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Marianita Escamilla
University of Texas-Pan American

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LANDING: ON THE OTHER SIDE

A Thesis

by

MARIANITA ESCAMILLA

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December 2014

Major Subject: English

LANDING: ON THE OTHER SIDE

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MARIANITA ESCAMILLA

COMMITTEE MEMEBERS

Dr. Jean Braithwaite
Chair of Committee

Dr. Philip Zwerling
Committee Member

Dr. Colin Charlton
Committee Member

December 2014

ABSTRACT

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This is a collection of essays that discuss one woman's struggle with the Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Fibromyalgia (FM). The narratives are organized non-chronologically because the more pervasive effects of this chronic illness manifest in waves that do not follow a simple means of progression. Rather, FM's most powerful symptom is the highly variable pain strength coupled with its unpredictability.

The mass marketability of this text, as with other illness/disability narratives, lies in the universal message of prevailing against adversity. A person need not suffer from this illness or any ailment to comprehend the narrator's plight. While this collection may be published as a whole, the individual essays may stand alone for publication in individual journals. It is the author's goal to enter and enhance the various conversations in which Fibromyalgia (FM) naturally belongs. These conversations may be grouped into the following categories: clinical, cultural and literary nonfiction.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family and friends who have managed to love and stand by me through the worst manifestations of my illness. I love you all more than you can possibly imagine, the support you show each day allows for the destructions of the demons of pain and frustrations associated with the illness.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members and the support they showed through my journey in and out of the program. It's been a long climb, but it was made easier by the ease of their attitude and their challenging nature.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A. Critical Introduction

Landing: On the Other Side began as a collection of essays that discuss one woman's struggle with the Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Fibromyalgia (FM). However, the collection also focuses on the author's struggle with her past, particularly her relationship with her father and his infidelities and their effect on her and her family. This struggle gets thrust into the forefront as Escamilla examines her father's battle with liver cancer and her own bout with breast cancer. The narratives are organized non-chronologically because the more pervasive effects of this chronic illness and cancer manifest in waves that do not follow a simple means of progression. Rather, their most *powerful symptom is unpredictability. While the essays focus on life with an illness, the* primary audience for this collection remains broad. The intended reader is an English speaking adult in the early 21th century suffering from chronic illness. Even though the narrator holds a high-functioning scientific vocabulary, a medical vocabulary is not required by the audience.

The mass marketability of this text, as with other illness/disability narratives, lies in the universal message of prevailing against adversity. A person need not suffer from a chronic illness or any ailment to comprehend the narrator's plight. While this collection may be published as a whole, the individual essays may stand alone for publication in individual journals. It is the author's goal to enter and enhance the various conversations in which Fibromyalgia (FM) and cancer naturally belong. These conversations may be grouped into the following categories: clinical, cultural and literary nonfiction.

B. Clinical

Clinicians see the world of the ill in numbers and words on a file. These numbers correspond to white blood cells, cancer cells, or sucrose levels. Prognosis, to them, correlates to a pre-set number on a standardized scale and patients are reduced to pages between manila folders. It is for this reason that Chronic Fatigue Syndromes (CFS) appears an aberration. While it is presently understood that CFS precipitates as a result of a viral infection, the first cases were labeled the "Yuppie Flu" (Hart 187). This derogatory description pertains to the perception of the patient rather than the actual disease. Medical literature in the early 1990s "characterized the disorder as most prevalent in white middle or upper class, well-educated, previously successful, and often perfectionist women and is predominantly considered to be due to psychosocial factors" (Hart 189). While it is true that 75% of all patients with CFS are female, the rest of the stereotype described by Hart does not hold true (190). However, many patients found themselves subjected to a combination of prejudice and physician ignorance which led to a lack of medical attention for their condition.

This brushing aside of the patient is depicted in a 1989 episode of the television series *The Golden Girls*. In an episode entitled "Sick and Tired", Dorothy Zbornak, one of the main characters, becomes stricken with a lingering flu-like illness that causes her to stop work, sleep all day and unable to stand to perform rudimentary tasks like washing her hair. Eventually, she seeks out medical advice from a world-renowned neurologist. When the series of tests come back negative, the neurologist dismisses her complaints, coldly suggesting her need for a boyfriend and aging as the cause of her problem. Luckily, the show ends with Dorothy finding a doctor who is willing to explore alternative reasons for her illness. The first doctor depicts an example of the narrow-minded male physician which made the acceptance of CFS as a real illness difficult. Without clinical validation, treatment and cure are impossible, and "without physician support, it is almost impossible to find support from others" (Hillenbrand 5). The main question that lingers in this history must be--if males were the ones predominantly effected by this illness, would its acceptance have taken as long? Or does the lack of acceptance come from the lack of standard confirmation (Soderlund and Malterud 242).

Gender bias is not new. In the 1978 essay "If Men Could Menstruate" Gloria Steinem satirically wonders what might occur if men began to menstruate. She argues men would take the stigmas attached menstruation, and convert them into positive "manly" traits (Steinem). While there is need to mention gender bias in CFS, there is not an overt attempt to provide a feminist commentary of the medical response in this collection. The author does this intentionally. She recognizes the benefits she has from the sacrifices made by the likes of Gloria Steinem, but realizes her own lack of social action. Yet, within the details of her own story, she hopes to enlighten the reader that thirty years after Steinem, women still struggle against negative stereotypes imposed on them.

While mentioning the role of gender, one thing which must be recognized is the fact that chronic illness attacks both genders and therefore a human problem. In his collection of essays *The Night Side*, Floyd Skloot discusses his first-hand experience with CFS and how it led him to his decision to create his nonfiction narratives.

> When I first got sick, my illness was so poorly understood by the public and the media which thought it was The Yuppie Flu, and so

> mishandled by the medical community, which had trouble diagnosing and believing in it, that I felt the need to the let them know what was really involved. I was driven to communicate. (106)

Nearly 20 years later, medical researchers Soderlund and Malterud now describe CFS as an illness characterized by "severe, debilitating fatigue, musculoskeletal pain, sleep disturbance, impaired concentration, headaches and other bodily symptoms…[present in] 0.42% of the population, most often among women, minority groups, and persons with lower levels of education and occupational status" (242). While the descriptor may seem rather bleak, for the patient suffering from an unexplained--or even unaccepted--illness the mere definition offers the relief that one is finally understood, an understanding that all patients need regardless of their ailment.

Amy Silverstein expresses the frustration of reaching out to doctors with no answers in her memoir *Sick Girl*. Silverstein does not suffer from CFS, but was born with a congenital heart defect which led to a heart transplant. In a poignant moment , she confronts her father, who feels that doctors have the ability to cure anyone, with the information that their family doctor recommend she eat salt as a prescription to her low blood pressure. Instead of outrage or questions directed at the doctor, her family openly asks if she stated her symptoms correctly (65). In this situation, the perception of the all-knowing physician is unwavering. Because of this, the only clear option to her family is Silverstein's inability to convey her message. As a result, the patient is to blame for her illness not the doctor.

Perhaps it is the fear of a daughter's potential death or true devotion to a man in a white coat that provokes this response, but one thing remains clear-- patients become lost somewhere in the process. It is for this reason that the medical narrative proves vital. Without the patient perspective, there is a lack of full appreciation for the effect of an ailment. Lauren Slater recounts how she took control of her life after the discovery of an atypical breast biopsy. With a history of breast cancer in her family, Slater demands answers. "What are the chances that these atypical cells will turn into cancerous cells?" (Slater 2). When the doctor offers that she has no definitive data, Slater states her desire for a radical double mastectomy. Her doctor informs Slater that most of the times they "prefer a wait-and watch approach" (Slater 2) in situations like these. But, because of her family history, Slater is well aware of the horrors which await her if the cells changed from atypical to malignant. And therefore, she wishes to avoid fighting the illness as a new mother and wife. While this decision seems extreme to both to her doctor and a reader not privy to the realities of breast cancer, she logically explains her decision by stating that a wait-and-watch approach is "easy to say if you're the one doing the watching, not the waiting" (Slater 2).

Laura Hillenbrand, author of "A Sudden Illness", recounts the numerous doctor visits she endured. One doctor decides Hillenbrand's problem is not in her body but in her mind. His bases this on the negative test results. In his mind, if his tests are negative, she must not be physically ill. The only alternative must be a psychological problem (2). A second doctor has similar reaction:

> In September, I was so weak that on a ride over to her office I had to drop my head to my knees to avoid passing out. When the nurse entered, I was lying down, holding my head, the room swimming around me. She took my blood pressure: 70/50. The doctor came in. She wouldn't look at me. "I don't know why you keep coming here," she said, her lips tight. (4)

No amount of excuses can justify the negative treatment of patients. It is true that some patients seek pain medication as a result of drug abuse, but when a history of this is not present, there is no reason to blame the patient or refuse treatment. Doctors must understand that all patients seek are answers.

I would certainly never say that all doctors fail their patients, but it is a fair assessment that some fail to fully understand what it is like on the "other side of the examination table" (Skloot, "Shadow" x). *Landing: On the Other Side* delves into this reality in the essay "Live or Die". In this essay, the narrator describes visits to various doctors seeking a reason for the overall pain she's experienced. Like Slater, the narrator does have a background (in molecular biology) she can rely on to make informed decisions about her medical treatment. However, she quickly discovers her diagnosing doctor, Dr. Porras, is more a pill dispenser than a true partner in fighting her illness. At a subsequent office visit with rheumatologist Dr. Alvarez, she faces the territorial nature of doctors. He enters the room reading her file as he greets her in a monotone voice. He then drops the file next to her on the examination table and informs her that he, as a rheumatologist, is the only person who can definitively make the FM call.

Even though she becomes enraged, she endures the examination since the medications she is on are proving ineffective. At the end of the examination, the doctor writes a few lines in her file and then grabs the door handle. "Do I have Fibromyalgia?" she asks. "Now you do," he responds without looking back. The moment of victory is fleeting, overshadowed by the fact that she actually wanted the primary diagnosis to be wrong. She did not seek out confirmation, she wanted an out-right rejection of the prognosis. Unlike Skloot, who found comfort in the identity of his ailment ("Night Side" 12), the narrator of A *Chronic Life* entrenches herself in denial. Part of the reason is that simply naming FM is not sufficient. The affected FM patient cannot find solace in its identification. In the clinical world, identification is the gateway to treatment and possible cure. However, this is not the case with FM, as its etiology remains unknown.

C. Cultural Impact

In Western culture, a strong work ethic is valued and praised. Most people spend years carving their perfect place in their professional world. Often times, for better or worse, we define ourselves by this professional persona. However, once stricken by a long-term illness days of missed work destroy that perception. And in the midst of visits to the doctor the whole person fails to exist anymore. What is left is an image of an individual who used to be something else. Floyd Skloot used to be a poet. Amy Silverstein used to be a law student. Lucy Grealy used to have a jaw bone. The narrator of this collection used to help catch bad guys.

Silverstein notices this reality when her heart begins to fail. The doctor who works to save her life stared in her direction, but failed to make direct eye contact. She wondered if he was angry at her but then recognized that it was her heart that was his adversary. "This doctor couldn't possibly be angry at me, because I, Amy--the law student, the young woman, and the whole persona--wasn't there anymore. His blank stare told me so" (Silverstein 147-145).

Work that used to take writer Skloot a week now takes up to six months to produce as he struggles with a damaged brain. In his essay "Grey Area: Thinking with a Damaged Brain" he recalls all he used to be able to do. Things most healthy people take for granted.

> I used to be able to think. My brain's circuits were all connected and I had a spark, a quickness of mind that let me function well in the world. There were no problems with numbers or abstract reasoning; I could find the right work, could hold a thought in mind, match faces with names,

converse coherently in crowded hallways, learn new tasks. I had a memory and an intuition that I could trust. (145)

Cognitive changes were not the only ones Skloot experienced. In *The Night Side*, he adds that his loss also included his activities as a daily runner. Noting the muscle pains he experiences during "seven minutes of easy walking" during an exercise treadmill test (5).

Lucy Grealy had her lower right jaw bone removed due to bone cancer, and spent most of her adult life hiding from the image in her mirror while searching for the one taken away at the age of nine. In "Mirrorings" she writes about the year she spent not looking into a mirror. Grealy's damaged face, unlike some of the other chronic illness mentioned, was the first thing people noticed about her. Because of this she was received with outward hostility by men. It was possibly for this reason and the maxing out of her medical insurance that she journeyed to Scotland to undergo a new surgical technique to "fix" her face. The surgeon charged with her case was reason enough to incur the cost of travelling so far, however she also found that the "government was willing to foot the bill: I didn't feel I could pass up yet another chance to 'fix' my face, which I confusedly thought concurrent with 'fixing' my self, my soul, my life" (209).

At times, the loss of an individual is not one that the patient feels. In Lauren Slater's narrative "I Gave up my Breasts to Save my Life", it is her husband who has trouble with the loss of her breasts. His comments: "But you have such beautiful breasts." and "Your breasts and I have a relationship" (2-3) speak of the outer world's perception and the need to hold on to the normal, the image of wellness regardless of the underlying need to view the person as whole regardless of that which is missing or not well.

Structure of the Narrative:

In *Landing: On the Other Side*, the narrator encounters the loss of her dream job as a forensic DNA analyst. In the essay "Live or Die" the narrator discusses the onset of FM led to the loss of that position. To the FM patient, the loss of self is accompanied by the gains of other things like pain to eighteen various points among throughout the body. What is not known outside of the FM community is the concept of FibroFog. This is the consequence which appears as a result of the lack of REM sleep because of the low serotonin levels. The fog leads to "forgetfulness, lack of concentration and confusion" (Jones I). For a forensic scientist, this is not a desirable trio. "Live or Die" also explores the narrator's loss of work allies as a result of her FM diagnosis. She faces prejudice from people who were her closest friends in the laboratory. The only rationale she can come up with is the fact that FM does not offer any outward signs of disease. Since fatigue is the main symptom her co-workers assume she had compromised her work ethic and begin a campaign to isolate her from the laboratory. The major betrayal comes in the form of her co-worker Anna's cancer diagnosis. When the laboratory staff learns of Anna's diagnosis, tears are shed and work ceases for a few days. While the narrator does not blame Ann, she longs to have an illness which has some historical reference point, one that may be viewed on an x-ray. It is here where she realizes that there are illnesses have their own class system. On this hierarchy, she has fallen short.

D. Family

Family inherits the effects of disease. Subsequently, a person with an illness functions as both patient and liaison between medical staff and family. There is a recognition that suffering is felt not just by patient, but by those who care for them. Because of this knowledge, a patient will actively modify emotions or information. Marjorie Williams recalls informing her husband of her liver cancer diagnosis: "I call Tim and tell him. We make it as clinical as possible, because otherwise there will be so much feeling it might stand in the way of acting" (249). The ability to remain stoic in no way means the afflicted person feels the illness less. This additional task actually makes their burden that much more profound.

