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La Vida Sin Papeles in the Rio Grande Valley

Natalia Salazar
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

LA VIDA SIN PAPELES IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY

A Thesis

by

NATALIA SALAZAR

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COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Dr. José Antonio Rodríguez

Chair of Committee

Professor Emmy Pérez

Committee Member

Dr. Mariana Alessandri

Committee Member

Dr. Alex Stehn

Committee Member

May 2022

ABSTRACT

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La Vida Sin Papeles in the Rio Grande Valley is a collection of fifteen vignettes and essays that showcase the tough realities that the narrator has lived through in being undocumented in the South Texas borderlands. This work brings into discussion some of the obstacles and hardships that millions of other immigrants and DREAMers face in the United States due to exclusive immigration policies.

In writing this collection, I drew inspiration from contemporary immigrant writers and poets and from my own life experiences living along the Rio Grande Valley border.

DEDICATION

Para todos los DREAMers indocumentados, DACAmentados, y repatriados.

Ánimo y corazón.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

i would like to first thank my mother because many of these stories would not have been possible for me to write about without her unwavering patience as i interviewed her. mamá, te amo. eres la persona más importante en mi vida.

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CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO MY COLLECTION OF ESSAYS:

LA VIDA SIN PAPELES IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY

"Fiction is my jugular. For me it is a great consolation to know that whatever miserable things happen to me in my lifetime, goodness will inevitably result because I will write about it. There is strength in this when none is left in the soul." Helena MaríaViramontes

In writing this collection of memoir essays, many times I had to fight the urge I felt to highlight everything on my screen and press delete. It didn't matter how many months I'd spent writing and revising, or what I'd given up as I prioritized finishing this project when the little voice inside kept challenging me: *Who cares about my stories? Who cares about my Abuela's little pink house in Matamoros, who cares that I'm undocumented, who cares about the hardships my family and I have faced?* I kept imagining someone picking up my essays and saying exactly that, "Who cares? Stop whining. You've broken American laws."

In this, I related to Gloria Anzaldúa's own writing process described in the chapter "Tlilli, Tlapalli / The Path of the Red Ink" from her book, *Borderlands*:

> I make my offerings of incense and cracked corn, light my candle. In my head I sometimes will say a prayer--an affirmation and a voicing of intent. Then I run water, wash the dishes or my underthings, take a bath, or mop the kitchen floor. This "induction" period sometimes takes a few minutes, sometimes hours. But I always go against a resistance. Something in me does not want to do this writing. Yet once I'm immersed in it, I can go fifteen to seventeen hours in one sitting and I don't want to leave it. (*Borderlands*, 67)

In this passage, Anzaldúa describes the lengthy process it took for her to mentally and physically prepare for a writing session, with it almost seeming like she was doing things that would distract her from having to write. I also had my own rituals I found myself practicing when I wrote my essays, such as needing to light a candle, turn my white noise machine on, and my phone off when I worked from home. Several times I drove an hour and a half away to the beach and stayed for days at a time because I needed to see and hear the ocean while I wrote. Yet whether I wrote at home or by the ocean, I went against a resistencia, like Anzaldúa.

I fought with myself to push past the fear of criticism, but also through my intense fear of exposure. Sometimes the only reason I kept going was because of expectations others had on me, whether professors at my university who needed my work to meet deadlines or my loved ones who kept telling me they couldn't wait for me to finish so that they could read my stories.

It took many months of writing and revising for me to get to a place where I better understood the point I was trying to make with my collection of vignettes and essays, why I was writing it, and why I needed to work through my fear of exposure. I'm not completely fearless about the repercussions of writing these essays, but I knew in my soul that I needed to get these

stories out instead of keeping them inside. Like Audre Lorde said, “My silences had not protected me.” (Lorde 1977)

I'll explain more about my writing process by first discussing the influences I gathered for my own work from literature I was exposed to as an undergraduate and graduate student.

Immigrant Writers

The first memoir I ever read was Edwidge Danticat’s *Brother, I’m Dying*, when I was a sophomore undergraduate student at The University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA). I read it in the first creative writing class I enrolled in.

Before taking the creative writing path, however, I had chosen a journalism degree as a freshman. I hardly knew anything about college, since no one from my immediate or extended family had ever stepped foot at a university. I was incredibly grateful to even be allowed to attend college since I was undocumented and hadn’t been made aware as a high school student about Senate Bill 1528, which granted undocumented students who had resided in Texas for at least three years before graduating from a Texas high school, the opportunity to attend college. Not all undocumented students are that lucky; some states still don’t allow undocumented students to attend college. I had graduated from high school in 2007, but I didn’t attend UTPA until 2009 when I learned I could enroll.

As I walked through the university that first day, all I’d known was that I wanted to write. I had seen the movie *13 Going on 30* (2004), and it had immediately become one of my very favorite movies; mostly because I longed for Jenna Rink’s career as a magazine editor in New York City. Then later when I’d seen the movie *Marley & Me* (2008), I loved it for a different

reason than most people probably did; I fantasized about having John Grogan's job as a newspaper columnist.

Very soon I found myself sitting in a journalism course on mass media, learning about the history of the printing press, radio, and television. We were a large group of students in a very large classroom and I remember sitting in the auditorium learning about journalism thinking, *This is not really what I had in mind when I said I wanted to be a writer*. But still, it was absolutely intriguing to learn about the first telegraph, Rupert Murdoch, and the significance of *I Love Lucy* for American television.

After a couple of semesters of journalism courses, I met a student at a social event off-campus and upon our first introduction, he told me that he was majoring in creative writing. We had been sitting on a bench at a park by the university, eating hot dogs, and I remember interrupting him and almost shouting, "What? UTPA has a creative writing major?" Adan told me all about it, and the next day I called my advisor's office to ask for an appointment so that I could begin my switching of majors.

Soon I was sitting in my very first creative writing course with Dr. Kamala Platt. It was a small classroom with a small group of students. Dr. Platt had two gray braids past her waist and her long skirt was flowing all the way down to her sandals. She turned one of our seats around and sat on top of its desk instead of on the chair as she read off our syllabus. She said we'd be reading literature and writing our own stories and poems. Right away I felt that her class was where I should have been all along. One of our assigned books was *Brother, I'm Dying*.

I was baffled upon learning that Edwidge Danticat's book was going to be about the story of her migration to America. *Why would she tell the whole world that she hadn't been born here in the United States?*

I'd attended middle school in the small border town of Mercedes, Texas, where I had often heard my classmates call other students who only spoke Spanish *mojados*; wetbacks. They'd tell these students, who looked just like the rest of us, to "go back to Mexico" where they were born. My classmates didn't know that I, too, had been born in Mexico. I had been their classmate since kindergarten and I spoke English as well as they did. Hearing their heartless taunting towards immigrant students who only knew Spanish taught me to keep my birthplace a shameful secret. I didn't want to be called mojada. Our schools in Mercedes weren't big and those labels followed you, with classmates only getting meaner every academic year.

Edwidge Danticat's memoir taught me many things. First, that you could write and publish a book about your personal life experiences -- up until then, I had only read fiction. Second, that memoirs written by immigrants existed. Third, the significance of being familiar with the history of your country of birth, since her memoir was heavily political. Edwidge Danticat's, and her family's, migration to the United States had been based on fleeing the war atmosphere in Haiti.

As much as I loved Danticat's writing, her memoir intimidated me because of how knowledgeable she sounded about Haiti. It made me face the reality that I hardly knew any history of the country I had been born in. My parents migrated to the Rio Grande Valley when I was one year old, and at that point as a college student, I knew but the first line of the Mexican national anthem because I'd heard it play on the tv. Her memoir intimidated me as well because

her family was prominent in their Haitian community, and through generations, they'd been directly involved in movements of resistance against U.S. occupation. They'd also all migrated legally to the United States.

In a passage from the chapter "The Return," where Danticat's parents visited Haiti after having been gone for several years, she recalls the moment she and her young brother, Bob, met their baby brother, Kelly, for the first time and the significance of his birth for the process of their legal migration:

> It was thanks to Kelly that our parents had been able to return to Haiti. Even though they had overstayed tourist visas, Kelly's birth in the United States had instantly made them eligible for permanent residency, which is no longer possible today. Before things were finalized, however, they had to file the paperwork at the consulate in Port-au-Prince; only then could they petition for Bob and me to join them in New York. (*Brother, I'm Dying*, 78)

The scene depicted here happened in the year 1976. The legal process hadn't been that tough for Danticat and her family to be able to immigrate legally to the United States back then. My mother had also overstayed her tourist visa when she migrated to Texas in 1990, and she also had American citizen children, but because immigration laws and policies are always changing, my family didn't have the same luck. It felt like I couldn't really relate to Danticat as an immigrant. In my family we were all nobodies, we hadn't had the opportunity to migrate legally, and we were Mexicans of course, not Haitians.

Still, the experience of reading her memoir made me ask a sheepish question that I kept to myself, "*Could I write one, too*?" I also had stories I wanted to tell about *my* life, about Mexico, about my family half-split here and there.

Edwidge Danticat acknowledged that in writing her memoir, she needed to write the stories of other family members too because they intertwined with her own:

> I write these things now, some as I witnessed them and today remember them, others from official documents, as well as the borrowed recollections of family members… This is an attempt at cohesiveness, and at re-creating a few wondrous and terrible months when their lives and mine intersected in startling ways, forcing me to look forward and back at the same time. I am writing this only because they can't. (*Brother, I'm Dying*, 27-28)

In this passage, Danticat is referring to telling the stories of her Uncle Joseph and her father, Mira. Her uncle was like a second father; he raised her in Haiti until Danticat's parents were able to come back for her. Later in his old age, he suffered direct persecution in his war-ridden neighborhood of Bel-Air in Haiti. To try to save his life, he escaped and attempted to ask for asylum in the United States, but instead died at the hands of American immigration officers. Danticat felt a duty to write both of their stories because it was the only way she could also tell her own.

I could certainly relate to that aspect of Danticat's inspiration for writing. In order to begin the journey of finding my identity as a Chicana and as an immigrant, I felt the need to trace back to my roots. But to do so, I needed to also uncover the stories of my mother, father, and grandparents; their life decisions had directly impacted my present life.

As much as Danticat influenced me, I'd always felt a duty to honor my family through keeping memoria of them in journals I'd kept growing up. Danticat's memoir simply allowed me to begin to see how their memoria could be honored in a less private way.

The second immigrant writer I happened upon as an undergrad was even more significant for me in influence. It was an essay by journalist Jose Antonio Vargas that had been assigned in another creative writing class. That semester I was enrolled in several literature courses, so when Dr. Jean Braithwaite had assigned our class to read the "Outlaw" essay to discuss the next day, I hadn't been caught up with all my reading assignments and I showed up to class hoping she didn't call on me.

I'd arrived to class hungry and sweaty from all the walking I'd done from bank to bank trying to cash a check. No one would cash it for me because they didn't accept my identification card that the Mexican Consulate in McAllen, Texas had issued to me. I'd been running very low on money so I was feeling desperate. As I walked to class, I had felt very frustrated and alone with my hardships.

"What do you think 'outlaw' means?" Dr. Braithwaite asked to get the discussion going. As the class responded and I listened, I realized that the New York Times article we were supposed to have read was an essay that had just been published by an undocumented journalist. Because of the day I'd had, and because I hadn't read the essay myself, I wanted to leave my seat and run out of the class as they discussed. They were having a respectful conversation, but I hadn't been allowed to cash a check anywhere, I didn't have groceries, and it had been another reminder that I was undocumented just like Vargas while no one in the classroom knew it. They discussed undocumentedness from a comfortable distance while I lived it.

After class, I immediately read the article in the comfort of my solitude. “My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant” was about accomplished journalist Vargas publicly coming out as undocumented because he was tired of hiding; the longer he kept his secret, the heavier it weighed on him. It had also become increasingly difficult to keep up his secret in his journalism career because he constantly needed to provide identification and work authorization in his different jobs, and the documents he was using were fake.

> There are believed to be 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States. We’re not always who you think we are. Some pick your strawberries or care for your children. Some are in high school or college. And some, it turns out, write news articles you might read. I grew up here. This is my home. Yet even though I think of myself as an American and consider America my country, my country doesn’t think of me as one of its own. (Vargas 2011)

Reading Vargas’ essay had been monumental for me because it was the first time I’d read something written by an undocumented immigrant. I identified with him on many levels, but not all. In the quote above, Vargas said he saw himself as an American and considered this country his own, but I didn’t see myself that way. Vargas had crossed into the United States once, as a child aboard a plane from the Philippines, while I had crossed as an infant to Brownsville, Texas; the sister city of my place of birth, Matamoros. Because I often crossed back and forth as a child to see my grandmothers in Mexico, I couldn’t see myself at all as being “American.” I was deeply tied to both countries, but in one I was ‘legal’ and in the other, I was not. As a college student who hadn’t crossed to Mexico in years, I still only felt Mexican because on paper, that’s where I was a citizen.

However, I felt that Vargas did have a right to make the claim that he was American. He had only migrated once; this truly was his home. He didn't have a second home just a few miles south past the border like I did as a child. My border crossings had been too messy and too recurrent, and I placed too much importance on legality and citizenship to be able to see past it.

Though Vargas was born in the Philipines and Danticat in Haiti, reading their work was helping me in my own journey of exploring my identity as a Chicana, as an immigrant, and as a writer. I began to write poems in my creative writing classes where I opened up a little about the summers I had spent in Mexico with my abuelas, though not stating upfront that I was undocumented in the work we shared with the class. In assigned journal entries that were private, I started to hint at it with two professors that I knew were immigrant allies. Vargas gave me the courage to begin to do that. In his essay, he'd found a community of support when he was wise about who to open up to.

Undocupoets & Chicanx Poets

As a graduate student in the creative writing MFA program, I was exposed to much more literature by writers and poets of diverse backgrounds, such as queer Afroindigenous undocupoet Alán Peláez López and Chicano poet, Juan Felipe Herrera.

Herrera's writing style caught my attention because it reminded me of Beat writing & Beat poetry, which I had been fascinated with since I first learned about the Beat Generation era as an undergrad. Herrera's poems were fun, risky, and didn't hold back. They inspired me to not want to hold back either in my own poems, such as in one I wrote about my grandfather being a Bracero, where I was sarcastic and satirical in tone about how his brown life had been so

disposable to his American employers when he got hurt on the job; how they would just move on to exploit the next brown body.

Herrera's poetry had so many specific references to events and history that it gave me a curiosity to look up some of them, and so his poetry educated me. One of his poems titled "187 Reasons Mexicanos Can't Cross The Border (Remix)," was very sarcastic and comedic in tone, with lines such as:

> "Because the CIA trains better with brown targets"
> "Because environmental U.S. industrial pollution suits our color"
> "Because we got to learn English first & get in line & pay a little fee"
> "Because we're still running from La Migra"
> "Because the pesticides on our skin are still glowing"
> "Because 125 million Mexicanos are potential Chicanos"
> "Because when we see red, white & blue we just see red"
> "Because the depression of the '30's was our fault"
> "Because we shoulda learned from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882"
> "Because we shoulda listened to the Federal Immigration Laws of 1917, '21, '24, & '30"
> "Because Operation Wetback took care of us in the '50s"
> "Because you can't deport 12 million migrantes in a Greyhound bus"

I loved how Herrera wrote so unapologetically in the lines above and in the rest of the poem. It edified me as a Chicana to read what Herrera said about brown skin, the border patrol and undocumentedness, the violence of colonization, violence of the Bracero program, and the exclusive U.S. immigration laws that had affected Mexicanos, Chicanos, and immigrants of other racial backgrounds through the decades. It inspired me to look up some of those laws and events that I hadn't been aware of, and I began to learn more about immigrant history, which edified me

and helped build a deep sense of pride and resistencia within me about the history of our survival.

In another fantastic poem by Herrera titled “Mexican Differences Mexican Similarities,” two lines, in particular, stood out for me:

> “You ask Are you an American Citizen? We say Yes way before you”
> “You’ve got the law on your side we got history on ours”

Lines like those helped me begin to see that I was undocumented today because of the violent events of the past. They helped me understand that the border had crossed me and my family, not the other way around.

Poet Alán Peláez López’s book, *Intergalactic Travels: poems from a fugitive alien,* was significant for me because they wrote a lot about financial hardships, colorism, and survival, all of which I had continuously experienced and struggled with. However, one excerpt that really stood out to me from their poem “Blackness Embodied Reads the News” reads as follows:

> in under two months, two young bois of color have died and i don’t know what to do anymore. joaquin luna jr. was eighteen when he died. the new york times says he committed suicide because he was undocumented. joaquin left a letter detailing the struggles of undocumentedness. this wasn’t suicide though, this empire killed him. this empire is killing all of us. i mean, we are here, everyone knows we are here, but the law names us “illegal.” technically, we have no rights or legal protection, but at any moment, the law can discipline us; punish us. this is to say that the law selects when it wants to author us into existence. (Lopez 2020)

In this section, Lopez discussed the heartbreak and anger they felt when they found out about the deaths of Treyvon Martin and Joaquin Luna Jr. The experience had been very impactful to Lopez, who internalized both deaths because of Lopez's own state of being undocumented and being Black. This section is significant to my own writing as well because in my last essay, "Thoughts of Repatriation," I mention Joaquin Luna Jr. as well, and in the same essay, I also make mention of when "the law selects when it wants to author us into existence," when I discuss how I was allowed to pay a fine as a punishment for not having a driver's license but not allowed to apply for one in the first place.

I was greatly inspired by all the work I was coming across but I questioned whether I had enough boldness in me as Vargas did to come out publicly as undocumented since the MFA degree required a book-length thesis and I only had one subject I cared to write about.

In addition, I wanted to be more knowledgeable about my own racial and cultural histories like Herrera and Danticat so that I could feel more confident in my identity and in my writing, so I decided to pursue a Mexican American Studies (MAS) certificate alongside my MFA.

Writing Style & Genre

In my first MAS class, Latinx Decolonial Theory with Dr. Merla-Watson, I was introduced to testimonio through an assigned reading by The Latina Feminist Group in their book *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*. The book is a collaboration between eighteen Latina feminists in higher education, and in the introduction, "Papelitos Guardados: Theorizing Latinidades Through Testimonio," they discuss the significance of testimonio as follows:

> …Latinas have contributed to empowerment efforts through literacy and giving voice, documenting silenced histories. *Testimonio* has been critical in movements for liberation in Latin America, offering an artistic form and methodology to create politicized understandings of identity and community. Similarly, many Latinas participated in the important political praxis of feminist consciousness-raising. The 'second-wave' feminist movement honored women's stories and showed how personal experience contains larger political meaning. (*Telling to Live*, 3)

This explanation of the significance of testimonio was powerful for me because it helped me see that writing about one's hardships wasn't just venting into a diary, as I'd sometimes felt about the obstacles I wanted to write about. Personal experiences contained "larger political meaning," and that was why they needed to be shared. Latinas and women of color had paved the way for personal stories (testimonio) to show the hard realities, exclusions, and injustices faced in marginalized communities, in order to raise consciousness and fight for change. The introduction continued as follows:

> Black, Asian American, Native American, and other feminists of color have shown how important it is to write about one's own experiences. Beginning in the 1970's, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Maxine Hong Kingston, Leslie Marmon Silko, and many others inspired us and legitimized subject matters and modes of writing that were previously ignored and deemed unacceptable. (*Telling to Live,* 4)

As this quote mentions, this type of personal writing was not accepted in the past. Due to strict rules in academic writing, or in the rhetoric and composition fields, writing with the"I" wasn't respected or seen as professional. The radical women of color mentioned in the quote above used the "I" in writing however, paving the way for the rest of us to be able to write our own stories too, and paving the way for more personal modes of writing to be acceptable in academic work.

Learning more about the use of testimonio by women of color in movements for social justice, and learning that testimonio was a literary genre in itself, helped me see how testimonio blended my two fields of study perfectly. I felt it was exactly where my collection of essays had found its place and relevance. In another MAS course, I came across Gloria Anzaldúa's autohistoria-teoría, which I understand to be self-writing that invites deep reflection and a deconstruction that propels towards knowledge, raising consciousness about the self and others. Gathering influence from everything I was reading in my creative writing courses as well as what I was learning in my MAS classes, my thesis inevitably came to be a blend of memoir, personal essays, testimonio, and autohistoria-teoría.

Themes in My Essays

During the first year of my MFA, I had taken several courses on poetry and only one in creative nonfiction writing, so when it came time to assemble my nonfiction thesis, I only had poems. I wrote all new work for my thesis during the Fall 2021 semester, due to this; fifteen essays in less than four months. Since I'd been so fascinated with writing poems, most of the literature I'd read was poetry, so during my Thesis I semester, I set out to find memoirs written by immigrants. Migrant memoirs would help me gain inspiration and would also allow me small

breaks from how taxing it felt at times to produce such personal stories and process emotions I'd stored away.

If I could pinpoint one writer whom I most strived to emulate in my own writing, it would be Marcelo Hernandez Castillo. When recommending his memoir, *Children of the Land*, I've often said it's my bible of undocumentedness because of the way he allows the reader to get into his innermost thoughts. Most of the time, those deep, sometimes negative thoughts, were thoughts I'd had, which I kept to myself. I found respite in how Castillo forsakes his own privacy on every page, and that's what I most wanted to do with my own writing so that other immigrants who read my work could find their innermost feelings, fears, and anxieties in my words too, since many of them seem at times to only be present in the minds of the undocumented.

> After finishing our meal and all the salsa we could eat, we took the back roads home. Every few seconds, I looked down to check how fast I was going. It was a habit I'd picked up after years of driving without a license… Sometimes I would spend more time obsessing over how fast I was going than paying attention to the road ahead. On a few occasions I almost crashed while going exactly somewhere between sixty-five and sixty-nine miles per hour on the freeway... I liked the range because it didn't look suspicious. That range told a story: it sent the message that I wasn't going anywhere in a hurry but that I had nothing to hide. (*Children of the Land*, 108)

In this passage, Castillo talks about anxieties he felt when driving without a license and the dangers caused by hyperfocusing on the speed he was going in order to avoid being pulled

over. Castillo later explains that his county had been cooperating with ICE, turning in inmates they suspected to be undocumented. A traffic stop could end in deportation, and in order to avoid getting stopped, he obsessively checked his speed. In two of my essays, "La Carcel del Valle" and "Thoughts of Repatriation," I also wrote about the same fears around driving and the dangers an immigrant runs when pulled over for a traffic violation. I wanted my work to discuss day-to-day worries and hardships like that, which undocumented people face and others may not even be aware of.

In one of my poetry classes, Professor Emmy Pérez shared a quote with us by poet Cynthia Cruz from an essay Cruz wrote in the months surrounding President Donald Trump's election:

> My own life has been political since the day I was born. Because I am Latina, because I come from a working poor/working-class family, have survived trauma and am living with chronic illness, because I live a precarious existence—living at and below the poverty line with no long-term health insurance, everything I write is "political." Writing "politically" is not a choice or a luxury, it is not something I can choose not to do, just as I cannot choose to be someone other than who I am. (Cruz 2017)

Here Cruz discusses that writers and poets who are from marginalized communities have no choice but to include in their writing ways in which politics affect their survival in every day life, simply due to the way one exists; lower class or suffering disabilities for example. In the essay she wrote, she mentioned that political poetry wasn't wanted until the new exclusionary

Trump administration affected the white middle-class too, suddenly making it okay to write political work.

I found Cruz's quote, and essay, very relatable. Every story that I wrote was centered around a significant or special moment in my life, whether it was a memory with a sibling, an experience in grade school, or adventures I'd had with friends in local nature centers; but I also attempted to demonstrate how there was always an underlying political message in each story. I grew up in the RGV borderlands under the poverty line with a family of mixed-status siblings and a single parent. We had deep connections with the family that lived on the other side of the border. There was no way to separate the political from the anecdotes in my writing.

In my first essay, I wanted to open with a theme I hadn't seen in any of the memoirs or poems I'd read, which was terror in the dreams of an undocumented immigrant. Many years ago, my family would risk crossing the border because we needed to look out for our abuelas in their old age. Back then, in the 90's, children were able to cross the border uninspected; it wasn't until January 1, 2008 that the United States required passports for re-entry from everyone.

