wrist deep into the masa and hold them there for a few seconds. She wanted us to

remember the feel of the grains as it moved through the cracks of our palms. If we could remember the feel of the grain now, we would remember it as we got older. The grain had to become our voice, she told us, we had to speak it out, over and over, and know it like a natural movement in our tongues. If we felt that voice, we would also know the feeling of it when the tamales were ready. A good tamale could survive the winter when frozen and kept well, but a great one could make you forget about the cold the moment you ate it. She said feeling that warmth in the masa now was important, because our job was to carry that warmth the whole time we made it. After we cleaned our hands and wrists from the masa, usually we would go over to bring the boiled chicken to stuff into the tamales, but on today we only had refried beans. It wouldn't be the usual filling center that my momma loved to provide to the colonia, but we had to make do with what we had this year more than before.

“Spread out the masa evenly mijo, no clumps.” Mama told Diego. He took his job to heart. He wanted to make the best damn tamales possible. The cold winds up north had to be afraid of the tamales he packed.

“Am I doing this right mama?” Diego asked.

“Yes Diegito, you are almost as good as me.”

“Do you think I can be better than abuela Rosa one day?”

“I'm sure you can be. We will compare tamales when we see her again, I promise.”

“Do you think we will get to see them again?” I said.

“You always see everyone again Roberto. Always.”

“I talked to Hector, about helping him with work, I think I’m going with him soon.”

“Muy bien Roberto. I’m very proud of you. I always am.”

“Can I go too Mama? I want to go with Robbie.”

“No Diego, this job is only for big boys like your papa and Roberto. Either way, I need you around the home to help me make more tamales.”

“I don’t know if Hector really wants me there. He just needs another set of hands.” I said.

“He wants you there Roberto. Hector has gone his whole life doing everything on his own, never wanting anyone with him. I knew as much the moment I met him. For him to ask anyone to help him with anything, that is something special.”

“Has he ever asked you for help with anything Mama?” I said.

“Aye Roberto. More than you know. He’s been asking me for help ever since he first saw me. I can see it in his eyes. Boys are like lost boats looking for land, and when they find it then they start to become men. Hector is a strong man, but he asks for help every day. I remember the look in his eyes the day you were born. I have never seen anyone more lost and afraid. But he never said anything. You and him are one in the same.”

“I’m not the same man as Hector. I never want to be.”

“Every man says that Roberto. It isn’t something you just choose not to be.”

We continued folding up tamales into the corn husks. The masa smelled stayed in our hands and I felt the grains underneath my fingertips. We had already made a couple packs

and the warmth from the finished tamales stayed in our clothes. A good tamale had oil dripping from the ends of each side, and when you bit into it you should be able to taste the fat cooked into grains and find it in between the flavor in the beans. Mama let Diego and I try one, her way of testing them, and she always asked us what we saw. I told her on my bite that I pictured a cooking fire, and Diego said he saw the outside of the home, so she knew they were ready. She grabbed about over half the tamales she had made and told us to put on a jacket or blanket over our shoulders. She gave us a pack each and said a small prayer. She always said something about warmth and Jesus in her prayers, but this year she added the word protection.

Our colonia had quite a few shacks lined up on each side of the dirt path we called a road. Our house had always been set a little further away from everyone else, and we never spoke to anyone from down the path. I had seen some of the kids and their parents in the fields, and saw some in town when we were still welcomed there. When we first moved here, Diego and I would play with the other kids out in the streets, especially in the spring when the first rains came. But those days in the mud had been gone for a while now. I assumed that everyone had come across Hector before and knew not to talk to the family of the man who could pick the cotton of four other men in a day. Everyone in the colonia knew of Hector's strength, and in this it made our family outsiders in a group of people who were already not wanted. But Mama thought differently. She also knew, that especially now, we in the colonia only had each other. She also knew that because of Hector's reputation, they would not come up to us, but we could go to them. We grabbed our packs of tamales and started heading down the road towards the other homes. The wind only beat so hard in our face. Mama didn't blink when it did.

“How many are we going to pass out?”

“All of them Roberto. It seems colder than usual this year. Everyone needs all the warmth they can get.” Mama said.

“Can I be the one to pass them out Mama? Please? I really want to.”

“Of course you can Diegito.”

When we walked I could hear our steps dig into the dirt and felt it come across the top of our shoes. The floating rain had collected enough on the road to make it slick but not flooded. The drops had now collected on every leaf from the corn stalks. We walked under a river to the other homes. The first shack we came across had the Rodriguez family. I remembered their names because Aaron and Abel Rodriguez were the first friends I had made when we had moved here. Their family came from the edges of Guadalajara and we laughed about the rich families there and we shared in or hatred of them. We agreed that those that never gave back to their villages were the most evil of people, and that one day we wanted to go back and break all the windows in their homes.

We used to race between the stalks, used to try and beat each other without tripping over fallen corn, everything we did had a winner or a loser. Diego used to try and run with us but I would always tell him no. He usually raced home to cry and tell Mama and when he did my afternoons with Aaron and Abel came to an end. I don't exactly remember the last day we raced or even hung around outside with each other. I do remember why we stopped. One day I let Diego run with us. I told him to follow behind me. The sun had been especially bright that afternoon and even though the stalks were high enough to cover you with their shadows, every now and then a ray of light shot through. When that happened they usually stabbed you in your eye and part of the fun of the race was wiping the tears off your cheeks at the end of the field.

Diego didn't know how to run through the beams of sunlight. When we set off I had been on pace to beat both Rodriguez brothers. Usually I could see them running next to me between the stalks but today I had ran past them and lost sight of them. I had been doing so good that I didn't hear the sound of Diego tripping on a corn behind me and tumbling down into the dirt and dried husks. I kept running and shooting towards the end until I noticed that I couldn't hear any other footsteps but my own. When I stopped, I turned around and didn't see Diego behind me, or didn't see the Aaron or Abel pass me. I ran back to see if I could find Diego and before I came across him I heard his cries and saw the brothers standing over him. They were laughing, joking about how he fell so early in the race. Diego was bleeding from his lip and the blood kept popping off his mouth every time he breathed. I ran faster the moment I saw them and reached out and shoved both brothers away from him.

I called them lowlifes. I told them I would punch their teeth into the back of their throats if they touched Diego again. They tried to say they found him and were going to help him up, but I picked up Diego myself and carried him out of the corn. The sun got hotter and the wind around us stopped as I held him in my arms. Flies beat around his head and wanted to land on the blood that had stayed on top of his lip. Mama cried when I got Diego home. She cried when she first saw him, and cried as she washed his face and cleaned his cuts. They weren't deep gashes, or bad by any means, but Diego ran in the field as a boy wanting to have a memory with his brothers and friends and came out as a scared, hurt rabbit, afraid of the potential of different things. Hector beat me hard that night. I didn't feel it. I felt Diego's lack of faith in me more.

I didn't talk to the brothers again after that day. It didn't have to do with Diego or his cut. A scar remained on his lip and every now and then I forgot how he got it. We moved on from that afternoon how most brothers do. We didn't talk again because of what I called them. I

called them trash, made them feel how poor they are, how poor we all are. In the colonia, we all know just how little we have. When it rains and our homes collapse and how we have to bathe outside in the muddy water and hang our clothes throughout our home when the sun doesn't shine outside, our lives are clear. People in town don't have our lives and we will never be one of the families that live in town. We know this much when we have to kill the rabbits that run in our yards in the fall in order to have meat on certain days of the month. We know how poor we are when we have our hands in dirt and trees, plucking fruits out that we cannot afford. We know the truth of our lives, but you never, even to the people you hate, ever remind them of it to their face. We are all dirt here. None of us better than another. But that day I felt better than them and I told them and they felt it in their soul like a truth that could never be made into a lie. So we stopped talking that day. That fire carries in you. It burns and burns and once you are told that you are lower than dirt, it never leaves. You do everything because of that truth. Abel and Aaron never raced in the field again, or maybe they did and just didn't ask me to join them. So when I saw them in the corner of the home as we offered tamales to their mama, their eyes didn't know me. I didn't expect anything else.

The next house we walked too stood alone in a field that had now turned into a small lake with all the water still falling around us. The home had caved into the mud like how our feet did when Diego and I stood in the dirt too long in the backyard. If it rained any more this week, the home would be gone. It's a miracle it stood this long, but one day it won't be here and I wondered walking up to it if I would be around for that. A man named Eleazar lived here. We talked to him and his wife every once in a while but she died last summer when the temperature got too hot and her old body couldn't take on any more sun. Ever since she died he hardly came out of his home, more than likely he just sat around waiting for the day he would leave too. He



hadn't died yet, at least we thought, but his house looked like it had gone too. Death makes its way through everything, once one thing leaves, everything else follows, and Eleazar seemed to just be waiting his turn.

“You should take him the pack of tamales Roberto. I don't want Diego walking too deep into the water.”

“Mama I am not sure if he even lives here anymore. Everything looks empty.”

“Just take it. If anything someone else will get the tamales. Hurry, it's cold and we got more to take.”

“Can I go mama? I'm taller than the water.” Diego said.

“No Diegito, I don't want your pants all wet I just washed them, let Roberto go and you can knock on the doors for the rest of the homes okay?”

“Are you sure Mama, Diego really looks like he wants to?” I said.

“Aye Roberto, take the tamales now or I'm making you wash all the clothes, now go.”

Mama wouldn't punish me. She hardly ever did. She would tell Hector what I did during the day and usually he would make me choose his boot or the belt. That's what he mostly did to me as a child. Now he just made me work extra hard in the field, but with the field gone, I didn't want to know what would happen if he found out that I didn't want to walk through water to drop off tamales on the porch of a home.

I walked through the lake of brown and moved onto the porch and left the pack there. The air outside the door of the home smelled sour. I pictured the dead bodies of rabbits,

the ones we found under the trees in the summer. I walked away from the door. The wind blowing over the water I just walked through sounded louder than the inside of the home. I knocked a few times but all I heard were the drops of rain behind me. I backed away and waddled back to Mama and Diego. She looked at me, afraid to ask any questions while holding him under his left arm.

“Was anyone there Roberto?” Mama asked.

“Si Mama. I heard some walking. He should be out soon.”

After I lied the rain stopped moving. It didn't hit our faces anymore. Diego took this as a sign. He ran around and started jumping in the puddles of water and Mama yelled in the way that made her anger sound more full of love than anything else. She screamed his name and told him to stop but her smile sounded louder than the words and Diego and I both knew that the water moving over his jeans would dry. This moment wouldn't. I saw mama's smile the rest of the afternoon. When we returned home and warmed up next to the oven, we felt our clothes dry as Mama hummed in the other room. She had a song stuck in her head and when I asked her what it was she said just a song she knew when she was a small girl. The song, the smile, all of it, came from the lie I gave her at the end of the afternoon. The truth wouldn't have given us this day. My mama knew this, I knew it, and Diego would one day know it too. I wondered if we would all be there when that day came. Diego ran over to mama and jumped into her chest as she continued humming. The song filled my ears and my warm propane dreams.

## CHAPTER XIII

### MIJO

Hector waited for me in the backyard, next to the orange trees, looking out further and further into a night sky that part of me wanted to fall into. I could hear the wind coming from the clouds that moved above us and the only reason I knew they were there was because the stars kept blinking on and off. Free and then locked away. Hector just stood there, not moving, shirt blowing across him, breathing in and out in a way I hadn't seen before. The way his shoulders hunched with each breath made him look more nervous than any night before this. When he heard the door close behind me, his body sealed up, held there in the wind and the smell of citrus and feel of the night. The wire from the clothes hanger flapped around in one sharp gust of wind and Hector turned in my direction to see it moving, to see me standing there. I hadn't seen his face this close in nearly a week, and I had almost forgot about how dark his eyes were, almost bleeding out the sky above us.

“I was thinking of how you used to run around these trees for hours when we first moved here. You would always be sticky and full of sweat. You never wanted to come inside. We always had to force you. You were always so stubborn.” Hector said.

“You always got mad at me when I came back in. At some point I just figured why try going in at all.”

“Roberto, I know it’s hard for you to listen to me, I see it all the time. I want to tell you right now, that when we go out there with these men, you have to do everything I say. Do you understand?”

“How dangerous is this job?”

“These men, they don’t like people to know who they are. You don’t talk to them, don’t look at them, just stand behind me and do what I tell you.”

“How do you know them?”

“I don’t. Not really. All I know is they pay me to help get people across the river and onto the nearest road. That is all we do. So don’t ask anything, and trust me. Now come on, it’s a long walk.”

A cold front looked to be coming in. The wind picked up as we walked down the road and moved south towards the river. Above me the clouds moved faster and louder. Whenever the northern winds came in, you could smell the way the flowers bloomed in cold and how fast birds flew overhead. Some winters the air got so bad that it made your face feel on fire. On those mornings the blood beneath the skin of your nose and ears froze and we would do everything possible to stay warm. I sensed one of those nights coming. Hector breathed heavy and labored with puffs of smoke coming out of his mouth, exploding and fading off into nothing. The cold hung off our shoulders. It crawled and hugged our bodies, sucked out the warmth from our chest. Every breath released the heat we needed and we hadn’t yet reached the monte.

Every road leads back to the river. Hector used to tell Diego and I this back when we were younger and wanted to explore the land we just moved into. He told us to never walk back towards it, that nothing was there for us to return to. Somedays I would think about running

back. I wondered how long it would take me to cross and find our old home, tucked in somewhere between the hills and wild goats. I missed the smell of burning cabrito and spring air often. Some scents didn't exist on this side of the river. We kept walking the path and a wall of shaded trees appeared ahead of us. Our road led to this, a wall of mesquite and fireflies, with the sound of water filling in the air.

Hector had his hand on the trees for a second before we went in. He felt the texture of the wood, grasped at it. Our town and the street we lived on that became the road that ran through the middle of the square, was once the original home of a lumber company. A couple of white men from up north had seen all the trees and saw nothing but money in front of them. They had enough work for a thousand men and I remembered that year because half the village left in the winter and never returned. Hector told me once how the men's company had cut down so many trees that they decided to just name the whole area and several towns after their efforts. People on this side of the river in the States thought it was righteous, others back in Mexico saw it as one of the biggest gangster moves they had ever seen. I asked him why he never tried working for the lumber company and he just said that they had made too much money at that point. Other men only need cheap labor when they don't have that yet. I figured being rich and white was a machine that doesn't need our help.

We walked into the monte and when I felt the first branch scrape against my face I thought of the difference of this and the feel of digging my hands in soil. I couldn't decide which one I hated more. We didn't have the sun here hanging over us and I wasn't used to work without seeing a shadow lay below me like a corpse of myself. I ran out of sweat during those afternoons, and some days I wanted to dig my whole body under the dirt just to escape the heat, but here the sweat running down my face felt cool and my breathing moved in and out with stabs

of cold air. I couldn't see any of the trees or bushes unless they were right in front of me, the moonlight didn't break through the trees often. I could see how a group of people could run through here and sound no different than the hogs or rabbits moving over dead leaves. It would be easy to get lost among the deep black and the scattered trees, but Hector knew the trail that got to the edge of the river where we would meet the men. He knew it well enough to move quickly and duck ahead of time where the trees hung low.