This knowledge is quickly learned by all sick people. In *Sick Girl,* Silverstein writes about the need to keep smiling and keep up an illusion of wellness around her friends: "I fed my friends a whole lot of sunshine as my illness progressed, and they soaked it right up" (56). The quick acceptance her recovery by those around her comes from the need for people to gloss over things they do not understand. Unless one has a chronic illness, it is difficult to form an associative connection. From an early age, we are taught not to whine in doctor's offices. Children are rewarded for not crying after a shot with lollipops, balloons or Happy Meals. Lucy Grealy was one of the children taught this lesson. Before her chemotherapy sessions, Grealy would cry, much to her mother's dismay. This apparent failure was further emphasized by the nurse who told Grealy's mother Grealy "reacted more violently than many "other children" (211). Sadly, Grealy recalls her final day of chemotherapy as a success, because it turned into the only day she did not cry before her treatment (211). Perhaps the aversion to Grealy's crying stemmed from a mother's love. Yet, it is evident that Grealy's interpreted her mother's reaction as a personal failure (216). The need for proper etiquette seems so vital to those not feeling needle pokes or scalpel blades. The narrator of "The Outing" in *Landing: On the Other Side* recalls the effect illness has had on her family. In the essay, Escamilla reflects on a trilogy of life events (Escamilla's breast cancer, her father's liver cancer and the witnessing of her father's arrest as a child) that have reached a pinnacle as a result of her breast cancer diagnosis. In this essay, she recalls her life as the child of a Rio Grande Valley drug dealer, the aftermath of his death and the discovery of many more children outside of his marriage to Escamilla's mother. Family life also touched upon in the essays, "Todo Esta Bien", "Free Speech Zoned: I Just Want to Sell my Beans", and "Seek and Find".

E. Graphic Nature of Illness Narratives

Escamilla attempts to provide an authentic view of illness. For this task, she looks towards the Silverstein narrative. While many people only consider the arduous task of locating a proper organ for replacement, rarely is the patient's condition considered before or after the transplant. Often, it seems only the sacrifice of the organ donor is considered as the beginning and end of getting a new organ. After four weeks of waiting for a new heart, Silverstein comments that she became unrecognizable due to "neglect and illness…I'd look down at my wasted body… I was sick; sick was ugly; I was ugly" (178). Her life before and after her transplant became filled with the need for bedpans and the growth of "thick dark hair" (190) all over her body due to the high-dose immunosuppressants. In her memoir, Silverstein concentrated on her physical condition, however, Escamilla elects to show the ugly situations she encountered in the form of her illness, family issues, and the prejudice she faced as a result of both situations.

F. Death

A phrase that appears in a few of the essays of *Landing: On the Other Side*, is the narrator's wish for certain things--work tasks, pain, and time--to stop. The author includes this to emphasize the degree of frustration accompanying any chronic disorder. Some may view this as a death wish from the author. This idea is not unique to Escamilla. In the opening pages of *Sick Girl*, Amy Silverstein contemplates stopping her anti-rejection drugs. This of course will mean death. Of her thoughts, Silverstein writes: "I'd have to be a crazy person to do that. Or awfully selfish. I'd be called an ungrateful organ recipient. A bad patient. A bad mother. A hurtful, unloving wife" (5).

When asked about the apparent suicidal nature of this thought, Silverstein is surprised.

> I have never entertained one [suicidal thought]. Rather, I have at times (and still do) evaluate whether the extraordinary effort required of me every hour every day to keep this body going is worth it ... suicide is not in my vocabulary and if ever I actually did contemplate in ending life all I would have to do is stop my Herculean efforts to stay alive against the odds and the hovering deadly realities that face me each day in this body. If I were to simply live like a normal woman my age, I would die. Fast. Suicide, then, is not in my vocabulary (though others may mistakenly label it as such.). (E-mail correspondence with Silverstein)

When addressing heath issues, quality of life is as important as its duration. Death, while not a direct consequence of FM, must be addressed. In Silverstein's case, the question of death was not hypothetical. During a routine procedure, her heart stopped. She recounts her struggle with her situation (78). She experienced that which other narrators fear and rally against. Marjorie Williams likens her impending death to "a great dark lozenge that sat bittersweet on my tongue for hours at a time, and I savored the things I'd avoid forever" (252). This speaks to the acceptance which can only be reached by a person given a fatal diagnosis. The outlook of death to her is different than in the FM patient. Unlike a person with a terminal diagnosis, the person with a chronic disorder has the capacity to hope.

G. Creative Nonfiction

Above all else the goal of *Landing: On the Other Side* is to tell a story of one woman's struggle to regain control of her life. A number of memoir-type narratives have been written on the subject of FM. However, the majority of them function as strategic guides for survival for newly diagnosed FM patients. Some offer worksheet to track the progress of the illness as the reader navigates from chapter to chapter (Jones). Tami Brady uses one quarter of *Strategies: A Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Fibromyalgia Journey* for what she calls Strategy Forms. These strategy forms are used to list symptoms and their severity, inspirational quotes, medication, and self-relief strategies (96-134). *We Laughed, We Cried: Life with Fibromyalgia,* is a compilation of cartoons, poems and essays from FM patients.

From the perspective of a newly diagnosed FM patient, the need to find information on the illness is vital. However, the authors of the memoir's available on the market provide little reflection on their illness and the ramifications of their situation. It appears as if the narrators of these memoirs lived in an FM vacuum where it was the sole challenge they faced. When reading the books one cannot tell what jobs or family issues the authors faced along with their health situations. Logically, this is impossible. Just because a person is ill does not mean that the rest of life stands still. If it were, then maybe an illness might not be as difficult to overcome since all the body's energy would be focused on this one act.

The unique aspect of an ever changing life is just what the narrator of *Landing: On the Other Side* examines in "Todo Esta Bien" and "The Outing". These two essays address the death of her father. Upon his cancer diagnosis, she is elected as his primary caregiver. While completing this task, she realizes his liver cancer is a death sentence. She hides this truth from her mother and sister who struggle with the weight of yet another sick family member. The narrator battles the knowledge of her father's impending death, her own illness and the fatigue from accompanying him through his four hour chemotherapy sessions. While she sits next to him, she recalls the times he accompanied her to the hospital at the start of her bout with FM. The narrator gains a firsthand view of the effect of illness has on those around the patient. It's this perspective she drew on when faced with her own breast cancer diagnosis. She begins to understand the blank stares her family gave her as expressed her discomfort. These sections were inspired by the discomfort found in an episode of the *House M.D.* television program. In "Informed Consent", Allison Cameron states that it is easier to die than to watch someone die. At first glance these words appear shallow and self-serving. However, during the time of a major pain crisis the only thing which matters to the patient is feeling better. The patient's family is wide awake waiting for news.

After her father's death, the narrator discovers his history of polygamy. At the funeral home, she must fight to keep primary control over the arrangements. This particular essay does not have the narrator's illness in the forefront, but without her health issues her reactions to the various situations in this essay would be different. The author chose to write about this topic for the specific reason that it emphasizes the fact that major events do not cease until a person regains their health.

In "A Sudden Illness", Hillenbrand writes of how she wrote her bestselling book Seabiscuit.

> If I looked down at my work, the room spun, so I perched my laptop on a stack of books in my office, and Borden jerry-rigged a device that held documents vertically. When I was too tired to sit at my desk, I set the laptop up on my bed. When I was too dizzy to read, I lay down and wrote with my eyes closed. Living in my subjects' bodies, I forgot about my own. I mailed the manuscript off to Random House in September 2000, then fell into bed. I was lying there the following day when the room began to gyrate. (10)

The world would have missed out on a on this perspective had Hillenbrand not fought through her illness. In the tradition of the championship horse, she was able to work past her physical challenges to thrive and succeed beyond all expectations.

The essay "I Just Want to Sell my Beans" in *Landing: On the Other Side* continues to look at the narrator's life as she works to move past her illness. In this essay, the narrator decides to volunteer for the Democratic ticket in the 2004 Presidential election. At an event, she and the other volunteers are nearly arrested. At first, she finds the situation comical. After an onslaught of police officers gets to the scene, she begins to consider the reality of an arrest. In the midst of the misunderstanding, she determines she fears the isolation, confinement, and the lack of control a jail cell represents. She realizes that her illness is her own jail cell and that she lost control of her body. While she never experienced a violent crime, the violence of the FM's attack on her life crystallizes.

The author's fear of losing control others is described in the essay "Stripped of More than My Clothes" by MonDesire. In this narrative, MonDesire describes a strip search she endured at the hand of US Customs. "There have, in my life, been two occasions when underwear was removed against my will. The first occurred at the hands of a rapist. The second time was at the hands of my government." (247) No matter how the individual loses the ability to move, the restraint removes the victim's dignity (247).

In the tradition of *Sick Girl, The Night Side* and "Mirrorings", this collection examines the effect illness has on the narrator. The essay collection allows for the elaboration of the illness, its effect on the body, but also view the narrator's life as a whole. FM and cancer ravage a body quickly. It is for this reason that the chapters in this collection are devoted to the lack the proper perspective of patients struggling with their diagnosis. Often times, cancer narratives leave the audience with over idealized view of the cancer patient, while books written on the subject of FM serve little more than to have something for the FM patient to hold while they suffer through the illness, rather than a true look in the life of a person with that illness. While the narrator is not a medical professional, her knowledge of molecular biology coupled with scientific observation skills allows for meditation on the underlying events happening along her biochemical pathways.

Patients suffering any serious illness feel fear and emptiness. Escamilla hopes to show the horrors and vulnerability to her readers. Within the writing, she reveals her fears and frustrations. Finally, in her writing she wants to show that success over an illness need not be its eradication, but in the ability to adapt by accepting ones condition. Of acceptance, Skloot writes: "It is a powerful passivity, the Zen of Illness, that allows for endurance ("Shadow" 198).

H. Landing: On the Other Side

When Escamilla began her collection, she suffered the effect of FM daily, and hadn't yet been diagnosed with the HER-2 positive breast cancer. While she originally selected to call her collection A Chronic Life: A Narrative of a Life Ruled by Fibromyalgia. In the time since, she's overcome both the breast cancer and has been declared to be in remission of the FM. The fact that she's overcome two debilitating and life-threatening illnesses does not go unnoticed by the author. In a way she has out run the foes in her life. While remission in both diseases does not imply a recurrence is not possible, the ability to enjoy a bit of breathing room is significant. For the first time in 16 years, Escamilla only takes one pill a day. That pill is Tamoxifen, taken for the prevention of breast cancer recurrence.

Escamilla recognizes her ability to look at her illnesses from a perspective that was not possible in the middle of the symptoms. She looks at them from the side of health and the side of hope. Something which is as unsettling as it is welcoming. She finds herself with a responsibility to do something with the life renewed. Perhaps survivor's guilt fuels this feeling of responsibility or perhaps it's simple gratitude. At this point there's no way of knowing, what this new found freedom will yield. Landing became the best description of how it felt to no longer be tied to a particular state. When one lands, the uncertainty of the flight and destination go away, what's left is a sense of relief and the need to explore and enjoy. Escamilla landed on the other side of her world, she landed on the greener side of the grass and is slowly learning to live life differently. While she remains content, she's also saddened by those never can or ever will know the relief she does. Lucy Grealy, Floyd Skloot and Laura Hillenbrand do not know the feeling of planting feet firmly on the ground after a long journey. Each while heroic in their own world, lives or lived in the solitude of a patient.

CHAPTER TWO

THE OUTING

The day he died of congestive heart failure due to cancer complications was the day I told Dad I loved him for the first time. Israel Escamilla, that's my daddy's name. I miss him very, very much. Early on a July morning, a Tuesday, just four days after my nephew's twelfth birthday, Mom helped Dad to the toilet. While leaning on her, he collapsed. She still blames herself for his death. She says that if she had only been able to hold him up he would be all right. But, we all knew what Stage 4, metastatic liver cancer meant. We all knew how that would end The day before he died, he underwent his second and last Ascites Removal procedure to purge the accumulation of fluid which built up in his abdominal cavity as a result of the damage the cancer caused the liver. While the procedure itself took 20 minutes, we spent 6 hours at the hospital. The doctor claimed the wait was because Dad had to fit into the doctor's tight schedule.

It felt like a lie since faced the same wait time when he performed the same fine-needle aspiration five weeks prior. That procedure confirmed the diagnosis. The second one was done to ease his breathing, since his belly had swollen to the size of a third trimester pregnancy. The typical image of a cancer patient includes sunken eyes, a pale face, a bald head and an emaciated appearance. Hollywood types love exploiting this look. The reality is almost never shown. He lost weight and retained hair, but his midsection grew daily. One of the many doctors who treated him helped our understanding of the swelling. Evidentially, when liver cells are damaged, they release a liquid. The more damage, the more liquid. Most of his liver had deteriorated because of the cancer.

"Hijo de su chingada madre," he said beneath his breath. All I could do was hold his hand and fix his pillow.

He liked it when I took him to chemotherapy. I think it was because I never told him he was going to make it. The rest of my family didn't accept his fate, they clung to hope rather than face of the chaos in front of them. Dad knew my background in the hard sciences allowed me to understand the realities of his prognosis. And I knew that while he never finished high school, he knew things that stunned me. A truth he reminded me he we sat in our tiny 150 square foot kitchen. He say in his regular chair, the one facing the television set. When I walked in the room, he pulled out some white sheets of paper from his pants pocket. The doctor had told him he had cancer. He then looked at me and pointed to the word metastatic. I bit my lower lip. I could feel his stare as while I continued to read what he handed me.

"Esta jodido, este vato," Dad said tossing the newspaper on the bed. "No se va ha quedar así," he said. We continued the conversation for a few more minutes, then were brought out of the exchange by my mother calling attention to the time. We laughed, it was a good laugh, for a good while I forgot my Dad was dying. There wasn't any outrage on the Tuesday Dad died—only fear. Fear of how the last steps of his journey would take form.

On the morning my father died, Mom helped him out of bed since he was weak from the chemo, the pain and hunger. He hadn't been able to eat or swallow food for a few days. She was a whole foot shorter, but she let him lean on her. When they reached the hallway he slid to his knees. She fell on one knee, but grabbed the shelf to her left to maintain her balance. My sister, Rosemary, heard the commotion. She managed to get my mom up and tried to help him up.

She couldn't.

Rosemary knocked on my bedroom door a few minutes later.

"Mari," she called. I don't know how loud she said it. She might have yelled, but in my memory it seemed like a whisper.

"What," my mouth tasted rancid and felt dry. I forgot to brush my teeth before falling asleep the night before.

"Mari," she repeated. "Papi se cayó y no lo podemos levantar."

I managed to say okay. But it wasn't okay. My dad fell. My thoughts went in a different direction. It was time. The time I knew would come since he told us about the diagnosis. I got up. I wore a tight blush-colored tank top and a pair of light blue pajama bottoms. Dad bought them for me when he came for a visit in El Paso during the time I worked as a DNA analyst. I normally tossed on a robe before greeting anyone when I wore that blouse because Mom never failed to mention I looked naked while wearing it.

I didn't think to get the robe that morning.

When I stepped into the hallway I saw the disarray. Unfolder clothing was scattered over Dad's legs. Mom sat next to Dad on the floor, her dark hands holding his pale, naked torso up. She tried not to press too hard because he was still tender from the procedure the day before.