My family had stopped crossing by then because the Abuelas had passed away. However, years after we'd last crossed the border, the undocumented members of my family would have dreams of returning to Mexico to visit the Abuelas; dreams that would turn to nightmares when panic set in about how we'd cross back. I thought I was the only one having those recurring nightmares, but when I mentioned it to my mother in passing, she said she had them all the time, and one of my brothers who was present for the conversation said that he had those recurring nightmares as well. Because the three of us did, I was sure other undocumented immigrants

might have them too, and I wanted to offer some sort of solace through the two essays I wrote about dreams.

Then I had a thought that perhaps those dreams / nightmares were particular to undocumented immigrants who lived in the borderlands, who continuously crossed the border for family. Perhaps they didn't happen to immigrants who lived far from the border and who had only crossed it once; perhaps they had different types of terrors. Even more, I wanted to share those essays to begin discussions with DREAMers and immigrants about dreams, whether terror about how one would return home, or even the nice dreams of traveling when one can't do so legally.

In the next couple of essays, some themes were about healthcare and medical negligence, labor exploitation, and the act of migration. I explored, too, a theme I had seen in the latest three migrant memoirs I'd read (*Children of the Land, The Distance Between Us, and House Built on Ashes*), which was a sort of persistent relation to the physical border and the more symbolic assigned meanings that immigrants placed on the border.

In *Children of the Land*, Castillo explores his thoughts about the physical border when he is granted DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and advanced parole, which gave him permission to have a quick visit to Mexico, a place he hadn't seen since his childhood. He waited nervously and anxiously for the moment he would fly over the Rio Grande that separated both countries. Once above it, he described what he felt when he saw the border wall:

> From the air, the actual borderland looked like a long thread of hair-- but nothing in the landscape around it held a particular shape for long… From above, the border looked so obviously out of place, so obvious that it didn't belong, an encroachment to the snaking valleys, hills, and mountains… Its geometrical

> consistency was jarring to the eye, violent in its precision, stretching for hundreds of miles without a single curve when everything around it was curving… I ventured to believe that the function of the border wasn't only to keep people out, at least that was not its long-term function. Its other purpose was to be visible, to be seen, to be carried into the imaginations of migrants deep into the interior of the country, in the interior of their minds. (*Children of the Land*, 28)

Here Castillo makes a captivating point about the contrast of the man-made border wall and the river; the river flowed beautifully through the landscape yet the wall was not only "violent" and "jarring to the eye," but it also existed to terrorize human beings that were migrating in search of better opportunities. He felt that the wall's aggressive nature was hard to overlook, making it easy to continually terrorize migrants in their innermost thoughts .

In the next section, Castillo reflects more about all the migrants who have died in their attempts to cross the border:

> How easy it would have been to look down and see nothing but sand. How fortunate for those who couldn't, or better stated, refused, to see the bodies strung like sweaters on clotheslines beneath the water in the Río Bravo. (*Children of the Land*, 30)

This quote discusses the privilege that some people have when they see the border as just a river because they haven't been terrorized by the border themselves, and he also makes a point that there are people who even *choose* to not see the deaths that have ocurred at the border as they look upon the physical river and the desert at the border.

Though the quote above is a very short section of Castillo's many reflections about the border as he flies over it, it beautifully captures what the river symbolizes for an immigrant -- whether from Texas, like myself, or from California like Castillo.

I made mention of what the physical border meant to me in a few of my essays, such as in "Tamaulipas to Texas," where I discuss the obsession I had with seeing the river on Google Earth. I wanted to locate my own proximity to it and also locate the proximity to the river from my Abuela's rancho. No matter how close the river and the rancho looked to me over the internet, in real life I couldn't go to either, due to not being able to cross anymore. Toward the end of my collection of essays, I revisited the theme again when I dared to go get as close to the Río Bravo as I possibly could, just to stand in its presence and see Mexico on the other side.

In Dr. José Antonio Rodríguez's memoir, *House Built on Ashes*, a short essay titled "the three enemies, or, bridge," also discusses the meaning he has assigned to the border as he is about to sign paperwork to obtain his naturalization certificate:

> The interview is over and the man waits for me to sign the form and so surrender all allegiance to México. This surrender is supposed to be a good thing. Maybe if there were no flags or bridges or razor-wire fences or birth certificates, you could love a place and it would be just that, a place, not a country. And then you wouldn't ever have to say good-bye to it, even if you left, because it would be different. It would not be this, a good-bye that feels like a wall rising. (*House Built on Ashes*, 182)

In this passage, Rodríguez explores the painful moment when it seems like he is being made to choose one of his countries over the other in the process of his immigration. Through the description of the border as a "razor- wire fence," the reader feels the violence that the narrator

sees. Perhaps Rodríguez means that the signing away allegiance to Mexico felt like he himself was putting up a wall between both countries; perhaps he sees it as an unnecessary step to his new life in the United States. I felt like he was asking why he couldn't love and be loyal to both countries at the same time. It brings to mind what Castillo said about the physical and symbolic border forever living "in the interior" of an immigrant's mind.

In Reyna Grande's memoir, *The Distance Between Us*, she writes as a child whose parents have left to el otro lado for work, leaving her and her siblings in Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico under the care of their grandmother. In Iguala, there is a mountain she lived nearby, which the locals referred to as the "Mountain That Has a Headache." Though she still hadn't migrated herself, at four years old, Grande had assigned meaning to the border and el otro lado as the place which had taken her parents: "Neither of my grandmothers told us that there is something more powerful than La Llorona -- a power that takes away parents, not children. It is called The United States." (*The Distance Between Us*, 3)

Later when she was a little older and her parents still hadn't returned to Iguala to bring Grande and her siblings to the United States, she had imagined that el otro lado was just behind that mountain in her hometown. In a scene where she played outside with her little brother in an abandoned car, she discussed what the border was in the interior of her own mind:

> "Yee-haw!" Carlos said. As he drove, I looked at the Mountain That Has a Headache and was sure El Otro Lado was over there. Mago said El Otro Lado was really far away, and back then nothing seemed farther away than an unknown town on the other side of the mountain. "Head that way," I told him. "That's where Mami and Papi are." …Because I'd decided that my parents must be on the

> other side of the Mountain That Has a Headache, I got in the habit of looking at it each night and wishing my parents a buenas noches." (Grande, 31-32)

Though she wasn't yet an immigrant herself, Grande's parents were, and as a child she felt confused and scared about the border due to the abandonment she felt from her parents who crossed it in search of work with a promise to return and build a home for her, Mago, and Carlos. Because they didn't return for years, Grande didn't see el otro lado as a good place, and so the border terrorized the interior of her own mind, too, even when she hadn't seen it or crossed it herself.

In my next essays, I explored themes of integrating into American society as an immigrant child; learning a new language than the one we spoke at home and learning to pledge allegiance to a flag for the first time. I took inspiration from Rodríguez's short essay titled "andie" for my essay "All-American Undocugirl."

In "andie," the voice is of an immigrant child who is being outcasted in school:

> Get away from me! You're such a faggot! she barks, her eyes tight little slits, her lips pulled back, her teeth white, bright like the walls of Mrs. Vasquez's classroom…When I say the word faggot to myself it is like biting hard on my lower lip. I understand more English now that I'm in fourth grade, but I'm not sure what that word means, what she's calling me. Don't think I've heard it before, not like this, the way the sound of it feels hot against my face that reddens over any little thing. Something has followed me from the other side." (*House Built on Ashes*, 81)

Rodríguez has experienced homophobia and hatred in this passage, yet he is confused about the word Andie has called him and why she seems so angry after he just complemented her. In the beginning of his book, Rodríguez mentions that some neighborhood kids back in Reynosa taunted and bullied him too, for no apparent reason, so he internalizes that something must be wrong with him when Andie does the same, thinking that whatever the reason was that he suffered bullying in el otro lado, it must have followed him to the United States.

I feel like he is saying here that as a child, he believes what followed him across the border was a bad, ugly, or dirty thing, which really moved me to write my own essay about a similar experience I had in the third grade and since most of Rodríguez's memoir is in the voice of his younger self, I was inspired me to write "All-American Undocugirl" in the voice of my younger self. It was a story I'd been wanting to write, yet hadn't found a way to tell it. Dr. Rodríguez's voice as his younger self is beautiful, poetic, and perfect throughout his memoir, but in my own anecdote, I wrote the voice of my younger self in the same the way I spoke English at that time with my little sisters at home; Spanglish and broken English.

In other essays I wrote about my childhood, I discussed themes of colorism, abandonment, financial hardships, identity struggles, and growing up with siblings of mixed status. For a lot of these essays, I took inspiration from how Reyna Grande wrote about those exact same themes; the freedom and openness with which she expressed very complex relationships with her both of her parents as she discussed moments she suffered abuse and neglect by them. Reading her words gave me freedom to open up about hard moments where I experienced conflict and tension with my own family members. In some scenes, a family member of mine may have been painted in a bad light, but that was not my intention. It was to show how the experience impacted me as an immigrant, as a daughter, as a sister, as a person

with dark skin; how the specific moment molded my character. I have always had the belief that no one is inherently good or inherently bad, and that maturity through life experience shows you this as you grow and make your own mistakes.

The latter essays I wrote from experiences as a young adult covered very real struggles and obstacles that undocumented immigrants face later in life, such as the yearning to accomplish one's dreams and goals but not being able to in the same way that other people can. I feel that I didn't get to a point in the end where my collection of essays felt complete. There were some gaps in time and the last essay may have ended abruptly. However, I didn't have another way to end the collection. My life is still in limbo and I still wonder what my next steps will be. I couldn't have wrapped my stories up with a nice little bow because that is not my reality.

Purpose

This is where I start to think about the purpose of the collection of essays that I have so far. As I mentioned at the beginning of this critical introduction, I have a fear of exposure that was more intense at the beginning than it is now that I've started to work on it, but it's still there.

In a Ted x Talk that journalist Jose Antonio Vargas gave, he said:

> Why do people like me come out? … I've come out twice in my life. The first time was when I was a junior in high school. We were watching the documentary, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*. And one of the last few lines was when Harvey Milk said, "If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door." And I was sitting in the back of room 101 and heaven knows what happened to me and I raised my hand and I said, "I'm gay," and I ran out of the room… That was the first time. The second time took fourteen years longer. And

> people like me are coming out. And here's the interesting thing; we're not really coming out. We're just letting you in. (Vargas 2012)

I understand why Vargas waited fourteen more years to come out about being undocumented. If that information lands in the wrong ears, your whole life can be uprooted, and that is terrifying. Not having stability in life is the norm for an undocumented immigrant. Most of the time we don't have stability in jobs, in finances, in the houses we call home, and of course, we don't have stability in the future because we can be uprooted at any given moment.

At the end of my first thesis semester, I went through a very tough time mentally as I thought about my future and the next steps I would take after I graduated. I wrote about the mental anguish I felt in my last essay, where I considered repatriating to Mexico. I didn't want to discuss it with my family or friends because they'd give me a biased perspective, not wanting me to leave since they cared about me.

I waited for the spring semester to begin so that I could ask for a therapist at the university to talk through it. I needed the perspective of a perfect stranger, one had to abide by rules of confidentiality. I hoped I would be assigned to a therapist who was kind and understanding so that I could truly open up about the crossroads I was at; deciding which side of the border I needed to be in. I was so glad to have been assigned someone who possessed both of those qualities. He helped me by first listening and then by giving advice based on logic, thus balancing out my wild emotions with his calm solidarity.

I also mentioned the writing of this thesis to him and my fear of exposure in sharing it and he taught me a very important lesson, which was the difference between exposure and disclosure. In exposure there was fear because I didn't hold the power, but in disclosure, I held the power to share what I wanted to.

If there are moments in my essays where I may have left out a detail that the reader wanted, it may have been intentional. It was me holding onto what didn't feel safe to share, versus things I wanted to take risks in telling.

In Audre Lorde's essay, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," she talks about the experience of facing her mortality after a breast cancer scare and how it made her reflect on the times she'd silenced herself for fear of speaking up. She discusses the bigger picture; the duty we have as women to speak up about injustices: "We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and our selves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned; we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid." (Lorde 1977)

I feel that Lorde is saying here that our duty to speak should be greater than the fear that keeps us silent because the bigger picture we should consider is the positive outcome we can bring to other women and to the world with our words and our work.

> And it is never without fear--of visibility, of the harsh light of scrutiny and perhaps judgment, of pain, of death. But we have lived through all of those already, except death. And I remind myself all the time now that if I were to have been born mute, or had maintained an oath of silence my whole life long for safety, I would still have suffered, and I would still die. (Lorde 1977)

I am inspired by Audre Lorde's encouragement in this quote, where she asks us to shift perspective on risk-taking and on overcoming the fear of visibility and scrutiny, which were the two fears I spoke about at the very beginning of this critical introduction.

Recently I agreed to be the guest speaker of an online series hosted by my university's DREAM Resource Center; a series titled "UndocuStories." Normally I would have shied away from being in the spotlight, and especially discussing such a personal subject, but I challenged myself to do it as exposure therapy and because I felt it was a safe space.

I surprised myself with how much I wanted to share with the students who showed up. I told them the story I wrote about in my last essay, before I even wrote about it, since it had just happened and I was still processing it. I never have wifi issues at home, but of course, the day I was a guest speaker there was a severe wind advisory in my city and my internet kept disconnecting for minutes at a time. Still, the students stayed until I reconnected. They wanted to hear more because they connected to the experiences I was sharing. When our allotted time was over, some of them asked where they could find the stories I'd mentioned I was working on because they wanted to read them.

That experience taught me that my stories do matter and that I should push past my fear of visibility to share them because they could help others in my RGV community, where many of us know immigrants or are immigrants. And being that the immigrant experience is a universal one, my collection could also be useful for others outside of the Valley, whether immigrant or not. My essays could simply show the realities of the U.S. - Mexico border in South Texas for those who aren't aware of our existence or who have misinformation about our Frontera and the immigrant experience. This is the next step I'm trying to work on now that I've written my stories; releasing them from my tight grip.

In chapter 7 of *Homegrown,* titled "Memory," Amalia Mesa-Bains and bell hooks dialogue about the duty we have of memoria as resistencia:

> bell hooks: “For Blacks, Chicano/as, and Native Americans, memory allows us to resist and heal: we know ourselves through the act of remembering…and memory becomes a thread that can bend, bind, and gather broken bits and pieces of ourselves.”

Here bell hooks talks about how healing the process of writing can be for people of color and how it can be an act of resistance to tell our own stories from our own narratives. Amalia Mesa-Bains continues the conversation by further discussing why it’s so important to tell our own stories in order to give the true versions of our own peoples’ histories:

> After all, Chicano/as have been accused of being a people really without a history, as though all of us were immigrants. We’re “new” to this country every decade, every century we appear in the United States -- and then, we’re new again. So it is essential for us to recover our collective memory. We must talk about what was lost through the incursion of the border, through the separation and loss of multitudes, and remember the millions killed through violence, disease, and brutal labor conditions in the so-called ages of discovery of Mexico. (*Homegrown*, 2017)

Mesa-Bains makes mention about the preconceived notions many people have about Chicanx people and how we’re othered from Americans though we have established lives here today and have existed in the United States since the beginning. This is why she says we need to write our stories and share them, in order to not only educate but also to keep memoria of our ancestors and keep record of our people’s struggles and the violences we’ve faced. These are acts of resistencia against erasure and against false narratives.

I agree with hooks and Mesa-Bains that we have a personal and collective duty to memoria. I’ve always felt a duty to remember and honor my family’s history in my writing, and I know now that doing so is memoria as resistencia.

More on My Writing Process and Language

In order to tell the stories in my writing that weren't of my own lived experiences, I interviewed my mother about her stories and the stories of my other family members that I wasn't familiar with. My mother only speaks Spanish, so for my essays, I translated most of what she said to English for the reader's convenience, but I kept some parts of her dialogue in Spanish when the words and phrases sounded too beautiful in Spanish to translate. (Most often I recorded her voice as she spoke and then I transcribed and translated.)

Me choosing to keep a lot of Spanish was me being aware that my stories aren't accessible to all in their current language, which is why my intended audience at the moment is readers from the Rio Grande Valley where most of us are bilingual, or my audience currently can also be anyone else who reads and understands both languages. In the future when I write this book for a larger audience, I would make my writing more accessible by using less Spanish. For now, this is what felt most authentic to me.

I plan on further revising my work and acquiring more knowledge so that I can feel more confident in the work I produce in order to get to the point where I feel more confident to share it with a larger audience.

Conclusion / Quick Author's Note

I want to give credit in my work to all writers, poets, and artists I have taken influence from and included in this thesis, but I didn't explain all of them in my critical introduction. The epigraph by Helena MaríaViramontes is from a testimonio she wrote in an anthology edited by Gloria Anzaldúa titled *Making Face, Making Soul = Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color.* Though Viramontes is most known for writing science-fiction,

her beautiful testimonio of familia and their influence on her as a writer really resonated with me. I loved the quote as the opening lines of my work; it's very true that writing gives strength to the soul when there's none left.

From the same anthology, Elena Tajina Creef's "Notes of a Fragmented Daughter" inspired the aesthetics of my essay "Notes of an Undocuperson Enjoying Nature Centers in the RGV" in my title and in how I listed seven personal scenes, too.

In my very last essay, I quote lyrics from a song I love: "Boston" by Augustana. This song carried me through the tough time I faced over the holidays at the end of my first thesis semester while I waited to sign up for talk therapy at my university. I played it hundreds of times and I'm still playing it. It's helped me find freedom and a new start, even if only in song.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

LA VIDA SIN PAPELES IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY

Written by

Natalia Salazar

RETURNING TO MÉXICO IN DREAMS

I woke up scolding myself because in my dreams, I had decided to go to México again.

It had been spontaneous. Nancy had said it was time we finally took a nice family trip and even though I had immediate reservations because my mom and I can't travel, I at least wanted to entertain the thought. We started to get very excited as we fantasized about our vacation plans, especially when we decided that if we went, it should be México because it would be cheaper, Mom wouldn't have culture shock or language barriers, and México was our beautiful homeland. My sister and I looked at Air BNB's and plane tickets for Mexico City. Of course, Nancy wouldn't have any issue traveling since she was the first child born in the United States in our family.

We went ahead and booked three tickets and the plane was set to leave the next day, so we hurried to pack. Only in dreams does that happen; in real life, I wouldn't be able to get past inspection to board a plane from within the United States. Only in dreams can you see large, fluffy clouds outlined in neon pink outside the window on the plane ride to México to vacation with your American sister and undocumented mother. Only in dreams did our plane have to make a random stop at Thailand and pass through the islands of Indonesia to pick up other people heading to México.

Once we got off the plane, we walked through the busy airport and outside we found the small train we were supposed to board that would take us to the fancy hotel we had booked in Oaxaca to rest overnight.

The whole train ride to Oaxaca, the three of us couldn't stop giddily chattering, planning everything we'd do. My mother, who has never traveled anywhere on either side of the frontera, kept pointing out the train windows at mountains, at the red sun as it set, at the signs on the road showing every city we were passing by.

"¡La vamos a llevar a que conozca el Ángel de la Independencia!" shrieked Nancy.

"Y también a la casa de Frida Kahlo!" I said excitedly, trying to silence my mind from the questions it was asking me. *How am I going to get back home? How is my mother going to get back home?? I'm younger and could maybe make it across the river back to Texas…but, how would Mom?*

I tried hard during the train ride to envision ourselves already there, walking amongst the millions of people en la Ciudad de México. More than anything, I wanted to show it all to my mother, but my mind wouldn't shut off, asking me how we were going to get back.

We never made it to the hotel in Oaxaca in my dream, much less to Mexico City. I woke up in the middle of us riding the train, heaving for air. Scolding myself because I'd decided to go to México again in my dreams, knowing I couldn't return.

TAMAULIPAS TO TEXAS

1. Aquél Lado

I asked my mother to tell me again the story about my older sister, Nilda, and that I wanted the whole story this time.

“Okay,” she responded casually and turned back to the novela we watched. We enjoy having cafesito and galletas together in the evenings sometimes. It was something we would do with our Abuelas in Mexico long ago. A few seconds later she noticed I was waiting on her to continue.

“Cuando? Ahorita?” she asked, in a voice that now had a hint of hesitation. “I can tell you about her, but not right now. It’s getting late and I don’t want to have it on my mind,” she continued. “Me afecta mucho todavía, y no me voy a poder dormir.”

Nilda was my mother's second child, her first daughter. I only know her from a large portrait that she keeps tucked behind other things in her closet. The photo of baby Nilda is large; 18 by 24 inches, and its edges curl up from how old it is. Large photos like Nilda’s are commonly found on the walls of Mexican families’ homes, depicting quinceaneras, weddings, or family member portraits. Since we move houses so much, we stopped hanging family photos on our walls years ago.

I didn't like looking at Nilda's photo when I was younger. I'd never met her and didn't feel a connection to her. I also hadn't liked looking at the large portrait of Tío Agustin in Abuela Concha's house in Matamoros when I visited her. He was my mother's younger brother, murdered at the Rio Grande River when he was twenty-two years old as he crossed to buy a birthday gift for his son on his first birthday. He'd crossed the river regularly to spoil his wife with chocolates from the United States, but that last time, he had been mugged for everything he had on him - thirty dollars and his watch. I had never met my Tío Agustin either because his murder at the Río happened three years before I was born. I could have sworn that every time I walked by his painted portrait, his eyes followed me, but I could never tell Abuela Concha that about the son that she had loved so much. I knew not to look at it, especially at night, but it was hard because the large portrait hung above the bed that Abuela and I slept on.

In Nilda's portrait, her eyes are large and wondrous and she is smiling so big in that moment that you get a full view into her little mouth. She doesn't have any teeth yet because she is only two months old. My mother purchased the portrait from a man that was walking around the colonia with his camera, knocking on doors to see if anyone wanted to have their photographs taken. If it weren't for him, and for my mother having enough money at that moment to afford his photography services, I would have never known my older sister's face.

✦

Over the weekend my sister Judy, my mother, and I got together to have our cafecito. The show we watched was about a young mother who worked as a maid, and the hardships she went through to raise her daughter on her own. We loved it so much that within a few hours we had already gotten to the sixth episode. The three of us could relate very well to the main character

on the show, even though she was white. Judy because she had been a very young single mother, me because I had worked as a maid many times, and my mother because she had done both. What we liked best was that it was available to be played in Spanish, so my mother could fully enjoy the show with us instead of just looking at the scenes and forming her own story in her mind like she usually did when we watched shows or went out to the theater.

The sixth episode started with a scene where the young mother kayaked alone on a lake. It seemed to be a memory of a trip, or a place she went to mentally to find peace. In the scene she looked focused as she paddled through the water taking in short, measured breaths, then she stopped paddling, looked up at the blue sky, and reclined on the yellow kayak to rest. She dipped her hands in the water and breathed in slower and deeper, smiling as the sun glowed all around her while she floated peacefully on the water.

"¡Mira! Que bonito. Así yo también remaba de niña," my mother had said.

"En serio, Ma?" I was surprised because it sounded adventurous; uncharacteristic of her. Sometimes she blurted out memories like that from her childhood and adolescence that she hadn't shared with us before.

I've always been fascinated by my mother's stories about her life growing up in Matamoros, the city right across Brownsville in South Texas, where most of my family is from. I savor every story about my Abuela Concha, my Bisabuela Panchita, the rancho, my mother's memories from school, the travesuras she got into with her siblings, the things they would eat when they had very little money. I like hearing the bad things too; the hardships, the deaths, the failed marriages and failed border crossings. I like to hear all of it because I feel a deep desire to

record all of those stories for the next generation we are birthing and raising in our family, the more Americanized one.

I paused the show when my mother began to tell Judy and me that she was eight years old when she used to row on a little boat all by herself in the arroyo behind Rancho San Juana in Matamoros. I paused it because I wanted to ask everything she remembered.

I keep hoping that she doesn't tire of giving me every detail that I crave. I've started to turn on the voice memo app on my phone every time she begins pulling another one of her stories out of her memory. I interview her while it records, and luckily she hasn't yet gotten annoyed. She had said to me a few years ago, when we were thinking about signing up for family counseling sessions, that maybe she did need someone to talk to. That she had been through so much in life, she could write a book. Perhaps she enjoys it when I ask her for her stories.

"Was that arroyo close to the rancho where I lived with my Abuelas as a baby?" I ask her.

"No, you stayed with them in Rancho El Gomeño. El que está por la Playa Bagdad, por la Carretera Lauro Villar."