“How far away is the river?” I said. My question came out winded. Hector had been in full sprint in some clearings. It was the first thing I asked him since we walked through the monte.

“Close. Keep your voice down and don't talk once we get there.”

“How many people are we taking through here?”

“However many they give us. The river is not far away now.” Hector stopped and planted his foot in the dirt and turned to look at me. He put his hand on my chest to stop me from colliding in to him. His palm felt heavy, and it trembled. “Remember the way we came and how fast we got here. If anything happens, you run back the same way. You don't stop.”

This was the second time this month someone had said that to me. My life had been filled with this saying. The idea behind my life came out of running. Always moving. I had to move like the bugs flying around me, jumping from branch to branch. They hit our faces constantly. They looked like dark stars when they landed below your eyes.

The rush of the water got louder and now flies exploded up with every step. The smell of the river moved over us, had a heavy stench when it hit the nose, one that I had forgotten the feeling of when we first came over. I hadn't thought about that morning in some

time. The coyotes don't tell you that the smell of the river hangs onto your shirt long after it dries. We lived in that smell for a few days until momma finally found enough soap to wash everything. I could see the crickets and cicadas from the monte after we crossed, feel the mud fall off my shoulders, the river truly lived off of us when we first came.

Hector moved through some more trees, brushing branches away from his feet and above his eyes. He waved his hand back at me, making me come to a stop. I moved a few branches away from my face and saw flashes of the moon in the ground right below me. It was the river. She moved slowly, peacefully, right in front of me and danced the night sky off of her. I looked into it and saw every star, every stain of the clouds, and even the grey in the moon. The ripples bounced up and down and when they did I remembered the taste of the water when it splashed in my mouth during our crossing. The sediment tasted like salt and I could crunch the sand in my teeth for days after. But now I imagined it tasting like the night sky and wondered if stars had their own flavor.

The water was low and steady. You could see how the current traced the grooves of the ground below it, some rocks even broke through the stream and created small tides. I forgot how wide the river was, but when looking across and seeing the land I came from it all seemed at once close but incredibly far. The trees on the other side of the river looked unreachable, and somehow in my years here I already saw them as foreign mesquite and alien leaves. The land across the river looked exactly like the land I stood on, the shadows of the branches on the other side looked just like the ones I crouched behind, but they were not them and could never be. A winding flow of water divided these trees and they would never be equal. The sky in the ground below me was neutral and eternal. There were no lines in the sky that we couldn't cross into. I couldn't imagine that feeling just yet.

Figures moved in the water. Shadows moved slowly and at the moment I remembered again why we were here. I saw a group of at least fifteen bodies slowly moving in the river. A few of the bodies carried smaller figures above their heads, and all of them had some type of bags wrapped around them. I realized the reason we had to come now was not only to escape in the pitch black of night, but because the river was peaceful now and the moment the sun came up the current would rise and anyone crossing would likely die trying to do so. The group started walking faster and I heard rushed whispers saying words like “rapido” and “órale muchachos”. The group was following the steps of a large man and every change of direction he made they did the same. I started to hear the small crying of babies and the sound of their mothers trying to sooth them. I couldn’t make out exactly what the mothers said because of the sound of the river water flowing around them, but their tones reminded me of Mama and I felt comforted there between the trees. The group got close to the banks and the large man in front of them stepped on the edge of the land and held on to one of the trees. He started helping the group out one by one, and when he did, Hector grabbed my shoulder and pulled us out from the shadows.

“Hola hermano!” Hector said. The large man in front of the group reached around his waist for a gun and drew it on us. He had a small flashlight in his other hand and shined it into our eyes, making sure he could see us but not the other way around. He yelled at the group to stop moving and directed a man in the back of them to hold his ground and make sure no one else stepped anywhere.

“Are you the wolf that is leading the way?” The large man asked.

“Si, hermano, through the woods.” Hector replied.



“Who is with you?”

“This is my son, he is going to help. You have been getting larger groups. I needed someone I trust.”

Hector had been standing in front of me during the talk. The large man had a scar going from the top of his lip that went up to his left eye. The line cut a thick, black moustache. He looked older than Hector, but stronger, and breathed heavier than he did. I thought Hector was the largest man I had ever seen, but this man looked at Hector with the look that he gave me out in the fields. The look had power in it, power that told anyone who saw it that they were weaker, and that shouldn't be questioned. The man looked like he came from on the villages near our old home. Those villages had workers that labored all day, working in mines, looking for oil. They had a different type of strength, and a different motivation for living. This man wore his jacket, a torn up hat above his head, and laced his boots just like those other men. He stood like them and his shoulders looked broad like theirs. Hector, for the first time in my life, didn't say a word unless the man let him.

“If anything happens, you know what that means. Yes?” He said.

“Yes. Of course.”

The man looked over to his partner in back of the group. He dropped the gun and whistled, and when he did so the man in the back let go of a rope that had tied the group together. The group had been huddled so close that I hadn't noticed it before. The small kids on top of the backs of some of the men in the group had been crying this whole time. The group had nine men and six women. Three kids had been carried along the backs and all of them were now shaking in the cold. The man in front yelled “andale putos” as they got the rope that tied them

together off of their waists. They had small bags filled with clothes or food with them. Not all of them looked like us, some even whispered words that didn't sound like any Spanish that I had ever heard of.

The man pulled Hector to the edge of the river. The group started trying to dry off their jeans. Three of the women started wiping any mud off the faces of the kids, not thinking about the dirt that fell off their soaking clothes. The kids were theirs, and I saw the look in their eyes that Mama had when she cleaned Diego when he came running back in from the yard. The man in the back of the group just stood behind them, but stared in my direction. He had been watching my movements, seeing if I would approach any of them or ask questions. The man in the back was around my height, skinny, and looked around my same age but older at the same time. He carried a gun too. He made sure his shirt stayed over it to remind everyone there.

I saw the large man hand over an envelope to Hector and then grab his shoulder tight to whisper one last thing in to this ear. Hector backed away and looked off towards the group then hung his head down, looking lost, or overwhelmed. He breathed in the air that had a sting to it due to the crisp water running right by us and started walking in my direction. It was time for us to go back into the monte, now with fifteen extra people who had never seen this part of the world before. They walked on entirely new dirt and stood before unknown trees. I looked back at the river and the stars were gone and I realized I wouldn't see them again like this. Hector stopped right in front of me and placed his hand on my chest and I thought for a moment he would try to cave it in right there along the banks of the Rio Grande.

“Be a man today, Roberto.”

He walked towards the group and started shouting his instructions. They were not to stray away. We were going to lead them to the nearest rode that bordered the monte. A truck would be waiting there and from that point they were on their own. The truck would only take so many and if it ran out of room then they better run. We were going to move fast. We would not turn back. If they got lost, tripped over and left behind, bitten by one of the snakes or attacked by a boar, then we could do nothing. They were not to ask his name or mine, and they would not address us in any manner. Cops would come around soon. We will now start moving. Hector breathed. He told me to stay by his side. I heard splashing in the water. The two men had gone back to the other side. They walked through the moon and tore it in half.

No one ever said how loud birds are deep in the dark hours of the morning. I wish someone from the village back across the river told me something about them before we came over to this side. It sounded like yelling and I heard the flaps of their wings as they went from tree to tree. Hector signaled for us to move and when we did the birds screamed louder. All of it came out in this black fire, swirling around us as we made our way into the monte. I had seen the clouds of birds making their way through the sky every night during these last few weeks, just like they did every fall before the cold came in. Thousands of birds would circle and dance in the sky, moving up and down, spreading all over. We now walked through those same clouds.

The men in the group outnumbered the women easily so they walked in front of them. The mothers stayed behind everyone else with their backs. The kids had been crying since they got out of the river. The water on them had to be cold and filled with heavy sand and now the air moving through the trees had been filling in their shirts. They were trapped in the burning pain of ice all over their backs and stomachs. One of the mothers tied a piece of cloth over the

mouth of one little boy in the group so the other two mothers did the same. The cries were still loud but muffled enough to sound no different than blowing wind.

We ran over branches but tried not to keep our feet too high above the ground to make our steps quieter. Hector knew the path without looking and as I followed him I noticed how he turned his body due to trees that we had not yet crossed. He had the whole monte mapped out, just like how he knew every row of soil back in the fields. When he told the group that he would not turn back for any reason, he meant every word. We had moved at a fast pace so far, picking up speed in small clearings, slowing down just enough to duck under low trees, and not once had he looked back to see if any of them were actually behind us. I had stayed by his side like how he told me. The trees in our way kept getting thicker.

I had heard stories from men back in the fields about the monte that bordered the river. I didn't remember it too much from when we crossed. I just remembered how jumping from shade to shade under the trees kept us alive. A lot of the men in the fields often crossed back every weekend to give family members back on the other side money. They crossed before the sun came up and came back at the same hour. They said how much easier it was to go back to Mexico then it was to come back here. When you cross here they said, everything around you moves just as fast as you, and you're so worried about being caught that you lose track of the trees and where you are. That's why people die in the monte. The path is pretty straight, but your mind isn't.

The birds started flying between us. We had been running enough that the birds now noticed and started making their way through the line. I hadn't been able to hear the sound of the river for some time and we had been weaving through the trees enough for me to realize that we were getting close to path that led to the road. I heard the crunching of dead leaves

behind me in a constant rhythm, the song of my life sounded like running. I heard it loud and close, loud and constant. Everything around me smelled like fresh mesquite, and I felt gusts of air and flashes of black from passing birds. The ground below me moved up and down and this was my music. Crack of leaves, a streak of black, and a scream. A scream. A yell so loud, that I heard no more leaves. A scream like the birds. But Louder. And then a word.

“Mi mijito! No no no Mi mijito!”

A woman started saying these words over and over from the back of the group. More shouting followed. One person started yelling for help, another woman started crying. I had stopped the moment I heard the first yell but Hector kept moving forward. The whole group stopped and turned towards the cries. The babies started crying louder. Birds kept flying through. Darker shades of black flew in front of my eyes. The crying lit up the trees.

“Ay no no no no! Mi mijito! Someone please help!” The woman said. The words came out between heavy gasps for air. They sounded wet. I moved back towards her cries. One of the men from the group came running towards me and grabbed me by my shoulder. He kept yelling words over and over, panicked, and I lost some of it in the trees. I heard the word boy, and tree. He pulled me towards the back of the group.

“Her boy, oh god. Her boy got hurt.” One man said.

“His eye, I saw his eye. There’s so much blood.” Said another voice.

“Mi mijito! No no no no...”

“You got to help him. Call the coyote back here! We got to help him.”

“She was running with the boy on her back. She didn’t see the tree fast enough. A branch went through the boy’s face.” One man said, crying through the words. “She didn’t see the branch. His face is gone, his whole face. Gone.”

The man pulled me until I stood above the woman. She had her son in her arms and tried wiping the blood off his face but it kept coming out. The branch tore right through his nose and must have exploded open his cheek. His teeth and jaw bone popped out from under the streaming blood. She kept holding him tighter against her, trying to make it stop. She begged to hear him cry, but his body didn’t move. The ground smelled like metal, and his shirt already soaked through enough that now the blood just dripped off into the leaves. She cried and said the same words over and over. Mijito, mijito. Muerte, muerte.

“You got to help her boy! We got to find him help!” One man kept saying in front of my face.

“Call the coyote back! You make him come back here and find him help for her son!” Another man said.

The group of men had circled around me and the woman. I only smelled the blood of her son and felt their warm breaths fill the air around us. One man pushed into my chest, trying to make me get down next to her boy. I didn’t hear anymore birds around me. The woman with her boy in one arm reached out and grabbed on to my legs and when I looked upon her I saw her face slide down, jaw open, blood with lines through it made by tears. I heard the muffled cries from the other kids. The two mothers behind me had been praying, holding onto their own children. I only smelled metal. Then I heard thunder.

“Get back! Move away from my son!” Hector said. He had a gun in his right hand and had it pointing at the group. He pulled the man that had been yelling in my face and threw him down into the ground with such force that it shook around us and birds flew away from the circle. He grabbed another man by the neck and threw him off against a tree. He pointed the gun in the face another and then pointed it towards one of the women. I stepped behind him and saw his back moving up and down from his breaths. The cool air rushed back across my body.

“Don’t make me kill any of you!” Hector said.

“Her son is hurt! You have to do something!” One man said.

“The boy is dead. There’s nowhere to take him either way.”

“You’re supposed to get us here safely. We got to find a road, get help somehow. She can’t just carry her son to where she’s going.”

“She’s not going to carry him anywhere. She will leave the boy here.”

The woman holding her son stopped crying. She looked at Hector with fear, tears drowning her eyes, enough to hold the reflection of the trees in them. The group of men looked at him angry. They wanted to kill him, but Hector held the gun firm. His arm didn’t move and his stare stayed the same. They wanted to see if he showed weakness, but he never did. The two other women holding their children now reached down to the now childless mother. She looked down and let out a yell, and realized she no longer had a son. The woman clutched the boy’s shirt and when she did so she dripped out more blood into the ground. He was now part of the monte.

“If you’re not going to help take the boy, I will. I’ll carry him to the road and then we can figure out what to do from there. The driver won’t notice,” One of the men said.

“I’m not leading you all anymore. You can do what you want. The road is straight ahead, maybe another mile. If any of you follow me or my son, I will shoot you and leave your body to dogs,” Hector said.

“You can’t just leave us here. We paid for you to get us safely to the States. I have a cousin waiting for me.” One of the women said. Hector didn’t care. He pushed me backwards and started leading us away from the group. They wanted to follow but he held the gun at them as he walked us back off the path and into the trees.

“If you follow, you die,” Hector said. We moved forward and when I looked back the line of trees had already covered the group. We moved fast and when I didn’t smell anymore blood in the air I knew we were already far enough that the group could never find us. We broke off the path we took to the river but Hector knew every way to get us back home, back to the trees and the yard and Diego. He had to get back as much as I did.

I wanted to ask him what was going to happen to the group. The answer had been clear though. I had heard enough stories in town about groups of “dirty Mexicans” swimming over the river only to die on the sides of roads or fill and smell up the local jail. The group I met were no different than any other group in the mind of the town. The boy who had his face taken off by a tree was the same as every other boy that died there. The mother the same as every other “irresponsible” mother. I didn’t know what would exactly become of the group, or where they would go, but I knew where they wouldn’t end up. The path they walked on doesn’t lead to the America they hoped for.