"Rae, Rae," she called him that every day of my life. Today, it sounded different. Was it desperation or sadness or just plain defeat? "No, no hagas esto, por favor," at the time it seemed appropriate, but he couldn't stop his body from stopping—no matter how much she begged. Rosemary rushed to the phone.

"Papí," I said spontaneously. I tried to assess the situation. But, when I swooped next to him, all I knew was that I had no idea what to do.

"Si se me safa se va ha pegar en la cabeza," she struggled for air in between each word. Her eyes remained planted on his face. Rosemary ran outside to call the ambulance. I think she thought it would be there the second she dialed. Her two kids remained asleep. I grabbed Dad by his underarms. At the same time I grabbed him, he flailed his arms making my task more difficult. Then, noticed the reason for his panic. His head fell forward constricting his air passage and he was too weak to lift his head without assistance. He clutched at his short graying hair attempting to pull his head up. His eyes darted and mouth hung opened. I heard nothing coming from it. His eyes were wide open—desperate. That's when I knew he couldn't breathe. I cupped my hands beneath his chin. His greying beard pricked palms. His eyes once a dark brown looked as gray as his hair. He felt cold and dry. After I sat him up, I ran to get all of the files I'd kept from the many doctor's visits. Somehow, I got shoes on my feet. From the front yard, Rosemary announced the arrival of the ambulance.

I looked directly in his eyes.

It was then the words formed.

"I love you, Daddy." He realized the severity of the situation. I wish he hadn't. Rosemary let the paramedics in. My aunt, his sister and next door neighbor. Dolores barged into the house. She just looked down at the three of us on the floor.

"No se porque lo dejaron que se viniera," she shook her head. She thought Dad was in no condition to be at home after the previous day's procedure. I don't know if she meant to admonish the hospital staff or mine. I didn't look at her. No one knew who she talked to when she began her rants. In the few weeks we had dealt with his illness, she focused on minutia she said I needed to do to make his life better. When discussing treatments, she demanded to know the rationale. Dad shrugged. I invited her to the appointments. She made one of them. She complained for the 4 hours we waited to see the doctor. Her live-in lover, who was also her uncle, came in the house next. He reiterated her question, then demanded we tell the doctors to keep Dad at the hospital. They didn't get it. No one realized it. Dad wasn't coming home.

"El debe de estar en el hospital, llevenlo y que lo dejen todo el tiempo que necessite estar alli." He looked like an orangutan flailing his arms with each syllabus. I tried to smile at Dad. I wanted to think I wasn't taking the words as harshly. So much of me wanted to respond. I just smiled. The commotion around me seemed so far away. The paramedics entered the house. Mom pushed the shelf away to make room for the gurney.

"Pinche mugre chingada," Mom spit. Her dark, full lips always protruded when she was mad. I rode with Dad on the ambulance. After talking to Mom and Rosemary, I signed the "Do Not Resuscitate Order" at the hospital. Later, his sister proclaimed to all who heard her that I killed him "as sure as a Governor who doesn't sign a stay of execution". He expired at about 12:30 that afternoon.

Twenty hours later Rosemary and I walked around the funeral home looking for an appropriate casket.

We chose a maple wood one with ivory lining. It cost a bit over six-thousand dollars. Paying six thousand dollars for a pretty little box Dad would never see pissed me off. My sister's best friend, Ana, was the funeral director's grand-daughter. When I touched the satin sofa, in the parlor, I flashed to a memory I held of the room. When I was ten, I sat in that same dark maroon parlor of the funeral home.

Around 1978. Rosemary and Ana talked in hushed voices about their not so secret secret crushes. Ana's portly grandmother, who always wore heavily tinted glasses similar to the ones the older Elvis used to wear, entered the room after a hair appointment. The scent of Aqua Net followed her into the room. Her hair looked as hard as Darth Vader's helmet—she never missed an appointment to "hacerse peinados". She gave Ana some last minute chores. She admired her new felt couches, as deep maroon as the drapes and walls. She gazed at the sparkling, crystal chandelier. Come to think of it, the items made the place look like a whorehouse parlor from a telenovela. As she gazed at her furniture, she took a deep breath and removed her glasses.

"O'jala que se mueran mucha gente para poder pagar los sofás más pronto," she giggled.

"'buelita," Ana said in a nearly disapproving tone.

"Pues, tu sabes. No es mi culpa que se muere gente." She left the room with one of the sofa pillows.

Ana turned to us and said something to make her grandmother's words seem less callused. I don't remember the exact words, just the hushed tone. But, in retrospect, I guess when a person houses dead people in her house for over 30 years in all states of decay it is hard not to think of them as cash cows.

My thoughts went back to Dad's collapse. I wondered if he knew he would not wake up again when he closed his eyes that last time. Since then, I engaged in my own battle with breast cancer. During my battle, I almost died three times. None of those moments came with a rewind button. To tell the truth, for one of those times, I was out like a light—I had a life-threatening allergic reaction to the anesthesia used during my first surgery. It was actually the opposite of what I most feared. On the day of that surgery, I remembered a 20/20 episode which featured a woman who felt everything done to her on the surgery table. As for the other times, I was too busy trying to get to my next breath to think of any past actions.

The night of Dad's rosary proved more revelatory than reflective for the family as a whole. During the service I met the twelve other children he fathered besides my sister and me. Subpoenas for child support hearings arrived regularly for him as I grew up so having his bastard children make their presence known wasn't shocking. What I didn't consider was his potency or luck with the ladies. The old man got around.

"Are you going to be mad at him?" Mom asked me after I met all of my half-brothers and sisters.

"Why should I be?" I asked staring at him in his little box.

"Por lo que hizo," she pointed at him.

I laughed.

"No te rías," she smacking my lap. She smiled then covered her mouth. "Mira, me estás haciendo que me ría, y horita." Mom shook her head and looked around to make sure no one saw. My extended family believes that actual grief is a constant emotion instead of waves.

"¿Que mejor tiempo, Mom? Favor."

We laughed softly. Then, stopped at the same time.

He was born in McAllen, Texas on October 20, 1932, but for some reason I always thought his birth date was on the 21st. Presents to him from me were always a day late. Dad grew up in the middle of South Texas. The area is known as the Upper Valley. My grandparents instilled in him the various methods of proving his manhood. As a kid he played on the streets, fended for himself. He knew that as a man, he needed to prove his manliness at any given time. Manliness meant more than anything to his family and involved brutality and humiliation.

When Rosemary and I were younger, he told us tales of his youth. Dad would hold court in our tiny living room. Like Archie Bunker, Dad had a favorite chair which faced the TV set. In his left hand, it was either a soda can or a dairy item. The right hand was used to point to the locations he was talking about. The stories started the same way. His mom needed a food item.

"Un día, A'ma nos dijo que necesitaba un hielo. Pues, yo y Lalo nos arancamos al Piggly Wiggly, estaba allí en el medio de la Cage." He pointed towards the East with his right middle finger. Cage is one of the main drags in Pharr, Texas. "Y alli entramos, y el Señor nos miro. Nos pregunto que queríamos, le dijimos que buscábamos el hielo." He started to laugh. Dad wore a full moustache, and was nicknamed Freddy Fender because of the physical similarities with the singer. In the middle of this story, his moustache spread out above his mouth to display his teeth, and his glasses slid down his nose. "Nos pregunto que buscábamos. No, le dijimos, nos mando mi mama por el hielo. Pues, nos mando a la casa con un pedazo de hielo. No'mbre, los fregadasos que nos dieron." He laughed harder than before at this time. Rosemary and I both asked him why his parent beating him was funny. He kept laughing. "Mi'ja, queria Jell-O." His parents expected him to understand their wishes. Rosemary and I laughed. It was funny to hear the Jell-O said in Spanish sounded like the Spanish word for ice. What I didn't appreciate was how my grandmom and grandad hit him for not knowing something intuitively.

Clairvoyance wasn't the only thing expected of him. The Escamillas had a set of guidelines that also existed for him when it came to women. I think this is what some people call

Machismo. Machismo makes men act reckless. It is the reason that there is drag racing on Tenth Street in McAllen and why Dad had a kid with almost every woman who stepped in his path before and after he married Mom. The culture expects the behavior, actually that is too tame of a word, the culture demands it. My grandfather also fathered many kids.

It was because of this my parents clashed. Words like divorce, and "La Otra" floated around in raised voices. One of their fiercest discussions happened when I was about eight. I heard Dad refuse to divorce my mother. She begged him for it. Sternly, he said no.

"I married you through the church," he said. "Eso se significa algo."

"Pero si te divorcio, te puedes casar con alguna que de deviritas amas. O con que te diviertas."

They lowered their voices when they noticed me standing at the doorway to their bedroom. My skin got prickly. I felt cold. Not out of comprehension, but because a lack of it. Dad called me over and hugged me. I squeezed him hard. I wanted to cry, but didn't. Instead, I noticed the smell of sweat from his day's work mixed with the Tres Flores hair balm and scent of grease on his hands. He worked as a mechanic and bus driver for the local school district.

"Don't worry," he said while pouting slightly. "Don't get scared, we're okay." He looked sad. I hated it when he looked sad.

Mom exhaled in anger.

"Si ya vas a hacer que yo soy la mala."

She turned around and walked out of the room. Her hands were clinched and her shoulder-length curly hair bounced up and down as her stride picked up. Even while angry, she still cooked. I guess that was her way of telling us she loved us. The word love only entered my family's vocabulary at the birth of my nephew. We would kiss him and say we loved him. In his tiny voice he repeated the words to us. Never did we turn to each other and say the same thing. I stayed with my dad a little while longer, then asked if I could have one of his bullets. He handed the shiny projectile to me. Girls in my class loved to play with dolls and braid their hair, I loved holding the bullets. They looked like gold. He laughed at my adoration of the bullet. At any given time he had two handguns in the home and about seven or eight boxes of bullets.

When I was twelve, the family experienced a heck of a day. Those days, Rosemary, my sister, spent her evenings with friends. Mom said she needed to hang out with people her age.

I didn't like it. As her annoying little sister, I wanted her with me at all times so we could talk about Han Solo.

Dad walked in about 5:30 in the evening. At the time, Hogan's *Heroes* played on the TV. He looked at the screen then patted my head. I pushed his hand away since he had trouble gauging his strength when he jostled me.

Dad asked Mom if we would go with him to work. Since he was a bus driver I envisioned getting on the bus and sharing the seat behind my dad with Mom. An evening field trip seemed exciting. I wondered where the students were going. My mind went to the lunch bags that came with long trips. They had the best peanut butter cookies. Bus trips with him were nothing new. Before I enrolled in school, he took me on his routes to get me acclimated to school kids.

"Para donde van los huercos?" I asked in a squeaky voice. I was about ten at the time.

He explained that this wasn't a bus trip. This was his night work.

He went out at nights, but I never knew he worked at night. I just knew he came home smelling like cigarette smoke and stale beer.

As soon as he asked if I wanted to go, I forgot about Rosemary's absence. Later, she told me her need to be out came because of phone calls we got from my father's mistresses. The women revealed bedroom secrets a daughter should never know about her father.

On that night, those images didn't exist in my head. All that mattered was the elation of having my parents with me. My little kid vocabulary didn't hold the words to convey my happiness, instead my flat portly chest filled with warmth.

"Look at her smile," Dad said while I looked for my flip-flops beneath the couch. I felt the once fluffy upholstery gritty on my hand as I gained leverage.

I hated that couch.

I don't know if it was because I could never drink cherry Kool-Aid on it or if it was because of the old fashioned wagon design or the silly skirt. I just really hated it.

"Make sure you find them," she said. My mom felt threats worked as a memory enhancer.

Dad calmed her.

"Vieja, no te preocupes no se nos va hacer tarde." My childhood house measured less than 800 square feet, yet held many places for shoes to disappear. His moustache looked wider when he smiled.

He said we were headed to El Centro Mall in Pharr. I didn't realize Dad liked going to the mall. The very idea of him working there failed to reconcile with the smells that came off his clothes when he got home. Maybe we were heading to shop before his work

"Pinches chanclas." I squealed, where were my flip-flops?

"O'rale," Mom said. "No necesitas que hechar vulgerias. Con toda la chingada."

I found them under my bed.

"Got 'em."

"Ya era tiempo," Mom said.

In 1977, El Centro Mall opened from eleven a.m. to nine p.m. We left at 8:30 PM. I worried about the late hour. I actually thought that if I didn't heed the store closing warnings, I would be locked in, doomed to spend the night in the dark store. Dad got a series of calls before we left. He kept talking about tires. He agreed to pick up fifteen of them. Getting tires at night at the mall made little sense. But I'd learned not to ask too many questions. Mom said there were many things I didn't know, therefore I shouldn't ask too many questions.

I wondered if at the end of the outing he would stay the night since his job would be done. Where he stayed never concerned me.

I sat in the backseat of the brand new Buick Landau with a goofy, toothy smile. My face hurt from grinning. I opened up a glass Coke bottle.

"Que no se te tire," Mom ordered without looking back. The fully paid car was less than a year old so she wanted to make sure it was treated right.

"No, ma'am," I yelled from the back seat.

The lights along the Expressway glowed yellow. The kind of yellow a paper towel gets when it soaks up a tea bag. They always looked that way. I closed my eyes until the car stopped. We parked between the Woolworth and the JC Penny signs. Those entrances were well-lit. Dad walked towards the darker entry way after he told us to wait in the car. I climbed up over the front seat. My mom didn't pay attention. I sat next to her. Her eyes held my father's silhouette. He didn't go into the building. He stood in the shadows. One of my favorite things at the time was reading about Jack the Ripper. This scene reminded me of the dark, dusky book covers I read in the library hidden away from adults who thought my reading about sexual sadists would do me harm. A couple of decades later, I took this hidden fascination into a full-on career when I became an employee of the state crime lab.

After a few minutes, I saw a guy with a bushy beard go up to Dad. They shook hands. I felt like asking what Dad was up to, since it looked rather fishy. But, I decided this was one of those things I was told not to ask about. Besides the bushy beard, the deep red the tip of his cigarette proved the guy's most distinctive quality. I saw a matching tip from my dad's outline. By this time, Mom had stopped watching them. She looked at her fingernails. They were painted red.

"What color are you gonna paint them next?" I asked.

"No sé," she whispered. "Ya, muévete para atrás. Ya viene." Dad sighed when he sat back in the car. "Y?" she asked anxiously.

"No, nada, todo ya viene."

They continued talking in code. He smiled back at me and asked if I was okay. I said I was cool. We drove back home.

As we walked into the house, my mom told me to be ready to go back out.

"Y no te quites las chanclas," I was thrilled. I had no idea what was happening, but I was going to be able to stay up late on a school night. I went to my room to finish my homework. Mom and Dad got into a somber sounding conversation. The rhythmic sounds in their voices lulled me once I started listening. This tone was different than any other I'd heard them have.

An hour later, we still waited.

I got tired of reading.

My shoes hung on my feet.

When we got the car, we also got brand new bedroom furniture. I got the white canopy bed I'd always loved from the Sears showroom. Dad made sure I got the whole lot, right down to the obnoxious pink chiffon bedspread and skirt. Beneath the bed I kept some loose bullets I stole from my parent's bedroom. I held them there not to hide them, but to make sure I didn't lose them. Their shine entertained me. Each time he saw me playing with them, Dad said he would teach me how to shoot.