I quickly type notes into my phone of all the names of streets and ranchos she's mentioning because I want to see if I can find them on Google Earth later when I go to the café.

"Rancho San Juana was by Rancho Galaneño, the one where I was born and raised. It's in Matamoros, about five kilometers from Ciudad Victoria. I lived there until I was ten years old."

I made sure to jot down which rancho was which while I listened.

“Era un paseo que le llamaban también Xochimilco, y el arroyo estaba bien ancho. En medio del arroyo estaba un árbol encino bien grandote, y allí se paraba la lanchita, y luego te regresabas. Estaba bien pacifico, bien bonito.”

✦

I set up my laptop at the café later that evening while I enjoyed a cup of warm mint tea and typed into my computer the names of the places my mother had mentioned. I learned soon enough how hard it was to find street views of ranchos and ejidos on Google Earth. It didn’t give me the option to set the little Google Earth man to take me to view Abuela Concha’s little shack like I had hoped. The little man was only available to give street views of nicer, more important places nearby, so I had only been able to see a satellite view of the general area of the ranchos; their carreteras and the arroyo in the corresponding places to the details that my mother had given me.

I searched for a good, long while trying hard to find an image or any current information online of the rancho where I had stayed with my Abuelas as a baby, waiting for my Mexican passport to arrive. My parents had migrated to Brownsville when I was one year old, and my Abuelas looked after me by themselves for the next six months while we waited for my passport so that I could join my parents. My family in Mexico didn’t take photos of the rancho, or photos in general. They were very poor and what little money they had wasn’t spent on expensive photography services.

How I wish I had found a street view of the casita in the rancho on the internet. Its wooden door with the padlock that Abuela Concha opened for us to step right into the singular bedroom with its two cots where she and I slept. Those thin metal cots whose sheets we needed to shake out before bed in case there was a tarantula or scorpion hiding in them. I wished I'd seen the casita's little window that let the warm summer air in at night along with the sound of chicharras and sapos. The same little window by the cocina, where Abuela lit a kerosene lamp over the small wooden table to cut through the darkness. I didn't get a chance to see on the internet the field of sorgo behind the casita or the noria from where we would bring up pails of water to use for bathing and washing dishes.

I just saw green and brown squares of land and the squiggly blue line that ran right behind the rancho, and kept running from one end of the map on my screen to the other. A line that perfectly separated the United States from México.

There was a tool on Google Earth that I *could* use, however, that calculated the distance between any two points, so I measured the distance from the ejido to the squiggly blue line. I was astounded at just how close it was; about a mile away from the Río Bravo. It verified the stories my family would tell about fishing in the river behind the rancho, getting baptized there, crossing it for fun when they still lived in the ejido before they moved out of the outskirts of Matamoros into the city.

I used the tool to see just how close the ejido was to me now that I live in McAllen. If I knew I'd be able to cross back home to Texas, I'd get in my car and head there. A little over fifty miles away, it would take me about an hour to get there. I'd have to use the internet to help me, since the last time I had visited the rancho was when I was seven or eight years old.

With the help of the directions on the internet, I would find it and I know that all my lost memories would come back. I'd swing open the door and check for alacranes in the sheets. I'd run to the backyard to pull up a pail full of water from the noria, then water whatever flowers were growing where there was once a field of sorgo. I'd climb the tall mesquite tree next to Abuela's casita like I did when I was a kid. If it wasn't for puentes that ask for papeles, I would be there tonight, claiming all my memories.

2. Nilda

A few days later, I caught my mother at a better time to ask her about Nilda. I hadn't even planned on it, but I heard her talking about her Tío Chito, Abuela Concha's brother. She was telling my younger brother Erick that he reminded her of Tío Chito because of how generous they both were. When I heard her in a cheerful mood, I set my phone to record, waiting for a good time to ask her my questions.

Mom was imitating Tío Chito's voice as she told the story about the gift he bought my oldest brother, Chuyín, when he was born. He was a man of few words and he mumbled and stuttered when he did speak up.

"Aquí le compre al niño--*ahem, ahem*-- un regalito--*ahem, ahem*. A ver si, *ahem*, le gusta," she said, sounding just like him.

I remember Tío Chito well. He was a tall, stout man with dark hair and a full mustache, his hair always combed neatly to the side. He was always dressed in buttoned short-sleeve shirts

and brown dress pants. We loved it when he came to visit the Abuelas while we were there in the summertime because he would give me, my two sisters and my little brother one dollar bill each to spend at the little store up the street.

My mother went on about Tío Chito's gift as my phone recorded without her knowledge.

"Y lo que le compró fue un andador! Y apenas había nacido Chuyín!" she chuckled. It was his very first gift, but it would be a year until Chuyín would be able to use the walker.

"And Erick is just like your Tío Chito. He's always buying Brisa snacks and gifts," she said to Judy, Brisa's mother.

"Y tu Abuelita Concha le compró a Chuyín una troquita roja grande con llantas amar--"

"Ma, wasn't Tío Chito married to Tía Locha?" I asked, interrupting her. Tía Locha was a name I hated hearing when I was younger.

"Yes.That was his wife."

"Wasn't she the one that killed Nilda?" I knew the answer already, but I also knew that it was a better time to finally ask more, especially because Erick, Judy, Brisa and I were all in the house and could be of comfort to her.

"Si, ella fue la que la inyectó."

"But why? Was she a doctor or a nurse? Why did she give her that shot?"

"She was a retired nurse. She was pregnant at the time, a few days away from giving birth. When I came to see her, she had been asleep so I guess that's why she didn't check the prescription with the right dosage."

I let her go on without interrupting.

“It was very different in those times; you did these things at home yourself. Nilda had been dehydrated. I had taken her to the hospital and they had her there for a few days giving her suero. Then she got better and they sent her home. The doctor gave me a tiny glass bottle with medicine and her prescription; two tenths of the dosage only, because the medicine was for adults.

I’ll always remember that day. I got out of the hospital and Nilda was doing much better. I asked your Abuela Panchita if she could watch Nilda for me just a little while so that I could go buy something to eat. I hadn’t eaten much since I had been at the hospital for days. Panchita said yes and I vividly remember her standing at the door waving goodbye with Nilda in her arms. Nilda with a little white dress. I hurried to buy food and came right back to get Nilda. Later that evening when it was almost time to give Nilda her medicine, I went walking with Cande to Locha’s house.”

“Tía Cande?” I asked, recognizing the name as somebody from my father’s side of the family.

“Si, tu tía Cande, la sobrina de tu papa. Ella y yo éramos muy buenas amigas de la secundaria. Well, we got to Locha’s house and she started to boil the water to sanitize the needle.”

“Boil the needle? You mean she used the same needle for other people?”

“Los tiempos eran bien diferentes en ese entonces. That’s what they did. There weren’t disposable syringes like now. You boiled the needle for a long time, waited for it to get cold, and then you injected the person.”

I was horrified. Judy grimaced, too.

“I put the prescription next to the medicine on the table for her. And when everything was ready, she got Nilda and gave her the shot.”

“And how soon after the shot did Nilda react?” I asked.

“Almost as soon as Locha had given her the shot. I took her back into my arms and Nilda couldn’t hold herself up. I felt her become loose, then she started to turn yellow. I asked Locha how much she had given her and she said she put in the whole bottle. So I took off running with Nilda in my arms, screaming for someone to take me to the hospital.

She was there for three or four days. I don’t know what they did, I didn’t have the right mind. They must have pumped her stomach. After a few days they said we should take her back home and see if she got any better.”

“And they didn’t ask you what had happened to her?” Judy wanted to know.

“Yes, they did ask me. I told them about the medication and the dosage she took but I didn’t tell them who had given it to her. I said I didn’t know her. Tu Tía Locha was just a few days away from giving birth and I didn’t want anything bad to happen to her.”

As I got older, I wondered why my family had always been so passive toward people that harmed us. Tía Locha and my father, especially. They kept showing up to visit or spend holidays with us in Matamoros. The Abuelas cooked for them and we ate around the table together, even though one had ended my older sister’s life and the other had abandoned us.

“I remember the day they gave Nilda back to me. We took the bus home and I sat her on my lap. She couldn’t hold her head up very well. She was wearing yellow overalls and her

beautiful dark hair was getting quite long. She was smiling but not like before. There was a sadness to her smile. The doctors told me that if she did end up making it, she would have brain damage.

Well she lasted sixteen days at home. I had severe anxiety during that time; I can't remember much. On the sixteenth day, she got very, very sick and your father and I took her back to the hospital but they gave us no hope. The doctors told us that we should find a priest, baptize her, and say our final goodbyes," my mother said, wiping a tear that had run down her cheek.

Judy wiped at her own face, then rested her hand on her belly. She had recently found out she was pregnant with her second child.

"I didn't have the courage to stay and watch Nilda die. I saw her looking up with her little mouth open, gasping in for breaths of air. I held her and told God, 'Muchas gracias por el tiempo que me la prestaste.' I cried and I cried, holding her. I kept thanking Him, and then I left because I knew she was about to die."

"Pobresita Nilda," Judy said, wiping more tears. One thing about the women in our family is that we are all chillonas, but especially Judy.

"Y que hizo Papá?" I asked.

"I didn't have the courage to face him or to stay in the hospital. Fuí bien cobarde. Me regresé a la casa. Ya no me pude quedar allí. Your Abuela Concha said that he was devastated. We didn't have much money and he had just finished a job pouring cement. He'd skinned his knees very badly and burned them, and he had huge sores and blisters, so he was limping that day. Tu Abuela Concha me dijo, 'Pobrecito, Chuy. Que dolor, hubieras visto. Entró chuequeando y salió con la cajita de la niña. Me dio tanta lástima con él.'"

She looked down toward the floor, pausing for a minute as she wept.

"Tu papá *tanto* que la quería. Y son cosas que todavía duelen. Por eso todavía no me gusta contarlas."

Judy and I sat on opposite ends of our mother, not courageous enough to reach out to hold her for comfort.

"And maybe that's when your dad started to change, though he never had bitterness toward Locha nor held a grudge. And neither did I. We both just knew to forgive.

Pero tan linda que estaba Nilda cuando nació. Estaba tan hermosa. Gordita, cachetoncita, y bien risueña. Era pura risa ella."

I thought of the large portrait hidden in my mother's closet of the older sister I was supposed to have, who only got a chance to live ten months. It wasn't her fault that I hadn't felt a connection to her. It was no use wondering if she'd still be here if she had been born in the United States, where perhaps doctors wouldn't have prescribed an adult dosage of a medication to an infant. It was no use to keep bitterness in my heart toward the person that had stolen my chance to have an older sister to guide *me*. Defend me from my older brothers. Be my mother's right hand, instead of that responsibility always being split between Chuyín and me when my father left.

I felt a duty to remember her.

"If I ever have a daughter, I will name her Nilda," I said to my mother. "Even if it's just as a middle name."

“I always wanted to name my next daughter Nilda. Pero todos me echaban miedo que se me iba a morir también.”

“Mom, those are just superstitions. Just things people say.”

“Things people say for a reason. Your great grandmother had three boys that she named the same name and they all died very young. So instead I just named you and Nancy both names with N’s.”

3. Este Lado

I was born in Matamoros, Tamaulipas ten years after Nilda, in the same hospital. My mother was 29. In Mexico back then, expecting mothers didn’t find out the gender of their baby until the moment they delivered. At least there at the Seguro Social that offered free healthcare for all Mexicans, that luxury didn’t exist.

My parents had two more boys after Nilda for a total of three, with their firstborn, Chuyín. My mother says that after giving birth to Israel and Cesar, my father had repeatedly belittled her, saying, “Tu no sirves ni para tener niñas.”

So when I first cried as the doctor held me upside down by my feet and spanked my bottom, my mother had not even wanted to look.

My father sat in the waiting room along with my Abuela Concha, Tía Norma, and her husband, Tío Efrain. At the Seguro, fathers aren’t allowed to be present during deliveries, so he waited for updates with the rest of my family.

“Que no quieres saber que tuviste?” the doctor asked my mother after a while. The nurses had long taken me away and she still hadn’t asked.

“Que fue?”

“Es niña,” he told her, and she burst out crying with joy and relief.

“Pues ya pa’ que lloras? Si ya nació.”

My family in the waiting room had known before my mother had and they said my father hopped around joyfully, glad to finally have another daughter. And to add to his joy, born the evening before Father’s Day.

Chuyín says now that he was disappointed upon meeting me when they brought me home from the hospital. He was attending the primaria then, and had seen how classmates made fun of the kids that were prietos and morenos. He didn’t like how prieta I was, too. Nilda had been quite fair-skinned.

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My parents had made a trip to Brownsville with my older brothers to visit family while my mother had still been pregnant with me. For a while, they had half-considered migrating there for better education opportunities for my brothers than they’d each had.

My father dropped out of school at fourteen years old to start working a job in construction with a social housing project called Infonavit, in order to help his parents financially. My mother’s family hadn’t been able to afford to send her to school past the secundaria. In Mexico, public education isn’t free for children like it is in the United States.

Families there must pay everything from tuition, uniforms, books, and supplies down to monthly fees for the school to pay the janitors. My parents were struggling to make ends meet between sending three boys to school and having enough to cover their cost of living on only my father's salary.

Friends and family that lived in Brownsville had told my parents that they should think about enrolling their boys in school there. My mother and father were enticed with the vision of seeing their children be able to attend school and actually graduate, instead of having to drop out when my parents stopped affording it. With education, they'd have a better chance of finding good employment, especially if they acquired a second language. But uprooting would be hard, so my parents stayed in Matamoros.

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Closer to my birth, my parents had visited family in Brownsville again. My mother's Tía Lupe showed them a little shed that was available for rent. It belonged to a practicing midwife who lived in a house in the same lot.

"Allá en frente del cuartito hay una partera. Ella cobra 300 dólares por parto, y cuando te alivies, ella puede venir a checarte mientras te recuperes," she advised my mother.

Three hundred dollars per birth? My mother and father discussed it. He had just received a bonus at the maquila that he had been saving, but since he had the amount, he said yes. My mother, however, was worried about not being able to make ends meet if they spent it all on me.

"I'll have her in Mexico," she decided.

Without meaning to, she had repeated with me almost the exact history of her own birth. My mother's father, Jose Santana, was a United States citizen by birth. He and my Abuela Concha were about to have my mother and they had an argument about where she would be born. Abuelo Santana wanted her to be born in the United States like the rest of his family, but Abuela Concha was upset with him at the moment, and in her defiance, she said my mother would be born in Mexico with her own family.

Abuela Concha alone had made the decision for my mother's birthplace like my mother had made with mine.

When I first learned the whole story behind the decision of my birthplace, I felt angry but I wasn't sure who to direct my anger at - my mother or the universe for it having been my fate. My anger lasted a few minutes when she told me, and I felt it as a lump sitting in my throat. I wanted to say something to her, reclamarle that her decision for my birthplace and their decision to migrate to the United States afterward had made my life so hard. But what was the use? My anger turned to sadness for a few other minutes, and then I quickly turned all of it into resignation. What was done was done. I had to breathe in and let it go.

I can't say that I still don't wish my mother had just agreed to pay the partera the three hundred dollars so that my life could have been much easier. There's a stark difference between the lives my three older brothers and I have lived, and the lives of my three younger siblings that were born in the United States.

It made me view life as a game of luck. Like when you're playing cards with somebody and they shuffle the deck, split it, and hand you your share of cards. Neither of you has yet seen

the cards you each got, and you turn yours up, hoping they're good. But if they're bad, it's okay because the game you're about to play has just begun.

EL RÍO ERA SOLO UN CHARCO

"1,950 mile-long open wound
dividing a *pueblo*, a culture
running down the length of my body,
staking fence rods in my flesh,
splits me splits me
me raja *me raja*

This is my home
this thin edge of
barbwire."

- Gloria Anzaldúa

My mother's father, Jose Santana, was born in Harlingen, Texas. Abuela Concha and Abuelo Santana met in the Rio Grande Valley, since my grandmother crossed regularly to Brownsville to work as a live-in nanny and maid. They got pregnant with my mother soon and separated just as quickly, never marrying. Since her parents weren't together long, my mother didn't know much about her father. She knew both of his parents had moved to the border to work as Braceros, and that's why he had been born in the Rio Grande Valley. Abuelo Santana moved around a lot for work and was hardly involved in my mother's life except for sporadic visits when he would pick her up in Matamoros to take her to visit his family in Brownsville.

When my mother was a child in the mid 60's and 70's, crossing the border was a completely different experience than it is today. When Abuelo Santana showed up and they crossed into Brownsville, my mother was never asked for a visa or any other identification. He

was a United States citizen and that was enough for the agents at the puente, who quickly allowed them both to pass through.

My mother's mother, Abuela Concha, also experienced a much different border than today's. For many years, Abuela Concha and her younger sister attended Los Días de Charro, at the border of Brownsville and Matamoros, which my mother attended a few times, too. Each year, the puente was opened up one day for free crossing during the festivities of the Charro Days. It was called the *Día Libre*, and no documents were asked from anyone who crossed to Matamoros or to Brownsville on that day. People made long lines to participate in the events and experience the floats and parades, and more than likely, they all went back home to their families. Abuela Concha and Tía Lidia always did. The annual Día Libre eventually stopped, stronger border walls were erected, the agents at the puente got tougher, and yet the celebrations of the Charro Days continued.

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My family has always lived and worked along the Río.

My great-grandfather, Abuela Panchita's husband, was a Bracero in the 1950's. He worked in San Benito, Texas clearing out fields. Working with a partner, they tied ropes around trees, hooked them to tractors, and uprooted them. One of those days as they worked, his co-worker failed to send the signal that he had started pulling with the tractor. My bisabuelo had his back turned while he prepped the next tree, and when the uprooted tree came down, it hit him on the head, causing him to lose consciousness.

When he awoke he was at a hospital in Harlingen, recovering from a surgery to put a metal brace in his head because the tree had cracked his skull open. The doctors told him that his spinal injuries were severe and that over the years he would slowly lose his ability to walk until becoming completely bedridden. The American contractors took care of the hospital bill, but my bisabuelo lost his job and wasn't given any compensation for being injured at work. My great grandfather's aching and limping got worse until he did in fact become completely bedridden, just as the American doctors had said.

When he passed away, Abuela Panchita was old in age and became dependent on their daughter, my Abuela Concha. She worked as a live-in nanny and maid in Brownsville during the week while Abuela Panchita helped raise my mother, Tía Norma, and Tío Agustin.

When American factories started opening up in Matamoros, however, Abuela Concha found a job at the Fisher-Price maquiladora, where she stayed working for 9 years. Fisher-Price gave their employees free toys around Christmas. I knew where to find those toys when I visited; she kept them stored in a small box inside her big ropero. One was a white telephone that rolled its eyes up and down when you dragged it from its red string. There were also two muppets, Gonzo and Kermit the Frog. I used to love to play with Kermit because he had long arms that I'd wrap around my neck as if he was hugging me and I could also pretend to give him piggyback rides, or camachito, as we called it.

My mother also worked in fabricas, which is how people in Matamoros more commonly refer to maquilas. She worked for E.C.C. de Mexico, on a television assembly line where she would weld tiny wires to tv motherboards. After that contract ended, she worked for the Electropartes fabrica on an assembly line where she would fix little bulbs onto tv sets.

Employees were hired on six-month contracts. My mother and Tía Norma both worked at Electropartes full time for $300 pesos, which today would be $14 USD per week. At the end of the six-month contract, employees were let go and each given three thousand pesos, or the equivalent of $144 USD today.

My mother remembers how excited she was, along with Tía Norma, to get three thousand pesos each. With their bonus, the first thing they did was purchase television sets. I naively asked my mother if they bought their tv's from the maquiladora they worked for, perhaps at a discount, and she said no, they bought their tv's in regular electronics stores in Matamoros. Electropartes tv sets that they assembled were only exported to be sold to Americans, under the Zenith brand.

I hadn't been born yet, but my mother recalls how happy my family was when they first experienced the luxury of their new 12-inch tv: "I would make a stack of warm tortillas de harina and then I would send your brother Chuyin with Tupperware to the little store down the street, where they sold frijoles a la charra. We made tacos and sat in front of our new tv to watch Don Francisco while we ate. We were so lucky. Nadie tenía televisores en ese tiempo, y menos a color."

My father also worked at the Electropartes maquila, but unlike my mother and Tía Norma, he was kept past the six months contract for a total of 10 years. Tío Agustin, too, worked at a maquila called Deltronicos for 7 years, starting at the age of 15 and up until his death at the Río Bravo in 1986.

My parents half-migrated to Brownsville in the early 90's. Halfway because my father stayed in Matamoros during the week to work and my mother stayed in Brownsville to enroll my older brothers in school. At that time, Tía Norma's husband, Efrain, worked for maquilas as well,

as a truck driver. He delivered goods from Matamoros maquilas to the ones in Brownsville. My mother says that Tío Efrain would ask my parents if they wanted to ride along when it was time to return the trailers, and so we all climbed in. I was two years old and Nancy was just an infant, still needing to be breastfed during those trailer rides across the puente.

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El Río siempre estuvo allí.

El puente nos rajó.

My Tía Elsa used to cross the river with her friends as an adolescent, just to pick and eat American oranges from orchards. My Tío Agustin, newly wed, used to cross the river to impress his wife with American chocolates.

“Es solo un charquito,” they would say of the river that ran through my family’s rancho.

El Río era solo un charco that we crossed, until it no longer was and we no longer could.

ARBOL EN INGLÉS

My older brothers were beginning to speak English to each other at home, so Nancy and I had been a little curious about their secret language. Since I was older and had already started school, I assumed that I was now able to speak English too, and it was my duty to teach Nancy.

"Como se dice arbol en inglés?" she asked me, as we stood under the shade of a zarzamora tree in our yard.

"Arbo," I responded confidently.

"Oh! Y como se dice… ropa?" she asked, pointing to her clothes.

"Rop," I responded, with all sincerity.

"Y gato?"

"Gat."

I hadn't learned any English words yet because we spoke Spanish in my class, but I believed in my heart that if you just removed the last letter or sound of every word, it would turn the word into English. That was the first rule. That's how "carro" became "car."

I'd heard my older brother call it a "car," which had taught me the second rule. Instead of the Spanish "rr" sound, you needed to use a soft "r." When I had taught my little sister the English words, I'd made sure to pronounce them as such: *are-boe* for arbol, and *rope* for ropa. I

spent a long time outside with my sister that day, teaching her all the words she wanted to know en inglés.

I remained in all-Spanish classes during kindergarten and first grade. My first grade teacher was kind and my favorite part of the day was when she read books to us. I had never seen a children's book; we didn't have any at home. My kind teacher had asked us to sit quietly on the rug in front of her and she sat on a chair with the book on her lap, holding the picture up for us to see after she had read the words. I was fascinated at how a story came out of the words on the pages.

Later I told the story to Nancy as we played in the front yard with yellow jacarandas. We loved to pluck ten flowers each from the tree and put one on each end of our fingers as if they were our very long, yellow fingernails. With my long nails, I pretended to be my grown-up teacher as I asked Nancy to sit down on the grass so I could tell her about the little brown bear with a missing button; the very first book I'd ever been read.

ALL-AMERICAN UNDOCUGIRL

"Honor the Texas Flag, I pledge allegiance to thee. Texas, one and indivisible."

We say this one right after the long one: "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America…" We say both of them with our hand on our heart. Then we get to sit down to eat our breakfast. My favorite is when they give us the stick with the bread on it and the carnita inside because they give us a little cup of syrup.

This year I'm in English again. My teacher's name is Mrs. Oettle. She's very white and she's very, very nice to me. And the best part. Her husband is my music teacher and he's also very nice.

Today was fun because we made art about Texas. My teacher gave us a bunch of little squares of tissue paper in a lot of colors and she gave us glue in a little cup and she told us to put the papers on our pencil eraser and then dip it in the glue and then put it on the paper. I did a paper with a bluebonnet so I used a lot of little purple papers. I love Texas. We also did a paper of an armadillo.

But the other day it wasn't so fun. My teacher said it was going to be Valentine's Day and we needed to buy cards and candy for everyone. I didn't want to ask my mom to buy them because we don't have money. But I'm really good at drawing so I asked each person in my class if they liked Piolín or if they liked Taz. I'm really good at both, but if they said Taz it was cool cause I just draw a hurricane.