“Why didn’t you fight back? Your pendejo ass just stood there. They coulda killed you.” Hector said. He had stopped running and now just walked in front of me holding on to branches of every tree we passed as if he knew the feel of them all.

“I didn’t know what to do. All I could see was that woman’s son. What was left of him.” I said.

“I can’t have you out here if you’re not ready. I need a man with me. Not some scared little boy.”

“I didn’t ask you if I could come work with you. Mama said you needed help so I came to help. Does she even know what you do?”

“I need a son who is going to do what it takes to care of his family. I don’t have that and I am starting to think I never will.”

“Why am I never enough for you Hector? What do I have to do to make you proud of me?”

He stopped in-between two trees and looked up towards a sky that had hints of blue from the coming sun. Fall mornings this close to the river meant that a cool fog would cover our feet soon and be so thick by dawn that we could walk past town and never notice. Hector had been rushing through the woods to have us beat it. The question made him lose care about the fog altogether.

“I have been on my own since Diego’s age. My dad would have beat the shit out of you with the way you act. Always dreaming about something else. I treat you hard because you’re so damn soft, like the boys that died back home. They couldn’t survive. Couldn’t keep no

family safe, so they died like dogs. I had to fight to make it out of there and I have been fighting every day since. Make me proud? Do something for once that shows me you're a man. I have done everything to keep you from my life Roberto. But your children might just go back to it because of you."

Hector moved forward without telling me to follow him. I did either way. We walked through more mesquite trees that had crickets flying off them whenever we passed. We passed puddles of water that had rats running out of them and into the leaves. I felt them run over my feet. Hector and I didn't speak after what he told me, not about the rats, or the smell of morning mesquite trees.

We made our way out of the monte and walked into a bay of fog that stretched on towards the end of the sky. As we walked, I could feel the thickness of it as it broke and moved around my body. If Hector walked a foot too far I would lose him in it and could only follow by hearing the sound of his steps in the mud in front of me. I wondered if the group had found the truck that had been sent to pick them up in this fog, or if they even made it out of trees. Maybe one of the ranchers from town would find a group of men, two mothers and their children, and now one woman without her son, wondering around the field looking for a way out. I already knew they wouldn't find what they were looking for, but maybe they could find something close enough.

When we got back to home Hector went straight to him and Mama's room without saying a word. I went to my bed and saw Diego hugging his blanket as tight as he could to cover himself from the cold. I laid down in my clothes that smelled like the river. I saw blood on the corner of my shirt and didn't know or care if it was mine. I felt too tired to move, to even try and close my eyes. I could still hear the water, the smashing of a branch, and a tapping in the

corner of the room. I heard it all faster and louder as it swirled around me, covering everything I could see. When I looked up I saw outline of Estrella floating still like a dark shadow. She didn't have a face.

## CHAPTER XIV

### FALLEN TREES

I woke up to the smell of beans cooking over the stove and for the first time in months it felt like I could taste a normal morning. I also woke up alone. When I walked out of the room I saw Mama and Diego sitting at the table. The sun looked brighter outside than it did the last couple days. I felt warmth again.

“Buenos tardes,” Mama said.

“It’s already the afternoon?”

“Si, me and Diego were worried. But I heard you both come in early this morning. You okay mijo?”

“Are you asking me or Diego?”

“You, Roberto. You’re still mi mijito too. Always.” Mama said.

She had a look on her face that I had started to recognize and see more often. Whenever Hector left in the morning without speaking to her or any of us, which had happened almost every day now, she wore the feeling on her. She had been cooking and cleaning more often during the day the last few weeks. The tamale deliveries I figured now helped pass the

hours. But she talked to me as if she needed me to say something back and eat the food that she had made.

“I’m fine. Just tired.”

“I made you some beans and a few tortillas. I made Diego some breakfast in the morning but you were still asleep. I need some help in the backyard. I want to plant a new tree. Can you help me after you finish eating?”

“Yeah, of course. Thank you for the food Mama.”

We went out into the yard and I saw a shovel next to a wrapped plastic bag underneath one of the trees. All the fruit had fallen off and black and orange circles had already rotted into the floor. The cold had killed them. Mama always said that when trees die you can either have them there taking up space or you can uproot them and make something new. Today she had decided to clear the soil.

“We are going to dig out the naranja tree and plant some lemon trees for the spring. The tree is already dead but the roots go pretty far down, so I’m going to need you to help me pull it out once we dig deep enough.” Mama said.

“It sounds like a lot of work just to have a few lemons.”

“Planting is just not about the fruit you get Roberto. That is one thing you have to learn before you leave this home one day.”

Mama grabbed the shovel and struck deep into the ground, hard enough to make dirt explode off into our face. The top of the soil had already dried but the tip of the shovel came back moist. This meant our jobs would be a lot easier the more we dug. The first strike into the

top layer always seemed the hardest to get through but after that everything is just moving around mud.

We took turns digging around the tree. After every few minutes one of us would wipe the sweat off the top of our heads and hand over the shovel without saying a word. Every time I saw Mama throw the shovel deep into ground, I wanted to grab it and push it further. And even though the tree had died, with every hit to the roots a shot of citrus came out towards our faces, as if begging for the chance to live again. Everything near dying always tried to squeeze out last moments of life, and I wondered if the little boy in the woods ever had that last moment.

The tree had survived all summer, even when the rain hadn't come for a couple weeks. It fought through the thirst and in this way I felt like we had connected in a special way. I remembered on some mornings before taking off the fields, Diego and I would run out to it and grab an orange before walking off to work with Hector. The tree never let us down. Every orange had enough juice to flow down our chins and create stains that lasted on our shirts all day until we came back home. So when we finally got to the base of the roots and cut through it with the metal of the shovel as hard as we could, it stung more than I expected. I wanted those mornings back. I never got to say thank you or bye to them.

I grabbed the base of the tree with both my hands and dug my shoulders into the dead branches. I took a deep breath and in one good pull I shot up with both my legs and pulled the tree out of the ground and threw it to the side of me. The dirt came flying out and the smell of old dirt flying into the air made me think of the smell of the river. Both smells come natural and from only one place and you could never find them again after you left.

Mama helped push the dead tree to the side and grabbed the bag that had the small lemon tree in it surrounded by soil. The cold never lasted too long so it only had to last until the sun came back out and then it would have lemons in it by the summer. Everything that mama planted grew stronger and faster than it should have. She always started by picking up the soil in her hands and rubbing it into her palms. She would scoop it up and then pat it back down into the ground. She got down on her knees and whispered something as she returned the dirt to its place.

“What do you say when you do that?” I asked.

“My mama always told me to say a small prayer to whatever you plant. The more you pray over it, the faster it would grow. She would always say plants have spirits too.”

Diego came outside and sat near us but started drawing into the dirt. He liked doing that or gathering up all the loose soil around him and making a small mound that he would call a castle or his fortress. As he did that, Mama started setting the lemon tree into the ground while continuing her prayer. She started sifting the dirt around it, making sure the tree stuck into the ground before getting the shovel to cover it back up.

“Does the prayer only work for plants?” I asked.

“Aye no Roberto. It does not. I always pray over you and your Brother too though. That is the first thing I do every night before going to sleep. I always pray for you, to keep you safe, help you figure things out. I’m always thinking of you mijito.”

“I don’t think I’m your mijito anymore Mama. And I don’t know anything it seems. What did you want to do before meeting Hector?”

“We didn’t really have dreams back in my home Roberto. My mama raised me to take care of the home. So meeting Hector really became my dream. But I always loved singing and taking care of children. But I think you’re the first one in our family to really have dreams Roberto. And you will always be my mijito.”

“I feel like I don’t have dreams anymore Mama. I don’t remember if I did. All I know is that I want to get as far away from here as possible. And I don’t see that happening anymore.” I said. I grabbed the shovel and started filling in the dirt around the lemon tree. I saw Mama look off into the sky and we both saw some birds flying south, having the winds carry them past the clouds and towards the river.

“You and Hector are more alike than you think Roberto. Always wanting to leave. Go somewhere else just like those birds and fly back whenever you want to. You have me. You have Diego. And you have this land. But that’s never enough for either of you.”

“We have nothing but dirt and a town that hates us. They come after us like animals. We aren’t important to anyone there. I just want something different from working in fields. And I am hated for wanting that.”

I threw the shovel into the ground and saw Mama trying to look away from me. Diego stopped playing in the dirt and ran to her side. He held on to her arm and hugged her tight. He hugged her like how I used to, and like how I wanted to. Instead I walked towards home and walked back into the room. I heard Mama pick up the shovel after I left and continue filling in the dirt surrounding the tree. I heard the wind outside the house, and heard Diego running around which made Mama laugh. I pictured her smile and tried to remember the last time I caused one.



Diego ran inside and I smelled the sun on him. He ran into the restroom and when he came out we both looked at each other as if we both saw only strangers. He walked towards me and sat next to me on the bed.

“Did you really mean what you said Robbie? About wanting to leave us?” Diego said.

“Yes Diego. I really did.” I said. As I told him that, Mama walked back inside and walked into the kitchen. She saw us together but didn’t look at me directly. I smelled the sun on her as well.

“Diegito, want to help me cook dinner?”

“Please don’t leave me Robbie.” Diego said. He left the bed and went with Mama. She never let him really cook. She usually had him count the beans and help set up the plates and table. She just wanted a son to be there with her. Diego just loved being there.

After he left I went back into the yard to check on the new tree. I saw it blowing off towards a sunset that had shades of grapefruit in it. The leaves already had the scent of lemon on them and it tasted like summer even though the cool air reminded me of the night coming for us. Mama had dug the tree back into the dirt tight and made the land around it look unbothered. The dead one still laid off to the side where I had left it. That tree wouldn’t see the summer again, or even the dawn.

I moved the body of the dead tree out further past the rest of the garden. I had led it to a small clearing on the edge of our home’s yard and to what eventually just became the beginning of nothing but dirt leading all the way out until the monte. Diego and I would imagine that our home stretched out for forever but we knew of this imaginary line that stopped us from

calling it ours after a certain point. One afternoon last year, we marked that line with a stick and a piece of cloth from one of our old shirts. We created a small flag and Diego and I pretended to run our own country in the backyard. One of the storms in spring knocked over the flag and drowned it in mud, but the border of our country still stood there, with or without an old torn-up strip of cotton.

I didn't want to go back inside so I sat under the lemon tree and watched the sun get lower with every minute. I always liked watching the sky shift and fall upon itself, having the blue drip into different shades of red and purple. In North Texas I heard they had some really tall buildings that blocked out the same colors I looked out towards, and I decided here in the yard that I would be willing to live without seeing these shades for some time. I had already tasted enough sunsets to fill lifetimes.

The smell of cooking beans and meat came from inside. Mama would let me eat dinner with her and Diego. She wouldn't tell Hector what I told her, not just to protect me, but also because more than likely he would get home without saying a word to her anyway. I knew Mama had dreams once, even if she wanted to forget or have them fade away like the sunset, she dreamt them. I wondered if they looked like mine. Maybe she wanted to see a city, or experience an actual snowfall for the first time. I thought of the distance between now and her dreams. They must have seemed further now more than the actual miles it took to reach the cities she always thought of. The distance between dreams and reality grew with years. Maybe Mama didn't even remember hers anymore. I didn't even remember my own.

The sun went down further and further towards the dirt and the mud. I saw the shades of orange and purple filling in the puddles of water scattered across the yard. In the reflection, I thought maybe in there were our dreams.

## CHAPTER XV

### IGLESIA

Before the sounds of rolling thunder, I had been in a dream where my world smelled like an early spring morning with rain on the edge of the clouds that hung above me. I didn't see the sun in this dream either. I couldn't tell the time of the day but somehow everything balanced on the edge of late night and early morning and I walked somehow in the realm of this color. I felt weightless. I didn't feel my actual steps and kept gliding across a field of oranges that led to the center of town. Hector walked past me, so did Mama. I couldn't see Diego but I felt him around me like sticky warmth. The square of the town had been burnt, all the buildings had scorched marks and smoke stains all over them, but their windows remained and they reflected a purple sky that had a figure floating in its' center. I wasn't allowed to see it yet.

I saw the high school that I was never a part of. Everyone in Weslaco went to the same place, rich, poor, didn't matter. A panther with yellow eyes had been painted throughout the hall that I would skip class in. I did that to look cool like the kids who had money and clothes, but also because I knew I smelled like dirt and beans cooking over gas. Everyone would laugh when my group of friends walked in the cafeteria. They would ask us to get fruit for them, like how we already did. I didn't see her, but I knew Estrella laughed with them. I floated on and glided over a neighborhood with fences so white they outshined cotton in the middle of summer. The grass looked green and flowed like water, and in of those

rows of houses that looked like so straight like magazine pictures was the two story wooden structure I called home. My house had a porch that smelled like maple and windows that looked clear enough to fall into. I couldn't see inside the house but I heard the sound of music coming out and I thought of all the happy memories that never happened. I could hear the laughter of the kids I hadn't had yet and could touch the love I felt for them when they ran around the house, or when they cried from falling. I thought of the moments that we danced in the living room after eating dinner, and how I tucked them in and sang them the prayer that Mama told the trees before they fell asleep.

I turned towards a church down the road that had a cross that looked over the city. In the church I heard the words of a choir singing and could hear my own voice in there, lips moving proudly about the grace of God and the beauty of forgiveness. I sang louder than I ever have. I talked to the congregation about how my soul was saved when I found out that there was someone out there that loved me for who I am, dirty and all. God loved me and made me clean and white as snow which was everything I needed to get into heaven. I cried talking about the sinner I was, how I worked in the fields and how I saw the real Jesus die one day in the sun and realized I was going to hell. And how I didn't know about God until I was adopted by the town and moved into a house nearby that had electricity. God didn't live out there in the fields and if you really believed in him he would rescue you out of there and give you everything you needed to be human, like a car and way to cook food in a matter of seconds.

The people in the city, the ones that shopped in the grocery store that had now burned down but not really, the ones that bought their drugs and radios in the stores with clear windows but black smoke stains around all their doors, those people knew God and they finally accepted me once I put on a tie and spoke in English. In this dream I never once said the word

Cristo or Santa Maria because everyone knew that those figures from the bible had brown skin and brown skin looks bad in a church when most of those that give money get that cash from their brothers in the fields. I wore the cotton sleeves of my shirt as far down as I possibly could. I tried to hide my accent in every word and talked only about the financial market and about those boys in Alabama causing trouble for the rest of us.