I held the bullets in my hand. They felt cold and smooth. They were as long as my fingers and extend beyond my palm. I touched the tip of one of the projectiles. I knew this is the part that penetrated a person's body in a gunfight. I dug it into my skin. It didn't hurt, and the cold remained the most significant sensation.

I wondered if I would die if the bullet to broke through my skin as I pushed it down. I never imagined my dad killing anyone. I know that many people who serve as peace officers claim to keep their gun holstered for years, unlike their counterparts on television who get into weekly shootouts.

But Dad wasn't a cop.

He cleaned his gun before he left the house each night.

"Si no la limpias, se te friega," he said sitting freshly showered on his bed. His hair gleamed from the Tres Flores hair pomade. The first day I walked in on him cleaning one of the guns, my mom got after him.

"¿Pero como sabes que no te van a llevar?" Mom asked loud enough for me to hear. I opened the door and looked in on them. I knew I would have to tell Rosemary of the goings on and wanted to make sure I had as much data as possible. Mom stood less than five feet, yet never got scared. That night mom's shiny face displayed wrinkles across her forehead, her focus held on my father's face.

When she saw me, she let me know we were ready to leave. I put the bullets away and ran all the way to the car.

When he pulled out, I noticed red and blue lights behind us and a bunch of cars crowding the driveway. Dad yelled at my mom, "Es la chota, vieja." I barely heard him over the sirens. He pulled something out from his boot and stuck it underneath his seat. I later found out it was a smaller gun.

Three men pulled him out of the car. A couple of others pulled out my mom. They were all yelling loud. She turned super pale and sat in our front porch. To this date, I don't know how I got out of the car. Standing in the middle of the yard, I heard nothing but radio chatter coming from walkie-talkies. I saw that the guys, who I later learned were Los Narcos, make Dad kneel on the grass with his hands interlaced behind his head.

I looked back to my as mom she swooned. The men caught her before she fell from on the concrete porch. They asked if she needed a doctor. Before I heard her answer, the one man dressed in a suit let her know that they were narcotics officers. He told her he arrested Dad on drug trafficking charges.

She remained unresponsive for a few minutes. One of the other narcs brought my handcuffed father over to talk to her. He told her he was fine and that everything would work out. I don't know if he actually believed it at the time. I can't imagine he did. I don't remember what happened after. I must have had some interaction with my mother, and my sister had to be told about what happened when she got home.

A few months later, we drove the Federal Courthouse in Brownsville. During this ride I learned that that one tire referred to a thousand pounds. His plea deal in retrospect was cherry. He got sentenced to four years yet only served sixteen months in a federal maximum security institution.

In court, his lawyer said we had to make sure we established eye contact with the judge. He said if the judge saw us, and saw what a family man Dad was his sentence would be all the more lenient—possibly just probation. The wooden paneled courtroom was like nothing I'd ever seen. An old man with short white hair and black rimmed glasses talked to my dad from a big chair at the front of the room. He looked like a king. He said a few things that seemed to bore him since he rattled them off with little inflection. He held a pen between his index and middle finger as he shuffled papers around him. I looked directly at him the whole time.

The judge failed to look up so I wasn't able to complete my task of inspiring pity. The judge finally addressed Dad when he offered the sentence.

"Mr. Escamilla, you have pled guilty because you are guilty," those are the words I still remember. That and that he got a four year prison term. I don't remember the drive home. But, we left the building without him. As a matter of fact, he got taken out a side door right after the gavel went down.

Whenever I think back on his arrest now, I can't help but think of doing it under the lens of a former law enforcement official. Many cases involving children ran past my desk when I worked in the crime lab. While I sat in my warm, well lit office, I read through the paperwork filed by police at the time of the incident or arrest. Some of the more memorable ones involved kids taken along as parent shoplifted at the local Wal-Mart, another case involved a child in the backseat of his mother's car as the mom killed her mother-in-law. Each time I read through the files, I wondered what kind of parent took a child along to the commission of a crime. After the arrest, the children were taken directly to children's services. At the time, I never associated my own family with these situations. But, in my dad's case, I was the kid in the backseat being taken to the commission of a crime. And truth be told, it felt like an adventure. I wasn't mistreated by him nor was I scared. While I'm not offering any excuses for my dad and his lack of common sense, I do see how easy it is to make the wrong choice. Luckily, I was left at home with my mother. Perhaps it was a sign of times, perhaps it was a way to have leverage over my dad. If the cops kept true to their general playbook, I'm certain they threatened with taking me away and arresting my mom.

What I also remember if my time were my hypocritical thoughts.

"These poor kids need to be taken far, far away from these people," I'd tell the detectives when we discussed the specifics before a trial.

"Yeah, they are horrible people. I don't get what makes these place their babies in danger."

"Let's hope they never get them back," I said added.

"I spoke to the DA and she assured me they wouldn't."

"Thank God."

I saw Dad twice during his incarceration. Unlike the orange overalls they issue in jail, he wore grey prison garb. They looked like surgical scrubs. We got to see him for about fifteen minutes after the twelve hour car ride and standing in line for close to four hours. I walked through my first metal detector that day. It reminded me of the transporters from Star Trek. A little pang of fear hit my stomach. The place smelled of sweat and rancid onions. It felt like a cave. I saw him behind glass and only got a chance to talk to him between a screen on the bottom of the window.

He looked small compared to the other men. My mother asked me specifically not to cry. I didn't. I wasn't tempted either. I hoped people who knew me at school wouldn't find out I had gone to prison. What would they say? Because of issues with his infidelity and the fact that most of my classmates were aware of it, I wanted as few people to know about the arrest as possible. I spoke to no one about it.

After the trial date, the next time my family was together was at Rosemary's Senior Art exhibit at the university. Only one picture exists of that night.

We are all smiling in that photo.

During his funeral, I saw most of his twelve other children. They clamored desperately to announce that my dad bred them. One woman claimed my Dad as her husband after we recited the rosary. As she spoke to the funeral director, she slammed the door on my face. That my father whored around concerned me little. That he died a horrifically painful death weighed heavily in my heart. That she interrupted and treated me like an intruder, well that wasn't smart. The funeral home belonged to the friend my sister visited the night of my father's arrest. None of my half siblings knew that, of course they didn't.

Those people weren't family.

They were not my family.

They trespassed, attempting to take over and distract. And, while I never questioned their love, I am angered at their mother's treatment of mine. For that, I have every right. Because, the man lying in the wooden, ivory-lined box was my father. He was the man who I went to mourn. The man who I saw handcuffed in the middle of the lawn, the man who forty-eight hours prior to the funeral stretched out his arms to his God begging for death. He was the first man who I ever loved unconditionally on this Earth. My parents gave me life, and he let me live it—as reckless as I chose to live it.

After we established my mom's claim on my dad, we stood in the parlor. Rosemary, Mom, twelve-year old Jake, seven-year old Kimmy and I were surrounded by all twelve of his other children, their wives and at least of their mothers. I had no idea who was who. Betty, the director of the funeral home asked if we needed to have the police come. Initially, we didn't. While I did work for law enforcement at one time, it seemed in bad taste to have them come to my dad's funeral. But, they lingered and then began to spread out around us. I asked for the phone so that I could call the cops. One of the older ladies, I imagined it was one of the mistresses looked over at one of my half-brothers and motioned her head to the door. A few others followed suit. My aunt Dolores asked why I had called. I told her I was worried for Jake and Kim's safety. She shook her head.

"You knew," she said.

"Knew what?" I replied.

"The warrants, you want them in jail."

"No, I want to be safe, and they have warrants?"

"Que? No, no, they had warrants. Antes. No, ya no," her eyes widened with each syllable.

The cops showed up a couple of minutes after the larger group left. A couple of others remained.

In their usual bravado, the two uniformed officers entered. They shook hands with Betty, me and my mom. As soon as they learned she was the widow, they politely offered her condolences. We recounted the evening's events. They didn't seem surprised.

"Lottery winnings and death make families get into fights more than anything else," said the younger one. "We've seen some bad ones."

I nodded. They asked a few more questions, we responded to them. Jake and Kim said they wanted to go to bed.

When the cops left I went back to the parlor where Dad rested.

"Drama queen," I whispered in his ear. "Even dead, we need to call the cops on your ass."

I caressed his face with mine. His cold skin cooled me. My dad, drama and threats of cops with lights and sirens infiltrated all our lives. Giving in and accepting the treatment would have been easier, but easy is not what he taught. While I get angry each time when I think about not being allowed to properly mourn him, I know the events of that night helped me recognize that he did that all he could as best as he knew how.

CHAPTER THREE

TODO ESTA BIEN

The Cucuy is real. I don't get why people ask if I believe in him. He looks like a golem covered in fresh, caked mud. He doesn't walk, he crawls, because if he walked his knees would crack. He takes his fat hands and places them in front of him and pulls himself forward. This is the reason he hides under beds. You see, he can't get up any higher.

If he were to climb up on the bed it would take too long. The reason he comes out at night? That is easy—no sun. The sun would dry him out. He would end up looking more like Lot's wife, a stiff pillar of salt rather than a creature from the netherworld charged with making children fall asleep on time or behave properly.

"Duermete, o si no vas a ver, va venir el Cucuy," my mom still tells my niece and nephew when they aren't asleep by 10 pm.

Little information exists on what happens when he arrives. Perhaps that means no survivors exist. I preferred to think he would touch my feet. That seemeed creepy enough when I was kid, since he would be cold. Also, death and horror at the level of my present day understanding didn't in exist my kid psyche. But, contemplating in the daylight of adulthood, what was supposed to happen? Unlike La Llorona, who kidnaps children to replace the ones she murdered, the Cucuy's manifestation fails to provide a distinct purpose or result past inciting fear. He's as innocuous. Maybe the Cucuy vanished when a victim screamed.

psyche, that no matter how much physics, biology, mathematics, or philosophy we learn, the stories remain as factual as the sun rising each day. This in no way is an excuse for or desire keep a superstition. It's a fact of my family's reality. Perhaps it is something about living in a border region. Between two countries, between two languages, and for me it's living between science and religion. We do know in our collective consciousness that these creatures do not exist, but in some way they give a face to the unknown evils in our world. This type of black and white logic makes sense to most children. However it changes once we grow up.

In my own early adulthood, science replaced any other philosophy in my life. I considered the crime lab in the middle of the El Paso desert my Bat Cave. Crime labs are a special section within some Department of Public Safety buildings. They are cocooned as deep into the buildings as possible and only the people who work in it carry a key. Of the people with a key to the lab's front door, only the analysts and the evidence technicians held the combination to the vault door. And, because I worked with DNA, I had the newest, coolest and most expensive reagents and equipment. DNA kits cost well over a thousand dollars at the time and were only good to process 36 samples which translated to about nine cases. El Paso had one murder a day and at least three fights and two sexual assaults in the same time frame so we purchased about 5 kits a month. I'm sure we would've ordered more had there been another analyst in the lab, but I was the only one employed in the position of the time. Because of this, I also maintained the equipment. My favorite one was the genetic analyzer called affectionately among the forensic world as the "310". My 310 had its own room. Maintaining it involved intricate tools and my climbing ladders to reach the top of the machine. I loved it.

A few years later, my childhood reality mixed in with my adulthood when my dead grandmother came to me in a dream in the winter of 2007. Abue, as I called her in my dream, died of emphysema when I was 5 in 1973. My memories of her are only those stories which were told to me when I was a kid. She was a three-pack a day smoker.

In my dream, I stood on the back porch of my childhood home, the one my dad built on my birth year. I carried a toddler. He measured 18 inches in height, and had curly yellow locks. He was dressed in a white diaper. His head felt sweaty as it snuggled into my neck. He remained fast asleep while I walked out of the house.

I noticed Abue in the middle of the yard. She wore a white linen dress and a multi-colored scarf draped over her shoulders. Her deep brown, wavy hair draped at her neck. She wore a dress that reminded me of what peons wore in the old Pedro Infante movies.

"Que pasa?" she asked. Now, I have to tell you I do not generally dream in Spanish. My primary dream language is English. That only changed once in 35 years, and that one time was this dream.

"Abue," I said. "El niño esta enfermo." She tightened her thin dry lips to form a tiny line across her lower face. Two crevices appeared just above her nose.

"Damelo," she ordered. I gave her the child. He remained unresponsive. The hair on his forehead was damp from perspiration

"Ru, ru, ru, ru," she sang while rocking him. "No te preocupes, ya estoy aquí," she said softly. She danced around me while continuing to sing. She turned to look at me. "Entiendes?"

"Okay," was all I said. I had no idea what she wanted to hear.

By this time, her attention returned to him. She sat in the middle of the dilapidated yard. She didn't seem to mind the loose dirt beneath her.

"Ru, ru, ru, ru," the song continued.

By her feet, a tree burst from the ground. It vibrant green leaves and white petalled flowers bloomed instantly.

"Ya ves," she said. "Todo va estar bien." She kept rocking.

I smiled. Things were going to work out. But I wondered about his problem. It was then I looked down that I realized the situation. His little thigh turned black, and while literally it was his thigh the shape I saw was undeniable. His thigh was the shape of a liver. I knew this because it was my favorite organ to dissect in my many years of taking and teaching science Biology labs.

"Oh, no. It's his liver," I said. That's his problem. She smiled at me rocking back and forth while she looked at the tree.

"Va estar bien todo," she repeated.

I woke up. Mom and Dad sat drinking coffee in the kitchen. I told them about the dream. Creases between my father's eyes formed immediately. It's here that I must say that I'm well aware of the REM cycle and how dreams work, but this seemed different. This was a throwback to my childhood. The Cucuy arrived in my dreams in the form of my dead grandmother. So, like most people in the area, we came to the conclusion that the dream was a bit of a warning. We assumed it was about my nephew, Jake.

Earlier in his life, Jake had been diagnosed with fatty-liver disease, his doctor at the attributed it to his overindulging in McDonald's Happy Meals. From the age of 3 to 6 he would eat about two of the meals a week. But, in retrospect, the family may be genetically predisposed to liver disease. We woke the poor kid up that morning and dragged him to the doctor. The blood work came out fine. We still elected to change our diet immediately changed. Salads and baked items became the norm at the dinner table.

"Nomas era para darnos un susto," my mom proclaimed. But, that wasn't the case. The visit lingered in my downtime. Then, it happened. The reality that all children understand will come.

In June of that year, my father handed me a paper full of columns and percentages he got from the doctor. "No se que dice," his face paler than normal. He understood.
Metastatic liver cancer.

No word, no Cucuy or Bruja inspired the helplessness I felt.

"It's the liver," I said. In a flash, I found myself in the backyard. My grandmother held the child in her arms.

"Todo va estar bien," she rocked him gently back and forth beneath the tree. Had this been a visit to tell us things would work out? How could metastatic liver cancer resolve itself?

Over the next five weeks, my dad withered in front of me. When he undressed his ribs protruded from his once pudgy frame. His dry skin sagged from his arms. He looked at himself in the mirror in our living room. He didn't say anything. He just sat on the bed we had placed in the room for him while he watched hours of the Food Network. I wondered what he thought of as he sat there, was he craving the food he saw or was he simply escaping? I sat next to him once. I wanted to tell him so many things, but I had no idea how to start. So, I just sat next to him, placed my head on his bony shoulder and smiled. He smiled back.