I was on my desk drawing my Valentine cards and one girl from my table pointed at me and yelled really loud, “Ew Miss, she has piojos!”

I got scared. Mrs. Oettle came to our table and took both of us outside the class. She asked the girl what happened and the girl said she saw a piojo on my head. I was embarrassed and my tears came out. Mrs. Oettle put her hands on my fleco and opened up my hair and she said, “See, she doesn’t have anything,” and she sent her back inside. Then she wiped my eyes.

I think Mrs. Oettle told her husband what happened because in music class he gave me a little plastic apple that opened and closed and it had candy inside.

THE GUAYABA SEEDS CROSSED TOO

At 8 years of age, I didn't know that I was undocumented, but I had started to notice that my two little sisters were different than me. Like when the three of us got sick, I couldn't see the doctor myself like my sisters could for medical exams.

I remember one of the doctor's offices that they went to, which had a little door that kids could walk in through instead of the normal door that adults used. I watched both of my sisters go in through that little door and I wondered what was on the other side. The waiting room had toys for kids to play with, but I stayed put in my seat while my mother went in with my sisters. After a long while, my sisters finally appeared through the little door and they always came out with Dum Dums and stickers.

I didn't ask why I couldn't see the doctor; my mother took care of the three of us just the same with their medicine. She poured some of my sisters' prescribed cough syrup into spoons for us and then she would make us té de zacate de limón. She would pour milk in the tea to cool it off, just like Abuelita Panchita did. She would tell us to put thick socks on because walking on the cold floors is what got us sick in the first place.

I noticed I was different too when my mother brought in the mail and there were letters of reminders for my sisters' dental cleanings. I never got one of those reminders, but I still came along with my sisters to their dentist appointments. I sat in the waiting room while they were inside with the dentist getting their teeth cleaned. They came out with white goody bags that had

more stickers and bouncy balls, but also their very own little tubes of toothpaste and a brand new toothbrush each.

I noticed once more that I was different from my sisters when we planned trips to visit our Abuelas in Matamoros. My mother didn't go with us, but a few times she sent us there with Lola, our neighbor. I imagined it was because Erick was too little for my mother to be traveling with him, so we went with Lola instead. My mother handed Lola two small cards, one for Nancy and one for Judy. I didn't have one.

Lola's kids almost perfectly lined up with us in ages and gender. My older brothers played basketball in the street with her sons and my sisters and I would run around the yard playing tag with Mari and Lupita. Their dad didn't live at home with them, so they visited him in Matamoros almost every weekend.

Nancy, Judy, and I sat at the front of Lola's big red truck with Mari and Lupita. Mari was Nancy's best friend, they were in the same class in school. Mari was a nice, beautiful girl with golden skin and light brown hair that ran down her lower back and curled at the ends. Lupita was pretty too, morena like me, and she had short black hair. She was Judy's age and though she was tiny, she bossed all of us around.

Before we left, Lola would stop at a convenience store to put gas in her truck with money my mom gave her, and she would also buy sunflower seeds and a soda. The five of us girls talked the whole way there, giggling mostly, and Lola sometimes laughed at our conversations while she spit sunflower seeds into a cup. She called her daughters "huercas

chingadas" or other bad words that I had never heard my mother say, but she said the bad words when they did something that made her laugh.

When we finally made it to Abuela Concha's little pink house, we unloaded our groceries and waved goodbye to Lola. We stayed to visit for a few weeks, or months sometimes, and then my mother would call that it was time for us to come back to Mercedes. It meant we needed to get dropped off at Lola's so that we could cross back with her. By the time that call came, Abuela Concha was ready with a bag full of new frilly underwear from the centro in Matamoros for us to take back home to Texas. She also packed in socks and several packages of colorful hair ties called bolitas, our favorite.

One of those times, we arrived at Lola's house early and they weren't done packing for the trip back. Everyone was coming in and out of the house loading their things into the old red truck. From outside their front door, I could see that it was very dark in their house. We weren't invited in so we played outside while Mari and Lupita finished loading the truck with their things.

It was taking a longer time than usual for their mother to finish up, so Mari and Lupita, who were now bored, picked some guayabas from their tree and shared with us. We washed the guayabas with the waterhose and after splashing our feet with water too, since it was very hot outside, the five of us ate our guayabas under the shade of the tree.

When Lupita was done with hers, she threw her head back and spit her guayaba seeds on the side of the truck. The rest of us cracked up, but since I was the oldest, it was my duty to have to say, "No, Lupita! Te va a regañar tu mama!"

"Pfft. She won't care," she scoffed.

“Yea, plus we can wash it with the manguera,” said Mari.

So the rest of us bit into our guayabas and spit the seeds out too, decorating the right side of Lola’s old red truck.

When Lola came out from inside the dark house, she hopped into the driver’s seat and in her rush, she must not have seen the seeds that we hadn’t had time to wash off.

“Ready girls? ‘Amonos!” she said as she put her seat belt on.

The five of us climbed over the back of the truck so that we could lay down under the removable truck shell, or the camper, as Lola called it. Lola was alone in the front, but if she needed to, she could talk to us through a little window that connected the front of the truck to the camper. We had blankets laid out on the bed of the truck so it felt like a clubhouse just for us where we could make as much noise as we wanted if we closed the little window.

We were in line at the puente for a very long time, but we were chattering and giggling, having fun. When we finally got to the front of the line, the man in the uniform stepped outside of Lola’s window and asked her something and she showed them a little card.

The man then headed to the back of the truck and saw us but didn’t ask us anything. He flashed his light around from one end of the camper to the other for a few seconds and was about to wave us off, when he stopped abruptly. Walking over to Lola, he shouted, “You’re crossing fruit ma’am? I smell fruit.”

“Oh, that was us!” we yelled out from the camper when we heard him, and he walked back towards us.

“We spit guayaba seeds on the side of the truck.” One of us said.

“Yea, look!” Lupita stuck her head out the camper and pointed at the seeds.

He stepped to the right side and saw the guayaba seeds that hadn't yet flown off the truck.

"Oh. Okay then. Go ahead," he said to Lola, waving his arm toward Texas.

As soon as we crossed the puente, clean streets and green grass suddenly appeared and that's how I always knew we were back in Texas. The five of us laid back down to get comfortable for the hour long ride to Mercedes. We'd get to see Mom, sleep in our own bedroom, buy school supplies, go to a new grade and meet our new teachers.

Those summers in the 1990's ended perfectly like this. I knew I would miss my Abuelas, but I loved being back home in Mercedes.

MY MOTHER'S RIGHT HAND

My older brother was allowed to check books out from his school library by the time I spoke and read English well. Lying around the house were copies of *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* or *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory,* which I read when Cesar was done with them. Because of the books that he would bring home, my favorite authors became Beverly Cleary and Roald Dahl and when I, too, was also allowed to check books out from my school library, I read as many Dahl and Cleary books as were available. My very favorite was *Matilda*; her family sort of reminded me of mine. Not that I had cruel, careless parents, because I had a loving mother, but my brothers did bully me. We did watch tv a lot. And I did find a lot of comfort in books.

✦

Because I was the oldest daughter and more willing to help my mother than my older brothers were, I became her go-to when she needed help with translations. Since I read books for fun, my mother asked me to help her with reading our mail too, since it was all in English, and to help her fill out my younger siblings' medical paperwork. I filled out applications for her because it was faster than to read out each question. I'd be on the phone with our light company, asking them for a payment plan so that they could reconnect our electricity. At times it was frustrating to always be the one on the phone for my mom or filling out paperwork for her, but it paid off when she told me once that I was her "mano derecha."

PIEDRA NEGRA

I sat quietly in the red rocking chair across from my bisabuela's bed. She had the small basket on her lap that held the grooming products she used after her daily shower. As always, she laid them out to her side in the order that she would use them: ointments, a bandage roll, a pair of compression stockings, Brillantina, a hairbrush. I looked down at my bare feet that touched the cement floor only when the rocking chair went forward. I didn't want to speak yet because I felt that my tears would come out, so I rocked silently with the lump in my throat.

I usually came into Abuela Panchita's room to sit in the rocking chair while she sat on her bed and we talked, but mostly we listened to the hymns playing on the radio that she kept on her bed. Now that she was in her eighties, her eyesight wasn't great and she could no longer read her Bible. Instead she left her battery-powered radio on day and night to listen to hymns and sermons. I loved listening to the coritos with her because they were the same ones that we sang in my church back in Mercedes, and on weekends while we cleaned our house, my mother sometimes played the same coritos over the radio station. 1290 AM; she knew that Abuela Panchita was listening too.

Fifteen years before, Abuela Panchita had hurt her foot in an accident at the rancho, which was why she needed all those ointments and bandages. She had been picking sorghum to feed her chickens when a sharp espiga from the sorgo punctured the skin above her left ankle on a varicose vein. Even though she'd had medical treatments on the wound several times, it was never able to scar over and close. From then on, she treated the wound on her own daily.

After her showers, she would sit on the edge of her bed to apply her ointments, then wrap clean white gauze around and around her ankle. She secured the wrapping with a small metal clip and then put on her pair of compression stockings. Once she was done, she slipped her feet

into her soft, black loafers. I had peeked at the open wound once but quickly looked away so that I didn't hurt her feelings. She felt shame about her ulcera, as she felt shame about how she looked now that she was old.

One time when I had been dropped off at the Abuelas' house at the beginning of summer, I had knocked on their front door, but no one answered. It was late in the evening and Abuela Concha wasn't home, but I knew that I could go to the back of the house and knock on Abuela Panchita's door and she would be there. I was so excited to surprise her.

"Abuelita! Soy yo. Ya llegue, Abuelita!" I called out to her.

"Ah, mijita!" I heard back. I got more excited once I heard her soft voice, immediately familiar again after I had gone the entire school year without hearing it.

"Dejame te abro mija, ya voy," she said, and I heard the door unlocking.

When she opened it, I saw my beautiful bisabuela in her blue sleeping dress with her long white braids. I rushed past her doorway to go in for a deep hug, careful to be gentle and not tumble her over, but as we hugged she said to me and my older brother, who stood behind me, "Mijitos lindos, no los quiero asustar! Ya estoy viejita y parezco un mounstro."

I had no idea why she would think she looked like a monster but she was chuckling as she said it, so perhaps she didn't mean it. I wasn't scared of her at all. I was just thrilled to be able to hug her again.

Now that she was done caring for her foot, Abuelita towel-dried her long, white hair and parted it down the middle. I rocked silently, observing as she poured a few drops of Brillantina oil into her hands and rubbed them together to warm it up before applying it to her damp hair.

“Tu has visto esas piedras negras que las mujeres ricas usan en sus collares?” she asked me, brushing one side of her wavy, parted hair.

“No,” I responded softly, holding back the tears.

“Son unas piedras bien caras, bien hermosas.”

I observed as she brushed the other side of her parted hair. I was a little confused. Maybe she was talking about the rich ladies in the telenovelas.

“Todas las mujeres ricas usan esas joyas en sus collares. Son tan brillosas y elegantes.”

I waited for more, but that was all she said to me. We sat for a few more minutes listening to coritos on the radio while she formed two long, white trenzas. Her bedroom door was open to let the fresh breeze in, and from my rocking chair I could see that Abuela Concha was back home, raking the yard. I excused myself and went outside to see if she needed any help.

The sun was almost setting and the Matamoros air was warm, carrying the smell of guayabas with it. I helped Abuela Concha pick some of the ripe ones from the tree and some of the ones that had already fallen on the ground.

“¿Qué andabas haciendo, pinga?” she asked me as we rinsed the guayabas in a bucket of water.

“Estaba con Buelita. Me conto de una joya negra que las mujeres ricas usan.”

“Ah, tu Abuelita con sus cosas,” she said, and we stepped into the little pink house through the kitchen door to get ready for dinner.

✦

It would be years before I would think again about the expensive black jewels. Abuela Panchita's words came to my mind as I thought about her when she passed away. I realized that I'd blocked out the part of the day earlier that had caused the lump in my throat while I sat in her red rocking chair.

I'd had a fight with my older brother Cesar. He was always picking on me back home in Mercedes and Mom wasn't around to defend me because she was usually away, cleaning somebody's house. My sister Judy was his favorite, and for some reason he didn't like me much. I guessed it was because she was the youngest or because they were both the same skin color; the güeros in our family. Sometimes he would create situations for me to get mad with Judy just so that he could be justified in hitting me or bullying me. I wasn't able to do anything about it because he was four years older and much stronger than me. I'd felt how hard he punched and I wanted to avoid getting him to that point again. When we had those fights, I felt so angry inside because I couldn't get even with either of them. Sometimes he would have Judy up on his shoulders and they both pointed at me, laughing because I was crying, which would only make me feel more powerless and more furious.

That day in Matamoros, I had been chasing after Cesar because he couldn't fight with me as easily when I was at Abuela Concha's house. Earlier that summer he had hurt me and Abuela Concha had defended me. I had been sitting on the floor watching cartoons and Cesar was sitting on the bed by me.

"Hey, look. There's an ant inside the garrafón," he said, pointing at the empty five-gallon jug of water.

Grandma's garrafón was by the door, ready to be picked up, and I was sitting next to it. In Matamoros, men that delivered drinking water stopped at each house weekly to trade out full glass garrafones for the used, empty ones to be refilled.

"An ant?"

"Yea, look."

I put my eye up to the spout to look and I felt Cesar push my head into the glass jug hard, then he burst out in laughter. There was blood trickling from my eyebrow to my chin. Abuela Concha came in from the kitchen and she scolded Cesar to no end. But this time, Abuela Concha had not been home.

"Negra! Negra!" Cesar yelled at me while I had been sitting on grandma's bed, brushing my hair. I got up and chased him around the small house but he ran outside. He probably wouldn't be back till much later that night, since he hung out with the neighbors that were around his same age. I stood there alone, feeling angry and defeated yet again.

Buela Concha wasn't home, Mom was in Mercedes, and Abuela Panchita had been taking her shower. Besides, Abuela Panchita never scolded us and we respected her too much to misbehave in front of her.

Because fights like that with Cesar happened so often in Mercedes without any consequences, I had been sitting in the rocking chair trying to calm myself down and let it go. I realized much later that Abuela Panchita must have heard our fight while she was taking her shower, and she had chosen to comfort me with the anecdote about the black jewels. She probably knew I wasn't going to understand her words in that moment and that they would reappear years later for me when I was able to.

Long after she was gone, I would return over and over to her words. The color of my skin was beautiful, too, and I had great value and worth.

BEE STINGS

In eighth grade I had my first crush. His name was Jace Huerta and he was the tallest boy in our class. He had a long, thin face and his rose lips smiled into a slight overbite. His hair was the color of the sand at South Padre Island. He was guero, the type that tans golden, and his eyes were a swirl of blue and green. More green than blue.

Every morning when Ms. Sepulveda was running late to our homeroom, we'd sit on top of our desks talking and hanging out while we waited for her. Jace was very outgoing. He always walked through the classroom door with a loud "*What's uuuuup*," whether the teacher was there or not. When our teacher was late, he came in bumping fists with the guys and giving the girls hugs. He didn't leave anyone out, that's why I had started to have a crush on him.

I tried to act like his hug wasn't what got me out of my warm bed every morning. I made sure to savor inconspicuously every warm feeling that his two-second hug gave me. Being wrapped up in his almost six-foot frame for ten seconds out of the week was the most action I'd ever had with the opposite sex.

I was a brown, chubby, five-foot three girl. I never spoke up in class or addressed guys unless it was my gay best friend, Ray, whom I hung out with at lunch and after school while we waited for our bus.

My other best friend, Breanna, knew about my crush on Jace. She was the opposite of me in almost every way. She was tall, had vanilla skin and long curly hair that she dyed a bright red, and she was very outspoken, with a boisterous cackle to accompany. She was the type to ask our teachers questions repeatedly if she didn't understand the assignment.

“Nambe sir! I don’t get it,” she would complain. She made the entire class crack up sometimes. She was chubby, too, a little bigger than me but not by much. She swayed around in her tight jeans confidently, her polo shirts barely covering her belly. Low-rise bell bottom jeans were the trend in the early two-thousands, and we were all wearing them.

Breanna passed me a note in class one day while our teacher was writing on the board.

“He’ll say yes or no.”

I immediately remembered the conversation we’d had at lunch about Jace. That stupid Breanna! All the blood in my body shot straight up to my cheeks and they steamed. I looked up and she giggled before she turned to continue taking notes. I did not move, but if I looked as far right as my peripheral allowed me to, I could see the blur of his sandy hair. I picked up my pencil and pretended I was taking notes. Instead, I quietly started to put my things into my book bag one by one so that when the bell rang, I could pick it up and dash.

As I slid my folder in, a girl sitting next to me put another note on my desk, whispering, “They told me to give this to you.” It took me a few seconds to undo the crafty way it had been folded up.

“Nat likes you. Will you go out with her. Circle Yes! or No!” in Breanna’s ugly cursive, blue ink.

“Yes!” was circled around and around in pencil.

Oh my God.

The fire in my cheeks got hotter. My stomach felt staticky, like when your legs fall asleep. I tried to concentrate the rest of the class period, but it was impossible because my face was ablaze and because the boy of my dreams actually liked me back.

When the bell rang, Jace made his way to me with his long legs before I could make my dash.

"Want me to walk you to your class?"

"Ok."

I glared in Breanna's direction but she winked at me on her way out.

When I got home from school that day, I found Nancy in our shared bedroom and I told her right away.

"I have a boyfriend!"

We shrieked. She was just a year and a half younger than me but she'd had her first boyfriend when she was in first grade. Now we could finally talk about boys together.

When we were little girls, Nancy and I were convinced that we were the first set of twins to be born a year and a half apart. We did everything together, but as close as we were, we didn't look anything alike. She had always been slender and had an angular, pretty face. That's why our Tío Efrain called her "Barbita de Clavo." My face was rounder, just like my body. Nancy's eyes were sharp and small, mine large and round. Her skin was a lighter shade of brown than mine. That's why Tío Efrain's nickname for me was "Prietita." She was the pretty one and she had never lacked attention from boys.

Though I was very shy at school, at home I was always the funny, loud one. Nancy and I had so many inside jokes and Mom usually had to come into our bedroom to tell us to stop talking and go to sleep.

That night, we were laying down on our beds whispering about my new boyfriend and what I was going to do or say at school when I saw him.

“It’s not that big of a deal,” I bluffed as I lay on my back resting my legs up on the lavender wall. My tripas trembled thinking about it, but since I was older than her, I had to keep my cool.

“Okay fine. Hey! By the way, I think my boobs are growing,” she said, as she scooted down to the edge of her bed. She kept her back and her legs on the mattress, face up, but she had put her arms above her head and arched them back so that they touched the floor.

“They’ve started to jiggle now when we run in P.E., and if I go back like this, my boobs move up towards my neck.”

Immediately I felt envious because as close as we were, there was always a silent competition between us, mostly from my end. I wanted to be smarter and funnier, and since I was older, I wanted to be given the respect and place I felt I deserved as the older one. Neither of us had gotten our period yet, but I was praying for mine every day.

“Well, it only matters if you can hold a pencil in between your boobs. I heard about that. If you can’t do that, then you don’t have real boobs,” I told her.

My breasts were already a little developed, primarily because I was chubby, so I was going to be jealous if it was actually true that hers were growing.

“Let me go get a pencil!” she said excitedly, and I scooted down the bed into the same wheel pose. My long hair was flowing down towards my hands on the floor. I was so happy that mine also went up slightly in the direction of my neck, and I couldn’t wait till she came back to our room to see.

We were both euphoric, but I played it off.

“How do you do the pencil thing?” she asked as she sat down on the corner of my bed.

“You have to squeeze your boobs together and see if you can hold it in between them.”

She slid the pencil down the center of her chest under her turquoise tank top and tried to hold it in place but there was no way it was going to stay held.

“Aww man, I guess I’m not there yet. That man in Matamoros was right, I do have bee stings!”

We cracked up as silently as we could manage.

We had been strolling a Matamoros marketplace the prior summer, and vendors were calling passersby to stop and look at their merchandise. There were always white Americans strolling around the centro too, buying artesanía, cheap liquor, sarapes, aguas frescas, tacos. Most of the vendors had learned a few English phrases in order to call Americans to their stands.

One of the vendors had draped some of the t-shirts that he was selling over his shoulders and arms to showcase them. Nancy and I were walking past him when he shouted out to her, “Which are you? Bee stings!?”

Without even glancing up, we knew which shirt it was. A lot of the vendors had the same merchandise. It was that white shirt with the rows of sketches of different types of breasts, each with a label underneath.

I let out a laugh as soon as he said that, but then I slapped a hand over my mouth and we both ran to the other side of the street. I felt bad. I was supposed to be protective of my little

sister. We stopped at a stand that was selling aguas frescas and we bought a large cup of agua de melon to share. As we sipped, we angrily discussed how it was so inappropriate of him to talk to eleven and thirteen year old girls like that. Luckily, Nancy didn't let it get to her too badly and afterward, it ended up being something we would remember about and laugh.

I put the pencil inside my shirt and stressed to cave in my shoulders as deeply as I could. The pencil stayed put in my cleavage.

"*Dang,* Nat. You're probably gonna get your period soon."

I beamed inside.

"Ya callense y vayanse a dormir!" my mother yelled at us from her bedroom.

✦

Jace had been walking me to my classes, and somehow, by the time the bell rang, he was already waiting outside my classroom doors for me. We hardly spoke when we walked because suddenly he had become shy like me. At school, I couldn't speak up to converse with him, yet every night, I couldn't wait to see him the next morning in class. After losing sleep about the awkwardness between us, I decided to write him a letter to give him the next day: "I don't want to be girlfriend and boyfriend anymore. I think we were better as friends because now we don't even talk." I gave it to him during our homeroom.

He wrote one back and sent it to me with Breanna: "Why are you breaking up with me? Can we try again?"

I didn't respond, and the rest of the day I walked by myself.

A few weeks later it was May and the school year was about to end, so we had a field trip to the Mercedes Boys and Girls Club swimming pool. I sat with my friends on the short bus ride there. The seats were full of loud, hormonal eighth graders flirting and play-fighting. Most girls were wearing their bathing suits under their clothes already. The rule was it had to be a one-piece, but I still only had the courage to wear a spaghetti strap shirt and shorts to the pool.

Once there, the lifeguards separated the girls into our musty locker room and the boys into theirs. We had to change into our swim clothes and leave our towels and other stuff locked up in our own locker. As I crammed my things into my locker, I tried to not make it obvious when I took a quick glance to see how much bigger the other girls' boobs were compared to mine. Then I remembered that I had lost sight of Breanna, who was probably already cannonballing into the water.

I felt very self-conscious as I stepped out into the sun, so I sat on the edge of the pool searching for her. Most of the girls were thin and getting curves in the correct places, and then there was me, undeveloped and chubby. I decided to get in so that the water could hide me.

Jace spotted me. He had been sitting under the shade of a canopy with his friend. He walked toward me and sat at the edge of the pool with his legs in the water. After we said hi to each other, he put his hand in the pool and splashed me. I pretended to get annoyed and I splashed him back. Then he lowered himself into the pool and moved towards me, but not before I snuck a quick scan of his golden body. He had a very long torso, and he was slender but muscular. He was wearing a pair of black trunks which rested right around his hip bones. We

kept playfully splashing each other and the people around us eventually moved away. He came closer and gave me a quick hug, and then he told me to lean on his back so that he could swim me around.

He faced away and I put my arms around his shoulders, but he reached back and grabbed my thighs, wrapping them around his waist as he started to walk us through the water. My face got hot again and the static came back for a few seconds, but then it started to go away. For the first time, we were actually flirting. How were we not shy anymore?

Breanna finally found me, and Jace left back to his friends. For the rest of our time at the pool, we joined a group that was tossing a beach ball around.

The lifeguards soon blew their whistles, shouting that it was time to get out and change clothes so we could have our lunch. On field trips, the school usually packed us paper lunch bags with an apple and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

When we got back to school, we played board games in class for the remaining hours.

I usually sat alone on the school bus on the way home. Breanna and Ray had different bus routes. I grinned to myself as I thought about Jace. All over again, I felt the flurries in my belly. I couldn't stop thinking about us flirting and how I had hung onto him around the pool. I couldn't wait to get home to tell Nancy. If she wasn't home yet, I was going to grab my notebook and write everything in there so that I wouldn't forget.