On the days I preached I talked of both Job and Peter. I related to both those figures because I too felt like I had not only lost my family but also lost my faith. I had finally understood why the congregation loved hearing about both men. The crops died, the animals died, his wife died, and after getting boils and sunburns, God gave it all back to Job once he stood up for himself. Job didn't die there in the fields when he really wanted to, not like the boy who had his face taken off by the branch or like my first Jesus in the field. They loved Peter because he sold out Jesus. He told the Romans where to find him and then they put him on a large tree with two branches. They stabbed his kidney and his piss flowed over on the outside of his body. Peter saw this all happen because he snitched him out and then he saw his savior die. Peter felt real bad but when Jesus came back he forgave him anyway and later Peter became one of the most important figures in the bible. In the field, in the colonias, or back in Mexico, you never snitched. There's no reward for it. You snitch and you may lose your family, your life, or worse your pride. But the people from the town liked that Peter became successful after selling out someone you love. They didn't say why, but all of us that had been allowed into their church knew. I spoke to them about these two men because they were the greatest of all traitors. I didn't see Diego or Mama among anyone in the crowd. I didn't hear their cheers when I finished my sermon.

I disappeared from standing over the congregation to being outside of the church again and the bells in the tower rang but instead of a soft bass it sounded like children screaming. The wind picked up and it made the leaves around me swirl and float up into the sky. Grapefruit and oranges started rolling over my feet and I felt the weight of them as I tried to make my way through town. One little boy picked one up and when I looked over I only saw blood streaming down his forehead with his eyes shooting through the red.

On the outside of town I saw mountains of black smoke streaming out into the horizon, blocking out the sun. The orange haze got beaten back and caused the sky to be purple and fade off into night off into the west. The mountains looked large enough to climb and see the rest of the Earth. Around me specks of sugar cane floated and some even landed on my cheeks right below my eyes. The scorched leaves rolled down the street and ran around wild, free. The billows of smoke had a rumble to them and the sound of it fell just underneath the screaming of the bells.

The wind continued to pick up and I felt my eyes move towards the sky, and the figure that floated when I first entered the dream had not moved in any way. It stayed there, right above the center of town, looking towards the mountains of smoke. I could finally make out the body though. It stood up right in the air as if it owned the atmosphere surrounding it. The wind that shot up blew made the leaves fall and touch the bottom of the figure's feet. I wanted to pray to it but when I did my lips couldn't open. And I understood why. The figure in the sky, floating over the town, facing down the mountains of smoke, was Hector. He had come to look over all my sins.

## CHAPTER XVI

### MUERTE

The night the Rangers came the world smelled like mesquite and lemon and I heard the sound of Mama's screams right before the sound of the gunshots. A few men rode in on their horses but most of them drove in their large trucks and shot wildly into the night sky as their horns blared. The shots into the air made a blat, blat, blat sound but nothing hit our home or tore through the trees so I knew they hadn't been aiming towards the house yet. Some of the trucks raced off down the road towards the rest of the homes and shacks in our colonia. The fading of the engines made me feel even more afraid. Mama ran into the room with her eyes wide and clear and shook me out of the bed and then picked up Diego and covered him with her arms. I couldn't focus my eyes or listen to what she was screaming as she ran out of the room. I only heard the gunshots and the sound of horses running. The engine of the trucks outside shook the bed that I hadn't left yet. And as Mama ran out, I saw a piece of wood from the wall explode out in front of my face and onto the floor. The real firing had started.

“We need to get under the house! We can all fit there!” Mama said.

“Where's Hector? Why isn't he here?” I said. I didn't feel his pressure or his anger. The bullets started flying through the trees and I heard the whistle of their iron as it moved through the air.

“He will be fine! We need to get under the house now!” Mama said. We ran out the back door and jumped into the dirt. I could hear the bullets flying through the house. It shattered the cabinets and broke through the metal in the kitchen. I heard plates crash and fall onto the floor. They fired at everything, moved the guns and the bullets around like God deciding where to drop rain.

The back of the house stood on cinder blocks. This helped the house stay afloat during the heavy rain seasons but today we used it to hide under the gun fire above us. We dug ourselves under the floor boards and through the mud. We were chest deep in shit. When Hector made the house he dug the pipe that connected to the toilet above deep into the soil. He said it would flow down into the earth, but whenever it rained or during the cold and damp months, it would sink in with the top soil and mix with it. We crawled and squeezed in through all the shit that had been stored up under the house for months until Mama made us stop. She rolled over onto her back and picked up Diego to hold him on top of her chest. He fit right under the floorboards and the light still coming from the house seeped through the cracks. We stopped there, right under where our only table stood, with the mud and waste digging into our nose. Cedar and mesquite fell on top of our heads from the bullets tearing through the house. The firing then stopped.

The world got quiet enough that I could hear the dirt moving under me. Far away, down the end of the road where everyone else in the colonia lived, the popping remained. It sounded like the fireworks we heard in the summer that came from the center of town. The crickets that rang every night had stopped. No wind moved over the home. Just mud and distant pops, and the sound of an engine running. The men started talking, and soon I heard the first steps of them entering in through the front door.



The men must have been wearing heavy cowboy boots because when they stepped into the living room flurries of wood dust started falling around us. They had spurs on the back end of them, or wore heavy belts because I could hear the metal clicking with every step they took. I tried looking through the lines in the floor but I only saw tall figures causing shadows. One of them kicked down the table from the legs and laughed.

“I heard that sonofabitch that burned down the fields lived here. Hector or some shit. One of those Mexican names.” One of the men said.

“His name is Hector Navarro. And that piece of shit is the most wanted out of all these fuckers out here.” Another one said. He had the voice of the man that fired all of us back in the summer. The one that threatened Mama and said he would find his friends. The rancher kept his promise.

“He would live in this shit home. This shed isn’t even bigger than the one I have in the back of the yard at home. One match and I think we can burn this thing down.” The first man said.

“I don’t want to burn this down yet. I want to find him and make that fucking wetback watch. He has family though. Two sons, probably some fat bitch as a wife. I don’t know where they are.” The rancher said.

“Maybe they ran out the back or headed down the path to go with their friends. You know how they like to gather in their groups.”

“They’re probably all together shitting themselves.” The rancher said. One of the other men walked around the house checking all the rooms. I heard him go into mine and Diego’s, flipping over the bed. I saw the rancher move and walk into Mama’s room. He started smashing

some of the glass and pots that Mama had brought from Mexico. He turned over their bed too. The frame of it crashed to the floor so hard that the wood on that side of the home caved in enough to where the smell of their room filled in the air we had been breathing.

“Look at this boys. Hector had some money saved up from under his bed. Where do you think this came from?” The rancher said.

“That ain’t no field money. And no respectin’ store owner would hire his brown ass here.”

“I’ve been hearing about some people working as coyotes. Bringin’ in some more Mexicans from across the river. They found a group of them earlier this week. Maybe he has something to do with them.” The man who had been searching our room said.

“Now that there is a real criminal act. One that probably has some type of reward for turning in the body. If we bring in Hector, we would just be doing our civil duty.” The rancher laughed. He stuffed the cash into his pockets and gave some to his friends and they did the same. “I don’t care about his family anymore. I want Hector dead. And I want to be the one to drag his body through town.”

“Whatever you say Boss. What should we do here?”

“Leave it, I want Hector to know we stopped by. If you all need to piss though, do it now before we head out for the others.” The rancher said

The men unzipped their pants and started peeing onto the floor. It dripped through the wood and we saw it fall into the dirt in front of us. They walked out after they stopped and slammed the door behind them. I could hear their heavy boots move through the mud and hit

against the side of their trucks. They revved their engines and sped off down the road. They yelled “yeehaw boys” and “let’s get them fuckers” as they drove off.

The world got quiet again. I could hear the water under us moving as we sunk into shit and mud. Diego had been crying and gasping as softly as he could but once the men left he couldn’t hold it in any longer. Mama patted him on the back and looked towards me. I could only see her eyes in the dark and the rest of her face had been covered like a mask. I started moving backwards from where we dug in from. The wood above us had nails that went through the floor and I could feel the tips of them scrape my back as I got out. They caught and tore away from the shirt I had on. When I got out from under the home, the feel and smell of night air hit me like a taste of heaven. The citrus taste from the trees hit my tongue hard enough to forget for a moment of what we had just been through.

When I got out, Mama let Diego off her chest and instructed him to move towards me. I grabbed him with my outstretched arm and pulled him out. Mama then came out as well, going slowly under the house through the mud, stopping right before the opening to catch her breath. When she got out, she looked up towards the sky and inhaled it, letting out a deep sigh, and then a gasp. Tears started rolling down her face breaking through the dirt. She clenched on to Diego and she held him as hard as she could and they both cried together. I didn’t want to cry with them, but Mama placed her hand on mine and I looked out into the fields as I felt the water grow in my eyes. I felt the anger also grow in me. It reminded me of the fire the night the fields burned down. I felt the heat of it in my chest and it flushed into my face. The anger grew and expanded like smoke. I wanted to dig my hands into the dirt and rip the world apart, tear the worms from each other, feel it like crushing bones.

Mama cried and gasped over and over until finally I got tired of it. I didn't want to sit there and hold Diego with her. I wanted to find the man that made us crawl under the home. I wanted to kill them and leave their bodies there. I wanted to dig their faces in their own piss, make them smell and taste it like we had to. The buzzing of the flies and chirps of the crickets returned but the sound meant nothing to me. I smelled the shit on my face.

“Where's Hector Mama? Why wasn't he here to do anything?” I asked.

“Roberto I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry mijito, are you okay?”

“I don't need you to be sorry. I need to know where Hector is. Why wasn't he here to be the man when we need him? Why are we still living in this shithole? Why can't we just fight back?”

“Let's try to get cleaned up. I'll get some towels from inside. Watch over Diegito.”

“No Mama. Answer me! Where's Hector? Why can't we just do something, anything to get away from this damn town?”

“There's nowhere to go Roberto! And I don't know where he is. I never know. You know him more than I do and you don't even love him. I am always here for him. For you. And I'm sorry I couldn't do anything but please believe me. I wish I could have stopped it. Please.”

“You don't do anything for me. You just make tamales and play with Diego all day. You don't know me anymore. You don't know what Hector made me do. To me, you just sit there every day and make me do useless things with you to pass the time. I'm never going anywhere because of you.”

“You and Hector are the exact same. You can find him before I do. If you don’t want to be here, go find him. Then maybe you and him can do whatever you want to get out of here.” Mama said. She stood up and picked up Diego and cradled him into her neck. He had still been crying, hearing our words, thinking of the gunshots. Part of me wondered if he knew he could have died. I wondered if he already had the want to.

“Do you really not want me here anymore?” I said.

“I just want you to be wherever you want to Roberto. And that isn’t here.”

She carried Diego towards the home but didn’t go inside. The rangers could drive back at any moment. The pops still carried off from down the road. When I looked towards it I saw soft flashes of light and knew that meant someone had died and the burning of brown bodies had started. The smell of fire and citrus circled my nose. And through the pops and haze of fire, I felt empty. For the first time, I truly felt alone. I closed my eyes to try and see the ghost of Estrella but she wasn’t there. I sat there in the middle of the garden with mud and shit all over my clothes and face, and I smelled the lemon tree and fallen mesquite, but I lived in nothing. I couldn’t dream of someone next me. The stars moved above. I felt dirt shift and settle like worms in my mouth.

## CHAPTER XVII

### COLONIA

When the sun came up it did so nervously. The birds flew and pulled it quietly from under the ground and dragged it through the smoke that lingered and floated through the trees. A fire burned down the road and cries seemed to echo and carry in the light wind. The day shouldn't have come. The night should have carried on and let the colonia cook itself into ashes to be dragged somewhere else. No one needed to see what the men had done. No one needed to travel down the road that they traveled. The world should have stopped there in the dead of the night, but still a fire raged.

The men never drove back past our home. They must have found a connecting road past the colonia and made it back to town without being seen. I'm sure it wouldn't have mattered anyway if they were. They had enough guns to shoot down an army but most of them spoke and sounded like white men that could do anything in town and get away with it. As long as they did it against the brown field workers of course. They probably roared and revved their trucks all the way back to town, rode the horses back over to their own ranches, and now slept in their beds or laughed over breakfast about the shit-colored Mexicans they just shot at throughout the night.

I wish they had driven back our way. I would have run in the middle of the road and try to fight every one of them. I don't care if they would have shot, or just run over my body

there. I didn't fight and I should have. I didn't fight when their piss fell on top of us, or when they flipped over Mama's room. And now the smell of the crap from under the house stayed in my nostrils, even as I tried to sleep away the night. The morning came and I wanted to fight that too.

Mama grabbed some towels and leftover tamales and packed them in cloth. Diego cried until he fell asleep and when he woke up he continued to cry even more but the tears had already emptied so he just gasped quietly. Mama and I hadn't said anything to each other. But when I saw her getting the tamales ready in the kitchen I knew that I couldn't let her go down the road alone. The smell in the home wouldn't change anytime soon. If anything it would stay in the wood for the next few months. Mama had cleaned up her and Hector's room as much as she could. She flipped the bed over and placed some of her frames and ceramic statues back on their shelves, but nothing could ever be the same, and spending the day here cleaning wouldn't take away the memories of the men standing and looking over our home in power.

All three of us took off down the road with the pack of tamales and a few towels, not knowing if any of these items helped or would erase anything. It didn't take long to find the first death that the men left behind. One of the dogs that ran around the colonia laid in the middle of the road and pointed off down towards the path of homes. It was split open and we could see the glimmer of its' tripas coming from the open stomach. One of the trucks must have hit it and left it there to look on towards the homes that it would never be able to protect. The damn thing fought more than I did.

Diego and I would sometimes throw rocks at it just so it could run around a bit when we walked by. We never tried to hurt it, or any of the other dogs. We always saw them chasing each other over leftover food or attacking some chickens in backyards. We had named a

few of them, I think it was this one that we called “pulgás” because he was always scratching himself and rolling in dirt. When I saw Pulgas lying in the middle of the road, I felt he deserved better. When we walked past him, I said some of the words that Mama spoke when she prayed over trees.

We kept walking until we came to the first house after ours. The brothers lived here but we didn’t see them or their parents. The house had been set on fire and it had collapsed on itself leaving just the structure and smoke behind. The birds chirped on from the fields of corn that had now died. The house smelled like burning oak. Mama moved closer and closer to the home holding the tamales in front of her like making a peace offering. When we get to the front of the home we saw a charred man sitting on the edge of the doorway, slumped over on the side, with one shoe on his left foot and the other bare and covered in dirt and blood. Mama said hello to him a few times but she knew he had died sometime in the night and the men left his body sitting there burning along with the home. He must have been the dad that Abel would say yelled at them and their Mama. They ran outside with us to get away from the yelling. His body didn’t make a sound taking up space at the door. I turned Diego’s face away from the man. Mama tried looking inside to see if there was anyone she could offer food to, but the house had burnt all night and no one left in the home could have survived in any corner of it. Everything remained still. I could hear a small crackle in the embers still burning. There were birds flapping their wings above us. And then we heard a woman’s scream coming off from down the road where more houses sent up their smoke. Mama looked up into the sky and walked off towards the screams. We followed behind her.