How was anything ever going to be fine?

One day, he collapsed on his way to the bathroom. Six hours after he was admitted to the hospital, died. For most of that time, he held his hands up praying, chanting, his face the most disjointed I had ever seen.

In the end, I begged the universe for relief. I wished each breath he took to be his last, I prayed for his death.

During his funeral, a life-long friend of his, commented how much Jake looked like Dad.

"No tienen porque están sufriendo, alli lo tienen. Míralo, con tuy el pelo güero. Ya ven todo está bien."

"Papi, no tenía pelo güero," my sister corrected her.

"Nunca sabían? Si, tu papi, era bien rubio cuando era chiquito."

In that instant, I understood fully.

Abue predicted the whole thing, my caring for Dad, and eventually her coming to take her favorite child home.

Todo estaba bien.

And that tingling in the back of my neck I get each time I think or tell this story, is her reminding me things right with the world. And, while it may not be the best outcome, it's the natural one, the only one.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHITE AS A SOUND

"If I were on the phone with you, not looking at your face, I would think you were white." Delilah proclaimed in the teacher's lounge. "You talk without any kind of accent." She was one of the women who taught English as a Second Language at the private school I worked for in El Paso. Her unmanaged grey hair never stayed in one particular style. Before this I worked at the DPS Crime Lab, so most things reminded me of dead things. Her face held deep wrinkles that appeared painful.

She stopped talking while she chewed. Her faded green eyes gazed at me as if expecting an expression of gratitude. Instead, she got pouting lips and squinting eyes—not out of anger mind you. No. My physical reactions came from confusion. What appropriates a correct response to that statement?

Literally, there is nothing wrong with the core content as it was a clinical observation of my speech patterns. And, I did work on the pronunciation of words whenever I ran into a new one when I was a kid—still do. I've always loved words and I wanted to make certain I paid them the proper reverence. So, thanking her for noticing all of my years of hard work might work as an option. Still, an overt expression of appreciation felt uncalled for. I don't remember what prompted the outcry. I said nothing. Dad taught me years ago to address Border Patrol agents with a stern, "yessir", when asked about our citizenship. This felt like a "yessir" situation. My neck tensed up. It happened on when I was stressed that was one of the reasons I stopped working in the crime lab. Two years into my tenure there, I received a Fibromyalgia diagnosis. This ailment snuck up on me at the most inopportune times. It made it hard to concentrate at the level a crime lab analyst needed to in criminal cases. Plus, a high degree of tension brought about a cycle of pain, insomnia, a fog-like state and an inability to control my limbs. The medication for the illness caused its own set of problems, so leaving that job was best. Sadly, this scenario didn't help matters much. One of the things I'd picked up from law enforcement was a foul vocabulary. So, I held my tongue. Gloria Anzaldua's disappointed image entered my mind. When I was in school, I'd read her essay "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" which was about various dialects and the importance of maintaining one's own connection with their native language. But, I wasn't able to verbalize my thoughts. Mostly because, I believe Dahlia did want to compliment me. Still, at its core was the lack of respect someone with a Latino last name carries in an English only environment.

I should have told her that the genetics of ethnicity are a bit more complex than verbal tone or accent. Over a dozen courts accepted me as an expert in genetic analysis so my expertise in the matter was not one of chance.

To Delilah, my Latina-ness or lack thereof, was decided on by my pronunciation. I sounded intelligent—it's what counted for her. This trickster ability deemed me special.

The comment lingered. Others in the room failed to join her in her praise, but none countered either.

I quickly joined another conversation. Even today, I wonder about what she said. More specifically, I wonder if any true language markers exist within our genome. It's easy to assign a statistical probability of a set of genes to exist in a population set. That's what the basis of genetic analysis and probability for DNA comparisons in criminal cases. It's a means by which a profile of an individual is brought together to formulate a case against him or as a means of exoneration. For all creatures, mingling and intermixing of genes is innate—greater diversity leads to greater survivorship within a species. While some presently study the ability to measure all the protein markers, the allelic dispersion of race seems far less complex to me than what some may imagine. Because if one really thinks about it, no matter how different we are from other humans, there exists a set number of codons to create the proteins that give us out complexion, eye color and hair color. If our differences were any greater, we would cease being humans.

It felt as if Delilah gave her seal of approval by offered me a hand. This gesture meant I was worthy of playing with her toys. I passed the test of intelligence connected to the mastery of *her* language, which of course I chuckle about, since the majority of my speech patterns were picked up by many hours of viewing 1970s sitcoms. Yes, I picked up my intelligent sounding, American, white, non-accent from Chrissie and Janet in *Three's Company*. I painstakingly watched Chrissie tell her roommates to eat their salad before it turned cold, and ask her landlord if the carpet had dandruff since he seemed so eager to shampoo it. What a role model.

But, I did learn from them. I didn't have much choice. My mother wanted my life to be different than hers. She infused the fear of not mastering English from the very first Parent-Teacher Night I dragged her to when I was in eighth grade.

Her demeanor was strange. Up until then I had only seen my mother in her domain, the house she ran efficiently by a simple lilt of an eyebrow that sent shivers through us when we misbehaved. While only standing 4'11", my mother commanded respect, within the home my father built. No word stayed trapped behind her lips. I think their verbal sparring is what made him love her all the more.

Yet, as soon as she stood next to my science teacher Mr. Mireles, she seemed resigned. Shaking his hand seemed to drain her feistiness. He started going through the grade book. He pointed out my percentages then moved on to discuss the various topics of the class. While I had explained this before, when I reported the day's events when we rode home after school. She looked at him without any expression of familiarity or comprehension. I wasn't even sure she was breathing. "Ok," was all that came out of her mouth? In the middle of the conversation, two other families entered. My mother turned to face away from them. My teacher continued to talk at her. Her cheeks turned red and her lips parted exposing her teeth a little.

"Any questions?" he asked.

My mother shook her head. "No," the word came from her mouth the way one swallows down some bad tasting medication. "Nat naw," she said.

I knew she wanted to know more. She had asked me about scholarships and she had wanted to know the possibility of my going to college, yet she said nothing. We stayed a bit longer after they shook hands. I showed off my project. She looked over her shoulder as Mr. Mireles and the other families spoke of my classmate's progress—in English. Did she fear they laughed at her? Did she want to join?

The drive home included a stop at Sonic, a huge chocolate milk-shake for me and a Sprite with "little ice" for her. While we waited for the drinks we didn't say a word. She looked at her hands. Rubbing the top of her hands one then the other. We talked since then about that night. She didn't like my teacher. He was to her "un viejo feo que se creía mucho". I'm convinced that that is why until this day she refuses to meet my friends and instructors.

"Me siento stupid," she said. Nothing has ever convinced her otherwise. Even now, when we run into people I know at the store, she decides to look for things at other aisles. She then tells me what I already know. The only time she didn't act this way was when I worked at a DNA analyst. I don't know what the difference was. One day, she went to El Paso where I worked in state crime lab. Her usual wind crazed hair was combed down and she wore some lipstick and eyeliner, something she'd not done for a few years. She made sure to look at John's face when she shook his hand. They treated her to lunch at a Chinese buffet we frequented. During the lunch she smiled and answered questions as best as she could.

"We love Mary Ann," Anna said to her.

"Thank you," my mom replied.

"Was she a good kid?" John growled from the head of the table. John's had a deep voice, but when he talked as he ate it changed into a more visceral sound.

"A bit," was all she said. "Is she good in the lab?"

John chuckled.

"She's great," Anna answered.

"Of course she is," John added. He winked at me as if he had done me a favor. My mom laughed.

"Well, just call me when if she stops."

I asked her about the change in her in meeting John and Anna. She said that unlike other people I knew, this job was different.

"Esto es diferente. Esto es tu career. Se tiene que hablar con la gente," she added.

She accompanied me to court during the visit. As the defense attorney cross examined me, she covered her mouth and looked away. In the courtroom, I had to testify to whatever evidence I located on clothing or items at a crime scene. Generally, if the scene was especially bloody a better sample would yield better results. And, because DNA developed a reputation in providing irrefutable identifications, defense attorney's focused on analyst's techniques.

"Viejo feo," she said after we left the courtroom.

"Mom, that's his job. He needs to make me look like I could have made a mistake."

"I hope he fries," she said. And, I think she meant the defense attorney.

This is the baggage I carry with each word I speak. I attempt to manipulate and entrench myself within the listener's soul, because I have to. Because my mother told me and continues to tell me so, I was given that chore silently between sips that night. I live the life my parents couldn't. For this reason, I can't thank anyone for confusing me with something that I am not. Because the person I am is not created as a result of personal desire, but over a need for survival.

CHAPTER FIVE

FREE SPEECH ZONED: I JUST WANT TO SELL MY BEANS

I still remember my father watching TV in the chemotherapy room with him as John Kerry introduced John Edwards as his running mate. He gazed at the set silently. We both knew the mortality rates of liver cancer, and we both saw the rapid deterioration of his body.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"'Ta bien. It looks good," he said. By this time, two weeks into his treatment, his voice had become hoarse. He cleared his throat.

We had a plan. On Election Day, we'd take all the people we could to polls to make sure they voted.

That summer the election seemed a lifetime away. During his funeral, three weeks after the Edward's announcement, I wore a Kerry/Edwards campaign button in his honor. I made it my goal to replace his lost vote, and fulfill his wish by recruiting as many people as possible in his name.

In the fall of 2004, I joined the University of Texas Pan American's Young Democrats student organization. Like many in the country at the time, I wanted to free the country from the Bush/Cheney White House. But, I knew the power I held went no further than a singular vote. I also recognized that information dispersal worked to sway the electorate's decisions. While that served as strong motivator, my reason for participating in the 2004 election was more personal. My father and I reconnected before his death of complications of metastatic liver cancer. The reconnection took the form of conversations including our disillusionment with government decisions in a post 9-11 US.

Promoting elections and registering new voters are two of the things that the Young Democrats work to do on campus and in the community. While I knew other means of supporting the cause existed, the energy provided by undergraduates inspired me. After just one meeting, I paid my dues. Like all other organizations, the Young Democrats required fundraising once or twice a semester to succeed in its goals. Officers offered the best ideas for these activities since they were the ones that had been in there the longest.

Mari served as President. She stood about 5 feet tall and weighed no more than 100 pounds. While a light-weight in size, she commanded attention at the meetings and other community events. Maybe it was the similarity in our names, or the fact that she reminded me of what I was like at her age, but we talked for about over two after the first meeting. She listed her goals that included becoming a lawyer and told me of her work with a local state representative. We also talked about the importance of our families. At the time, my own grandmother was still healthy, but hers was undergoing some health issues.

Getting involved in the club was loads of fun. Reflecting on this time, I recognize this satisfaction came not from following through my convictions. And, while the friendship Mari and I shared failed to provide the rationale for the happiness I felt. Perhaps happiness is not the correct definition, I believe it was more of a sense of relief. I loved this group. For the first time in six years, I had an identity other than patient or child of patient: I was a Democrat. No one in this life asked how I felt, when I woke up. Instead, they asked my opinion on the latest candidate ads. No one asked how many my pills I popped in the morning. My symptoms still existed. Chronic fatigue disorders rarely disappear or go into remission. I discovered a cause more important than illness.

My chronic disorder was caused by a serotonin imbalance called fibromyalgia (FM). I experienced pain when I walked, sat, leaned, showered or breathed. The muscles on my lower back and upper thighs twist sometimes causing shockwaves to shoot up my neck and down my feet. But during this time, my leg cramps came from walking down streets in grass-root effort to 'get out the vote". The novelty delighted me. The time of servitude to the illness passed. Work even came easier for me during this time. I moved faster, my thoughts cleared up. My involvement with the student organization rubbed off on my job.

For the annual Hispanic Engineering and Technology (HESTEC) conference, we decided to sell chicken plates with potato salad, rice, beans and a pickled jalapeno. Mari and the rest of the officers calculated that if we got all items donated we would only need this fundraiser for the semester so that we could devote the rest of the time campaigning for the upcoming election.

The idea of participating at this event married both my professional and student worlds. HESTEC is a huge deal at the school. International corporations arrive for the event in droves. During Educator Day, this conference allows local science teachers an opportunity to interact with working scientists. From this exchange, teachers pick up the latest techniques and discoveries while learning practical applications for their classes. They get out of their classroom and bond with others of their own kind.

The pinnacle of the conference takes place on Saturday. During this day, members of the community are invited to the school free of charge. This is when we were to sell the chicken plates. We rented the temporary booth for a nominal fee and divvied up assignments for the event. We planned on selling about 250 plates, which meant I needed to cook a lot of beans.

I wanted to make them special. I decided on making *Borracho* beans. Borracho directly translates into drunk. While some people add beer to the dish, my mom's recipe does not. As a matter of fact she specifically stated more than once that it needed to be as spicy as possible, since that's what it took to "curar la cruda" (treat the hangover). According to my mother, the heat from the jalapenos counteracts the alcohol concentration in the body so that a person doesn't get a hangover after eating them while drinking. As I in all things in life, I needed to experiment and analyze. I went to at least two Mexican restaurants to conduct research on the ingredients needed to make the beans.

"No mas necesitas los frijoles y ajo, tomates, cilantro y cebollas," my mother said while I poured over the new Mexican food cookbook.

"Ma, it needs to be perfect,"

"Porque?"

I gave no answer. She went into the pantry. In her hands I saw a bag of uncooked beans, fresh garlic, tomatoes, cilantro and onions.

"Ya, aquí esta lo que necesitas."

I sat looking at the ingredients. All of those items needed to work together, they needed to make one single taste. What in the world had I done? I realized that during my quests, I was looking for ways around the large number of steps in the process of creating good beans. None existed. In the books I read, time and proper order offered the best avenue to creating the best beans.

Overwhelmed, I stood up and hugged my mom. I dragged myself to my room. I wondered what excuse I could give not to make the beans. I slumped on the corner of my bed and turned on my television set. On the screen, I saw a group of soldiers die as a result of an airplane crash in Iraq.

"Shit," I said to myself.

I was a selfish bitch. Soldiers died on the battlefield. No matter how many hours I needed to cook my safety was not at issue. My cooking offered me an opportunity to dissent to the status quo.

I went back to the kitchen.

"Tell me how Papí liked his beans, Mom," I said softly to my mother. We made a small pot of beans that night. She taught me each step while I wrote each on paper. She shook her head. She told me I was too scientific. The steps of making beans didn't need to be as precise as I was making them. Tasting was the best way to create food. After a few years of cooking under my belt now, I have to say she was right.

The day before the plate sale I purchased two huge silver pots. They were so shiny that I knew anything made in them would cause a sublime experience. I called them ollas, since I was making Mexican style beans. Yes, I know, it makes no sense. But, I wanted to make certain that I connected to the soul of the beans. I think I got that idea from reading *Like Water for Chocolate*. I imagined the only way to give them the Latin zing was to infuse it in each layer of the process.