The bus pulled into my street and started making its regular stops. It was finally across my house so I grabbed my bag and hurried down to find Nancy.

I ran past our gate and threw open the front door, but I froze when I saw my mother standing by the sofa, sobbing. The whites of her eyes were bright red. There were stacks of folded clothes on the sofa, and I recognized my clothes in one of the stacks. She held open a black trash bag with one hand, filling it with our clothes.

Immediately and without a word being exchanged, I knew. I started crying, too. I stayed unable to move, frozen in place at the entrance to the living room. Even though I'd never seen skyscrapers in real life except for on tv, in that moment it felt as if one had just fallen on me, completely demolishing me. My mother, who hardly ever showed us physical affection, came to the door to wrap her arms around me as I wept.

"Ay, mija. Se nos fue tu Abuelita," she wailed, holding me. "Se me murió mi mamá."

With how hard she held me, I couldn't say who she felt needed more consolation, herself or me.

We sat down on the other sofa waiting for Nancy's bus to bring her home. She said we needed to go to Mexico as soon as Nancy arrived. Then she continued to pack our clothes into trash bags and I went to my bedroom to be alone.

My Abuela Concha was gone.

In Matamoros, her soul was leaving her body at the same time that I had been flirting with some guy in Mercedes, piggybacking on him around the pool. It made me feel guilty and dirty. Suddenly Jace was nothing. He became completely meaningless to me. I sat on my bed feeling so disgusted with myself and deeply heartbroken.

I knew my grandmother had been sick, but Mom hadn't explained just how sick. She always left us out of grown-up conversations. "No se metan en las cosas de adultos," I'd heard

her say plenty of times when we were little, until she only had to give us a look. With that look, my mother never again had to verbally remind us to not eavesdrop, ask questions, and especially, not interrupt when adults conversed. My siblings and I knew that after we had properly greeted our visitors, it was time to go outside to mind our business and not be in the way until it was time to eat.

When Nancy got home, my mother made a phone call to our neighbor Don Rogelio, quickly explaining what had happened. She asked him if he could take us to Brownsville, and within minutes he was in our driveway loading our trash bag suitcases into the trunk of his car. I knew this meant that Mom would have to cross back through the Río and that worried me. During the forty-five minute ride there, the four of us sat in silence.

It was always so easy to cross into Mexico; I wondered why it was so different when you left it. I couldn't comprehend why going that way only required some change at the border for the toll, but coming back was an ordeal that could cost someone, like my mom, their life.

✦

I went up to see Abuela Concha's body at her funeral before people started to arrive. She looked almost the same as I had seen her the summer before, except that she wasn't wearing her glasses. Her skin that was always the color of dulce de leche was a little paler, but her silver ringlets were just as shiny. Her hands were crossed over her stomach and I could see the little

lunar on the side of her palm. I looked at the lunar on the side of my own hand. Before walking to my seat, I lightly touched her hand and kissed her cheek.

I heard many people tell their memories of my grandmother on the stand, most of whom I'd never met. One was a very young lady from my grandmother's church who had stayed overnights at the hospital taking care of my Abuela Concha in her last days. She laughed through her tears, remembering some recent conversations they'd had. It had been nice to listen to all the other people tell their stories, but I felt jealous listening to the young lady who looked to be in her early twenties. It could have been me there at my Abuela's bedside on her last days. Though I felt jealous, I was also grateful that she had helped cared for someone she wasn't related to, and for nothing in return.

Part of my hurt with my grandmother's passing was that I stopped being somebody's favorite. She had never told me that I was, but I'd heard her say it to her neighbor, Doña Lala.

Abuela Concha had been watering her roses that morning, platicando with Doña Lala who was leaning over their shared fence. I was hanging up our damp clothes that I had helped Abuela wash by hand in a tub on the tallador. I don't remember the rest of the conversation, except for the part where Abuela Concha said, "Y luego me preguntan porque mija es mi favorita. Ella siempre anda conmigo y en todo me ayuda."

She hadn't known that I was listening. I hid my smile behind the wet shirt that I pinned up.

Some time before, Abuela Concha had bought me a little broom from a man that came down the street in his old pickup selling children's toys. The bed of his truck was full of them,

and Buela had told me to pick two things. I had picked the mini escoba and a fully functional mini iron tortilla press. Every morning as the sun rose, Abuela Concha stood outside her white iron gate and brushed the street with her escoba, and now I could brush with my mini broom right behind her. I was Conchis, her little shadow.

When Abuela Concha finished talking with Doña Lala, she came to help me hang the last of our clothes.

“Buela!”

“Quien vuela? Yo no vuelo,” she said, patting me once on the head before pinning a shirt up on the lazo. It was as affectionate as she would get, but it didn’t matter because I’d finally heard her say I was her favorite.

✦

My Bisabuela Panchita and Abuela Concha had lived together for many years after my great-grandfather died. In her will, Abuela Concha had left everything to Tía Norma, who now said that she needed to sell the little pink house in order to help pay for Abuela Concha’s medical bills and funeral. It would displace Abuela Panchita and my mother was very worried about where her 91 year old grandmother would be forced to move to.

“Se iría con nosotros, Buelita?” my mother had asked her.

“Si, mijita. Me gustaria pasar mis últimos días a tu lado,” she had responded, though she had never crossed into the United States.

Wanting to spend more time with her grandmother in Matamoros to comfort her, but also wanting to make arrangements for her to come live with us in Mercedes as soon as possible, my mother decided the best plan was to cross back home and send for her. In her desperation, she thought that the agents at the border wouldn’t think twice about letting an old lady in her nineties through.

Once back in Mercedes, Mom sent for Abuela Panchita with a family friend. She sent Nancy, too, because even though she was only twelve, she was the oldest American citizen in our family. Surely it would paint a normal family portrait for the border patrol agents; an American citizen girl crossing with her great-grandmother. For added measure, our Tía Elsa also sent her oldest American citizen child to Matamoros, our little cousin Danny who was even younger than Nancy.

Once in Matamoros, they loaded Abuela Panchita into the vehicle with Nancy and Danny at her sides. When the agents asked “American citizen,” my great-grandmother couldn’t respond, and when they asked for papers, she didn’t have any to show. Everyone was called out the vehicle and interrogated. A few hours later, Abuela Panchita was returned back to Matamoros.

Though most of her children had been authorized to cross, Abuela Panchita never had been able to obtain a visa because she’d never had a birth certificate, which was the most basic paperwork necessary to begin to apply for a visa or passort. When she was a baby, Panchita’s parents had made a hard decision to keep half of their children and give half away; they were

very poor and couldn't afford to feed them all. Panchita was taken in by a couple who was very kind to her and she forever lost touch with her birth parents and siblings. Her new parents never formally adopted or registered her, so Abuela Panchita lived her entire life not having a birth certificate or knowing her date of birth. She'd only been told by her new family that she was born sometime in the year 1912.

Abuela Panchita was moved to live with her other daughter, Lidia, who was very poor. They built for my great-grandmother a little shack big enough to fit her bed and her clothes. When I had visited her and seen her new home, I felt overwhelmed with guilt. In Mercedes, my mother rented a home for us that was pretty comfortable, but Abuela Panchita was living in a makeshift room in the middle of Tia Lidia's grassless yard, and since it had rained when I visited, there was mud everywhere. Abuela Panchita was very happy to see me and she talked to me as she always did, but I sat across her not really paying attention to her words, not even being able to connect to her emotionally due to the feeling of guilt that overpowered my ability to sit back and enjoy my time with her.

As she spoke, I kept wondering how she would be able to walk through the mud in order to get to the outhouse that was in the backyard. How she would stay warm when the air came in at night through the cracks between wood planks in the walls.

My mother had long returned to Mercedes to make the arrangements to cross her, and she didn't want to risk coming back and forth, nor could she afford it. She urged me to stay with Abuela Panchita as much as I could, but I could not bear to see her in that extreme poverty, in the middle of the yard surrounded by mud. I had been used to seeing her in their little pink house, in a comfortable room with her armoire and her rocking chair, our kindergarten crafts hanging on her walls, an indoor bathroom, a yard full of rosales in the front and arboles de duraznos y

guayabas in the back. I returned to Mercedes and then I felt even more guilty because I had chosen to not spend more time with her.

Abuela Panchita died two and a half months after having attempted to cross into the United States through the Brownsville border. We were all in Mercedes, back in our regular school routine. The evening that we got the call, we all broke in llanto together in our living room, except for my brother, Israel, who was a few years older than me. He walked over to his bedroom and locked the door behind him. A minute later we heard a loud crack from his room and an agonizing wail. I had never heard him cry before. We didn't know what to do or if we should knock on his door. He didn't come out the rest of the night. The next day we saw that he had punched a hole through the wall. He had been Abuela Panchita's favorite.

Through days of phone calls, family visits, and embraces, we all realized that Abuela Panchita had died of tristeza. She was in her 90's, but she had been perfectly healthy up until losing her daughter and having been displaced. We tried to comfort each other as best as we could, especially our mother who was devastated that she hadn't been by Abuela Panchita's side when she passed, that she hadn't stayed longer in Matamoros, and that she hadn't been able to cross her here.

OJOS DE BECERRA

Whenever someone identifies me as Mexican-American, I always correct them and say I'm Mexicana, or at best, Chicana. As if by instinct, I've always rejected when someone refers to me as Americana. I feel like I don't have a right to claim this country as mine because I am undocumented. In the same way, I've always rejected referring to my father as "my dad" when I speak about him. I've never felt a right to use that word of endearment because my father chose to leave when I was an infant.

I have to acknowledge that a part of my identity is American, but it's limited to cultural, and that I do have a father, but his involvement in my life was mostly biological. Lately, I wonder if feeling unworthy of a country and/or a father was inextricably linked for me in my mind; if they were dependent on each other like a symbiotic relationship. He birthed me and didn't want me; the country he migrated me to doesn't want me either. The history of the relation between the United States and Mexico clearly lets Mexican immigrants know we're undesired here. Both rejections of my father and this country have forever made me feel inferior, abandoned, and displaced.

✦

My father was able to freely enter the United States long ago, and when he no longer could enter legally, his abandonment of my family began. In February 1991, just six months after my parents had migrated from Matamoros, Tamaulipas to Brownsville, Texas, his authorization to cross was revoked.

Wanting to find better work opportunities, my father had decided to join my Tía Norma and Tío Efrain on their trip to Michigan. The three of them went to an immigration office to apply for permits to travel there for a season since their border crossing cards only allowed entry to the United States along the border region for a maximum stay of 72 hours. When they had each filled out their applications, the immigration agents asked them to turn in all their belongings as part of a security check. Tía Norma was asked to dump everything she had in her purse onto the table, and my father and Tío Efrain were asked to empty everything from their pockets and wallets onto the table as well.

Tía Norma said that once everything lay out in front of my father, he turned pale as the agents came closer to inspect his things. One of the papers from his wallet was an elementary school enrollment record for one of my older brothers. My Tío and Tía lived and worked in Matamoros as they had claimed, but my father in the application had also claimed to reside only in Matamoros, yet he had documentation with a Brownsville address and a child enrolled in an American school. The agents immediately separated them and took them in to be interrogated. Tía Norma says the agents shouted at her: “Tell us the truth and don’t try covering up for your brother-in-law!”

She was honest with them about my father residing in both Brownsville and Matamoros. The agents took their three crossing cards, ripped them up in their faces, and threw them in the trash bin. All three got a *castigo*, a ban from entering the United States for a year. Tía Norma and Tío Efra were furious with my father for quite a while afterward, because he had ruined their plans when they could have had no issue traveling to Michigan if they had gone to immigration by themselves.

✦

My parents had dated for only six months before getting married. They knew each other from church, where they both helped lead Sunday school classes. After going on a few dates, they felt pressure from both of their families to get married. They had a small wedding at church and right after the ceremony, my mother was whisked away to live with her new mother-in-law, my Abuela Josefina, since they couldn't afford a honeymoon and they had nowhere else to live. My mother says that she felt very in love with my father as a newlywed, but also incredibly estranged from her home. At 17 years old, she had slept in her Abuela Panchita's bed every night and now she slept next to a man with only a curtain separating their makeshift room from Abuela Josefina's bedroom.

They soon found out they had very different personalities. My mother was more affectionate and my father was colder, both emotionally and physically. My mother says she was caught off guard by how hard marriage turned out to be and she questioned why her family had allowed her to get married so young. My father would stay out late most nights and my mother caught him having an affair with an ex of his in the first few months of their marriage. She wouldn't confront him because he had made her feel like no one else would want to be with her. "Tu estas prieta, gorda, y chaparra. No cachas ni un resfriado," he would tell her.

As they had children, they learned how different their parenting styles were as well. My mother, like her own mother, was constantly in survival mode, worried about the day-to-day provisions. My father, like his mother, was very strict and valued abiding by the rules. My older brothers remember him as never letting anything slide, punishing them harshly when they didn't follow his rules or meet his expectations.

My father's rule-following nature also showed in his opposition to me being crossed illegally through the border after I was born when my parents' American citizen friend had offered to cross me as her own daughter. Another family friend had also given my parents advice to pay for a false American birth certificate for me with some midwives. Having lived in both Brownsville and Matamoros, that person told my parents that my life would be so much easier if I was American. My father ended that conversation and wanted nothing to do with that idea.

Long before I was born, my parents had also been told by acquaintances on both sides of the border that it would be easy to scam their way into qualifying for the immigration reform of 1986 that the Ronald Reagan administration passed. Some of them had stretched the truth in order to qualify for the amnesty, mostly due to not exactly meeting the time requirements which were to have been residing inside the United States before 1982. Some of them had been living in the United States for less time than what the amnesty law required. Some of them lived on both sides part-time, and some fully lived in Mexico but quickly found ways to provide proof that they resided in the Valley in order to qualify.

My parents were told that all they had to do was pay an employer on this side to sign a letter of employment for them and pay a landlord to write a letter as proof of address. They'd take it to immigration and automatically qualify into the amnesty program. My father refused to make his way into the United States using falsified letters. They watched their acquaintances get approved one by one. Three million undocumented people gained legal status through the amnesty of 1986.

Naturally, when my father was given the one-year castigo, he didn't have any plans to cross back illegally. In February when the agents ripped up his crossing card, I received my

passport from the Mexican consulate. Abuela Concha and Abuela Panchita had been taking care of me for six months in Matamoros while we waited for me to receive it, and the day it was issued to me, I was crossed to Brownsville to reunite with my parents and older brothers.

My parents had plans to eventually fully migrate to Texas legally once they worked and raised the money and my mother quickly started the paperwork with immigration to qualify for citizenship through her American citizen father. When my father's crossing card was revoked, their plans were halted. Instead of our family reuniting, there was an exchange of me crossing into Brownsville and my father being sent back to Matamoros. My parents' marriage, which already hadn't been strong, suffered more with that separation. Once in Mexico, my father grew even more distant and stopped providing for us financially.

Nancy had been born with the help of midwives within those six months in Brownsville; the first United States citizen in our family. After they paid for her birth and with my father now gone, my mother ran out of money and soon made the decision to leave Brownsville for a more affordable place to live in the Valley so that my brothers could keep going to school.

We moved forty-five minutes west to the small town of Mercedes. Abuela Panchita had some good friends that lived there, Doña Pera and Don Chago, and they wanted to help my mother get more stable. They owned a small piece of land out in the country which had two houses, theirs and the one that they were going to let us rent. Our new house had three bedrooms and was much more comfortable than the little shack in Brownsville we had lived in.

Since the rest of us were able to cross legally, we visited our family in Matamoros on the weekends and my parents ended up pregnant one last time with my youngest sister, Judy. Even though my father had been present at all our births, he wasn't able to be present for her birth

because of his ban and the time it took to receive his new passport. My mother took Judy to Matamoros so that my father could meet her, but around the time that Judy turned one, my mother's crossing card expired. This pushed my father to gain courage to break the rules in a way that he hadn't before. He decided to cross the Río Bravo to see us again in Mercedes. A family friend named Bocho helped him cross.

✦

Bocho lived in the same ejido in the outskirts of Matamoros where my Abuelas had a ranchito. The ejido didn't have running water or electricity, so my Abuelas only visited for a few days at a time to check on the land and while they were gone, Bocho helped keep an eye on the rancho for them. The Río Bravo snaked right behind the ejido, and Bocho sometimes helped people cross it on a small boat. He could see on the other side of the river the houses where his family lived in Brownsville. He crossed now and then to see them.

"Es un charquito," Bocho would say about the river. Just a puddle.

That time that Bocho helped him cross was my father's first visit to Mercedes. He stayed just a few days because he still had his job at the maquila in Matamoros, and later my mother would find out, a new partner.

A year or so later around Christmas, when my father had obtained his new passport, he came to visit us a second time for a weekend. He had even surprised us by bringing us a Christmas present. One doll each for Judy, Nancy, and me, and one Barbie for my cousin Nelly, who lived with us. Our Tía Elsa had just migrated to Mercedes and since we had three bedrooms, my mother gave one of them over to her and Nelly. I remember being very happy about my doll

and running over to give Nelly her present, then feeling a little envious when I saw Nelly open her gift, which was a Barbie. I'd seen them on the commercials when we watched Saturday morning cartoons and had always wanted one for myself. If my father had been living with us, he would have known to get me a Barbie too and not a baby.

My father informed my mother during that visit that he had only applied for a one-year expiration date on his passport. The reason for that was probably to save money on the passport fee, or perhaps because now that he'd found a new partner, he'd needed to come just once more to Mercedes, to tell my mother in person that he no longer wanted anything to do with her. My mother says that he told her to not cross to Mexico again, but if she did, she was to not show up anywhere near his house. Along with the dolls he brought for us, he had brought divorce papers for my mother, which she refused to sign. She said that she didn't think it was fair for him to get off that easily from his responsibility towards us.

✦

Some time later, we crossed to Matamoros to visit the Abuelas. Our family there was aware that my father had recently been fired from his job at the Electropartes maquila and he had received quite a good sum of severance pay after working there for ten years. With the money, he had bought a small Infonavit home, where he lived with his new partner. My mother had never seen her, but her acquaintances in Matamoros said the lady looked just like "La Chimoltrufia." Perhaps they said she looked like that tv character just to make my mother feel better.

Even though we were in the same town as my father with no border for him to have to cross, he didn't go see us at Abuela's house. Tío Efrain would let my father know when we were

in Matamoros with our mother because my father didn't want to unintentionally cross paths with her.

"Aquí esta la comadre," he'd tell my father, and my father knew to not visit his compadre until we had left back to Mercedes.

✦

At that age, I didn't have a clue of anything that was going on between my parents and since my mom raised us to stay out of grownups' business, we didn't wonder about it. Matamoros was where I got to see my Abuelas during school breaks and Mercedes was my home with my mother and siblings. I couldn't miss what I didn't have at home on a regular basis, so in those early years, I forgot that I had a second parent.

My mother did feel his absence, deeply, but she kept all of that to herself. She didn't see any of my father's severance pay, though they were still legally married. Not only did he not help us financially, but he also never called.

Not for a single birthday did he call to wish me or my brothers and sisters a nice day. My mother, on the other hand, had a special tradition for us. Every year at 11:59 p.m. of the day before it was our birthday, she'd light the candles of a birthday cake so that just as the clock turned to 12:00 a.m., she would be walking past our bedroom door with one or two of us who had managed to stay awake, and we'd gently shake the cumpleañero awake, then yell, "Feliz cumpleaños!" and have them blow out their candles.

Thinking about this now, it seems a little silly that she would do that because we wouldn't eat any of the cake; we'd go right back to sleep and eat it the next day. But perhaps it solidified

for us younger ones that we had a normal childhood; that we weren't missing out on anything or anyone. Only Chuyin, Israel, and Cesar had experienced living with our father in Matamoros before my family moved to Brownsville. Nancy and I had only shared a home with him when we were still babies before he was given the ban, and Judy never had.

I don't remember a single conversation at home when we were kids where any of us mentioned my father. The phrase "out of sight, out of mind," rang true for us. My mother says now, however, that sometimes she stayed up at night looking at us sleeping when we were very small, feeling sorry for us to be growing up without a dad. It was ironic to her how my father had desperately wanted a daughter, but now that he had three, he had abandoned us all.

✦

After my mother could no longer legally cross, she went years at a time without going to Mexico, which caused my father to be more likely to stop by to see us when we visited the Abuelas.

Since we had school breaks from June through August, my mother would send us to Matamoros to see Abuela Concha and our Bisabuela Panchita for her, so that we could spend time with them and help them as much as we could. During those three months, my father would show up to see us maybe two or three times. His visits were random, but I was used to seeing family drop by all the time to visit the Abuelas. Those random family visits were the only way I'd met my primos, Tío Chito, Tía Locha, Tío Filomeno, and Tía Lupe. They didn't cross to Mercedes. The Abuelas warmly greeted anyone who dropped by and they quickly started cooking food and boiling café de olla to have with dessert. They would send me to the tortilleria a few blocks away to get a kilo de tortillas de masa, where they also sold menudo and barbacoa

on weekends. We always bought menudo on Sundays, visits or not. Panchita loved the menudo's warm, spicy caldo. They'd also send me to get pan dulce or galletas at Don Tino's up the street for our evening cafecito. I was happy to run errands for my Abuelas, anything they needed and before they even had to ask.

When my father visited, however, I noticed that my Abuela Concha was a little short in her responses to him, but she still welcomed him in and served him a full plate of food. Abuela Panchita was nicer to him, but she was very kind to everyone.

"Ve a traerle una Manzanita a tu papá," she would tell me as she handed me a big golden coin. Manzanita Sol was his favorite soda.

✦

Almost every memory of my father during those random visits is a good one. I never expected him. I'd be playing outside Abuela's house and would suddenly see him roll up to the front gate in his blue bicycle with its skinny road tires. I always wondered how those skinny tires could hold up my father, who was sturdy and well over six feet tall.

I remember one time as he was getting off his bike, he opened my Abuela's gate and walked his bike through it, and the first thing he did when he was inside the yard was to pick me up. I was maybe six or seven and it felt wonderful to see how happy I made my father in that moment. I could tell he was happy because as he held me up toward his face, he had a smile so wide that his small eyes almost disappeared behind his cheeks.

"Ay, tu barba me pica!" I giggled, as I soothed my cheek from the prickles of his thick black beard. That made him laugh. I forgot what else happened that day. He must have stayed to

eat and then left. In the next few memories I have of him, I don't recall my age or dates. They're all just photographic memories imprinted in my mind.

✦

One day, my father walked in through my Abuela's gate carrying a bag of manila mangos. He gave me one and we both ate our mangos on the front yard by the rosales. He was standing up and I was sitting on the front steps, mango juice running down my chin.

"Ay, Natalia," he said in a playful disapproval of my messiness.

No one had ever called me Natalia before, but hearing him say it, I wanted it to be my new name.

As I ate my mango, I told him I wanted a bunny, a real one. He promised me that he would get me one for my birthday, which would be in a few days.

"De verdad, Papi?"

"Si. De qué color quieres el conejo?"

"Café!" I shrieked. "Con manchitas blancas."

He smiled, making his little black eyes disappear behind his cheeks again, and I knew he meant it. I fantasized about what I was going to name it. My father didn't show up for my birthday, and when I saw him the following summer, I asked him for my bunny once more, but he missed that birthday, too.

Another time, he dropped by as I was playing in the yard with the manguera, watering the rosales. Sometimes there were huge black bees flying over the roses, barely able to hold themselves up with their wings because of how fat they were. I'd never seen bees like that, but they reminded me of the zarzamoras back home in Mercedes on the trees that I used to climb with Nancy, Judy, and Nelly. I was scared of the blackberry-looking bees so I sprayed water on them with the hose. I hadn't noticed that my father had shown up and that he was leaning on the white iron gate.

When I noticed him, I greeted him and made my way to the gate but he stayed leaning, staring at me dotingly for a minute or two. I looked up at my tall father, wondering why he wasn't coming in, but at the same time, enjoying the tiny black dots he had for eyes as he said to me, "Mija, que bonitos ojos tienes. Bien grandotes, como ojos de becerra, ja ja. Con tus pestañas largas, te pareces a la borreguita Lamb Chop. Sabes quien es?"

"No," I said to him, enjoying his smile a little longer. All of his attention was mine at that moment and I was certain that he knew I existed.