We followed the path and dug deep into dirt were tire tracks that had bullet casings scattered around in the grooves of the mud. The trucks must have been heavy and



moving fast because puddles of water had already started forming in the holes left behind. The casings had fallen everywhere and looked as random as rain drops. The men had been shooting into the sky as they drove and set fire to the colonia. They shot and shot and when they saw a body they stopped and turned their guns towards that instead. We saw the body of a woman lying in one of the puddles left behind by a truck. She wasn't the one screaming.

Down the road a man had a bucket of water and carried it over to more of the homes that had been left on fire. He ran back and forth from the puddles of rain left behind, dipping the plastic red bin in them and then running back, spilling water on himself each time. Families from the colonia had gathered down the path where the rest of the shacks were and huddled together in a circle, surrounding a floor of blankets. We knew what the cotton hid. I saw one of the brothers that we used to run with come out from the group. His mama and his other brother ran out to see him and that is when they saw us going towards them. Abel had a wrap going around his head over his left eye. Blood had seeped through it. Aaron had cuts all over his face but he didn't seem to be missing anything so he had been one of the lucky ones. Their mama grabbed them and started crying louder and stronger. She had been the one yelling, not for her, maybe for her husband, but for the colonia as a whole.

"Aye dios mio," Mama said. She walked up to the group that had surrounded the figures of cloth. They had been bringing the bodies from the colonia there. In the distance they carried more and it reminded me of carrying cotton during the middle of the summer. They labored over it, carrying bodies in satchels that had blood soaked through them. The smoke continued on and we heard screams of others saying *it's all gone*, and *the pinche rangers burned down everything*. "Take Diego back home Roberto. He shouldn't see this." But she was wrong and I kept him with me because I felt I knew better.

We watched as they gathered bodies, throwing them on top of each other. A small pyramid of them had formed and now birds started circling overhead. Diego looked at the cluster of bodies with a face as still as the sky. His eyes looked empty and his mouth was wide open. I half expected Miguel, the rancher that pissed in our home and paid us during the summer, to come with his truck and throw the bodies in the back like he did in the fields. No one came for them though. When they gathered the last of the bodies, the group just stood there. Mothers cried, men looked around for God, and all of us wanted to be taken away with them.

The brother's stayed until someone came back with the bag of their father and threw him in with the rest of them. Abel cried with his one good eye and Aaron dug his face into his Mama's leg and she yelled loud enough to scare away the crows flying above us. One man said the bodies should just be burned right here, that if they buried them somewhere they could hurt the crops and get the colonia sick. No one listened, not the dead or the alive that felt jealous of the dead.

No one would bury the bodies yet. I took Diego back to our home and Mama stayed to help those grieve. Some of the men went around putting out any fires that remained in the colonia, and others started helping build back what the men had taken down. Mama came home later that afternoon and talked to Diego about the bodies and the men that put them there. He asked her if the men that came last night wanted him dead too. Mama didn't know how to answer so instead she said to ask the question another time and if he wanted anything to eat. I sat in the room listening to her voice, when I heard Diego ask the same question again. Mama ignored it and asked if he needed something to drink. When he finally asked the third time, I heard her feet stop and could feel the truth come out of her.

“Yes Diegito, those men wanted all of us dead, even you.” She said.

“But why Mama?” Diego said.

“Because all men are the same mijito. I just hope you don’t turn into one.”

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A BOY

Hector didn't come home for the next couple days. I hadn't seen him since the night before the men came and because of this I felt peaceful again. He must have heard of the raid and if he was smart he should have assumed we died in it and now he had the chance to be free. Mama had been trying to find new things to cook for the family he left behind but now we were down to the last few packs of beans and rice. We had no money, barely any food, and a man who said he would protect us with everything in him suddenly gone. I saw the first signs of regret in Mama's eyes. They looked deep and full of fear.

I knew where to find him. Mama didn't want to say he was there but we knew. I saw her look outside the front door, hoping to see him off at the end of the road, or coming through the trees, but he never did. She looked for hours, from the middle of the afternoon until the sunset, but she waited for nothing. We couldn't go into town, too afraid of what the men might do. We only had each other, a house that still smelled, and a group of people who had all lost everything. I knew I had to find him, and when the sun went down I knew I had to say goodbye.

"I'm going to be back soon Diego, I promise." I said.

"Are you going to try and bring back papa?"

“I’m going to try. You know how he can be.”

“Does he not love us anymore? Is that why he never came back?” Diego said.

“He loves you so much Diego. And when I bring him back I will make sure that is the first thing he tells you.”

“Will you come back Robbie?”

Diego had been sitting up on his side of the bed picking mud off of his shoes. He hadn’t been looking in my direction at first but now his eyes shifted towards me and I can see the glimmering surface on top of them. I’m sure he had the words from the other night going on in his head. We hadn’t talked about it, not about what I told Mama, or what the men did to the home, but I’m sure he thought about it every second. Maybe he knew that the garden and the trees outside weren’t the same, and wouldn’t be the same for some time.

“I’ll be back Diego. I’m sorry for what I said. I love you, and I love mama. Never think that I don’t. I just don’t know if I can stay here forever. But nothing ever stays in one place forever Diego. I’ll bring back Hector, and tomorrow will be a good day.”

“I don’t think you will be back Robbie, not like today.”

Diego laid down on the bed and looked towards the ceiling as if he saw the entire universe through it. I walked out of the room and saw Mama sitting in a chair by the door, looking out to see if Hector would appear at the end of her sight. She knew he wouldn’t so when saw me coming towards her she didn’t have to ask where I was headed. She also knew what I would find, and where it could all lead, so instead of saying bye to me she just looked into my eyes.

I saw her again for the first time since I was a child. I saw a woman looking at her son knowing that he wouldn't come back the same, and how she couldn't do anything but see the path he walked away from her on. It reminded me of the moments when I would run out the house to play with the other boys back in our home in Mexico. I saw the same worry, the same hope, and the same Mama that I ran to like how Diego did now. I knew she hadn't gone anywhere. We looked at each other and right there our worlds united before the great separation of ourselves. We met and tore apart here like veins stretching through the body. And before I stepped out, she grabbed my wrist with the touch of my childhood.

“I love you mijo. Always.”

When I left I saw her eyes reflecting in the clouds. I could see stars between them and they stretched on long past the town and off to some part of Texas that I never knew. I could only see the dark shades of the fields around me and the tops of the corn and the edge of the monte reflected blue with the moonlight that broke through the sky. I walked down the road that headed towards town, looking dead ahead to see if any headlights headed towards me. I knew how far I had to walk and everything I would go through along the way, but I felt different, and the world seemed much larger because of it.

The wind blew dirt in my face and I felt specks of it land all over my body. I felt the grains flow over my arms and collect on my cheeks. I had to cover my eyes and whenever I opened up to see the road again I prayed for nothing but darkness. I didn't know what I would do if I saw the men and their trucks coming towards me. Alone on the road, far from any colonia or town that mattered, my body would be laid out without anyone ever knowing that I died. Part of me would want to fight, maybe get a good hit in, but I knew that the hit would mean nothing. Maybe Hector didn't return for this reason.

I walked through the dirt and the wind, under the couple miles of stars that looked at me through clouds, until I reached the edge of the neighborhood that I knew Hector had been hiding. He had nowhere to go in town, and the only way he could survive with the money had was here. He disappeared and ran away here before. We all knew the neighborhood, the men in it, and the things they made the women do. When he came back after the first time he left, I heard Mama say she could smell the women on him. I still how remember how he hit Mama that night for what she said. We never talked about this road and the houses in it, no one in the town did, but everyone knew. The rangers and the other men would never touch this street. No bodies would be laid out in the middle of the road here. When I walked in, I knew I stepped into the only safe ground for me in all of town.

“Do you know where you are at boy?” A man called out from one of the homes. He stepped out to meet me in the road. He had no shirt and I could see a Santa Muerto figure tattooed in his chest. He had some torn-up jeans that looked like his only pair and was smoking something strong enough to have a slowness to his words.

“I’m looking for someone,” I said.

“If you’re trying to find a girl you better have cash or get the fuck out,”

“I’m looking for a man named Hector. He lives out in the colonia down the road, used to work the fields nearby. I know he’s been here.”

“I don’t know who’s been here or not, but if you don’t have money then you should leave before I kill you right here vato.” The man said. He came towards me, pulling a knife out of the torn pocket in his jeans.

“Hey Jose! Hold on.” A woman said as she ran out of the house the man came out of. She had a shirt on but only wore underwear under it. “This is Hector’s boy.”

“I don’t care who he is. Get back inside before I cut you up too!”

“Aye calm down, Jose. Let him in. I’m sure he just wants to ask about Hector. I won’t keep him long.” The woman said. She looked at me as if she knew everything about my life by being there on that road.

“You have ten minutes with her, you don’t want to be here any longer, trust me.”

The man said. He walked me into the house, standing behind me with the knife in his hand. The woman walked over to a backroom and had the door opened slightly as she went in. Everything smelled like smoke inside the house and empty tequila bottles had been thrown everywhere. They had a radio inside that played some Tejano music and a kitchen with leftover food spilling out of the pots in the sink. The house actually had electricity. This must have been the last neighborhood outside of town to have it. They only had one lamp on in the living room but they had money it seemed to get more if they wanted. They had two couches and a small metal table with two chairs, with blankets all over the floor. When I walked into the room with the woman, she had another lamp by the edge of the bed. More bottles were here too.

“It’s okay if you don’t have money. Close the door behind you.” The woman said. She sat on the edge of the bed and grabbed a bottle off the floor and started drinking it.

“I just want to know where Hector’s at. We need him to come back home.”

“He was here in the morning, but he leaves every night. He’s been here the last couple days, in different houses. Your name is Roberto right? You’re his oldest? Yeah he talks about you a lot.”



“Do you know where he went?” I said as I stayed standing by the door, listening to Besame Mucho play from the living room. I could hear the man moving around the kitchen, searching the cabinets and pushing bottles out of their way.

“No he didn’t say. You can call me Sonia, Roberto. Don’t be so shy. Come sit next to me.” She said, patting the space of the bed next to her. She rested her hand on the sheets and grabbed the edge of the blanket she sat on. She crossed her legs and when I sat down on the bed I could feel the warmth of her thigh next to me. I never sat next to a woman on her own bed before. My arms shook as I tried not to touch her. “Do you want to know what he would say about you?”

“How much he hates me being his son?”

“No, nothing like that Roberto. He told me a lot about you. About how you stand up to him. He talked about wanting to be more like you. He never said he hated you, not once.” Sonia said, she put her hand on my leg and started moving it slowly up until she felt the tip. “And I can see how much of a man you are right now. I know why you came here. You didn’t just come to find him. Men don’t just look for answers here.”

“I don’t have any money.” I said softly, trembling more and more in voice as each word came out. “And I’ve never done this before.”

“I can tell. But Hector treats me real good. I’ll ask him for more when I see him again. Don’t worry, I won’t say a word.” Sonia said whispering. She put both her hands on me and slid the loop over the button of my pants and dug her fingers down. She grabbed on to it real tight and reached over to my balls and cupped them. She kissed the side of my cheek and moved her leg over across my waist and straddled on top of me. “It’s okay. I won’t hurt you.”

She asked me to slide her underwear down and as I did that she pulled down my pants down to my knees. She then grabbed both my hands and moved them under her shirt until they reached her tits. She made me squeeze them softly and then harder. She let go of my hands and I kept them there. I looked at her face as she closed her eyes and then got on top of me. I felt it go inside her. She moved her body in a smooth motion and then started picking up her pace. I could feel it grow and felt the rush go through it. Her thighs clasped hard around my waist and before I could close my eyes I felt it burst out of me. I still had my hand on her but I let go when I felt it release. She must have known too because after I let go she stopped moving and just sat on top of my waist.

For the first time I felt like I could actually see her face. I saw how her hair ran to her shoulders, some of the strands looked grey and frail. She had wrinkles under her eyes and a mole on her left cheek. She looked around the same age as Mama, and there on the bed with her on top of me, I could only think of the last look that Mama gave me. Sonia got off of me and wiped me with her hands. I noticed how they looked old now, and how her arm skin moved. She put her underwear back on and I still imagined Mama, how she must have felt back at home with Diego, knowing what would happen. Sonia sat on the bed and looked at me and laughed as I still laid flat on my back on her bed. “You weren’t bad Roberto, not as bad as Hector his first time.”

“I always thought it would be different.” I said, looking at the ceiling and buttoning my pants back up.  
“It never is. It’s all just fucking. Like animals.”

“Why does Hector come here? What’s the point?”

“To get away, like all men do. They just run away from their problems like little boys who break something. Hector is strong, but he came to run.” Sonia said, she took another drink from the bottle of tequila by the side of the bed. She looked around her dresser and saw a bottle of perfume and sprayed herself. She walked like nothing happened, and I just stayed sitting on her bed feeling like nothing happened either. “I understand though. The men he’s running from, I would be trying to get outta here too.”

“The men from town? They said they wouldn’t stop looking for him when they came the other night.”

“No, not those men, Roberto. Hector doesn’t care about the ranchers and their trucks. They want him dead, but they have limits. They never go to the same place twice, he knows this. But the men across the river, they don’t have limits.”

“The men across the river?” I said. I saw the bleeding face of the boy when she said it. I felt the screams in my chest again. “He told you about them? He told you about helping the people cross over?”

“Oh yes. Now those are the men he is afraid of. They heard about how he left the group there in the woods. They never made it to the truck. The group got caught, the man sent there to pick them up got caught. He really messed up there.” Sonia said as she found a joint and lit it with a match. “The people he is hiding from, he told me they don’t quit. These men don’t care about how they get him. I’ve never seen Hector afraid, but he said he couldn’t go home, not yet. He started shaking when he told me.”

“Did he say where he goes?”

“No se. He just talked on and on about the bad men. That’s all he said before he left this morning. I wish I could help more. I hate to see lost boys like you. Remind me of my own. You should go Roberto. My boss won’t like you being here much longer. I can’t protect you from him again.” Sonia said as she led me out of her room. I saw the man standing in the kitchen, looking at my steps as I walked out the house. He walked to the frame of the door and saw me leave back onto the main road.

The moon now hung above me and I felt the light drape my shoulders. The wind picked up and the tops of the corn moved like water. Birds had already started chirping and flying over and through the night. The sun would come up in a few hours, and for a moment I stood there in the middle of the road to look up into the sky and really see it for the first time. Everything felt new to me, the stars, the breeze, my own body. I could never walk back home the same. I could never smell the air around me again. I looked into the sky to see if I saw or felt anything familiar. All I heard was rushing corn.