To better connect with the ollas, I washed the pots with warm water and the best soap. I needed to make certain that the proper amount of love poured into them from the smallest of details. After I finished cleaning the pots, I rinsed the beans and let them soak overnight. This makes the cooking process shorter and the tenderness of the product will challenge the texture of butter.

I woke up at 4 AM on the morning of the event. I took the plump beans and tossed them into the ollas with water added garlic and onions. I made certain I added salt and pepper early in the process. Without these two items, beans taste like little balls of dirt. The other ingredients come in one at a time. According to my mom no set time-frame for the task. She claimed the art of making them depended on the person stirring in the ingredients. And oddly enough, once I placed my feet in front of the stove, I innately knew the next step. Perhaps the lack of sleep made my Zen connection with the dish seem an actuality.

I stirred.

I tasted.

I added.

Each new item added one more layer to the story molded in the dish in front of me. About three hours later, the ritual ended.

I felt exhausted. My back spasmed. When I was done, I looked at the shiny pots with satisfaction. They held my vindication, my reconciliation with humanity. This day served as the first day of cooking I experienced in over two years. Since my diagnosis, I had slowly lost my abilities to participate in normal day-to-day activities. After I transferred the beans into the insulated travel container, I took a quick shower and nap. Without a nap, I knew the spasms would start. I needed not to feel them that day. Actually, I needed never to feel them, but I no longer held out for that hope.

Community Day started at noon and ended at 8:30pm. I arrived at eleven. The place looked like an ant farm. Makeshift wooded booths were situated along the sidewalk between the two Health and Physical Education Buildings on the East side of campus. The booths came equipped with a counter and a roof, all the members needed to do was decorate them with whatever the organizations wished.

Mari and some of the other girls from the organization placed Kerry/Edwards signs as decorations. Signs for Democratic candidates of local elections added to the decor. The richness of their blue background stood out against the rest of the sea of green and orange, the university colors.

"Hey," Mari said. Her straight auburn hair moved in the breeze.

"What's up?" I responded.

"Want to meet Mario Lopez?" she asked with a huge smile in her face.

"Of course," I said without thinking.

Mario Lopez starred in *Saved by the Bell*, a 1990s Saturday morning sitcom. Among my colleagues, I never admitted to watching the show, but I knew all the characters. At the show's pinnacle, I was totally invested in Zack's relationship with Kelli. Mari explained that one of her friends had access to the VIP booth and agreed to give her and a friend access to the actor for a meet-and-greet and photo-op.

While we made plans to meet Mr. Lopez, the rest of the members organized the essentials for the sale. A few feet behind the booth, three of the guys moved around the bar-b-que pit. They looked like grilling professionals complete with old baseball caps and reclining lawn chairs. Our faculty advisor assisted them, offering advice and helping with the briquettes.

When twelve o'clock rolled around, the chicken pieces started to come off the grill and we stood ready to sell our first plates. We sold about ten plates by one in the afternoon. With dollars in our till, we felt that our goal would easily be accomplished. More organization members arrived with additional side dishes as the time crept by. More people started to crowd the area and soon there was a steady stream of customers.

I helped by putting plates together and taking money from buyers. I didn't feel my body at all. In the back of my mind, I kept thinking of fixing my make-up in case we needed to run over and meet Mario Lopez. During a lull in the selling, Mari and I stood at the side of the booth taking a break. We discussed our campaigning goals for the month. The elections were only one month away. We wanted to reach as many voters as possible.

Our discussion stopped when this scrawny guy in grey-rimmed glasses barreled down to us. He wore a bright yellow polo shirt with the HESTEC insignia embroidered on the upper right side. The ensemble finished off with extremely loose fitting khaki shorts held up by a tan belt. The guy seemed so awkward in them I imagined he did not wear shorts on a daily basis. While I don't clearly remember if he wore socks to his knees, I am inclined to believe he did.

"Hi," he yelled over the noise of the crowd.

"Hi," Mari replied as she shook his hand. One thing people in politics do well is greet individuals since every person represents one vote.

"Who is in charge of this booth?"

"We are," she replied as she pointed to herself and the rest of the members.

"Great," he seemed relieved. "We need you to remove the propaganda you have on your booth."

"Propaganda?" I asked. The negative connotations of the word offended worse than a personal insult or an actual punch.

Mari's eyes opened wide. She looked at the booth and then at me.

"Is this a joke?" Mari asked.

"No, we have had complaints about the message your signs are sending."

"Who complained?" I asked.

"It was anonymous," he replied.

"We don't have *propaganda* that offends anyone," Mari said. I could tell by her expression and by her soft tone that the comment and tone of the demand had yet to settle. I have to say, I felt like I should be ashamed at supporting the candidates. No real reason for this shame existed, for some reason I felt less embarrassment in a confessional than I did in the light of day doing something which had been previously approved by the campus.

"I'm not here to argue with you, we got a complaint that you are promoting candidates from one party while the other party candidates do not have any representation here so you are violating the rules of fairness." His statement rolled out of him as a well-rehearsed pick-up line.

He walked away with the same smugness with which he had arrived.

Mari and I stood looking at each other. We then looked at the booth.

"What do we do?" I asked her. I thought of the warm beans encased safely in the insulated travel container. The last thing I wanted to do is take them all back home.

"I don't know. Who do you think complained?"

"We can guess," I said. Anger made my stomach churn. "What the Hell do we do?" I repeated the question. The rest of the members sold happily not aware of the demand given to us.

"Who was he?" Mari asked.

"Staff member?" Community Day volunteers make sure the events go smoothly. His hair was short, not military short, but business short, like one would find on an accountant.

When we realized neither one of us had an answer.

"We have a problem," Mari said to our faculty advisor.

"We were told that we need to stop handing out our propaganda or shut down the sales."

A full beard covered his face. I saw his whistekers move from side to side.

"Are they kidding? What do you want to do?"

"We need money," Mari said.

"Okay, I was hoping you would say that."

This command reminded us of those issues we felt we needed to rally against. The 2004 election necessitated a change in ideology and a change in individual responses. After an impromptu meeting with the rest of the group, we took a voted to stay. None of the posters would come down.

Because the organization paid for the booth, we felt were well within our rights to offer pamphlets that promoted the organization and the signs that represented us. Mari and I chuckled at the scenario. We lived in the twenty-first century not in the 1960s, all we wanted to do was sell our food, and have the signs that represented us, The Young Democrats, appropriately. We began intermittently announcing the sale of the chicken plates and yelled out Kerry/Edwards to passersby while we moved signs up and down in the in the air. We reminded passersby that voting was important and that the election date a month away.

Ten minutes later, he returned. He repeated his gripe. We made our point clear to him. We then countered that we should not be penalized for the fact that the opposition had failed to rent a booth at the event.

He held his hips with both hands. His brows protruded out over his glasses. Our well thought out comments appeared unappreciated. I swear he stamped his foot. His finger shook vigorously near our noses. In that short time, he grew to hate us.

"Ladies, you need to remove the signs and anything that promotes a specific candidate. The person who has complained is well within their rights to do so." He didn't stop to take a breath. "You have to take them down." Like a serpent, he glided towards the booth.

"Are all the other organizations going to be asked to get rid of their literature too?" Mari questioned.

"No other booth has gotten a complaint nor are they political," he said puckering his lips.

"Just because there aren't any complaints doesn't mean they aren't political. The vegan people have information on the bad things that happen when you eat meat. And the global warming people are promoting the dangers of not taking care of the environment," she said quickly.

"What about it?" he spit. This is not a literary description, he actually spit I felt a wet hit my right hand, the one I held the Kerry/ Edwards sign with.

"They need to take away their flyers because I don't see a pro-meat organization or one that claims there is not global warming."

He stared at Mari for a while. Then, he turned to me. I think I smirked. I don't think I should've smirked. He left in a huff. If we were in some animation script there would have been some dust trailing behind him.

He would be back.

A few more plates sold. More than half of the beans were gone. A clear success. This would not last long.

Fifteen minutes later, glasses-guy drove up in a golf cart with the HESTEC coordinator. The golf carts are used to carry around those VIP people, because once you become an important person, you lose the ability to walk around campus on your own means. It kind of makes you lose sense of it. A disconnect with the ground that you came from. His mouth moved at record speed as he walked by her side towards our area. She took notes rapidly on the papers held together by a clip board. I recognized her immediately. I had participated in HESTEC for 4 years so I knew her.

I readied myself for a proper logical discussion. After she opened her mouth, I realized that my time was wasted. Along with the whiny man and this woman, two bicycle cops arrived at the booth.

"A complaint on your booth was filed," she repeated. By this time, Mari and I stood closer to one another than we had the entire day. Our faculty advisor spoke to her.

"We followed the proper procedures," he countered. "The students have the right to sell their items in peace, and to promote and hand out any flyers they see fit."

"We are not hindering them from selling or are we wanting to prevent them from passing out their documents, it is just that HESTEC guidelines state that this event will not allow campaigning."

Our faculty advisor shook his head.

"We are only asking," she continued, "that your students confine their promotions to the free speech zone."

"Where is the free speech zone," he asked. I never realized that this place existed.

"The zone is located behind the library, in front of the Physical Science building." My eyebrows went up simultaneously. Mari took in a deep breath. The free speech zone, while lined with pretty foliage and comfortably stocked with benches, was hidden away one of the deepest part of the campus. Dissent while not discouraged, apparently needed to be a dirty little secret to these folks.

It is a known fact that cops will attract other cops. By this time, the two cops on the bikes, were joined by two other fully uniformed officers. I looked at the way their eyes looked at all of the members of the organization. Most of the members were so busy fixing plates or cooking they were completely unaware of the situation. The guys cooking the chicken were about 10 feet from the actual booth and were too involved in their task to notice the number of armed men around us. After a while, the people in line to purchase out food noticed the cops standing around our booth. The two girls in the booth tasked with selling and constructing the plates huddled together. When the police cruiser arrived and parked, near us people walked by the booth in a slow deliberate manner, you know the way people pass by car accidents, twisting their heads ever so slightly.

I wanted to laugh. There was no way that this was a real situation. I wondered what cold hand-cuffs felt like. I tried not to make any sudden moves since all of those movies based on Sixties unrest had the heroes arrested as a result of a misunderstanding. I also expected to feel the business end of a fire-hose turned on us, to cool us off. I realized two things at this point. The first, that I had seen quite a few movies based on the troubled times during the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. The second that things can get really screwed up fairly quickly.

I understood the divisiveness of the time, but I never fathomed its invasiveness. My school, my alma mater failed me. I remembered wearing my black robe as I walked up the ramp to get my degree. This place held more than books and empty rooms, this place lived in me and I carried it every place I had been, making certain that I put my best face forward. In this school, found my best friend. I fell in love. But on this day, I felt a fear I'd never felt, no matter how late I walked within the building corridors. Today, I tasted it. I wanted to sell my beans not make statement. I wanted to back down, but I wanted to say 'we don't need your stinking booth', but if we were right then why would we need to lose out just because other people chose not to participate?

I looked at the cop's holstered weapons. I wanted this to end. Actually, I wished this had never started. I was saddened that my father was dead, not for the obvious reason, but because if I were to be arrested we would have something we could talk about. Our advisor saw our reactions, he also did not find this as an acceptable alternative. Before we could continue our dissatisfaction with this alternative, she countered with her decision.

"Look, this is not my choice, I am following the guidelines. You have a choice and I need to know soon. You need to decide what is more important, if you continue to leave the signs up you will be shut down. If you chose to remove them, then we will let you complete the sale."

This is when I realized that the cops were not here just for show, nor for moral support. This is was for real. For years, I made certain to follow rules and laws. I trusted them and those paid to uphold and interpret them. Violations don't just happen among civilians, they are at times perpetrated by law men who follow the orders of naked emperors. What the hell was happening? We needed to make a choice none of the other groups needed to make money or give up those foundations that make you who you are.

I felt my back spasm. Since I left my job at the crime laboratory I have the ability to find a common ground to peace officers. I generally ask about their day and what shift they work, then follow up by telling them of my previous job. In this scenario, the cops on the ground offered no olive branch. Their eyes remained focused on the scene as a whole not on the individuals. In this scenario, I was on the other side of the blue line. My safe haven in El Paso remained there, it didn't travel with me. And, that brought a cold, empty feeling.

The silly man stood proud next to the woman with the clipboard.

"We will be back to see what your decision is," she said. Both got on the golf cart and took off, the cops lingered for a while then eventually left.

With food already made, we had only one choice –take the signs down and make the money. While making a stand seemed desirable, practicality won out. I felt like a sellout, but there was no other way to go.

To salvage the day, Mari decided we should go look for Mario Lopez. Mari's friend called us over to the V.I.P. section. There we met Mr. Lopez and took a group shot. As Mari and I walked away, glasses-guy ran up to us yet again. He grabbed Mari's shoulder. Surprised we both turned.

"So, I guess you aren't protesting when you get to meet a celebrity," he said.

"We were never protesting," Mari said in a daze.

"Well, you guys sure wanted to make a statement," he stood there a staff member, grabbing and yelling at us because we met Mario Lopez.

He shook his head in anger and walked away from us.

"Did that just happen?" she asked. "Or was that my imagination?"

"Maybe it was a collective stroke," I said in the same disbelief.

At the next official meeting, we discussed the day's events. Some of the members of the organization had not known the extent of the discussions. We located the Student Handbook of Operating Procedures. The book provided the answers we sought. When purchasing a booth, at the time, an organization was purchasing the right to promote their beliefs. In a nutshell, our rights were violated, and we were verbally and physically assaulted for following the rules.

Two weeks later, we arranged a meeting with the HESTEC coordinator and the witnesses to the event and the Dean of Students. We provided proof while offering testimony. At the end, we were vindicated and while we never got an apology from glasses-guy, we knew we were right. And, really all I wanted to do was sell my beans, not start a revolution. However, the revolution had already begun inside of me. The anger caused by the situation combined the fun time I had cooking reminded me of what humanity offered, the good and the bad. When Mari and I talk about this day, the disbelief still lingers, but we're certain it helped create a bond no one can ever break in this lifetime.

CHAPTER SIX

VAMPING

I love Nietzsche's line "Battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you." A warning no doubt, but perhaps a desire. The need to be recognized by the very thing that's indefinable, the things that keep us awake at night proves such a seductive idea. And, while becoming a monster may seem frightening to some, the idea of becoming enraptured by the power of an enemy emboldens me in my daily life. While I never ever hope to hurt anyone, the ability to not be hurt by others is pretty cool. And, this all begins with a shift, a slight change in physical appearance. As I write this piece, I realize that I'm not the same person who was diagnosed with fibromyalgia 16 years ago. I look at that time as one of ease now.

January generally brings resolutions and hope. It is the imaginary line in the sand that allows people to feel as if restarting is possible. Unfortunately, not all beginnings are positive. In January 2010, I began my first steps as a cancer patient. Unlike most survivor stories, mine doesn't begin with the presence of a lump. Mine started with pain—a sharp, annoying pain in my left breast. It started in October of 2009, and while it wasn't constant, it did increase in intensity as the months progressed. I hoped ignoring it would make it go away. It didn't. Something was wrong. My OB/GYN was troubled but optimistic. He sent me for a mammogram. It was my first one, ever. I wasn't scared of the test, I read most of the literature and my training as a scientist helped me understand the process—I am a former forensic DNA analyst. Most fear comes from not knowing, but what did happen was something I did not expect.