✦

Those are the only one-on-one memories I have with my father as a child. I have a few more memories of spending time with my father together with my sisters.

Like the summer when he took us to an indoor game area called Park Street inside the shopping center of Plaza Fiesta, where I always accompanied my grandmother to buy groceries from one of the stores there called Soriana. He didn't have much money to let us play on the rides and games, but we still had a lot of fun just being there with all the lights and noise.

Afterward, we walked into Soriana and my father bought a bag of warm baguettes, or barras de pan as he called them, some avocados, and a bag of freshly sliced ham. We took some of the aguacate that he had split open, smoothed it onto the barra, and then stuffed the ham inside, just like he demonstrated. He told us these were called tortas de jamón. To this day, every time we make tortas de jamón at home, I think of him.

✦

My father didn't have a car, not many people in Matamoros did. When it was just Nancy and me with my father, we rode on his blue bicycle with him. I would sit on the rack behind him, holding onto him, and Nancy would sit in the front, right on the handlebars with her legs dangling down. He had told her to keep her legs apart so as not to touch the tires, and she sat back towards my father as best as she could while my father pedaled.

During one of those rides, we sunk into a puddle on the dirt road, and Nancy's ankle got caught on the front tire. She screamed and my father stopped immediately. He carried her the rest of the way to a curandera for her to massage Nancy's ankle because he thought she had sprained or fractured it. The skin around her ankle had peeled back and she was bleeding, and Nancy writhed in pain while the lady firmly massaged the bones, attempting to put them back into place. When my father took us back home to Abuela Concha's house, she was furious with him, wondering why he didn't take us places on the pesera.

Abuela Concha and I used peseras when we needed to get anywhere, like everyone else did. The peseras were large buses that charged two or three pesos each to ride, depending on your age. When peseras first began to operate they only charged one peso, which is how they got the name peseras. The chauffeurs drove wildly and regarded stoplights as mere suggestions, so

Abuela always grabbed onto me tight and taught me to hold onto the metal bars as hard as I could. We rode peseras when we needed to run errands to buy medicine or get groceries, but perhaps my father didn't have the money to pay for Nancy and me to ride, or perhaps he did and just wanted to save his money by taking us on his bike.

Abuela Concha thought it was irresponsible and she wished she didn't have to let us leave with him. She worried that he didn't know how to take care of us properly, but she knew she had no right to keep us from our father.

✦

A final memory of my father and my sisters involved Judy, since my mother had started allowing her to go with us to Matamoros now that she was around five years old. My father came by with his son, Emanuel, who was around three. Abuela Concha and Tía Norma had respectfully asked my father to not bring Emanuel around because they felt it was a sign of disrespect to our family. Still, my father showed up that day with Emanuel, staying outside the gate telling us that he wanted to take us to La Feria, and so we ran outside to go with him.

La Feria was a huge carnival with rides and long aisles of vendors selling all sorts of things. Mood rings, bracelets they could weave your name into, wooden photo frames and keychains that the vendors could burn your name on, flashing toys, shirts, and of course, food. Tacos, tortas, elote en vaso, aguas frescas. We salivated, wanting to try some of the food, but Nancy and I were older and knew not to ask. After all, we had walked miles to get there because my father once again, hadn't taken us on the pesera, so he probably didn't have money.

Way before we got to the Feria, we could see the bright red lights of la rueda de la fortuna and we could smell the aroma of bistek, cilantro, y cebolla. My father had carried Emanuel most of the way there, and the rest of us forgot all about our aching feet once we approached the entrance. He had to pay a few pesos for each of us to get in, and every time Judy begged him to get on a ride, he said she couldn't because he had already paid the entrance fee. Emanuel did get to climb into a few kiddie rides while we watched.

On the way back to Abuela Concha's, Judy had needed several breaks from the walking, complaining that she couldn't continue. Since she was a little too old to be carried, my father just told her we were almost there, and by the time we got to Abuela's, Judy had been on the verge of collapsing. Abuela Concha had no choice but to call my mother and let her know because she didn't want to be held responsible for accidents when we went out with our father. My mother hardly sent Judy back to Matamoros after that until she was a few years older.

I believe that experience really shaped the way that Judy felt about our family on that side. Due to seeing how our father had treated Emanuel so differently, she grew resentment toward him. And due to not being sent to Matamoros as much as Nancy and I were, she didn't form a deep connection with our grandmothers. When Judy visited for short periods, she wouldn't treat my Abuela Concha with the same respect that I did.

One evening Judy and Nancy were playing outside throwing rocks at Abuela's window, and Abuela Concha scolded them, asking them to stop. They made faces at her from the window. I screamed at them to stop, embarrassed that they were misbehaving, and even hurt for my Abuela to be treated that way. My mother had raised us to have respect for our elders, especially the Abuelas, and I knew that their behavior wasn't meeting my mother's expectations of us as

visitors. Since I was their older sister, they listened, but it went to show how different our bonds were with our Abuelas. I loved Abuela Panchita very much, but because she was much older, she mostly stayed home, and Abuela Concha was my everything because we were always out and about running errands. My family started calling me Conchis because they said I was her little shadow.

I didn't care much if my father stopped by or not, I felt indifferent about him. I had my Abuelas.

✦

A few days before my ninth birthday, Abuela Concha took me to Soriana to buy our groceries for the week. I loved going there with my grandma because I helped her with carrying our groceries on the pesera and she rewarded me with a bottle of liquid strawberry yogurt for me to drink on the way home.

On this trip to Soriana, not only did I get my Lala strawberry yogurt, but also a beautiful pink t-shirt and matching pink shorts. For shoes, I picked some clear jelly huaraches. Abuela Concha had told me on the way there that Tía Norma was going to bake me a cake for my birthday; her special homemade cake which had merengue frosting and was decorated with rings of sweet pineapples with a cherry in the middle of each ring. I could hardly wait.

I had been anxiously counting down the days until I could wear my new pink outfit. I would open the Soriana bag a few times a day to smell my brand new huaraches. The plastic smelled so good when you brought the huarache up to your nose, and that close to your face, you could see the tiny bits of glitter floating inside.

On the day of my birthday, my father showed up at my Abuela's to drop off fifty pesos for me as a gift. I couldn't believe my luck-- this was the best birthday ever. He said he was going to head over to Tía Norma's house early to see Tío Efrain, and their house was just around the block. I walked there by myself all the time. I just had to walk past Irene's house, grandma's neighbor that had pierced my ears when I was three months old. Then I'd pass Lesly's house, my friend whose parents had money and had bought her so many Barbies, even male ones. Her dad had even constructed her a big, wooden playhouse in the backyard where Nancy, Lesly, and I could fit inside to play with all her Barbies. Then I'd pass the house of Chabela, Felix, and Maria, the three sisters who were very poor but were a lot nicer than Lesly. At the end of the street was Don Tino's tendajo to the left, and the papeleria to the right. To get to Tía's house, I had to pass the papeleria, a few more houses, and at the corner was the paleteria where they sold delicious ice cream. A few more houses and there was Tía Norma's house.

I hurried to take my shower and put on my new outfit and then I sprayed a lot of the Avon perfume that Buela had bought me from one of her neighbor's catalogs. The perfume had glitter on it and now, so did my arms. I felt beautiful as I rushed out the gate to spend some of my money.

I couldn't decide what I would buy. Should I buy some tamarindos at Don Tino's? Or Looney Tunes coloring books at the papeleria with a set of brand new coloring pencils? I loved coloring with Tía Norma. Maybe a bolis de rompope at the paleteria? Fifty pesos could go a long way and if I planned it well, I might be able to buy all of those things.

As I walked to Don Tino's, I saw that a house across his little store was holding a yard sale. I checked both sides of the street to make sure a car wasn't coming, and I crossed to the

house. I looked at the tables full of used toys, used clothes, and used shoes. She had so many things, and she waited as I looked through each table. I felt bad about how long I had been making her wait on me, so I asked her how much one of the toys cost so I could buy it and leave for Tía Norma's.

"Cincuenta pesos," she said, as she saw the maroon bill in my hand.

I handed it to her and she put the used toy in a plastic bag for me. It didn't feel good that it had cost me all my birthday money, but it also didn't feel good to waste the lady's time. I walked to Tía's house so that I wouldn't be late. When I got there, Tía Norma brought in the cake from the kitchen and placed it in front of my father.

"Feliz día del padre, Chuy!" she and my Tío Efrain shouted.

My heart sank. I had believed the cake was for my birthday. I looked at my dad to smile and wish him a happy father's day too, but then they all looked at me and laughed; Tía had pranked me.

"No te creas! Feliz cumpleaños, Conchis."

I had fallen for it because father's day was always a couple of days before or after my birthday.

"Qué es eso que trajiste?" my father asked, pointing to the bag next to me.

I proudly took my toy out to show him. "Es un juguete que compré con una señora por Don Tino."

"Y cuanto te costo?" Tía Norma asked.

“Cincuenta pesos,” I said.

“Híjole. Te hicieron mensa,” she responded.

“Ve a regresarlo antes de que cierre la señora,” my father said.

I felt so embarrassed to have been taken for a fool by the lady. I was already nine, I should have been smarter. I walked over to the lady’s yard sale again and I told her that my father wanted me to return the toy for my money. She didn’t object, she took the bill out of her monedero and gave it back to me. I walked back to Tía's house in shame. Luckily, by the time I got back, Abuela Concha was already there and my Tía handed me the butter knife to cut my cake while they sang to me.

✦

When I was back in Texas, I would unintentionally forget about my father again. My mind had separated both worlds perfectly and each had its own allotted time.

One day in seventh grade, I was standing outside with a small group of friends as we waited for our school bus when one of them asked, “What are you all doing for the weekend?” One boy spoke up saying, “I don’t know. My dad will probably have a cookout like always.” I didn’t say anything out loud, but my mind whirled. His dad was home??

As I rode the school bus to my house, I realized that the normal thing was probably for dads to be home. That my two worlds should probably only be one, like the other kids from my school. Suddenly I felt sad, realizing that I didn’t have a dad grilling fajitas in our backyard every weekend.

✦

Nancy must have also been having those thoughts. One day, we found a big yellow photo album that belonged to my mother. We sat on the living room floor to put it on our laps and savor the pictures together. It was a weekend morning and Mom was out cleaning someone's house for work, which meant that my siblings and I should be cleaning *our* house before she got back.

We flipped the pages of the album carefully because the photos yellowed and curled around the edges. In one of the photos, Chuyin was a toddler having the time of his life on a red swing at the park. One showed Cesar smiling, holding me in his arms when I was just months old. In another photo, Tía Norma was just a little older than us, all dressed up in front of a nice car. We flipped the page and saw a photo of my parents at their wedding. Mom looked so beautiful in her white gown and makeup. We hardly ever saw Mom wear makeup. My father looked so young. He had a black mustache and he was tall and very slim. They looked so serious in the photo, barely touching as they stood side by side, neither of them smiling.

Just then, Nancy stood up from the floor and walked to our bedroom. She came back with a black permanent marker and grabbed the album, taking out the wedding photo from under the protective clear sleeve.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

With furrowed brows, she started scribbling on the back of the photo: "The day Mom ruined her life."

"Nancy!" I yelled in disapproval, but I didn't do anything to stop her.

“I hate you,” she wrote on the spot behind the photo where my father stood.

Then she decided she wasn’t yet satisfied, so she carefully ripped my father’s face from the photo. We put the album back on the kitchen table where we’d found it and started on our chores.

When Mom came home, she was very pleased, as always, at how the house smelled of Fabuloso and bleach, and how the kitchen sink and counters sparkled. Judy and Erick were watching cartoons on the sofa; a treat they'd earned by helping put away shoes and backpacks for it to be easier for Nancy and me to sweep and mop.

My mother sat down on the sofa to rest her feet and we all knew that it was her turn to enjoy the tv. We gave her the remote control and she flipped it to the noticias. Erick and Judy went outside to play, and Nancy and I went to our bedroom to hang out. After a while, we heard my mother go to the kitchen to prepare us something to eat. Whatever it was, we knew it was going to be delicious. Flautas con arroz hopefully, or maybe fideo con pollo. But instead of the aroma of Mexican food cooking on the stove, we heard the shouting of an angry Mexican woman.

“Que fregados hicieron!”

I turned cold. I hated when my mother was mad. It was rare, but every time she was mad we knew she meant business.

“¡Quien cortó mis fotos!”

She had picked up the album and my father's perfectly cut-out face had fallen from inside the pages. Nancy and I stayed frozen in our room, staring at each other. My mother had seen the nice handwriting and she knew it was Nancy's or mine. She stormed into our bedroom with the first weapons she had found; a chancla, a hanger, and an extension cord.

For a few minutes she chased us around the room, cord and hanger stinging our skin as they cracked down on us again and again. Then she stormed back out the door and Nancy and I sat on our bed fuming, bitter tears running down our cheeks. Speaking in English, we made plans to run away. She had never hit us like that. We didn't understand why she had gotten that angry over a ripped photo of our father, who had left us long ago.

Before we concretized our plan to run away, we hid from her in the bathroom. It was our way of getting back at her because we knew she wouldn't come in and tell us to get out. More than likely she was feeling remorseful for having hit us and she would have to lose her pride if she wanted to use the bathroom.

Our bathroom in that house was large. It was one of the nicest ones we'd ever had. It had a white wooden shelf that ran along one wall where we put all our favorite hair products, like our bottles of Light'ning Gel that all our friends in middle school were using to bleach streaks into their hair. My mother loved our beautiful long black hair exactly as it was, but she also loved to spoil us whenever she was able to, so she had bought us the gel so we could be just like our friends.

The bathroom also had a large bathtub, which a while back, we had invited Nelly into so that the three of us could celebrate shaving our legs together for the very first time. The girls at school had been making fun of my legs for having hair, so after whining to my mother, she had

given Nancy and me permission to shave. Immediately we'd knocked on Tía Elsa's bedroom door for permission for Nelly to shave too, and she allowed it. She even sent her over with a brand new bottle of shaving cream and her own razor. The three of us had so much fun that day hanging out in the bathroom, running warm water into the tub and pulling up our shorts to shave. The dark hairs disappeared in rows, revealing beautiful smooth skin underneath.

That bathroom was special to us. One other time when Nelly had come over to our side of the house, we had dampened squares of toilet paper in the sink and then we threw them up to the ceiling, where they stuck.

"Kerplunk!" Nelly shouted as she threw her piece.

"Kerplunk!" Nancy and I shouted too, and the three of us cracked up, trying to throw just as many kerplunks as we could before it was noticeable. I'm not sure if Mom ever found out, since the ceiling was high and painted white, like the toilet paper.

Nancy and I decided we could comfortably live in the bathroom during our huelga against Mom. If anyone needed to use it, they should use the small abandoned one on the other side of the house instead. It was empty now that Tía Elsa had moved out.

After an hour or two of our silent strike, we could hear my mother snoring. I turned the doorknob slowly and poked my head out the door, and I saw Mom sleeping on the sofa at the end of the hall.

“Let’s go to the kitchen to get some food,” I whispered to Nancy. “But we can’t make any noise. We grab whatever we find and come right back.”

I didn’t want Mom to know we had food with us in the bathroom. I wanted her to think we were starving in there and maybe then she’d apologize, realizing she had gone too far. Nancy and I tiptoed down the hallway to the kitchen past Mom. We found a bag of Hot Cheetos in the cabinet and two bottles of Gatorade in the fridge.

Back in our bathroom, we opened our drinks and our bag of chips as slowly as we possibly could so as to not make noise. We waited until the Hot Cheetos were soggy in our mouths before we chewed. Through the small window that faced our backyard, we watched as the sun was starting to set outside. Judy came knocking on the door later that evening, saying she needed to pee. We let her in and then pushed her back out the door. We saw the night come and no one else had needed to use the bathroom.

I wanted Mom to knock on the door to tell us she was sorry. I wanted her to want us to sleep in our warm beds and not in the cold bathtub the way we were planning to, but she never came. In the middle of the night, Nancy and I decided that we would end our bathroom strike, but that we wouldn’t end our silent treatment. For two or three days, we only left our bedroom when Mom wasn’t around. She cooked for us but wouldn’t ask us to come eat.

Somehow, we started talking to Mom again later that week. Either she had made us laugh or bought us a small gift, like a candy bar or a coloring book. She would leave that in our bed for us to find after school or she would leave it on the kitchen table, but she never directly handed it to us.

“Ejele!” Mom would chant at us sometimes when we were kids and we were acting moody. She poked us on the ribs playfully singing, “Ejele!”

If she didn’t manage to make us crack a smile, then she would put her hand in front of our face with one finger up in the air, bending it up and down as she chanted, “Este dedito te hace reir, este dedito te hace reir!” She would sing-song as her finger went up and down closer to our face each time. Never once did that dedito chant fail to break any of us into a smile. Suddenly, whatever we were mad about was sent out into space to be, as they say, swept under the rug.

The photo album incident is a perfect example of how things get solved in my family to this day. Silent treatments, strikes of distance, and too much pride to apologize until one of us manages to make the other fold, sweeping the actual fight under the rug, never to be discussed.

✦

I wonder what it was like the first night he made up his mind that he would abandon us. Did he lay his head on his pillow with a smirk on his face, dreaming of how free his new life would be without the burden of six children? I wonder if he ever thinks about us now, or remembers any of our birthdays. There’s no way for us to forget his; it’s right on Christmas Day, which is why he was named Jesús.

I haven’t seen him in person since I was 17, and before then, I hadn’t seen him in a good while either. Abuela Concha passed away in the year 2003, and Abuela Panchita passed away the following year. Matamoros then had a new meaning for me, and that was to see friends I had made through a translating organization called Adventures in Missions (AIM), where Nancy and

I worked during the summer. Our brother Israel had worked for AIM for a few years by then and he introduced it to us now that we were twelve and fourteen years old and the Abuelas were gone. He had been very excited to share with us the place he lived in year-round ever since he'd graduated high school.

Because we were fully bilingual, Nancy and I also got hired with AIM to translate for the American missionaries. It was very fun to work alongside them to help build churches in colonias, visit women's shelters, play soccer with the children, and give out warm meals, amongst many other activities. It allowed us to make friends with so many people in both countries; the Mexican people we were serving in the colonias, the American missionaries, and translators from both sides of the frontera who were around our age or a few years older.

As soon as the summer break started, our bags were packed for Matamoros again, but this time for the AIM campgrounds. We were so excited that we would always start packing about a month before school let out, chattering on and on about how excited we were to see our favorite translator friends from Brownsville and from Tampico.

The summers of 2003 through 2006, we translated in Matamoros and even had the opportunity to visit Saltillo, Coahuila to help people there. We stayed in a hotel up on the mountains that had no air conditioning, yet we still needed sweaters and blankets at bedtime because it was very cold. It was strange to us because Matamoros was incredibly hot in July. Saltillo was the most beautiful place I'd ever seen, especially at night-time when we looked down from the mountain at all the little lights that were people's homes scattered below us.

We had needed permission to travel across Mexican states that time, since we were minors. We were asked by AIM to have a parent sign a form of consent. Since it had been

brought to our attention last minute, we didn't have time to send someone to Mercedes to get Mom to sign a letter. Israel found my father and had him write a letter for us and they got it notarized.

> "Yo, Jesús Salazar, como padre de las señoritas Natalia Salazar y Nancy Salazar, les otorgo permiso a que viajen a Saltillo, Coahuila."

No agents asked us for the letter when we traveled. I still have it folded up in a memory box in my closet. It's the only way I know my father's handwriting.

✦

AIM stopped operating by the year 2007 because Matamoros was becoming increasingly dangerous. There were headlines everywhere of cartel activity, kidnappings, and murders along the border, and AIM didn't want to be liable for anyone getting hurt, so they stopped bringing American missionaries down.

Still, I decided to cross into Matamoros one last time. Two of my translator friends had just opened up a school there where they would be holding classes to teach English, and I had wanted to spend time with them while I figured out what I was going to do with my own life now that I had just graduated high school.

While my friend, Ruth, managed her new school, I spent my time looking through ads in the newspapers for any entry-level jobs available. I also spent some time visiting Tía Norma and wandering about the city.

One of those days, I got myself ready and ventured out to catch a pesera that would take me to a shopping center that had recently opened up in another part of Matamoros that I wasn't familiar with. I had always gone to the Plaza Fiesta mall with Abuela Concha, but I was sure I'd be able to find my way around the new one.

The pesera dropped me off and I made my way into the mall. I looked longingly at bracelets and earrings in one of the stores. They weren't real jewelry, they were plastic accessories, but those chandelier earrings were the trend and I wanted to buy some. However, I needed to be very wise with my money since I only had forty-five dollars that I needed to stretch.

I bought two pairs for twenty pesos each and I decided that was all I should spend, but I stayed longer to wander about the mall. Peseras were now cinco pesos each and I wanted to make my trip worth it. I walked into the Soriana and headed straight toward the back where the dairy aisle was. I grabbed a Lala de fresa to remember my Abuela Concha, and I sipped it slowly as I walked toward the bus stop. Thanks to riding in peseras with her for years, I recognized many of the routes, so even though Matamoros was dozens of times bigger than Mercedes in population, all I needed to do was stick to those if I got lost.

Finally the right pesera came and I handed my five pesos to the chofer, who immediately drove off before I could take my seat, causing me to stumble over. The pesera was mostly empty so there was a metal bar available to grab onto, just in time to avoid falling. Looking down, I took my seat, hoping no one had been paying attention. Once sitting and with my shame dissipating, I looked up inconspicuously to see if anyone had seen me stumble. Sure enough, there was a rude man laughing at me. I was about to glare at him when I froze as I recognized the small eyes disappearing behind his large grin.

I don’t know what facial expression he saw on me on the seat across from him, but inside, it felt as if all my organs turned cold in that instant.

“Natalia?” he asked. I nodded.

“Pensé que eras tú, pero no quería decir nada porque, que tal si no eras, y me dabas una cachetada,” he said, still grinning.

I managed to return a shy chuckle.

“Oye, te pusiste gordita mija,” he said, which made me feel very self-conscious.

When he had seen me as a kid, I had always been skinny. However, at the end of each summer when I returned to Mercedes, I had a little more weight on me after having been spoiled by the Abuelas.

I nodded but didn’t say anything to him. I couldn’t form words.

“Quieres ir a la casa un ratito?” he asked me. “Aquí vivo en la esquina.”

Two minutes later, I was exiting the pesera with my father.

We entered the front gate of his yard and sat outside in rocking chairs under a tree. The air was very warm in the late afternoon. His yard had some junk laying around, like old bicycle parts. He asked me some things, which I can’t remember. From the moment we had met eyes in the pesera, I was fighting so hard inside of me to hold back tears. I had one question my mind was screaming at me as we small-talked: “Is he not going to explain anything?”

He asked me if I wanted anything to drink and I said sure, so we walked into his kitchen. In the bedroom across, the door was open and I saw a fan blowing air on a pair of feet. Someone was laying in bed by the fan, watching tv. On the small kitchen table he had a blender and a pitcher filled with a papaya-colored mixture.

"Esto es lo que tomo yo," he said. "Para el diabetes," and he asked me if I wanted to try it.

"No, gracias," I said, and he chuckled.

When he gave me my cup of water, he asked me if I wanted to go to his bedroom to watch tv, so we walked over to it. His bedroom was very dark because he had put aluminum foil on the windows to block out the sun. I noticed a figure of the Virgen de Guadalupe by the window next to his bed. His room was small and cluttered; a large bed, a small tv in front of it, an armchair next to the door, a nightstand, some boxes of junk lining the wall by the armchair.

I climbed up on his bed and scooted toward the wall so that there was a good amount of space between us when he sat at the edge. The children's movie Madagascar was playing on the screen.

"¿Has visto esta película?" he asked me.

"No."

"Esta bien buena, bien chistosa," he responded and soon he was howling in laughter at the zoo animals on the screen.

I wished it had been easier to enjoy a funny movie next to my father, but I couldn't turn off my brain with its question. It was getting harder to fight back my tears the more he laughed as if everything was okay, as if he had just seen me yesterday.

I glanced at the screen and glanced over at him, trying to gain courage to stay or courage to speak up with an excuse to leave. It must have been fifteen or twenty minutes of us watching the movie before I found my voice and said, "Me voy a tener que ir. Me están esperando mis amigas para salir." I said it calmly so that he couldn't tell it was a lie.