## CHAPTER XIX

### A MAN

In the morning the smell of rain seeped into the home and I woke up to hearing the taps of the drops hit the roof above me. Whenever it rained Diego and I would rush to cover everything up because off the water would drip through and fall on us but today we just looked up and let the water fall onto our faces. I missed the smell of it, and how it got into everything, the wood in the floors, the sheets on our bed. The rain came down lightly but I could already hear it falling through the trees outside. Diego had been under the covers right next to me, slowly opening his eyes once he heard the sound of the water with me. I listened to it until I felt the warmth filling the home, and heard a sizzling sound coming from the kitchen. In-between the drops of water, I also heard heavy breaths and a deep tone.

I got up and opened the door to see Hector sitting at the table, a coffee in his hand that had steam coming from it, and Mama getting his plate ready over the stove. He looked tired, and moved his eyes slowly to face towards me. He had new layers of wrinkles on him and a scabbed up cut going across the top of his forehead. He had been in the trees again, and it seemed like he had been running without sleep and food the whole time he had been gone. His shirt had stains of mud and smelled of the banks of the river. Mama dropped his plate of food in front of him without looking at either of us. I sat in the chair across from him and in the small home we all felt as far apart as fields separating the town.

“I need you for work tomorrow night. We have a big job to do.” Hector said. He started eating the food off his plate and making noises of desperation in it. He grabbed the eggs with his hand and dipped it into his mouth and tore apart the bacon in-between his fingers.

“You’re going to have to be a man this time in order for us to get it done.”

“I’m not going with you Hector. I’m done with you and your man-up bullshit.” I said.

“Roberto! Don’t speak to him like that!” Mama said. She looked in our direction and I could see her eyes red. She was exhausted.

“You don’t get to choose Roberto. You’re going with me and you’re going to be a man and I’m not dealing with you crying about it like a child.” Hector said.

“You don’t get to call me out on being a man. You weren’t here the last few days, you weren’t here for your family when the men came and pissed all over our home. You were too busy fucking some cheap putas out there in the colonia right outside town. You’re no man to me Hector. I was the one here.” I said.

“I’m your father! You don’t-“

“You’re a shit father.”

He got up from the table and threw the plate against the wall. It shattered and fell across the floor and the juice from the eggs splashed against our feet. He started moving towards me but Mama got in his way and put her hand into his chest. He grabbed her by the shoulder and I could see his hand squeeze into her arm over the dress she had been wearing. He was about to

throw her into the wall until he stopped himself while looking into her eyes. I had stayed sitting at the table looking at him, feeling his anger and his fear, soaking it in like the smell of the rain.

“Roberto,” Hector breathed and we felt his breath come down on us. “I need you to come with me tomorrow night. I really do.”

“Where were you the last couple nights Hector?” I said.

“I don’t answer to you.”

“Tell Mama where you were, Hector.”

“Pinche Roberto you shut your damn mouth! I don’t answer to anyone here! I’m the one bringing food home. I’m the one getting us money. I’m not here for a few days and now I’m a damn stranger until I bring you all food. I need you tomorrow, and I expect you to come with me!”

I heard a crack in his voice and sensed his need. I had never seen him need anything of me, or see any fear in his eyes of not having me with him, but I felt it. I felt a shift, a change of voice within the home, and in my chest I felt the warmth I knew he had all his life.

“You can stay here, Hector. We don’t have to talk or even look at each other. But I was the one here. I’m a man now.” I said. I got up from the table and walked back to the room where Diego had been hiding under his bed sheets. The rain still fell but I had forgotten the sound of it tapping and thought of the clouds above us, thundering, shaking in themselves. Hector stayed standing with Mama by the table and the broken plate and didn’t say anything back to me as I left.

The rain stopped falling on the roof so heavily later on into the afternoon. When it did, Diego went outside and just sat next to some of the trees on the edge of some puddles. Mama or Hector didn't try to stop him, so he just sat there having the water soak into his clothes. Hector left in the afternoon and walked towards the other homes down the road. We hadn't gone to go see how anyone in the neighborhood had been doing, or what they did with the bodies. No one had come by our home, asking for food or money, or if we wanted to say bye to those that died. The men that came had taken a lot more than just the lives of some poor brown people that meant nothing to the town.

I thought about Sonia, about her body, and the way I felt now knowing I had been inside her. I wished I squeezed her harder, or lasted longer. Diego sat in dirt outside and couldn't tell what I had done just the night before, didn't know that I had become a man. The moment I became one reminded me of crossing the river. When we made it to the banks of States, we stepped on to dry land, and felt nothing. I didn't feel America, and right now I still don't, and having sex with Sonia came and went just as quick. I'm sure the men that came to our house and killed kids and mothers had met with Sonia at one point too. The rancher that wanted Hector dead had for sure seen her bedroom too. We had more in common than I thought.

I would never touch Estrella the way I did with Sonia. I thought about being with her so much before, acted out the moment in my head of what having sex with Estrella would feel like. Her body had always looked so smooth under her dresses, how they hugged on her hips and stayed there every time she passed me in the hallways at school or sat in the front at church. I saw her stomach once, the soft brown of her waist, and I stared so long that she must have felt my eyes because she pulled her sweater down without looking at me. I wish I could have felt her body. The dreams I had of us with a family meant that I got to feel every part of her. Part of me



wanted to see Sonia again so I could picture Estrella instead. Another part of me wanted to forget about walking into bedroom.

Later that night after Hector got home, we ate dinner as a family for the first time in months. No one said a word to each other, not even Diego who usually talks about different bugs or birds he sees. He sat there eating the beans off his plate without looking at Mama or anything else. I didn't look in Hector's direction, even when he grunted or tried to make a noise to fit into the silence.

"They took those who died here when the rangers came and let them go in the river," He said. "They couldn't dig enough graves and didn't want to burn them. So they'll end up in the gulf and carry out probably."

"Don't say those things at dinner Hector," Mama said.

"I'm done eating. Thank you, Mama" Diego said. He walked off back to the room and left his plate on the table.

"He has to learn," Hector said.

I went with Diego to the room and sat with him on the bed. He laid down and closed his eyes but only pretended to be asleep. I leaned back against the wall to hear what happened just on the other side. Hector continued eating and his elbows hit the table hard whenever he stopped to breathe.

"Where were you, Hector?" Mama said. The words sounded low through the wall but I could hear Hector breath and sit back in his chair causing the floor to creak below him.

"You already know, so why do you ask?" He said.

“Because I’m your wife and I have been here on my own thinking about if you left us or not. We hid under the floor you sit on, hearing men talk about finding you. And I just kept thinking that I wish I knew where you were at too.”

“I would never leave you or the boys. I do everything in my life for you and to keep this family going. Pendeja. How dare you think I would just leave after everything?”

“What’s everything, Hector? I’m the one with the boys. I’m here raising Diego and telling Roberto that someone does love him. He always tells me how you hate him. How mean you are to him. And now he is becoming just like you and I can’t do anything about it. I’m here making food for them, washing their clothes, trying to keep them safe. For all I know you just go sleep with some other women and leave me here alone. I do everything here. You just come back for me to make you food.”

I heard Hector stand up from the table, pushing his chair back violently. Mama started to cry and I could hear her breathing and sobbing out the last few words. I didn’t want to open the door to see them fighting. Diego pulled the blanket over his ears.

“I should have just left you here if that’s what you think. See how you survive without me or my money.” Hector said.

“I wish you didn’t come back Hector. And I’m happy the money is gone”

Hector went back to the room and slammed the door behind him. Mama had stopped crying and started cleaning the dishes in the kitchen. I walked out to see the mess left behind and Mama stopped scrubbing the plates she held. She turned towards me and there was a moment of brief silence as we looked at each other and I saw her eyes look at me as if she tried to remember who I was. It’s not that she didn’t know me, I’m sure she saw more of who I am

now, but she wanted to remember who I was from different years ago. She couldn't quite do so. She turned away and kept scrubbing plates and I kept looking on at her to see if she would turn towards me again to say anything, but she never did and I knew for one second we had a chance to truly talk again.

When I got back to bed the rain started falling on the roof again and I hoped it would wash us all away by the morning. I knew it wouldn't and that tomorrow the ground would be wet like today and the clouds would hang the same and we all would choose to make it through the mud and walk through the dirt for another set of hours while the sun hid somewhere above us. I wanted to hide with it.

Bodies float away faster in the rain. The river picks up and the banks overflow. Things disappear and get taken down by the rain, never to be formed again like they once were. But not here, and not this home. When the rain comes to the colonia, we walk through the shit that sits under our feet and try to last until daylight. I didn't know if we'd make it that long.

## CHAPTER XX

### MUD

The next afternoon when the sun rose over south Weslaco and broke through the clouds, Hector listened to the sound of the shovel he held pierce into the dirt and split the ground beneath him. Mama had him digging some holes so she could plant new trees to go with the lemons that would come nicely by spring and be perfect for the summer. Hector was more than happy to be out of the home and I am sure part of him missed digging his hands into the soil and feeling ownership of it again like he did in the cotton fields. I didn't hear him and Mama talk again but whenever she came out to hang wet clothes on the wire he looked at her through the dirt that flung in his eyes.

The cold air still hung around but with the sun out we didn't mind it as much. I even asked Diego if he wanted to go outside and he said yes so we tried looking for frogs in the mud surrounding the garden of fallen trees and drowned plants. When we dug our hands in the water the cold stung so it made the frog hunt fun to just throw fists into the ground and see if we come up with one. I kept grabbing mud to throw it at Diego and he ran and laughed and when he smiled I felt the warmth of the sun that much more.

The secret to frog hunting is that you got to work together to corner and actually catch them. We made the game a race usually but they're quick and once they see one person leap at them they jump away and slip through the hands because of their slime and mud-covered

skin. So to really catch the frogs, Diego and I had to work together try to catch the ones that jumped first. The garden and the yard had enough holes in it that I figured a secret city of frogs and squirrels lived under us and when the rain came and their homes flooded they all had to go somewhere. So Diego and I stomped into the dirt, trying to cave in their tunnels, to see which one of us got the most frogs first. Diego loved the feel of catching one in the air.

“You got to move your hands faster Robbie!” Diego said. “You can’t catch them when you move that slow! Watch me”

Diego jumped from puddle to puddle and when a frog shot out of the mud he threw his hands in the air and opened and closed his fingers to grab on to the back legs. He caught one, then two, then continued to reach into the mud and dig out more. He laughed and the sun looked like it came down on him a little more when he did.

“You’re faster than me now Diego. I’m getting too old. You’re going to have to take care of me soon!” I said.

“It’s okay. You’ll always be stronger than me. I’m just better at catching frogs.”

We jumped and ran around in the mud as the sun came over our heads and Hector finished digging holes for new trees. Mama came out to see us covered in dirt and laughed at Diego rolling around in the puddles.

“Diegito! You look like a little pig!” Mama said.

“Mama I’m beating Robbie at catching frogs!” He said.

Diego started making pig squeals and laughing whenever the mud fell into his nose. He ran around looking for more frogs and I watched him run like the brother I

remembered. The blue from the sky started showing through the clouds and whenever the wind blew we felt the cold again but the sun fought through it. Birds chirped around us and when Hector walked back into the home I could see the sweat that went through his shirt. Diego ran out of breath and decided to sit there in the mud, surrounded by the frogs he had caught and let go. When Hector came back out, he held a towel in his hand and looked at the both of us.

“You’ll always be my favorite little pig Diego. Always.” Hector said. He placed the towel in Diego’s chest and looked at me to help him clean up before going inside. His eyes looked at him different.

“Thank you Papa, I love you.” Diego said.

“You too mijo. Your mom told me she’s gonna make something special tonight. I can’t tell you what though. You’ll have to get it out of her when you wash up.”

Diego ran off inside with the towel in hand, rubbing his hair as he made his way in. Hector stood in front of me and the cool wind blew between us and we both held ourselves against the cold. The trees rustled around us and he took a deep breath and sighed it out, making the wind move faster. We stood there with no words left to say to each other, and begged silently for someone to speak. When he realized this, he spat into the ground and exhaled a long sigh that sounded deep from his chest.

“I’m still doing the job tonight and I want you to come with me. So when you see me leave, you know why.”

“Do you have to go? Are you sure it’s safe?”

“This isn’t a choice Roberto. Those men, they make sure of it.” Hector said

He went inside and left me there surrounded by muddy frogs and fruit trees. I started to hear some grasshoppers around me and I heard their chirps clearer in the cold. I felt the air around me move and then come to a still and felt my feet sinking into the ground below me. Hector must have felt the same sinking ground below him the entire afternoon.

After the caldo de pollo dinner Mama had made, I heard Hector moving around his room, putting on his boots. He came out and wore the same clothes from the time we went to the river together. He had his long-sleeve buttoned up shirt with slight tears on both arms and jeans that had been faded, filled with scrapes on both knees. Everything he had was stained with dark red and brown spots. The shoes had old mud on them, both laces stretched out and torn from the ends. Mama came out from the room behind him and before he walked towards the door he grabbed her hand and kissed her. She didn't seem ready for it, and after the kiss she just stood there for a moment as the touch of it faded from her lips. Diego and I watched from the table, and when he turned to us he just touched both of our shoulders and gave a light squeeze. When he walked out I felt the night air rush in from the door.

Mama went back inside her room and when she did I got up from the table quickly and went to put on my clothes. Diego saw me leave in hurry and followed me into our room. He didn't know and I didn't tell him, but he knew. I put on my boots as fast as I could and tied them strong enough to feel the pressure above my ankle. I found the shirt I wore to meet with Sonia, the same one I wore into the monte with Hector. I put on my jacket and saw Diego looking at me confused and standing in front of the door.

“Please don't leave Robbie. I need you here.”

“I have to go, Diego. There's something I have to do.” I said.

“What are you going to do? Please stay.” Diego said.

“I can’t tell you Diego. I just have to go. It’s very, very important that I do. I don’t think you will understand. I’ll be back though. Like always.”

I could hear the river, and how it always ran and went without ever slowing down, off into a gulf that never lost water. I thought of the trees along the bank, and the sound of the bugs and things running across the branches and the dead leaves. I saw Hector coming across the bank, to meet the men, to breathe in the smell of water. Standing on the edge of a line, looking strong but feeling scared, tasting mesquite. I thought of Hector and how he walked off towards the dark of the monte, to the edge of a rushing river, alone. I knew I had to be there with him.



## CHAPTER XXI

### HECTOR

“I’m going with you! I’ll tell Mama that you ran out if I don’t!” Diego said.

He had already put on his pants and his jacket, rubbing the mud off of them as they rose over his legs. He looked for his shoes all over the room and found them under the bed. When he put them on he tied them just like I did, pulling the strings as tight as he could. The wind blew stronger on the roof above us and I remembered how the trees sounded in the night when nothing but branches moved around you hitting your face in the dark. I thought of the boy.