When the pressure of the machine squeezed down, it took my breath away. However, the tech at the Women's Imaging Center watched me closely. She also walked me through the process explaining each step or the process. And, in retrospect, I prefer having experienced that pain than to not be alive and writing this at this moment.

Two weeks after the exam, I sat in the OB/GYN's office. He cited a peculiarity in the scans. I needed a second mammogram and an ultrasound. Still, he remained optimistic. Evidentially, if it were bad I would be sent to a surgeon not back to the Women's Imaging Center. The words meant for support, made me feel empty. If there was really no cause for concern, no follow-up exams would be necessary.

When I walked in the Woman's Imaging Center again, my original mammogram images covered the computer's desktop. Before we got started the technician looked at my orders, then at the monitor. She pointed to an area on the screen that represented the lower portion of my breast. "There it is," is all she said. When I saw the area she pointed to, it looked like an astronomer's chart of the galaxy. She called them microfilaments. Micro- sounded like a good thing.

It wasn't.

I later found out that they only grow in places with a high degree of cellular growth. On the image, they appeared to be glowing. I guess in a way they were, they were actually a collapsing solar system that was causing a black hole in my body—there was my abyss.

Unlike the screening mammogram, this one was to focus on a specific area. Therefore, this was called a diagnostic mammogram. Because of this, the compression was harder. Which meant the pain I felt the first time was doubled. After one of the first compression, I felt darkness overtaking me. The tech sat me down and watched me for a bit while I gathered myself. I was ready to go home. But, I still had another examination. This time I had to have an ultrasound probe pushed into my already aching breast. I wanted to cry. I didn't.

We never hear stories of breast cancer patients who cry. We hear the ones who face the fight without hesitation and with bravery. I wasn't going to be the one to break the pattern. When I went back to my OB/GYN, he walked in without looking at me. He looked at the paper work, his nurse and the computer as he drew up orders for a biopsy. He wasn't optimistic. It felt like I was on trial and he was part of the jury who had voted to convict me of a capital offense.

While I waited for the biopsy appointment, people asked about my results. I told them that the diagnosis still wasn't complete. Without fail, most of the people who I talked to about this clung to the fact that I had pain. In their logic, cancer generally doesn't present with pain. If I experienced pain, then it must not be cancer. An added bonus was the lack of a lump because every cancer story started with the locating of a lump or growth in the area. But, cancer isn't logical and it makes its own rules. I realized that it would take a biopsy to confirm the presence of malignant cells.

I didn't need the procedure to understand my situation.

I knew.

I knew my diagnosis back at the Women's Imaging Center, I felt the cellular invader who festered in me and needed to be sliced out. After the biopsy, my surgeon confirmed the presence of breast cancer. Thankfully, it was at Stage I. Regretfully, it was HER-2 positive. From my understanding, HER-2 positive breast cancer is one of the most aggressive types of cancer with a

35% recurrence rate regardless of the type adjuvant care received and a 5 year survival rate of 68%.

I began chemotherapy. A deadly mix of clear medication designed to kill of any rapidly producing cells that came with a list of possible side-effects. One of which was death. Luckily, I'd done my research. I knew all the means by which people had met their doom while on the drugs. If my body rejected the medication, within 15 minutes of it being slowly dripped into a main artery, I would go into respiratory arrest. But, I wasn't to worry since the nurses assured that they had effective counter-measures. So long as I told them I was feeling funky they could help.

No wonder the OB/GYN didn't want to look at me. This was so similar to a lethal injection. Yet, with all of the unknown factors surrounding treatments, the infusion center provided comfort. There, I found others like me. A clique of sorts with IVs strapped to our chests while lounging around on recliners, talking about surgical scars as proudly as soldiers tell of the battles where they earned theirs.

I guess this is where the label warrior comes from. Warriors with no battle armor that have any defense knocked out of them with biochemical weapons, seems like a war designed for my side to lose. But loss is not what we discussed. In this room, we brandish our scarf-covered heads, proudly we told ourselves that depilated heads were the nouveau chic and that our pallid coloring fit the Twilight-style that was all the rage. This comparison with a vampire became more evident when I needed a blood transfusion as a result of the chemo knocking off too many of my red blood cells. My lack of blood at this time made me think back to many of my cases when I worked in the crime lab. As a DNA analyst, it was my hope to get large amounts of body fluids in a case. At times, this was hard as some assailants cleaned up the incident or others moved the body to an alternate site leaving only the victim's DNA behind. If I was lucky, both parties bled profusely and an identification of the suspect based on the DNA evidence would begin. One time, I had a case involving a gang member's death. The nineteen year old victim was murdered by an old school stoning. He'd been found beneath a large amount of concrete pieces. One piece looked like it had once belonged to a parking space. It measured at least ten inches in length by 5 inches in width. Caked blood with a piece of his scalp clung on to the sharper side. But, the worst of this case was the white oversized tank top he wore. By the time I got the case, which generally was ten to twelve months after the event, the blood had been dried and flaked all over my freshly cleaned station. I can't imagine how long the attack went on, that would be the job of the medical examiner. But, he bled out at least 4 liters from what I could see and feel. When I touched it, I no longer felt the cotton beneath the dehydrated layers of blood. Eventually we learned that the fatal blow came from the large piece of concrete, but the attack had lasted for about fifteen minutes. In the process of the investigation, the detectives learned that this was a case of retribution within the gang the victim belonged to. I felt bad for the guy and the constant trauma he endured within those fifteen minutes. It related to me in as a cancer patient. Each step of the diagnosis and treatment was planned and methodical and destroyed so much of my blood that I needed to have it replaced.

I now understand why vampires are so bitchy when they're hungry. And, really I've always thought that they could use a bit more self-control when feeding. More often than not, vampires drip blood all over the place. It made no sense not to appreciate each drop they got. You see, without blood, it was so easy to fall on my ass. I must say, a vampire I wasn't, I could have gotten away with being bald and pale, but sprawled out on the fucking floor? Who the Hell wants that in a creature of the night?

In this pseudo-vampire clique, we were special. And not because of any clichéd idea of a profound sisterhood, or a newly realized sense of purpose which didn't need to be coaxed out by the threat of death, nor were we special because of strength or bravery. We were special because unlike the rest of you—we know.

We know how we will die. And with these women, I spoke of my imagined death without anyone shifting in their seats –they offered no change of conversation nor did I have the need to apologize for intense sincerity.

To this day, they understand the ideal of dignity, but they recognize that the emphasis given to it is a crock. There is no way that we have any dignity once our bodies have been defiled by both the illness and the treatments. I do not want to die, but if I do then all the more louder I say, fuck dignity. Like George on "Seinfeld" I want to be the first person on Earth to die without it. If dignity assured survival then I would embrace it full. But, really, upon my death I want to rant, rage, whine, spit, and claw. Stages of grief be damned. Acceptance be damned. My hair is brown. My posture straight, yet my life-line remains stunted. To those who read this, realize that I have no repentance of my actions, no regret for words spoken. I called stupid people stupid because I didn't have time to waste on them.

At this time, I'm lucky to have overcome the cancer, my abyss came with an escape hatch, but like the gravitational pull of a black hole, the a possibility of getting yanked back in there exists each day. I know it will eventually take me over, as the finite nature of our existence has no other outcome. All I wish—to have a bit more time, at least as much as my grandmother had or at least until a chunk of grey hairs come out of my head.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LIVE OR DIE

People diagnosed with fibromyalgia (FM) now are lucky. Not because it can be cured or is any less painful. No. The reason for their good fortune comes from the fact that people hear about it in commercials for the drugs Lyrica and Cymbalta. When I was first diagnosed with this ailment, no one but people who suffered from it knew of its existence let alone its horrific effects on a body and spirit of the effected person. At the time of my diagnosis, I lived alone in El Paso and worked as a forensic DNA analyst for The Department of Public Safety Crime Laboratory. I loved that job. I loved the manipulation of the DNA and the eventual discovery of evidence at the molecular level.

My training led to this career choice. I landed my first undergraduate internship at the California College of Medicine in an Immunology laboratory specializing in HIV research. When I returned to my university after that, I worked in a Genetics laboratory whose main goal was population control of ticks known to cause cattle fever. For this job, I needed to dissect out the sex organs of cattle ticks. I rocked this. At the end of my undergraduate career, I decided to teach at the local high school. Boring. No true stimulation came into my life during those two years. Not that I imagined a parade each day, mind you. But, there weren't any parades—ever. At the HIV lab, we had a "Silence is Death" parade.

Still, I wanted to do something with the molecular. Still reeling from the O.J. Simpson trial, DNA proponents worked hard to promote and expand the field. That included the hiring of people with coursework in the molecular field and experience in the necessary equipment. To date, regardless of the strides made in forensic knowledge and no matter how many exonerated people walk out of prison doors because of DNA, the stigma of the Simpson case has yet to disappear. And, that was the challenge of this career choice. Perhaps my naïveté combined with the hubris typical of molecular scientists made me think I'd redeem the field. My plan was simple, I'd get there, keep my head down and do the work.

When entering a career to specifically change the world, no one warns of the various pitfalls possible. In the midst of getting hired, getting trained, moving and settling down in a new city, hope and anticipation make everything possible. About two years into the job, judges knew my name, assistant district attorneys called me for special projects, and local sexual assault centers requested presentations for new nurses charged with collecting evidence. Everything ran smoothly. But that didn't continue for long. While I'm sure many events on the microscopic level occurred before I saw any real effects, my life went smoothly. Then, one day as I participated in the daily gossip with my boss and secretary it happened. As most days, my boss John, loved to start the day ranting about anything that crossed his mind. For thirty years, he served as the head of the El Paso field laboratory. His tenure earned him a favorable reputation among the whole office and also came with conversations without filters. Because of this, these conversations lasted for hours. His rants included years of prior information. Some were entertaining, others not so much. I much preferred working on cases. Each case came with its own crime story that ended in the middle of the story. My duty required I gain enough information to help reveal the beginning and in effect led to an ending.

This morning's rant started as usual. John, my boss, read the newspaper each morning for source material. He began complaining in the lounge and moved to the secretary's office. Poor

Sandy, in the midst of answering phone calls from angry assistant district attorneys and frantic cops, she endured his loud, booming words intertwined with sarcastic laughter when he felt he'd made a point. When I walked past Sandy's office, she rolled her eyes as John generally talked without looking at your face. He motioned his portly arms using them to provide emphasis on items he felt required it. At least once a week, I'd join the conversation. John was a life-long bachelor with horrible luck with women. His longest relationship was with a woman who'd worked in the main building but was married at the time. Still, that never hindered his affection or her ability to ask for cash. This particular morning proved busy. Cops dropped by to deliver evidence of the previous day's violent crimes. At the time, El Paso experienced 2-3 murders per day. As the area's DNA analyst, I got to see all of the clothing associated with the cases. It's funny, I remember my mom telling me to always wear clean underwear, because you would never know if you would end up in the hospital and the whole world saw your state of dress. At the time, I thought it funny. In this job, I prayed the owners of the clothing I got had mothers as conscientious as mine.

But, the strange part of all the clothing of involved in crime scenes is this: No matter how clean it is, it's a reminder of the most horrible day of people's lives, be they the clothing of the victim or the assailant. Because of this, they reeked. Imagine the amount of force a victim uses to protect themselves, and the force of the assailant to get the job done. While blood evidence holds a starring role in evidentiary value, what's hardly mentioned is the sweat and saliva released by people during the event. Combined with blood or semen or vaginal fluids, the clothes give off musty, sweet smell I've not smelled in any other place. For some reason, John no longer worked evidence. Perhaps, he grew tired of the responsibility, or didn't feel the need to keep up with the times and new techniques, or maybe he just wanted to sit down talking to whoever walked in the door. After I collected the morning's evidence, I saw my stapler on Sandy's desk. Because of my relatively recent arrival, I held the newest office supplies—including the stapler—which was necessary for organizing the reports that needed to be sent out. A quick purchase order would solve the problem of people taking my stapler without my permission, but it only proved a problem to me, so it wasn't on anyone's to-do-list.

At this point, I have no recollection what we talked about only that it was accented with the typical DPS vernacular of 'some bitch', 'I tell you what', and 'jack-ass' as John scratched his balding head and looking deep in his nails he used to scratch. At times he would rub his fingers together to wipe away what he had scratched off at other times, he sniffed his fingers. After forty-five minutes, the conversation reached a lull, I decided to go to back to my desk. I meant to take my stapler in one quick sweeping motion. That didn't happen. The damned thing slipped right from my left hand. The most unusual thing was I didn't feel it. I knew I held it because I saw my fingers around it. But, its form didn't send any of the familiar signals of touch to my brain. A few weeks later, I began to drop more and more things, and started to feel numbness across the right side of my face. With my science background, I immediately thought I may be getting stoke symptoms. Pain became pronounced throughout my body. Walking up to my second story apartment during laundry day took my breath away. My legs felt like they were encased in wet cement. Each step took longer to make, at night my fatigue reached epic levels but no matter how heavy my eye lids felt I was unable to sleep.

Concentration at work fell apart, I found myself caught up more and more in John's talks, not because of his quality entertainment, but because getting up to get away meant moving though the sharp pain radiating from my lower back to the base of my neck. Categorizing that as pain lacks the specific punch it actually held. The best word—agony. My head felt like it was jabbed on my neck with a sharp yet frayed pole littered with fire ants. Pain wrapped in burning sensations kept rapid movement to a minimum. Massages, chiropractors, muscle relaxers, pain killers and hot baths failed to alleviate any pain. Needing something more, a doctor's visit was in order.

The day of my diagnosis was a bit strange. When visits to other doctors fared no clear answers or relief, I'd come to find a clinic near my apartment. The place was furnished in late twentieth century medical equipment and furniture. The examination table covered with the thinnest butcher paper fed off a role; its task to keep one patient's cooties off all the others. After three years as a microbiologist, I seriously doubted its efficiency. I wasn't as scared as I should have been.

Dr. Porras entered the room followed by Dr. Esquivel. Both seemed fresh out of medical school. They dressed in newly starched immaculately white lab coats, had dark eyes and hair. Each stood set to listen. Dr. Porras was portly when compared to Dr. Esquivel, who belonged in a GQ advertisement. After the obligatory handshakes, Dr. Porras asked me to change from my jeans and blouse into a little paper outfit. Since this was the seventh doctor's office, this was nothing which seemed odd, nor was it disconcerting. Nor were the blood tests I'd been subjected to before I walked into the examination room.

Outside of the room, I heard the two murmuring. They said my name with a lot of "she's" and "hers" tossed in the mix. After changing, I stood next to the door fighting the urge to say, "Yo' speak up, I can hardly hear you." They knocked.

"May we enter?" It was Dr. Porras. His thick accent was noticeably different than that of Dr. Esquivel who spoke without one.

"Sure," I said and quickly jumped on the table.

With Dr. Esquivel watching us, Dr. Porras asked me perform some actions which according to him tested my dexterity and flexibility. They felt like field sobriety tests.