I don't remember what he responded but he looked sad that I had to leave so soon. I don't remember if he hugged me or if he told me to take care of myself, but I do remember that he pointed to the end of the street, where he said I could catch the next pesera. Once out the gate, I waved goodbye and walked off. There were several people gathered at the bus stop, and luckily, I didn't have to wait long before the pesera arrived.

As soon as I gave the chofer my five pesos, I took my seat and burst into tears. The pesera wasn't empty, but I didn't care. Even if I had tried to, I would not have been able to hold it in. I was crying so hard that I was heaving, but no one asked me what was wrong. Or if they had, I couldn't hear or see them because my hands covered my face in an effort to muffle my llanto so as not to disturb the passengers. The pesera made another stop and some people exited. I glanced out the window to take note of where we were and went back to covering my face, trying to calm myself down.

Finally I was at my stop in Plaza Fiesta by the the Puente Peatonal. Many, many times I had been there with my grandma. I knew it very well. A few times when we'd needed to cross to the other side to get her medicines, we had climbed up that high pedestrian bridge. Sometimes I

had wanted to climb it just for fun, but Buelita wasn't too fond of that idea because of how many steps there were to get all the way up there. The bridge was crucial for pedestrians because there were eight lanes to cross to get to the other side. Four streets going north, four streets going south, and a very low and narrow safety barrier in the middle.

The pesera dropped off too far from the pedestrian bridge, since it accommodated people who were going to shop at the mall. I exited and decided not to walk over to the Puente Peatonal to cross, because it was too far and a waste of time. Ruth's house was in the opposite direction of the bridge.

I made it across the first four streets without an issue, stopped in the middle barrier, and started to cross the next four. I hadn't noticed a car that had quickly approached. My vision was blurred from my crying. I heard the loud honk behind me, the driver extending the length of the honk in a scold. He yelled something out the window and sped off while I ran as quickly as I could through the next two lanes. I immediately thought about my mother in Texas, how she had no idea where I was, or the day I'd had, or that she'd almost lost me under the Peatonal.

I couldn't have guessed I'd run into my father that day when I left to shop, but later it made sense. The Casas Infonavit were right next to the new shopping mall, Plaza Sendero. The people from my father's neighborhood in the Casas Infonavit now shared routes with the mall. He had been riding the pesera back home.

✦

I started writing this essay about my father recently. I had booked for myself a writing retreat at South Padre Island in the cheapest hotel I could find. Due to it being off-season, I was able to stay a week for half the regular price. The extra time gave me a chance to get a lof of writing done for my collection of essays. I finished several of them, but after writing two or three paragraphs of this one, I had gotten stuck. What was the point of me writing about my father? It was hard giving him that much space in my mind. I felt like he didn't deserve it.

I hadn't been able to write anything else about him until Christmas Day.

Some of my family got together at our small apartment to celebrate. After the Abuelas passed, a lot of our family drifted apart and holidays were never the same, but Tía Norma and my mother have always made it a point to stay close.

Tía made a huge caserola de menudo, my favorite. Mom made dozens of tamales de pollo, de queso con rajas de chile, and frijoles a la charra. There was pan dulce, cafecito, and most delicious of all, the storytelling of our memories with the Abuelas along with photographs of Christmases in Matamoros decades ago.

"Tu papá allí estuvo con Marvelia y Fernando la semana pasada," Tía Norma said over dinner, passing her cell phone to my brother so he could see the photo. Marvelia is Tío Efrain's sister, and her husband is another compadre of my father's.

It has always felt so strange to me how Tía talks about my father to us so nonchalantly, since she often sees him when they visit Matamoros. Tía Norma and Tío Efrain are pastors of a church and they often try to give us messages of hope when we have family holidays, and messages of forgiveness, too. They say it is never their intention to force us into forgiving our

father, but that holding bitterness toward him isn't going to help either. Tía Norma usually weeps as she says these things, having gone through the process of forgiving her own father who abandoned her as a child, too. We all cry. My mother had a different father than Tía Norma but he wasn't around either. Our holidays usually go like that.

I didn't want to see the photo at first but I also didn't want to leave wondering. Tía Norma had mentioned recently that his health was deteriorating as his diabetes went unmanaged.

"Let me see it when you're done, Cesar."

He handed me the phone across the table. I hadn't seen a photo of my father in many years, so it shocked me.

"Que diferente se ve Papá," I said as I zoomed into his face. "No lo puedo creer. Parece un viejito."

Just two years older than my mother, he looked at least a full decade older. I thought about my mother and how everyone always told her she looked much younger than her age. I felt a tinge of pride for my mother's beauty as I saw his photo. I remembered how my mother had begged him to return, how he had said she was ugly, fat, and dark. How years later, my father had begged her to return to him, saying, "Ya regresate conmigo, Juany. Ya estoy cansado de levantar faldas ajenas." How she had said no, that she was happy alone with her children.

"Si, tu papá ya está bien acabado. Y ahora está cumpliendo años. Cuántos, Juany?" Tía Norma asked my mother. Sixty-three, she responded.

Judy asked me for the phone but I was too focused on the zoomed-in image, needing to examine every pixel. His mustache, beard, and eyebrows were now completely white. His hair was gray and hung in patches down the sides of his head. One of his eyes was almost entirely shut. Zooming out, I examined everything else. His jacket, his jeans, the way his full belly was gone; there stood a very slim man. Tall as always, towering a full head over Fernando. Above them was an arch of green, gold, and red balloons over a table with a festive green tablecloth. Behind them, a banner that said "Merry Christmas," with decorations of Christmas trees and Santas.

I was jealous. Jealous that they stood next to him at a Christmas party. Jealous at the way that Marvelia held onto his arm. Jealous that my father looked happy. I also felt sadness at how frail, old, and colorless my father looked. Nothing like when I ate manila mangos on the front steps of the little pink house with him.

As soon as our Christmas dinner was over, I sat at my desk and I began to write. I stayed up all night typing, as if writing about him gave him more time. I had felt many things for him, but never the fear that I felt now, of losing him. For years I had pushed him out of my life like he had pushed me out of his. Sometimes I'd wondered what he was doing at a precise moment or if he was okay. The last couple of years I wondered if he was taking the pandemic seriously or if he walked around without a face mask, but those thoughts of worrying over him didn't feel reciprocated, so I shut them off.

After seeing the photo, I wondered if I would I feel remorse hearing Tía tell us that perhaps he'd caught coronavirus or that his diabetes took him first. Would I regret hardening my

heart toward him all these years? Death was so final. I'd learned that with my Abuelas. The memories and conversations I had with them were the only ones I'd have for the rest of time. If I didn't reach out to my father, I'd have to live the rest of my life without hearing the words I needed from him.

I thought about writing him a note to send with Tía, simply greeting him or saying happy birthday. Maybe if he replies, I'll ask him if he remembers my ninth birthday when he gave me cincuenta pesos, or when he said I had ojos de becerra, or when the four of us ate tortas de jamón.

TE CAMBIO LUGAR

I was fourteen when my mom started dating Fernando. My mother had never dated anyone after she separated from my father around the time that Nancy was born, and Nancy was now twelve. She had gotten together with Fernando while my sister and I had been away in Matamoros for the summer, and she hadn't told us so we didn't know.

Nancy and I got dropped off in Mercedes by a family friend, excited to see our new house. Over the summer, my family had moved down the block to another house, and since we were used to moving houses often, we were excited to explore this new one. We thanked our friends and waved goodbye. The sun was almost in for the night as we carried our bags of clothes into the house. We were excited to unpack, sleep in our new bedroom, and as always, go shopping for school supplies over the tax-free weekend. We loved buying school supplies. We'd get new pencils, fun erasers, brand new notebooks and folders, and if there was enough money and good enough sales, maybe even a new backpack. Then we'd get home and rip open the packages, splitting up pencils and folders between us and setting up our backpacks to be ready for the first day of school.

Nancy and I were coming in through the door when Judy and Erick heard our voices and came running over to hug us. They always looked so different every time we came back from Matamoros. They showed us our new bedroom and I threw my bag on one of the twin beds. I knew that the one with the new pink sheets was mine because that was my favorite color and Mom always got us special bedding when she found some on sale. The bed with the ladybug sheets was Nancy's; her favorite insect. Our beds were all made up for us.

"¿Dónde está Mami?" I asked Judy.

"En su cuarto. I think she's asleep."

They showed me which door was hers and I skipped over there to tell her that we were home.

"Mami! Ya llegamos!" I turned the knob to swing the door open, but I was caught off guard when I felt it locked. My mother's bedroom had never been locked before.

"Ama!" I yelled out impatiently, but there was no answer. "Huh? Why is the door locked?" I asked Judy and Erick. They looked back at us as if they had stolen something.

"Fernando lives with her now," Judy informed me. I was speechless, shocked, and even angry.

I knew who Fernando was because before we'd left, my mom had helped him with housing. I used to hate how Mom was always housing people in our home when we were growing up. We'd come home from school and there would be a stranger staying in one of our bedrooms without us expecting it; it happened several times.

It was always people from church who were immigrants that had barely arrived in the United States. They had nowhere to live, and sometimes my mom would house them for free or for a small amount of rent in exchange for the room when they found a job and got on their feet. My mother used their contribution to help us pay our rent and utilities, but it probably didn't go a long way, since she also fed them. I knew she didn't do it for the money, but because she wished someone had helped her when she first arrived to Brownsville and couldn't afford the costly rent

on her own when my father left. Because it was *her* desire to help them, she would make the arrangements without telling us and then tiptoed around us knowing we were upset that she had taken one of our bedrooms.

It wasn't that I also didn't feel a desire to help them, especially being immigrants like ourselves; it was that my siblings and I were already sharing rooms and giving one of them away meant that we were going to be extra cramped.

We were renting a small three-bedroom mobile home when Fernando first came to live with us. Two of the bedrooms were on one end of the house, then the living room, bathroom, and kitchen were in the middle, and the third small bedroom was on the other end.

I came home on the school bus one day, excited to see what my mother had made us for dinner when I saw a small, dark man sitting at the table next to Erick, drinking a cup of coffee. Without having to ask, I knew it was an hermano from church. I knew because of the way my mom hung her head, avoiding meeting eyes with me. I rolled my eyes and went to my bedroom to put my backpack away and change into house clothes. What I hated was having a stranger in the house. The way it didn't feel comfortable to sit at the kitchen table to eat with just my family, the way I had to knock before walking into the bathroom, the way I couldn't watch tv in the living room because the respectful thing to do would be to leave it open for the guest's use, the way my sisters and I couldn't wear shorts in the house anymore because my mother never let us wear shorts when there were men in the house.

Erick came into my room later and told me that the hermano's name was Fernando and that he liked him.

Fernando was a very shy and quiet man. He had a soft voice that I barely even heard him use. He had a wide forehead, tiny eyes that always looked sleepy under his large eyelids, stringy waves of black hair that weren't enough to fully cover the browns of his scalp, and he stood around 5 feet tall. He stayed to himself on the other end of the house, so I hardly saw him, except for at church and when he came out from his bedroom sometimes to eat.

“Ve y pregúntale al hermano que si quiere almorzar,” my mother would ask Erick or Judy on weekend mornings. She would be turning hot tortillas de harina on the comal and rolling more from fresh testales. My mother’s homemade tortillas and watching cartoons on tv with my siblings were the best part of weekend mornings, but now Fernando was here.

✦

At some point during summer while Nancy and I were away from home, my mother had started a relationship with Fernando, and not only that, but they had moved together into one bedroom in the new house. I was repulsed. I couldn’t believe what Judy had just told me.

A few minutes later, my mother came out of her bedroom to greet us, completely ignoring the fact that had just flipped my entire world. She started asking us about our trip but she could tell we were being short with her. No one brought up the locked door or why Fernando was in the room. It was too awkward and upsetting. I retreated to my room for the night.

I was angry for quite a long time, at both my mother and Fernando. Nancy moved on from her anger a lot quicker. Over the next few months, I acted rudely to show them I didn’t like him now that he was my mother’s partner. Like the time that it had rained and our yard was very muddy outside. Fernando’s blue Astro van was parked in the driveway and I stood in the yard

looking around for a good while, going back and forth on whether I would gather the courage to do it or not. I squished the cold mud under my bare feet and watched it ooze in between my toes. I looked behind me at our little blue house but there was no one in sight. I picked up two handfuls of mud -- I would just make it look like an accident. No one would think anything of it because my siblings and I always ran outside as soon as it started to rain, ever since we were little, and we'd jump up and down under the cold rain yelling, twirling our arms all around the yard like they were helicopter blades. No one would think I'd done it on purpose.

I twirled around and around with my two handfuls of mud, and as I spun, I "accidentally" lost grip in my hands, causing the mud to splatter right on the van. It kept accidentally happening every time I was facing the van. After I'd done it several times, I saw the multiple splatters of mud on the windows, on the doors, smearing off the license plate. I thought it would feel good, but it didn't. I immediately wished God would make it rain hard again so that it would wash my splatters off, but it didn't rain. I was too prideful to grab the hose and wash it off.

Fernando never asked what happened to his van.

✦

Another time, after I got home from my friend Blanca's house, I smelled a hint of alcohol so I went to go see who was drinking. I saw my mother sitting on one sofa watching the evening news and Fernando on the other sofa. No one ever brought beer to our house; my older brothers drank away from home out of respect for our mother.

"Porque huele a cerveza?" I asked as I stormed past the living room.

I threw the refrigerator door open and searched for the cans of beer. Since I couldn't find any there or in the trash can, I looked around the living room, pushing the cushions aside to make sure they weren't hiding the cans in between them.

"Oye hija, cuando tu me has visto tomar?" my mother asked me, in a voice that was as offended as it was hurt.

Fernando didn't say anything, he just sat there meekly with his eyes on the noticias. I had assumed that now that there was a man at home, she must be condoning beer in the house, but hearing my mother's voice made me immediately regret acting like that.

I tested Fernando, too. Every time I walked behind my two younger sisters, I looked through my peripheral, not moving my head, waiting to catch him staring luridly at them so that I could tell my mom. She wouldn't hesitate to leave him then, after what had happened to us with my grandfather. But over the years, I never caught him looking, not once.

✦

My mother had raised us in church, and between services, choir rehearsals, outreach events, Christmas plays, and prayer nights, a large part of my childhood was spent in the church building. This is why one day, I said to her, "Usted sabe que esta mal ante los ojos de Dios, verdad? Va a escojer a Fernando, o a Dios y nosotros?" At church they taught us you couldn't live with your partner if you weren't married.

My mother sat on her bed folding clothes. Fernando was at work that day. Some hermanos from church had given him a job in their construction business, helping them build homes.

"Pues lo escojo a el," she said casually, folding a towel and stacking it on top of the others. "Yo soy adulta y no le tengo que andar pidiendo permiso a nadie."

When she said that, I stormed off to my bedroom. It had hurt my pride how fast she'd chosen Fernando over me. I grabbed the phone on my wall and dialed Blanca's phone number. I cried as I told her I'd just gotten in a fight with my mom and that I didn't want to be home, and could she please come get me.

"Calm down, it's going to be fine. I'll tell my dad and we'll go get you," she said.

I hung up and packed a tote bag full of clothes, stuffed my homework in my backpack, and waited. I knew she'd be there quickly because her house wasn't more than twenty minutes from mine.

Soon I heard a honk outside and I picked up my bags to head out. I made sure to be quiet because I didn't want my mother to know I had left. It wasn't that she didn't give me permission to go out, because she always let me go anywhere I wanted. I had been spending the night at Blanca's house since I was in middle school, and now that I'd started high school, I had even more freedom. My mother knew Blanca's family from church, and my mother also knew that I always stayed out of trouble anyway, so she had full trust in me. I left quietly because I wanted to spite her in not telling her I was gone or where I'd be.

From my front steps I saw Blanca's face on the passenger window and I could only see the outline of her father in the driver's seat, since it was dark out. I put my stuff in the back of the truck and Blanca opened the door for me to get in. She scooted towards the middle and I sat on the spot she'd just been sitting in. I greeted her father and the rest of the ride to her house we all sat in silence.

Once we were in her bedroom, I told Blanca everything that had happened. Blanca, who was the toughest girl I knew, who intimidated nearly everyone she met whether a guy or a girl or even our teachers, cried with me. It was a silent cry. Tears welled in her eyes, which she quickly wiped away. I'd never seen her cry. In that moment, I knew that it was true when she said she saw me like the little sister she never had. She was an only child and grew up with both of her parents, and even though she couldn't relate to what I was going through, she felt my hurt with me.

That week, Blanca and I got dropped off at school together, and instead of riding the bus home like I always did, her dad picked us up. Where my home was always loud and full of people, Blanca's home was very quiet. Her bedroom alone was almost as large as my entire house. When we got home from school, we'd go to her room and hang out browsing teen magazines or we'd jump outside on her trampoline, waiting for our favorite novela to come on at 7pm.

By 6:55pm we were both sitting on her bed, anxious for it to start. Blanca's mother would knock and bring in a tray full of snacks. Chips, crackers, tall glasses of orange juice or soda. I'd never had such special treatment. I always felt both special and guilty when Blanca's mom brought us food into her bedroom.

When it was time for actual meals, Blanca and I would sit at the long dining table with her parents. In the center of the table sat a stack of large and perfectly round homemade tortillas, and plenty of food and beverages. At my house, we had to ration out the food and drinks so that everyone got equal amounts, and we hardly ever sat at the table. We usually took our meal and sat in front of the tv.

At Blanca's house, she filled up her glass of orange juice all the way to the top. I couldn't believe her parents let her do that. Even though I was at her house and not mine, I still always filled my cup halfway because at my house, we always needed to be mindful of leaving enough for everyone else. When we were done eating, Blanca would say something like, "Come on, let's go to my room." But I always picked up my plate and took it to the kitchen sink, then started washing it. I wanted to wash everyone's plates and the pots Blanca's mother had used too, if she allowed me to, but they insisted that I leave my dishes there. There was no way that I would have her mother wash my dish after she'd already done all the cooking. I could hear my mother's voice and I wanted to obey it, even though I was mad at her.

"Acomídete," my mother instructed each of us, not only at home, but especially when we were at someone else's house. Rules she'd given us probably from the moment we came out her womb. "Never let it get to the point where someone has to ask you for help or ask you to clean up after yourself. Do it before they even ask and insist even if they say no." We were to never leave room for anyone to say that her children were lazy and therefore, become unwanted visitors.

One time, Blanca and I even got in an argument because I insisted on washing my dish after eating dinner. "Oh my God, just leave it!" she said in an annoyed voice. I hated getting into

disagreements with Blanca because her voice would get so stern when she would get mad and I was definitely intimidated by her. I hurried to wash my dish and glass at least, stressed as I washed because even though I didn't want Blanca to get mad at me, a greater part of me didn't want Blanca's mom to think that I was an entitled guest.

One of those days that week, Blanca and I got home from school, chit-chatting giddily about some boys in class. We put all our stuff down, changed into comfortable clothes, and went outside to jump on the trampoline. Her mom joined us outside after a while and we sat with her on the porch.

"Oye mija," she addressed me. "Tu mama vino hoy a preguntar por ti."

I sat there quietly, surprised that my mother had swallowed her pride to come and make sure that I was okay.

"She just asked me how you were doing, she didn't say you had to go home. She brought you some changes of clothes. I don't want you to think you have to leave, mija. You can stay here as long as you want. But your mother looked sad and worried."

I looked over at Blanca, but she was sitting there as quietly as I was. I didn't want to leave but I also wasn't sure if perhaps a small part of Blanca's family thought that I'd overstayed my welcome, and were just being polite.

"What do you wanna do?" Blanca finally asked me.

"I don't know. I guess I can go home. Is it okay if I stay here today?"

“Of course it is,” they both replied.

“You know my mom has even offered to adopt you. Don’t be crazy, haha. You know you can stay,” Blanca joked.

That was true. When I was in middle school, they had mentioned legally adopting me so that they could file immigration paperwork for me. I wasn’t sure if they had been serious or if they had been joking.

Blanca and I enjoyed our novela, but in the back of my mind, I was dreading having to go back home. I missed the comfort of my own room, but I wasn’t ready to set aside my pride.

✦

A year or so later, Fernando came home from work quietly greeting us as he walked in. He headed to his bedroom to gather his things for a shower, as he always did after work. My sister-in-law, Jeniffer, was over for dinner, and she noticed how everyone, except for me, had greeted Fernando. She’d seen that behavior from me for too long, so she called me out in front of everyone once he was in the shower.

“You’re so rude. Instead of being grateful that he works and helps your mom out with the rent and the bills, you act like that? You can’t even have the decency to greet him?”

Her words stung because she’d never spoken to me like that before. Jeniffer slightly favored me over my sisters and sometimes she randomly called my phone in the middle of the night when she couldn’t sleep, asking if I would go to Walmart with her to shop around. I loved the spontaneity of it so I always said yes.

I glared at her, because she too, had now chosen Fernando over me. I left the dinner table and went to my room, but her words kept playing in my mind that night and for the next several days.

It was true that my mom had someone to help her now. She wasn't so stressed about how she was going to make ends meet like she always had been. He treated her right, he respected us. He kept to himself. He would take my mother out to eat and to flea markets to buy her plants for her garden, and then he'd plant them in the ground himself. He did all the yard work even after he came home from work. He didn't want my mother to do it, even when she would insist. I had to face it, my mom was much better now that she had a partner that kept her company and helped. Jeniffer was right; the least I owed him was respect.

With the change of my attitude, Fernando seemed more at ease when he was home and soon he was inviting us to join him and my mother to eat at the restaurant that they frequented, where they sold fried fish and shrimp. The pescado was delicious when you sprinkled a lot of limón and salsa on it, then wrapped it in a tortilla de maíz. It felt nice to be out together like we had two parents, and it was such a treat to go out to eat at a restaurant because before Fernando, we couldn't afford it.

Fernando also started taking my family out to the beach on weekends, and we even stayed overnight at a hotel. Even though the hotel was in Port Isabel in order to cut costs, and even though we all crammed into one hotel room with two queen beds, we'd never been taken out on a little family trip like that. On the way to the beach, we always listened to the Maná CD in his van.

“Rayando el sol! Oh eh oh,” we’d sing loudly in the back seats, but Fernando didn’t sing. He tapped his fingers to the music on the steering wheel as he drove.

2.

By the time I started college, Fernando had been living with us for around five or six years. Nancy and I had just moved to an apartment in Edinburg by our university with two other roommates. I was very excited and felt so grown up, but I worried if I was going to make enough money to pay for my share of rent and utilities month after month. I was babysitting to make money, but the one family that I worked for didn’t need me that often. I saved everything they paid me. My only priority was making rent.

Nancy had a different situation because she was able to apply for federal school loans. With her big checks, she never had to worry about not making rent or utilities, and whenever her friends invited her to go out to eat, she could always say yes. She bought a lot of shoes and clothes at the mall. She even bought a digital camera and a laptop, which I always asked to borrow, and it sometimes annoyed her.

Our college experiences were so different, not only when it came to our financial situations, but also socially. She fit in more easily than I did with people in the club that we were both a part of, and they would invite her out on trips to visit their families over school breaks. Our club also went on missionary trips and Nancy went to Yucatán with them, but all I could experience from those trips were the photos on Facebook that they shared of them swimming in lakes and enjoying the beautiful scenery.

One day, our club announced that they'd give a few students the opportunity to be matched up with a country for a missionary trip. They were going to perform an extensive interview to find out what the most ideal match would be for the student, and it would be at their discretion. The intention was to stretch the student in areas they felt the student might need. Our roommate, Adri, who was also my best friend, was matched up with New York to serve in soup kitchens and to also help women who had been sexually trafficked. She was looking forward to going, though at first she had been a little disappointed that she wasn't chosen to leave the United States.

Nancy was matched up with Africa. I hadn't been jealous of any of the trips she'd been able to take before, but when she told me and my family that she was going to go to Africa, my first reaction was to be envious, then sad.

When I was a little girl, I would sit in front of the tv with my sisters to watch Saturday morning cartoons, and commercials would always come on asking for donations for animal shelters or sick children in hospitals. Of course, those made me very sad, but the commercials that always made me cry were the ones where they showed babies in Africa that didn't have food to eat. I saw children walking barefoot, carrying jugs of water on their shoulders. The person narrating the commercial said families needed to walk miles to find water, and we could help them have food and water secured. As I watched, I made a promise that one day I was going to go there myself to help the children. I had a plan that I would get many donations of clothes, food, shoes, and water, so much that it filled a big airplane, and then the pilot and me would take all of it to Africa. I kept asking myself, why aren't we doing that already? They had a need and I had a solution.