“It’s going to be too dangerous Diego. You can’t”

“I’m a man now Robbie, please let me come with you.”

I saw something in his eyes that looked strong enough to look scared. I could see the fear he had of me leaving, and how nothing in the world seemed more important to him than coming along. He had to be there in the woods with me. Part of me knew he had to see them too. I saw the boy I wanted myself to be again. A boy dumb enough to care more about love than fear. I hadn’t seen him in a long time.

He stood up in front of me, and zipped up his jacket, looking into my eyes to see the hesitation. He looked strong, and I patted his shoulders and felt the firm muscles coming out

through his skinny body. The wind blew harder above us and when we saw the light go down in Mama's room, we walked quietly through the back door and into the night.

We went through the trees in the yard and for the first time we ran around them in the middle of the night. It made me think of how we used to hear coyotes run around when we first moved here, chasing rabbits and leaving their bodies scattered under grapefruits and oranges. I hadn't heard them in years but our feet hitting on the ground sounded the same.

Diego moved as fast as he could without turning his walk into a full run to keep up with me. I knew how fast Hector made it to the monte. He knew the path and the moon was full tonight so everything in front of him couldn't be clearer. I kept looking at Diego to make sure he kept up, even pulled his shoulder when he dragged two steps too far. I looked at him and he knew he had to man up and stay behind me.

We ran along the road and under the moon the land seemed just as bright as it did during the day. Everything had a blue tint to it and the sky above us looked like an explosion with clouds stretching away from it. The wind had gone back to being cold and far away we heard the sounds of howling. And in the shade of blue and yelling from the wolves I felt a sense of belonging to a piece of dirt that I had run over and stepped in all my life.

When we got to the edge of the monte I stopped Diego and kneeled right before him. Circles of light showed around his head and he looked like an angel or a king of the fields. He had sweat dripping down his cheeks and he breathed as fast as he could. The sweat on the back of his neck felt cold and his body had shivers running through it. He looked off into the woods and saw how the trees reached higher into the sky than he imagined.

“You’re going to have to stay behind me and do everything I say Diego. Don’t move unless I move. Okay?” I said.

“Where did Papa go Robbie?”

I grabbed his hand and we went off into the monte. As we a howling came from beyond the trees. We climbed over branches and ran through leaves that crunched under our feet. I held his hand strong enough to feel the blood trying to reach his fingers. His breathing got faster and his feet tripped over a few rocks in the dark but he got up quick enough to not lose step. When we stopped at a clearing I heard him coughing behind me, moving his stomach up and down like a sick dog. He threw up chunks of dinner into the trunk of a mesquite tree.

When he looked up I saw the look I had when I threw up picking cotton one summer. We were in the middle of the field and the heat does funny things and I swore I saw an ocean in front of me so clear that I had to dip my face in it to drink in the water. When I opened my mouth I just started spewing orange and red stomach lining and juice. I couldn’t stop and the heat mixed into my mouth from the edge of my forehead. Hector ran over to me and dipped my face into the dirt, yelling “you’re puking all over our money puta!” I just kept throwing up with my face in the dirt and having it get all over me. When I got up I saw an angry man in front of me, smacking my head as I tried to stand. I stopped calling Hector my father that afternoon.

Diego looked with the same fear, gasped and tried to hold himself together like a boy in front of his god. So when I reached down I patted him on his back and told him to get it out, and breathe. He threw up more into the dirt and then wiped his mouth with his shirt, wore his puke like pride.

“The river isn’t too far now. We can make it. You’re doing good Diego. You’re being a real man now.”

Diego gasped again but then stood up and took in the air that flew around us. We smelled different mesquite and the smell of water. More bugs flew around us and the moon lit the trees like a holy path. We turned to keep running down it. As we passed the trees I saw the stars above us reach out through the sky and head further than the river could ever run.

We ran and jumped through the trees until our feet stepped into a wet leaves and the smell of the mold that stuck to the rocks on the edge of the river hit our nose. The rushing water sounded louder than before and the taste of it felt sharper on my tongue. We stopped at the edge of some trees and walked down the river to see if we could find Hector. I saw Diego looking at the water and it had hit him that he hadn’t been here since he crossed, with him on the back of Mama, and now he had come home.

I led us to the spot that Hector and I had come to last. I remembered the clearing between the trees and how the point was perfectly straight between two curves. I didn’t see Hector, or anyone across the river. Diego walked to a group of a trees behind us. I turned and saw a figure snatch Diego by the arm and pull him into a cluster of branches. I ran off and behind the tree a man stood there holding Diego by the shoulder, grasping both of them hard through his shirt.

“I could have killed you. You all are too damn loud.” Hector said. “I heard your footsteps from the time you walked into the trees.” He stood up and let Diego run back to me. Hector had cuts and bled from above his eyelid. His pants had been covered in dirt and mud. He smelled like the dogs back from the colonia and his eyes looked as tired as they did too.

“I only told you to come Roberto, not to bring Diego.”

“He needed to come. To man up.” I said.

Hector looked up at the stars and in his eyes I saw the reflection of the sky above us. They were so clear and full that in the moment I thought I could count the different dots of light and the thousands and thousands of specks in them. The pace of the river blew the wind around us and the cool breeze made his shirt blow across his chest. He had lost weight. In the moment I saw a man breathing in a piece of land that he felt he had some power over. When we worked in the fields he often did this, looked at the sky, and took in the sun while holding dirt in his hand. It’s what made him the man I feared. But right now I didn’t feel that fear.

“Make sure you get Diego home Roberto. Take care of him. Do you understand me?” Hector said.

“You don’t have to meet up with those men, Hector. We can run or ask for help.”

“You always were a better man Roberto. And the truth is that doesn’t work down here, not yet. But you tell your Mama that you love her for me okay?”

Two lights appeared through the trees off in a clearing not far from where we stood. The river sounded too loud to hear anything else but the two lights stayed on and soon a figure stood in front of one. Hector bent down and stroked his hand through Diego’s hair and patted him on the shoulder. It sounded firm.

“You get you and your brother out of here. Help him. You’re so strong Diegito.”

“Where are you going Papa?” Diego said.

“I’ll see you at home, don’t worry.”

Hector walked off along the river bank and we stayed there hiding under dead mesquite. Two men met Hector not far down the path and whenever the sound of the river broke slightly I could hear the engine running from the truck they came from. Hector's walk didn't seem slower than usual, and really no different than how he approached everyone else in his life. And this made the men seem to walk slower in front of him when they finally got face to face with each other. Even when Hector stood there at the banks on his own, he still carried the power that he had since he was a boy.

I wish I heard the words they said. I listened to the sound of cicadas ringing, water pouring over rocks and filling in the dirt, a wind that blew so hard and fast that the sky couldn't keep up. In my head I imagined Hector talking his usual shit to them, his voice ringing at them like thunder. They stood in front of him like I did. Afraid, small, and because of that I imagined Hector as being a man that made everything around him stand taller and move quicker. He stood tall because he knew I watched not far behind. And his shoulders moved up and down with every word because he knew some of the last words he would speak would carry beyond the sound of a fast-moving river.

He talked like Jesus. Not the one that died in the field next to me, but the one that told people he would forgive them when he got put on a cross. I wanted to imagine his words left some impact on the men he stood in front of, that they would talk of a man on the banks of the river that made them see the power and fear of God like I did. But I knew this wouldn't be the case, because after Hector stopped moving his shoulders, one of the men hit him on the side of the head and Hector crumpled over into the dirt like the rabbits who got eaten by coyotes in our yard.

One of the men jumped on Hector, throwing his fists into him so fast that I saw the dirt from the ground kick up around them. Hector's feet dug into the ground and he kicked his legs wildly, trying to get any help he could. He kicked and tried to get his arms around the man but the man kept beating into him so hard that I saw blood flying into the air. Diego wanted to run out but I tackled him to the ground next to the trees and covered his mouth. The other man started kicking into the Hector's side so hard that I heard the thud and small crack break through the sound of water. Hector fought with everything, his legs, his arms, trying to raise his head but the men kept digging into his body and tearing through his veins. The man on top of Hector then stood up and kicked him a few more times and I saw the reflection of the headlights shine off of the man's boots. Hector stayed there in the floor, not moving his arms, trying to flip his head over to see the sky above him. Instead, both men brought out their guns, and then shot into his chest. They fired fast over and over and I saw Hector's chest and stomach explode out of him, pieces of skin, of bone, fly out of his body. I saw the fire from the gun move out like stars, and the shots rang out through the trees. They shot until they ran out, and small click came from their guns. Hector's body didn't move.

Birds flew loudly overhead and across the river flashes of lights came out of the grass. The man that first tackled Hector walked over to the bank and yelled "Ah sí, es puto muerto" and laughed. One man across the river shot into the air and said "andale wei, come back across" and the men laughed and looked at the pace of the water. Instead, the two men got back in their truck and raised their radio loud enough to echo through the trees and a corrido played that said something about money. They drove off leaving a cloud of dirt behind them and the lights across the river went out and then the cicadas came back. The singing from the crickets

returned and when they did I expected to see Hector stand up on his own; he didn't. The river ran louder than the wind in the trees, and Diego got out from under me to see the body.

I could taste the blood in my mouth as we walked over to him. He had been shot all across his chest, torn open from the head down. The blood had seeped in through his shirt and now doused over his clothes. Diego got down by his side and tried to shake his arm. He cried and cried and said "papa" through gasps over and over. The heat from the bullets made Hector's body smell like cooking meat. A small simmering sound came from over his belly button, where the men had shot the most. I saw the tripas in him like the torn animals we found in the yard.

His eyes though were what I couldn't stop staring at. They were both wide open and reflected everything above us. They had a small moment of when they pulled out their guns and to when they fired, and in that second, it seemed like Hector stared off into the night, past all the stars. It's almost as if he saw something greater, something far more important, deep in the sky. I wished I could ask him. For the first time, his eyes looked at something that brought him out of the monte, and away from the river.

"Robbie! We have to do something! We need to find Mama." Diego said.

"She won't be able to do anything Diego. He's gone."

"He can't be. He's our papa. He can't be dead."

"We got to move his body somewhere" I said. I saw Diego still holding his arm and dropping tears over Hector's body. I forgot what it was like to love Hector the way he did. I didn't remember what it was like to see him as a man that protected him from all things with his strength and want to be like him. Diego didn't have that man anymore



“I didn’t say bye. I could have helped. Why didn’t we help?”

“Diego, I’m going to have to ask you for a lot right now.” I said. I knelt down to hold his shoulders like Hector did. “He is not going to come back. And I feel sad too. Hector wouldn’t want us to feel sad and do nothing though. You know he wouldn’t like that. We got to get back home for Mama, but we can’t leave him here. We can’t dig with anything, and the river is right there. Help me carry him to the banks, and we will say goodbye. Okay?”

“But what about Mama?”

“We’ll say bye for her too.”

We grabbed Hector by the legs and dragged him towards the edge of the water. Diego took off his hat and put it on top of his head. His body left a trail of blood behind in the ground that snaked like the river we dragged him to. His eyes remained open and the stars passed across them as we reached the grass. The water rushed so fast that it already splashed around our feet without stepping in. When we got close enough to push his body in, we moved over to the top of his shoulders and sat above them. With the river running, we both took time to look into the sky and breathe in the water that had defined our lives.

“Do you want to say anything Diego?” I said.

He looked down across Hector and what remained of him. He parted his hair, and wearing Hector’s hat, he tipped the brim forward like how he did in the middle of the summer afternoons. Diego didn’t cry, nor did he struggle to get the words out of his mouth, He waited for a break in the sound of cicadas, and spoke through the current.

“I love you papa. I will miss you. I will miss the moments we ate the fruit from the trees. I loved how you always carried me when I got tired. I promise to do the same for Mama. Goodbye now papa.”

“The hat looks good on you Diego.” I said.

“Are you going to say something Roberto?”

When he asked, I looked down and saw the man that beat me in the fields. I saw the man that ran off from our home to sleep with other women, the one that didn't care when I cried. He told me to man up more times than I remembered. But with his body lying in front of me, I still saw the power he had when he stood against the wind. He always stood so tall in the sun and I saw the arms that helped pull me across the river when we came. I saw the man that I feared, that I saw on every horizon and that made me move in every direction that I did. His voice would remind me of thunderstorms far away in the sky, and how their rumble traveled over cotton. My hands had the scars from the fields and my fingerprints were his.

“Hector, One time we went fishing and you told me that it was the only way you felt close to God. You told me how everything about religion and life could be learned by standing there on the edge of the canal, waiting for something to bite on the line. I think that's why I never listened in church after. I still had your words in my head. I always think of the things you have told me. I have tried so hard not to be like you, but I know I always be. I wish I could have been a better son, and I promise to be a better you. I love you Papa, always.”

We pushed on Hector's shoulders and his legs sunk down into the rushing river. The current pulled at his jeans and once his stomach touched the water, his body moved down through the mud and slid away from us. His arms floated past and Diego reached out to touch his

hands one last time, hanging on to the tip of his fingers before he drifted away. The body moved out into the water, floating out into the middle of the river and soon he sunk under the riptides. His body would go as far as the river went, and if he was lucky, it would float out into the gulf and would be there in the ocean under every star in the sky. Maybe he would snag on to a branch, or wash up on a bank down the way, but I hoped he wouldn't. I prayed right there that his body would go into the sea, and carry on to places Hector had never seen before. I hoped his soul would find peace in that way.

We walked back and in the fields of cotton a small shade of blue hovered on top of them from the coming morning. When we saw birds fly over our head, Diego started humming through his cries, and I joined with him. We hummed and pushed each other all the way back home. By the time we reached our yard with the lone lemon tree, a small hint of sunlight appeared on the leaves. Diego didn't ask on the way back why Hector knew those men, or why they wanted him dead. I hoped he just didn't want to know the answers yet. When he was ready, I hoped I would be too.

When we got home, we saw Mama sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee in front of her. I let Diego go to the room and fall asleep before I went to sit down with her. Diego fell asleep with his clothes on, jeans still stained with Hector's blood. Mama knew something had already happened, and I wondered if in her she already felt the loss. For this one moment I had a distinct power over her, one that I didn't want, and never will again.

I told her the truth about how Hector had died. I told her about the job he had been doing, and why he had so much money. I didn't tell her about the whore-houses, or Sonia, or maybe the other women he had gone to see. When I told her the truth about everything, the

truth about the group we helped cross the river only to have a boy die and get his face ripped apart by a tree, she sat there in silence until the sun came up.

When it did, and the first ray of light went through the door screen and poured over our hands on the table, she walked into what was now only her room, and cried the rest of the day. She stayed in the bed that still smelled of Hector, and I sat in the home that he had made. I wondered when the scent of him would leave, or if he ever truly would. I felt his voice echo in every piece of the wood that he had hammered together. Mama wouldn't come out of the room until the next morning. I had to cut up some fruit and leave them at the foot of the door. Diego and I started eating through the bags of uncooked beans.