"Do this," he said. He closed his eyes and touched his nose with his right forefinger. I complied, but I missed my nose.

This prompted laughter from both of them. I think this is one of the perks a person with an M.D. at the end of his name looks forward to in his daily routine, that and to give a person a life or death sentence. No need to give a person a jury trial when you have taken the Hippocratic Oath.

After the laughter died down, Porras and Esquivel listened to my heart like a tag team. They took turns taking my pulse, poking my back, my chest, my legs and upper arms. Then once again, the duo stepped out of the room. Not to an office but outside in the corridor. The muttering from before continued. By this time my interest faded, I decided to close my eyes. When they returned, each had a solemn look on their face.

"Ms. Escamilla," Porras said. "Taking a look at the negative results of your blood test, we are happy to tell you that you do not have Lupus, Rheumatoid Arthritis, but you do have a high sedimentation rate."

My eyes squinted at the last one.

"Sedimentation rate?"

"That tests for any inflammation in your body."

"And, that's high? What does that mean?"

"Positive, this tells us that your pain is real." I chuckled, so does that mean they thought it wasn't?

"Then, I guess I'm not nuts, huh," I said.

To this comment both stood stoically in front of me hands clasped.

"Not nuts at all," Porras said. "And that is what we are here to tell you, this pain you have is real. There is a physical pain you feel. And more importantly, we believe you."

"Cool," was all I could manage. But I had never contemplated that anyone would question my authenticity. I was a 28 year old professional with no history of hysterics or anything more than a cold.

"We've determined, based on your negative tests and with the one positive exam that you have one of the Chronic Fatigue Illnesses." Esquivel said.

"Which one?" I asked.

"Fibromyalgia," Porras responded.

My first class at the university was in medical terminology, but all of the definitions of prefixes, suffixes and Latin roots words eluded me at this very second. The word meant nothing. All I remembered from the class was that a word ending in *–algia* generally meant something that hurt. At least it matched the symptoms. I tried my hardest to memorize the word, but that was out the window when Esquivel chimed in the conversation.

"Marianita," the first time either of them had said my first name. We don't want you to leave without you knowing for a fact that you are really sick. But, we do have the ability to fight it. We're in this together."

The famous royal we, doctors have laid a claim to. "We" turns quickly into "me" when I wake in agony from a head to toe muscle cramp at two o'clock in the morning and writhe around until mid-afternoon.

I was prescribed some pills for the tenderness, a couple of muscle relaxants; one for the morning and a second for the afternoon. My medicine cabinet also gained an anti-inflammatory drug, and anti-anxiety pill and an anti-depressant.

When I was given the script for the anti-depressant from Porras, I understood why there was an adamant need to claim the reality of my complaint. I asked why I needed an anti-depressant, and was told that this provided FM relief and was the only medication allowed for the treatment. I nodded and Esquivel repeated Porras' declaration of the realty of my situation. Until this point, I had never questioned its reality. Now I wondered how many of those in my life had wondered if it was all in my head. This question was only amplified Porras handed me a Psychiatrist referral.

He helped Porras and Esquivel adjust my medication. After a few months of treatment, and the adjusting dosages of each drug led to two to three doctor visits per week. My discomfort turned to constant throbbing. Even with all the drugs, the nuisance ebbed deeper into each level of my life.

Motorcycle and helicopter lessons I started before the diagnosis stopped. My trainers worried over the side-effects of the drug combinations. Drugs zapped all of the desire to ride either one of those machines. The only thing that mattered was watching the clock, waiting for the next time one of the pills was due. They ranged in color from pink to green to yellow—each so tiny.

About two years after my diagnosis and four additional doctors, I noticed a blasé attitude in them. Treatment depended on the latest drugs offered by pharmaceutical companies more than any proven tests. I still went in three times a week, and got refills to all of my drugs each time. Eventually, I developed a craving for certain drugs and my taking them no longer was as dependent on the clock and became contingent on how much tingling was felt through my skin. When it became unbearable, it was time for the next dose; a delicious, delightful, dangerous, dream packaged in minute vessels. If the word addiction came to mind, that was quickly replaced by the word treatment: doctor prescribed and approved.

Bill and I met in the crime lab. He was married with two kids. In his job, he was seen as a trouble-maker. As a result of an accident in the field he had developed severe nerve damage in both his hands. This made field work for him difficult since he wasn't able to wrap his hands around his gun and would have trouble defending himself or anyone. When we first met, he completely annoyed me by demanding the evidence he submitted be finished by a specific date. Things weren't run that way in my laboratory. Not even my boss ordered me to do any case. Cases were done in order and were only bumped up if their trial date was set within a few weeks. In the world of the Crime Lab, DNA analysts are considered divas. We had the most expensive kits, equipment and reagents than the other analysts. This, of course, made all DNA analysts feel superior to the other disciplines of the laboratory. Many cases were won by the identifications we made. It was this feeling that gave me the guts to complain to his superior. The next day, he showed up. He was apologetic and brought donuts for the laboratory. After he did this he had won the lab over. I wasn't so easily bribed.

"Are you mad at me?" he asked before he left. His lower lip formed a tiny pout. It made me laugh.

"No. Well, maybe. Just don't forget, I'm state, you are local. We aren't partners and you aren't my boss. I technically don't have to do your work if I chose not to."

"Think you do," he snickered.

"Well, maybe I just don't have to like it," I countered. He let out a laugh.

"I think you two need to bury the hatchet," John said. He'd heard the whole exchange. John heard every conversation he could.

About a year later, Bill and I were subpoenaed to court. He showed up dressed in a sharp grey suit. I was also in my court attire that consisted of heels, hose, a skirt and a blazer. During the proceedings, witnesses were only allowed in the courtroom to testify. And, each step of the hearings took while as the attorneys contend with each step the other make. This made for a long wait in the marbled hallway. With nothing to do, Bill and I struck up a conversation.

"You know, I still think you hate me," he said.

"I don't hate anyone," I assured him.

"So, what are you doing after this?" he said as he took a swig of his Dr. Pepper.

"I'm taking a nap."

"Need company?" His question was so nonchalant that I thought he was joking. Soon, I found out he wasn't. "Don't start being shy now."

As I was about to respond, a bailiff called out his name. A few days later, he came on to me again in the lab. I'd considered his offer. I asked him to help me take the evidence he brought to me into the vault. He complied. It was there, in the middle an evidence vault whose shelves were lined with sweat scented, blood stained clothing that I got my first kiss from Bill. One day he wanted to tell me about his problems with his wife, but I didn't want to partake in that conversation. I didn't want to talk about her behind her back. We established some rules that recognized that neither one was in it for anything other than sex.

We hung out my apartment for the most part. This suited me just fine since my medication made me lethargic. One day, he brought over the Sandra Bullock film *28 Days*. The movie made me recognize how much an ever-present disorder is like an addiction. The pain, the insomnia, the sharp burning sensations along my thigh and neck, the fatigue, the sadness, and the foggy memory from both the drugs and the condition itself offered a familiarity to my life. The more desperation I felt for the lack of a proper treatment, the stronger I was in my solitude. This affliction turned into a true ally a constant force that was now the only recognizable aspect of my life.

I hate this part of this story. Hate it, because it feels as if I let the sisterhood down. While so many life affirming stories feature heroines who wear dark red lipstick during mastectomies, there are times no tube of lipstick can cover up all the scars both physical and emotional. The thought of giving up felt shameful. As I reflect on this, I've survived breast cancer and words like hero and amazing have been used to describe me. And, while I see the struggle I faced and battle I won, I don't like other women thinking that they can't be vulnerable or cry. My struggle with FM was my first major medical problem. Because of all the hero stories in the media, my lack of heroics in the face of my situation made the struggle more difficult.

One of my many sleepless nights, I left Bill in bed while I searched the television for anything worth watching. Sitting in front of it required little muscular or emotional flexing. Voyeurs risk little. He walked in to the Goo Goo Dolls video as they sang the lyrics, "…and you bleed just to know you're alive," from their Iris track.

"You bleed when you're alive right?" I asked Bill as he plopped next to me in the dark room. He took my scarred up arm and held it close to him. "You also let people near you." He pulled me close to him and kissed my forehead. I pushed him away. He knew I cut myself, I'd told him it was one of the few times I felt control. I controlled the pain I felt. I knew the wrongness in it and the risk of infections considering how many blood products I worked with in the lab. But, tonight was not the night to hear him preach. "You're here aren't you," I said.

"Maybe that's not enough?" he said.

"Maybe?"

"Maybe you can let me help you?" he said softly.

"Maybe you should give that shoulder to your wife."

"I thought we didn't talk about her."

"We don't."

His need to play boyfriend instead of bed buddy bothered me. Those weren't the rules. But, ultimately I did know his concern came as a result of the friendship we had before we began this part of the relationship. I got up and went back to bed. He followed. He had no idea what it meant to be disappointed in myself. The last thing I needed was to be disappointment to others. He fell asleep easily after that, I went back to the living room to watch nothing.

I walked into work the next day to hear Sandy crying. She was sobbing because Anna, one of my co-workers diagnoses of breast cancer. I snorted at the scene. Just the week before I'd walked in on Sandy and a couple of other co-workers talking about my luck at finding doctors who went along with me and my make-believe illness. Other people also asked me about the amount of time I took at the doctor's and asked if I needed surgery, since serious illnesses always had some sort of surgical fix. Sadly, mine didn't. Phone calls poured in as did people from the station.

I was so jealous.

Not of the outpouring of grief, but because she had a tangible disease that could be seen on an x-ray and be cut out, and anything which remained would be irradiated with the sole purpose of her reclaiming her body.

I stewed. I wanted to trade places. Soon, she would wear the scar of battle, a medal of victory she would live to display proudly at pink ribbon marches. No one marches for the person without scars. At the time no one gave up their Saturdays to move their ass for people with chronic fatigue illness because it is not something anyone can see. Hell, some of the Troopers even came up and told me that they were tired because of their work so that meant they were chronically fatigued, too. They followed it up by a laugh.

As a Latina, I'd never faced bigotry at the level as I experienced as a disabled individual. For the most part, their dislike stemmed from a condition for which I lacked any control. And, while it made no sense at all at the time, I felt like that kid who learned the word bigamist on the playground all over again. It happened the day after my parents drove Lydia, a sixth grade friend, home.

"My father told me something about your dad," she said to me in the playground at Buckner Elementary. She covered her hand with her hand, it seemed like she was trying to pinch her lips between words.

"Really?" I responded. I kind of knew she alluded to but I wanted to hear her words.

"He said your dad is a bigamist. He has another family," she announced with spite and hate towards me. Evidently, my dad's sexual adventures were my fault. Tears formed in her eyes when she revealed the conversation her father held with her. In it, he prohibited her from ever speaking to me.

"My dad said not to talk to you, because your father isn't a good person." I seriously can't believe I remembered that so clearly. I never told any of my family about that exchange, not because I didn't believe, but because I knew it to be somewhat true. I do remember that I replied to her that my dad didn't have a second wife, but a mistress.

Lydia didn't appreciate the distinction and ignored my correction.

I think the news spread among the playground. By the next day, the only person who would talk to me was the blond little girl that all the other Latino kids ignored. I don't remember crying over the shunning. I felt a sense of relief once I learned the rules. That's what I ended up learning in the lab, too. There was a set of rules for illnesses that were tried and true, but anything which didn't leave a person mashed up to a pulp proved more difficult to accept.

Fibromyalgia ate away the individual me as much as a cancer eats away healthy cells in a body. Only FM steals the soul slowly, and is persistent in its task. Having lost my father to liver cancer, I totally understand how extreme this statement sounds. And. don't get me wrong.

I did not want cancer.

I do not want cancer.

I just didn't want the FM.

Cancer was at least visible, recognizable. It comes with standard course of treatment that has proved successful. I had a silent ailment that attacks from behind without having the decency of causing death, nor does it debilitate to the point of unconsciousness. If it were a person, it would be prosecuted for kidnapping and torture. Not an option, instead, I served the sentence, a life devoid of interest a life devoid of me.

Because of the insomnia, I watched most movies on television. I also raided the video stores for new shows. Bill and I loved watching movies. We chose the Sigourney Weaver movie, Copycat, not for its grand storytelling but because of one scene. I snuggled next to Bill on the couch, his warmth comforted me. His breathing lulled me. Double shifts ran him ragged. He fell asleep before the first crime scene search. I think cops movies aren't as fun for cops as they are for civilians. He woke every now and then to give a hug.

In the movie, Weaver plays a behavioral analyst named Dr. Hudson, who was stalked and nearly killed by a serial killer she helped capture. Because of the attack, she developed agoraphobia. Her situation spoke to me. To help her connect to the outside world, she employed a nurse named Andy. Andy put up with Dr. Hudson's ranting and panic attacks, but also stood up to her. One scene stood out most, however. As Dr. Hudson continued her Andy nonchalantly finds an easy out for her.

"Why don't you just die, then?" he stated as he cleaned around her.

She shook her head, and responded something which wasn't that important. Andy continued.

"Make up your mind, live or die," this time he looked at her in the face.

I saw that scene over and over again, until Bill took the remote from my hand and tossed it across the room.

"Make up your mind," he said in mid-yawn. "Are we going to finish it or not?"

I didn't wake up the next day and start a new life. But, I realized my choice. A choice I'd not wanted to make. I preferred sitting back and not actively participating in either. A full recovery involved 5 years of self-reflection and action. Doctor's visits went beyond my nodding and accepting scripts, I asked whatever question possible. Esquivel and Porras did say that I was an active member of the team. They finally sent me to a Rheumatologist. His name is Dr. Alvarez. My diagnosis didn't impress him. He stated that the only person who confirmed FM was a Rheumatologist no matter how many meds I had taken. He proceeded to do the same tests Porras and Esquivel had done. After each one, he remained silent. He avoided eye contact. At the end of the examination, he wrote a few lines in her file. He made his way to the door.

"Do I have Fibromyalgia?" I asked.

"Now you do," he said without looking back.

Instinctively, I rolled my eyes. What an ass. This confirmation came at the time I elected to make the choice to live or die, to experience life or just let it run me ragged.

I made my choice—I chose to live not just watch anymore. I never again stepped foot in Porras, Esquivel or Alvarez' offices again.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Marianita Escamilla presently resides at 1214 Kokopelli Dr. in Edinburg, Texas. She has a B.S. in Biology in 1993 from the University of Texas Pan American, an M.A. in English Literature from the University of Texas Pan American and an M.F.A in Creative Writing in 2014 from the University of Texas Pan American. Ms. Escamilla works as a Lecturer at the University of Texas Pan American's English Department where she teaches in the First-Year Writing Program and Literature courses. Ms. Escamilla is a self-proclaimed political junkie and a television fanatic. Both came as a result of being bedridden at the onset of the illness she writes about in this collection. Ms. Escamilla is active in her Community volunteering at her St. Anne's Catholic Church as a Catechist, participating in reading at local libraries and leading tours as a docent at the South Texas Museum of Texas History. Her job history is as varied as her reading tastes, Ms. Escamilla has taught high school chemistry, worked at the State Crime Laboratory as a DNA analyst, and worked as telephone psychic. She believes that life needs to be fun no matter what one is doing.