The next day, when she came out of her room, she cooked breakfast, complete with the coffee that Hector usually made, and eggs in the way he liked. She moved around the kitchen, swept around the home while she hummed her usual songs, and moved like no other days existed before this. She gave Diego a tight hug when he came out of the room, and moved her hands through his hair whenever he walked by. We didn't speak to each other much the whole morning, but we felt a new day come for us. I tried to pray for the meal that she had placed in front of me. I said the one that helped plants grow.

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE RIVER

On one of the afternoons after Hector died, Mama made a small cross from some wood she found in the yard. She tied it with twine, and then drove it into the dirt in front of an orange tree that had started to heal from winter again. She got a necklace that Hector had worn and kept from when he was a boy, and placed it around so it can hang above the soil that he chose to build his house on. Mama sat there in front of the cross for a few hours.

That same day, I grabbed the hat that Diego took off of Hector the night he had died, and walked out of the home with it on my head. The dusted cowboy hat with the cracked brim still had the dirt from the river and the blood from the man that died wearing it. I tilted the front of it down towards my eyes and started down the road that headed towards town. The sun had come up today and hung in the sky by itself without any cloud near it for miles. Spring was still awhile off, but the cool winds from winter had left the area for now, and by the feel of it I knew summer would be just as hot as every year.

The road was peaceful as I walked into town. Birds chirped from the tops of buildings. Butterflies flew across my face as cars drove by. An old man walking out of a store even waved and smiled at me when he saw me coming down the sidewalk. I walked to the police station and along the way no one stopped or drove in front of me to send me back to the colonia. The town didn't care about the fire anymore. The church bells rang and kids ran around the

streets, going past me in their new clothes. Even with the blood from the hat, no one turned to see the boy walking through town that carried the dirt from the river on him.

When I walked into the police station, I saw the rancher we used to work for leaning against the front desk talking with a group of rangers, laughing as he drank a soda with them. He had a new hat again and new boots, but this time they actually had dirt on them. His jeans and shirt fit tight from having to do his own work in the fields. None of the men saw me walk in. I took off the hat and held it in my right hand walked right between them and placed it on the counter. All the men stopped and when they did I kicked dirt from my shoes off on the side of the desk. The rancher took a moment but then he recognized who I was, and whose hat I delivered.

“Hector is dead. He was the one that worked for you, and he started the fires in the fields last year. He did it on his own. He said he was tired of the pay. He died a few days ago and we dumped his body in the river so you won’t find it. You can go check the colonia or the banks of the river if you want. But this is his hat with his blood on it and that’s all we have of him. I’m giving it to you because we just want to be left alone. We don’t want anyone else to get hurt. So please just take the hat and we won’t bother you or the town anymore.” I said. They all stopped talking and looked at the blood from the hat, scraping at it with their fingers.

“How do we know he is really gone? That you all just aren’t hiding him in one of those shacks of yours?” The rancher said.

“You can go and check every home there. You won’t find him. He’s gone, and the fire is over. You can take his hat and hang it if you want. Tell those that care that you got the man that destroyed their crops. Just please leave us alone.”

“We’ll keep the hat, but don’t come back to this station, okay boy?” The ranger behind the desk said. “If we see Hector walk this town again, we’ll go back and find him. You hear?”

“Yes sir.”

I walked out from the group and they looked at the hat between them. The rancher looked on as I walked out the door and we stared at each other’s eyes one last time. I wouldn’t see him that close again. He still owned fields on the outskirts of Weslaco and Mercedes. He expanded north after a year or so. His family would have money for generations after and I’m sure city streets would have his name in a few years. I didn’t care about his future, or what he did to get it. I just wanted to stand outside in the colonia and take in the air without him being there.

When I walked out of town that day they were making a new drug store that also had malts and candy inside. The town had gotten few of those in the last year and all the kids after school would go to them and talk without worrying about the future. The town square had opened some more stores to sell newer televisions and radios. And the day I dropped off Hector’s hat, I saw them setting up for an onion festival in a small park with a pavilion. The town celebrated the lumber company that Weslaco got its’ name from the weekend after the rangers hung up Hector’s hat on their wall. I couldn’t help think of how they were connected. Men came and cut down the trees, called for workers and made a town. My papa died because of those men, because they wanted the wood and the fruit that grew here, but not the men that helped them grow. In the colonia, we had to make a choice to either be the men that dug our hands in the fields, or be the men who didn’t care to see others around him die. I didn’t know which man I was yet.

The sun showed over town that day and cars went by. Birds sang their songs, celebrated the rich people that came from the nice houses. I saw some kids from school walking around the church. They were some of the ones that didn't talk to me when I went to classes, didn't talk to us on Sunday mornings either. I looked across to see if Estrella was around in any of the stores, but she wasn't and I felt free because of it. All the stores would change over time. The man that sold meat and fruit would be run out by a supermarket that would move in soon. A movie theatre would replace it and the other kids I went to school with would spend their weekend nights there doing what normal American teens do. I passed by on some Friday nights just to imagine walking in. No one would remember the fire and the man who started it after the next harvest.

Hector must have known the fire would be put on his shoulders. In the fields, he looked after all the men, talked for the group whenever the rancher needed answers. He pushed us during the hottest of days. When Jesús collapsed and died in the dirt, he must have seen his future and wanted more. When I saw Jesús die, I saw a figure I could pray to. Hector saw himself, dying like a dog, having men carry his withered body to an empty field. Maybe Hector did start the fire, got a few friends to do it for him, and convinced them it was a good idea to get back at the men that paid us nothing to make sure they had light and food back home. He knew what the fire would cause, the war it would bring on the town, and back home in the colonia. Between dying in the dirt under the sun, or floating away in the river, he chose the option that I'm sure everyone in town would choose if they had to make that choice. I would have chosen the river also.

Mama sat in the front of the home when I got back. She said some people from down the road were going to come over for dinner. When they did show up, the house smelled



like tamales, beans, and warmth. Abel and Aaron came with their Mama, and we sat there with them while our parents laughed and shared stories. The home filled with new sounds that night, experienced moments of joy that had been gone for whole seasons, and for one brief moment, the sound of the river became so small that I forgot it ran entirely.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE GARDEN

On a morning long after the fires, and into a new spring, Diego walked out into the backyard to sit with the lemon trees and bougainvillea that had come to bloom. The flowers had come out in a violent purple and smelled soft. Diego put his face in the bush and let the petals flow across him in a glide that he said reminded him of the yellow birds flying above. I sat out in the yard watching as he smelled in new life, and tasted the fragrance of lemon in the air as if he drank the juice from the trees. The backyard had come out in a wildfire of leaves and fruit, exploded from the ground and surrounded the home more than years before. I felt the earth breathing around us.

“Papa would have loved the garden,” Diego said. “He would have eaten all the lemons from the tree.”

“I’m sure he’s still watching it grow from somewhere Diego. He wouldn’t leave the yard behind.”

“Do you think he can see us from Heaven Robbie? Do you think that’s where he is?”

“Of course Diego, the river always leads to Heaven. He’s probably bragging about the trees right now, telling God how his garden is better.” I said.

“Yeah, I think so too Robbie.”

Mama came out from the home with clothes in her hand and hung our shirts and jeans along the clothesline. She saw us sitting in the garden with each other and smiled our way. The sun reflected above her and she looked brighter than all the leaves around us. She hadn't spoken of Hector in some time, not of his name, or his words, but she talked about herself more and the dreams she thought of. She told me one night that she could remember them again, and it felt like seeing the mountains come from behind the clouds back home in Guanajuato.

“How are the flowers looking mijo?” She said, looking at my direction with her brown eyes that turned hazel in the light. Her voice felt as soft as the flowers, and I felt the mid-afternoon warmth of being called her son.

“Good. They're looking real good Mama. Better than last year.”

“Muy bien. Diegito, you should pick some lemons and I'll make some juice for us later. Pick the fattest ones mijito.” Mama said.

“Yes Mama, I'll get the chunkiest lemons I can find.” Diego said.

After Mama put the clothes on the line, she walked over and stood by me, and placed her head on my shoulder. She had grey strands that ran from the top of her head and wired down to the base of her neck. I felt the beat of her heart, the moving of her breath, and the softness of her cheeks. I hadn't been this close to her, or anyone, in some time. I thought that part of me burned away in the fires.

“Make sure he picks the best ones. I love you mijo, always.” She said.

“You too Mama. I love you too”

She walked back in the home and the wind picked up, spreading the smell of lemon across the top of my body. Diego sat there with the trees, watching as different bees and dragonflies flew around him. The dragonflies bumped around his face, kissing his cheek, tasting the last remaining drops of innocence on him. The day was coming soon where he would want to know answers to questions he didn't know yet, but for now he was happy letting bugs fly around while he squeezed different lemons.

I sat down next to him and felt the cool dirt go around my legs. His dark brown hair flowed in the breeze. When it hit the sun, the strands of hair turned gold, and I thought of the kid that brought out the afternoon when we first moved here. I wondered if Diego missed that version of him too.

I pushed his shoulder and he slid into the dirt, holding lemons in his hand. I got up and ran off, laughing at his struggle to get to his feet while balancing the fruit he held. We ran around, throwing different lemons and fallen oranges at each other. Some oranges were so plump they exploded on impact and juice would drip across us. When I saw him start to slow his feet, I ran up and tackled him into the ground and held him there. He wiggled around like a rabbit but I held him strong, tickling him, hearing his laugh as dirt and bees floated atop of us.

He coughed out into the air and continued laughing while holding his ribs. When I stopped holding him, he just stood still on his back and looked up into the sun. The clouds had shades of orange in their cream white hills that balanced against the blue. If we were actually looking into Heaven, it didn't look half bad.

“I can't wait to see Papa again up there one day Robbie. It will be great when we can all be there with him. I'm sure he misses us too.” Diego said.

And just then, birds flew overhead, floating in a circular wind, creating shapes in their wings. The sun beat down upon us and the hairs on our arms rose to meet the warmth. We laid there, next to the lemon tree, watching the world move in a way that only someone more perfect than either of us can make. The soil breathed below, and dragonflies moved and bounded as if they balanced on the fingertips of the breeze. We tasted the citrus heaven above us. I felt the beauty of hope on my tongue.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE AFTER

Almost over. In the Valley, the afternoons are long with a short night until morning. One last note before the end. A man in California created Unions for laborers and made some big waves. They even called a strike over grapes not long ago. Over grapes. White people really need their wine so they got scared. Things are now changing around this part of the states, not fast, but not too slow, like the summer afternoons, long day, a quick night.

Diego is in high school now. He's a big kid with some serious smarts and he might just get his degree. He loves math, the class I couldn't stand back in the day but he teaches me things now that I swear sounds like a new language. I think about what he tells me when I'm working in the shop, fixing tires, cleaning dead bugs off windshields.

Mama cleans and bakes at home. She makes tortillas now and sells them around the colonias and in town. She makes decent money selling to the folks when they leave church on Sunday afternoons. I never go with her. I work until it's late at night but I always make sure to go home, take the money earned during the day, and make sure Diego does his schoolwork. He really is a smart man. He will do great things one day. Great, impossible things.

I only go to town to work in the shop. I work with a man that knew Hector and worked with him in the fields. He tells me stories about him all the time, tells me how Hector

drove him to leave the field because of how much of an asshole he was but now he owns his own garage so it all worked out. Hector made everyone better somehow.

I stay up to talk with Mama every night. She is getting old now. Her hair is now all gray. She wants to go back to her home in Guanajuato one day to see if her family is still around. I tell her every night how dangerous it is to go back home, and how she might not be able to come back. She has to go though, and I know this. She tells me that I can move away one day if I really want to, that it's my choice. I know this, and I know about choice. But I want to stay here for Diego, until he is ready. He can do anything and I want to see what anything looks like.

In the summer, there will be a field worker rally in San Antonio. I told Diego that I want us to go. I want him to see what having a voice really looks like. I haven't seen anywhere north of this place, and seeing new trees and hills reminds me of a future that I forgot about.

I will go to work tomorrow and do the same thing again. I will fix an axle, or replace the oil in a car I can never afford. But tonight I will watch Diego struggle with his English homework, watch him read Shakespeare and look to me for help. I will read in the whitest voice I can to help him understand all the problems of love, and why he should stab himself for a girl he just met if the opportunity presents itself one day. He will teach me new math equations after that, and maybe tonight I will be able to piece different symbols together and know what he's doing. Mama will cook beans and meat on the stove. We will talk about the future, and wonder what our family will look like if Diego graduates high school.

I will go to bed tonight thinking of that future. I think about the fires, Hector, Estrella, and the men that once looked at our bodies' burn in the field as we picked their money

for them. I never want to feel cotton in my hands again. I never want Diego to step foot in an orange grove to provide money for his family. I will think of a future that the fire couldn't burn away. I will think of a hope that can't just wash away in the river. Maybe I will pray tonight. I try my best to say words, and I think I know how to speak to God now. Yes, I will pray for the future tonight.

I will pray for the future.



## REFERENCES

- Díaz, Junot. (1997). *Drown*. *Faber and Faber*.
- Díaz Junot. (2009). *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. *Faber and Faber*.
- Paredes, Americo. (1958). *With His Pistol In His Hand: A Border Ballad And Its Hero*. *Univ. of Texas Press*.
- Robinson, Marilynne. (2004). *Gilead*. *Picador*.
- Hemingway, Ernest. (1940). *For Whom the Bells Toll*. *Scribner's Sons*.
- Hemingway, Ernest. (1952). *The Old Man and the Sea*. *Scribner*.
- Biss, Eula. (2010). *Notes from No Man's Land: American Essays*. *Graywolf*.
- Cintron, Ralph. (1997). *Angels' Town: Chero Ways, Gang Life, and Rhetorics of the Everyday*. *Beacon Press*.
- Gonzalez, Emma. (2015). *Field Mice: Memoirs of a Migrant Child*. *Country Rd. 34 Publishings*.
- O'Brien, Tim. (1990). *The Things They Carried*. *Houghton Mifflin Harcourt*.
- Urrea, Luis Alberto. (2008). *The Devil's Highway: A True Story*. *Back Bay Books*.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mark Anthony Lopez is a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and Bachelor of Arts in Mass Communications recipient from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. He graduated with his MFA degree in May 2019 and with his BA in May 2016. Born and raised in Edinburg, Texas, Mark took up Creative Writing due to his family's strong love for reading and education.

He has worked as a Teaching Assistant with the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley where he taught English. He has also worked as a Recruiter for South Texas College, as well as a Program Assistant with the University, working with programs such as MUSE that promote higher education for migrant students. If you would like to contact Mark Anthony Lopez, email him at [lopez.mark09@gmail.com](mailto:lopez.mark09@gmail.com).