Of course, I later understood that airplanes don't work that way, just as I later understood that I had been blinded at the need of my own family and the need of many Mexican kids all along the border. Since I could open the fridge and find food and water, I had wished the same for them.

Still, my attachment to the dream of going to Africa to help children had remained up until that point. I'd even had a conversation about it with one of my friends from church, Fresia, when I was in high school. She was a few years older than me and very wise and kind. I told her about my dream and that I didn't know how I was going to be able to do it when I didn't have papers to go.

"If God gives you a dream, He will give you a way to do it," she told me, squeezing my arm in encouragement.

"But how do I know that it's a dream that He gave me, and not a dream that I have on my own?" I asked, knowing that it made all the difference. Maybe God could give me the papers if it was Him who wanted me to go.

"It's hard to tell sometimes, but you can look for signs. Look at your skin color, for example. Perhaps your appearance would make it easier for you to be trusted and accepted by them, than someone who looks a lot more different."

I'd never thought about it like that, but Fresia's words made me believe that perhaps it had been my purpose in life all along.

✦

The day that Nancy told me she had started raising the funds to go to Ghana, I smiled sincerely and told her I was happy for her, but that evening, I walked to the soccer field across our apartment complex, and I sat under the tree that I liked to go sit under when I wanted time alone. I cried.

I sat there for hours, praying and crying, asking God why, when it had always been *my* dream, never hers. I prayed for God to remove the hurt and jealousy that I felt, and for Him to help me to be sincerely happy for my sister. I stayed under my tree until I was sure that I was composed enough so that none of my roommates could see that I had been crying.

I felt like the prayer helped. I let go of my jealousy and supported Nancy as she got ready for her trip. Once there, I asked her all about what she was doing or eating when we got a chance to talk on the instant messenger or through emails. She told me about the village, the family she was staying with, the food, the language.

On the day of my birthday, she had made me a poster that said "Happy birthday, Nat! I love you! Wish you were here!" and she held it up with a huge smile. A large group of kids from the village stood all around her, wishing me a happy birthday, too. Nancy wanted me to be able to experience being in Africa somehow, even if it was just my name on the poster. She saved some dirt for me in a little glass jar so that I, too, could say I'd touched African soil. I was so happy to get that picture and jar of dirt. I knew that my sister wished so badly that I could have been there with her.

✦

Some time after Nancy's trip, Mom and Fernando had come to visit us at our apartment to check up on us and invite us out to eat. Before they were going to drop us off at our apartment, Fernando reached back and gave me a jar of coins.

He always took the spare change from his pockets and put it in jars because he didn't like bothering with coins. When the jars were full, he or my mom would take them in to the grocery store coin machine to get exchanged for dollar bills. They'd sometimes managed to save twenty or thirty dollars worth in a jar.

"Ten, mija, para que lo cambies," he said to me.

"Ah, muchas gracias Fernando," I replied, grateful and looking forward to having a little extra help for groceries or rent.

Immediately, Nancy got upset.

"Porque siempre la ayudan a ella y no a mi?"

I couldn't believe she had said that. I felt a lump in my throat form immediately, so I turned to look out the car window when tears welled up.

"Nobody ever gives me anything," she went on.

"Here. If you want it, you can have it," I said to her, putting the jar next to her. And when I gathered more courage, I added, "They help me with some coins and you're jealous? Do you want to trade places? Because I'd much rather be in your shoes, going to Africa, getting checks from school loans. And you're mad about twenty dollars of coins?"

She didn’t say anything after that. The rest of the car ride to our apartment was silent, and for a few weeks, Nancy and I didn’t talk to each other.

NOTES OF AN UNDOCUPERSON ENJOYING

NATURES CENTERS IN THE RGV

Some Personal Scenes

1. 2017. Adan and I trudged through the muddy marsh at Santa Ana Wildlife Refuge in Alamo, Texas. Behind us, a resaca rippled with every falling drop of rain. We made it through the muddy field back to the graveled trail, noticing how the bottoms of our pants were black with mud. The rain had also caused streaks of my teal hair dye to run down my shirt. A few days before, Adan had been very insistent that I dye my hair a "fun" color like he just had. It was June and he made sure to do everything he couldn't do during the academic year while he taught fourth grade; adventuring and coloring his hair.

"Just do it, come on. Don't be boring," he had said.

I had told him that I didn't want to damage my hair, but that afternoon I found myself sitting in my living room with a towel draped around my shoulders and Adan excitedly saturating the bottom half of my hair with a bleaching mixture.

"It's a vegan hair dye. It's gonna look badass," he said, trying his best to reassure me as he fried my hair and turned it "sea nymph" blue. Now with the pouring rain, it water-colored my shirt.

We stomped on the crunchy gravel, flinging off layers of mud from our shoes. We were laughing, enjoying getting wet in the rain as we walked down the trail when we noticed a white truck heading towards us.

“Dude, look at us. We look like we just crossed,” I said, and we assessed each other. Our piel morena, mine much darker. Wet, disheveled hair, dirty clothing, muddy shoes. Adan bent over in a fit of laughter, then immediately hushed himself.

“Sorry, it’s not funny! Let’s just look real chill.” The white truck was getting closer.

“Will you at least come visit me in México?” I joked.

The truck was now close enough for us to get a good view of its green stripe as it rolled down the path. The windows were down and I could see a flash of yellow hair behind the steering wheel. Adan and I straightened ourselves out, trying to look as normal as any other visitors. The white truck with the green stripe was a few yards ahead of us when we saw that the man with the yellow hair waved a hand out the window as he sped past us. We waved back but he was gone before he could see our saludo.

2. 2019. Mom, Judy, and I decided to visit Santa Ana one morning with the goal of walking five miles. I was very excited to show them the nature center that my best friend Adan had shown me.

“Mira, que bonito el encaje en los arboles!” my mother said in pure wonder, pointing up to the trees. From the short research I’d done on Santa Ana, I knew it was Spanish moss that hung from the mesquite trees.

“Eso es lo que usan para ponerle a los arbolitos de Navidad, verdad?” she asked, confident in tone. “De aqui lo agarran para vender?”

Judy and I looked at each other and burst out laughing.

“Oh, apoco no?” she asked.

“No, Ma! Esas decoraciones son de mentiras.”

“Oh, pues perdon. Yo no fui a la escuela como ustedes, mugrosas.”

I led them to the tall suspension bridge, which I successfully persuaded my mother to climb by telling her that perhaps we could see México from up there. On the way down, she was tired from all the climbing and walking, so we headed out. The South Texas sun was beating hard on our skin and we’d run out of water.

As we neared the exit, two border patrol agents walked toward us. There were only five of us on that trail, two of us their targets, unbeknownst to them. I pulled out my map of the trails that I’d been given at the visitor center and whispered to my mother to not say anything and to walk behind me. In the most perfect English I could speak, I talked to Judy while I pointed at the map, holding it up to my ‘puzzled’ face. When the agents stood before us, they bowed their heads and one of them addressed me.

“Sorry to disturb you, ma’am, but did you all see a man running through here? He’s wearing a blue shirt. He might be dangerous.”

My family and I looked at each other and shook our heads.

“No, we haven’t seen anyone. Sorry.”

“It’s ok. If you do see him, let us know because he’s running away from us.”

"Sure. Do you know if we're close to the exit?" I asked.

"It's right up there."

We thanked them and left.

3. 2018. Since Adan and I had gotten really into cycling, we visited the Bentsen State Park in Mission, Texas often to ride on the trails and sometimes just to hike. On one of those trips, we were still out hiking past the park's closing hours and we didn't want to leave before we saw the resaca and javelinas.

An older white man by the entrance booth saw us by the gate and asked, "Were you all wanting to hike?" We nodded. "Tell you what. The park is closed, but if you can promise to only be here for thirty minutes or so, I'll let you in. And I live right over there in the mobile homes, by the way."

We thanked him profusely and walked past the gate to get to the resaca. We spent a good long while taking in the beauty of the sun shining on the water, losing track of time. Close to the water, we'd spent a little more time observing six javelinas while they ate. We'd kept a good distance from them and had been very quiet because Adan, who is very knowledgeable about animals, was talking to me on the way there about how fast they are when they feel threatened. I'd climbed up a tree to watch the javelinas as they ate to be extra safe. The sun was setting when we started to head out. Bentsen was pitch black at night and we wanted to get out of there before nightfall.

As we neared the gate, we heard a vehicle coming fast around the curved road behind us. Adan and I had been walking in the middle of the gravel trail but we quickly jumped over to the grass to get out of the way. A white truck with a green stripe sped past.

"We aren't supposed to be here," I said to Adan, a little worried. "The park is closed. I hope they don't tell us anything."

Just then, another white truck with green stripes sped past us too, then another, and another, and another, and another, not paying us any mind as pebbles in the clouds of dust they left behind ricocheted on our ankles. Whoever they were chasing seemed to be more important than two people hiking past closing hours.

4. 2018. On another visit to Bentsen, we strolled down the road that led to the National Butterfly Center, just a few walking minutes away. As we passed a canal, Adan taught me about water hyacinths. He had started to raise koi in a pond in his front yard that he'd dug and built himself, and he'd done a lot of research on fish and their habitats. I listened to him as we walked, keeping my eyes on the water. I was thrilled when I saw a black snake wriggling on the surface of the water before diving in and disappearing. I loved how much wildlife we saw at Bentsen every time we visited. Jackrabbits, tarantulas, javelinas, hummingbirds, snakes on the trails, snakes in the water.

Further down the road, we passed a rancho with goats and as we walked we began to freestyle pocho poetry in the voice of Allen Ginsberg reading "Howl."

"Angel-headed hormigas crawling into the posito, chivas chewing zacate on our way to the mariposa center, la black serpent sleeping on the street."

We arrived to the butterfly center and were greeted very warmly, and apologetically, since we couldn't visit that day because there was a field trip for students going on and it was closed to the public. At the gift shop, we were given information about how to attract butterflies to our

own yards with a concoction of bananas and beer, and before leaving we bought a few postcards and seeds. We planned to visit again at another time.

Not long after that, we read news about a proposed border wall that was to run right through the butterfly center, Bentsen, and Santa Ana; our favorite places to hang out.

5. 2019. Adan and I picked up a couple of barbacoa tacos from the Stripes gas station and ate them on the bed of his truck at Bentsen as we waited for the rally to begin. The morning sun shone bright and birds whistled through the trees above us.

"I hope the border patrol doesn't come to the rally to stop us," I said as I poured salsa verde into my taco.

"Nambe. They can't."

When it was time to start, we walked to the pavilion, where we met a group of about thirty or forty people. The speakers took turns talking about the effects that the border wall would have on the wildlife as well as how costly it would be. We were given postcards to sign and send out to state officials, and at the end we had a quick meal of homemade empanadas that a young man had brought to share. The rally was wrapped up with a group hike to the Hawk Tower, where we enjoyed a beautiful view of the park and a glimpse of México. We held up a large "No Border Wall" banner and took a photo as a group. Adan and I snuck off after a while to continue our own hike through the trails.

6. 2020. The next time Adan and I visited Bentsen State Park was at the end of the following year, once the coronavirus pandemic had hit. We walked Adan's dogs through the same places we'd walked and biked many, many times before, only this time there was a giant

red wall erected with signs that told us to keep out of one side and stay on the other. Through the shutdowns of the pandemic, it had quietly begun to be constructed.

7. 2022. I woke up very early on a day that I was off from work and Santa Ana was the first thing that came to my mind. I just longed to be there. I hadn't visited the refuge since 2019. During the start of the pandemic when the refuge was shut down, I'd done a lot of research about it online and had found out that one of the trails took you straight to the Río. I hadn't ever been on that trail and even though I was going alone and felt a little nervous, the deep yearning to see the river and México was stronger. The thought made me jump out of bed to get myself ready.

What would I wear? Every time I had gone, I'd seen more white people there, bird watching, than people from the Valley. They came in RV's loaded with bicycles and license plates that said they were from Florida, Illinois, Ohio, even Canada. Somehow, I wanted to look like I was just bird watching too.

I checked the weather and saw that it was going to be very hot, but I decided I couldn't wear a sleeveless shirt because my tattoos would show. I chose a light sweater, pants, tennis shoes, and a bright orange bucket hat that my university had sent out in the mail for students. Not only would the hat shield me from the sun, but it also said I was a university student and maybe it also said that I was just another outdoor hiker. I stuffed my backpack with a large bottle of water, some almonds to snack on, and sunglasses. I wondered if I should even take the backpack or carry my things in my arms while I hiked because it's different to be a brown person walking by the border with a backpack on than to be a white person walking by the border with a backpack on. I decided to take it. Applying makeup, doing my hair, and wearing my orange

bucket hat would do the trick of letting me pass as just another visitor. I hurried out the door to make good use of the fresher temperature of dawn.

Before driving to Alamo, I stopped at the Stripes by my house to put gas in my car and pick up a barbacoa taco and a taco de papa con huevo in honor of my adventures there with Adan. The tradition of road trips and tacos was something we'd started doing about ten years before when we met as undergrads. We'd pull all-nighters to study and when morning came, we would go to Stripes to enjoy breakfast tacos made with fresh, hot tortillas. I put the white paper bag with my tacos in my backpack because I wanted to wait to eat them by the Río.

The road that led to Santa Ana was empty, with only a vehicle or two at a time. It reminded me of Matamoros with its yonques and its tienditas announcing "Snack's;" listing goods with unnecessary apostrophes. There were large fields growing crops on either side of the road, houses caving in and several that looked like they'd been pieced together with whatever materials were available. I enjoyed all of it. The sunrise, the road, the solitude, the houses that looked like the ones I grew up in, Norah Jones playing on my radio.

Upon arriving, I didn't hear the loud buzzing of chicharras and birds as I always had, rather the buzzing of dozens of fifth graders that were there on a field trip. Their shirts said they were from PSJA School District. It made me glad that they'd been exposed to the nature center much sooner than I had. I'd lived about twenty minutes away from it in Mercedes my whole life and had never known about its existence until I met Adan.

I found a tour guide at the front and asked her which trail led to the river, just to make sure it was actually true that there was such a trail.

“Pintail Lakes, it’s right over there,” she pointed. “The students are about to go on that trail too, so you might see them there. They’re not going to go all the way to the river, just by the resacas.”

I thanked her and hurried to leave for the trail before the students. I wanted to enjoy it alone. The first sight I had as I turned into Pintail Lakes trail was of a border patrol truck on the field to the right and two border patrol agents on foot. They were searching by the bushes for a minute or two, then one hopped onto the bed of the truck and the other drove them off through the field, terrones flying in the dust.

The students were walking a few yards behind me and I heard a boy shout, “Ay! La migra!”

His classmates giggled and the teacher shouted, “If you don’t get in line and be quiet we’ll just go back to the bus and sit there for two hours!”

When I made it to the resacas, I saw a posted sign at the edge of the water that read: “Wetland biologists pump water from the Rio Grande. This simulates the periodic river floods that used to occur each year before the river was dammed.” The river was indeed damned.

Another sign said that I was 0.2 miles away from the Rio Grande, the arrow pointing straight ahead past the several little lakes. I wanted to enjoy the ducks floating on the water but that wasn’t why I’d made the trip.

I took two pods of mesquite from the branches of the trees that lined the path, remembering when my father had taught me at Abuela’s rancho that you could suck the

sweetness from the seeds. I put them in my backpack as keepsakes. To my right, a sign read: "AREA beyond this sign CLOSED. All public entry prohibited." I stayed clear from that area.

At the end of the path, the Río.

I could hardly believe it. How had I been allowed to get this close to it? The river lay there peacefully, right under the cliff I stood on, serpenting between both countries, separating them.

Five white cranes floated on the water. The cliff had a steep drop off and I wasn't sure if it was natural or if it had been cut into to make it steeper. It looked very natural at least, lined with wild brushery and old trees. México was the dense forest of trees that touched el otro lado del Río, just a few hundred feet away from me. The closest I'd been to México in many years.

The only thing that separated me from the country that birthed me was a rickety little fence structure on the cliff, no more than five or six feet wide, made out of two short posts and three strings of wire. I could have easily gone around the post to step on the two feet or so of ground before the drop-off, but I didn't dare. What if there were cameras of some sort that could track my body heat and location? I couldn't dare cross to the other side of the rickety wire barrier because what if that foot of land was technically México? Or what if I fell down the cliff? The two men in green that I saw at the entrance of Santa Ana would be quick to come and get me. Instead, I slid part of my tennis shoe under the fence and stuck my hand through the wires, careful to not put my limbs too far to that side.

It took me a while to get courage to sit down next to the rickety fence to eat my breakfast. I looked down the path for a very long time and saw no one approaching, so I sat down on the ground and took my water and tacos out. As I ate, a couple of fish made splashes in the water

and more white cranes floated by. I recorded a video of the river and the fence for my mother, who responded immediately: “Si cruzas la cerca ya es México. Ten cuidado, mija. Si ves a alguien por alli vete de inmediato.”

“Estoy bien. Me estoy comiendo mi taco aquí en el Río,” I responded, and added a photo of the river and my brown hand holding my taco de papa con huevo through the wires. On my thumb, a tiny finger tattoo I’d gotten the week before: “956” in black ink.

Nine-five-six. The area code of my Valle. The Valley that I couldn’t leave because of the checkpoint seventy five miles north and the border a few miles south. El Valle that had taught me to be a little envious of, and a little in love with, white cranes in Santa Ana who could touch both countries at once and monarch butterflies in Bentsen who could migrate freely across the Río.

LA CARCEL DEL VALLE

On the first day of my Diversity Reading & Writing course, my professor had asked us to do the "privilege walk" exercise, where we stood next to each other in a horizontal line in the middle of the classroom and took a step forward or backward as she asked us questions such as, "Take a step forward if you had more than fifty books at home when you were growing up. Take a step backward if your first language was not English. Take a step forward if your parents went to college."

After about twenty or so questions, the line we had started out with was spotted all over the room; a few classmates had advanced toward the very front, but most were in the middle. Stevie and I found ourselves behind the rest of our classmates. I made a mental note about her; if ever we had to break off into groups, I wanted to work with her. I knew why I was at the back of the room, but I wondered what it was that made her be back there too. I was not going to ask her because I understood privacy very well, but whatever it was, she alone was back there with me and this made her safe to get to know.

We had a few chances to work together for projects in the first couple of months of school, and we even met up several times at a local café in the evenings to study since we had two classes together. Over spring break, our university switched to online courses because the coronavirus pandemic hit and our city was ordered to shelter at home. After that, Stevie and I hardly communicated, except for liking a post here and there on each other's social media.

It wasn't until eight months into the pandemic when I decided to send her a message: "Hey! I don't know how you feel about it cause of the pandemic, and you can totally say no, but

thought I'd ask anyway… would you want to maybe hang out sometime?" She wrote back right away and said that she'd love to. She told me about a bar downtown with a patio and we agreed to meet there in the evening, since it was outdoors and we'd be wearing our facemasks. I was excited to socialize after so many months. I got ready and headed out a little earlier than we agreed, since I hardly ever went downtown and needed to make sure I found good parking.

I was relieved to find the bar Stevie told me to meet her at. I'd never been there but was excited when I saw cozy yellow lights hanging from the roof and when I heard live music coming from the patio. Just as I turned my steering wheel toward it, I felt something crash into me and I pressed on my brakes immediately. A guy on a motorcycle had hit my headlight on the intersection. He was very angry, throwing hand gestures at his motorcycle and my car.

"What the fuck!?" he yelled at me.

"Crap! Are you okay?" I asked him.

"I don't know! That's what I'm trying to see!"

I reached over to the passenger seat to grab my phone, but he yelled, "Don't move! Don't try to leave."

"I'm not leaving, I'm just getting my phone."

"Stay there," he told me. "I'm calling the cops. Don't move."

"Okay, I'm just turning off the car."

I grabbed my purse and phone, then I saw that Stevie was standing on the sidewalk.

“Oh my God, Nataly! Was that you!? We heard it from the patio. Are you okay?”

“Hey. Yea, I’m okay.”

“Are you sure?”

I walked over to her. “Yes, I’m fine. But, dude…What the fuck just happened.” I looked back toward my car. “I’m scared.”

“Don’t be scared, your car seems fine. It’s just the bumper.”

We both walked back to the intersection where my car stood still with its headlight dangling and the bumper halfway off. The guy on the motorcycle was talking on his phone.

“I’m not worried about the car. I’m just so nervous right now. The cops are on their way.”

“It’s gonna be okay. Accidents happen. As long as you’re fine. Have you called your family?”

“No, not yet. Dude, I’m sorry. I feel like I just ruined the whole evening.”

“You didn’t ruin anything! I’m just glad you’re okay.”

“Oh my God, the cop just got here, hang on. Let me go talk to him.”

The policeman asked me for my driver’s license. I dug into my purse, looking for my passport to give him as an identification instead.

“You don’t have a license?”

"No."

He took my passport with him and went back to his vehicle. I walked back over to Stevie.

"Everything good?"

"Yes. I'm just so nervous."

"It's gonna be ok, friend. Your car doesn't look too bad."

"No, you don't understand…. I'm scared." I paused for a few seconds, then decided to just come out with it, just in case. "I'm undocumented."

"Huh?"

"Yea."

"Wow." She paused. "I had no idea… *Fuck*."

Even though most of the poems I'd written in our poetry class spoke about issues around immigration, we knew better than to verbally assume the writer was the narrator. Our professor, who is an activist heavily involved in social justice issues in the Rio Grande Valley community, had made our classroom a safe space. We read undocupoets and immigrant writers in her class and we had amazing discussions about their work. We spoke freely about current events such as the upcoming 2020 elections. We workshopped each other's poems abiding by her guidelines such as no tolerance for disrespect and never assuming that the person who wrote the poem was the subject of the piece. I'd felt safe writing about being an immigrant in her class because I could hide behind the ambiguity of poetry, never having to openly admit anything about myself during writing workshops. Classmates gave me feedback on my lines, enjambment, musicality,

or the narrator's voice. Stevie had read all my angry immigrant poems but she hadn't assumed they were about *me*.

"Dude, I'm going to get deported."

"No you're not! You're crazy. Everything's gonna be okay. Don't worry."

"Stevie, I can literally get deported right now. They have my Mexican passport. Oh my God."

"Calm down, I'm not gonna let them take you. I'll call our professor and organize and we'll get you. They're not taking you anywhere. You're gonna be okay."

"You promise??"

"Yes."

"Here, get my brother's phone number in case anything happens to me and he needs to come get my car."

She called my brother to explain what had happened while I went to look at my car one more time. I looked at all my bumper stickers, wondering if the policeman had noticed them. One was a logo from my university, one was a sticker from my favorite show, The Office. Another sticker said, "No human being is illegal." One had a picture of a green jay and the words "Save Santa Ana." A black sticker had the words "No Border Wall" surrounded by barbed wires. I hoped the officer liked The Office too, but if he happened to be a Trump supporter, it was going to be over for me.

Two more police vehicles arrived, and the cops got off to survey the crash. The man on the motorcycle was now talking with the cop who had my passport.

"Was she using her phone?" the cop asked him, scribbling notes down.

"No. Wait. Yes, she was."

"No I wasn't! Sir, I was not on my phone. I was about to park. My friend was waiting for me here. She's right there," I said, pointing to Stevie who was on the sidewalk in front of the bar. Two of her friends now stood there with her and they all looked at my car that was being intermittently illuminated by red and blue lights.

"I'm asking because I have to ask. It's his word against yours. Doesn't mean that what he is saying is true," the cop assured me as he scribbled some more. He gave me my passport back and I stuffed it into my purse. Something in me told me to take pictures of the crash; the man had already lied about me being on my phone. Stevie stood by me as I took pictures of his motorcycle from all angles while he watched me do so. Not a scratch on it.

The cop who had taken my passport walked over to me and motioned the other two policemen to leave. I was so relieved because it looked like the border patrol wasn't going to be called. The motorcycle guy left as well and I made small talk with the cop, hoping that he saw I was a respectful person. Yes, I was a Mexican national and didn't have a driver's license, but at least I needed him to know that though I was surrounded by bars and clubs, I hadn't had any drinks or been driving recklessly.

"You can pull the car over there to the side," he said, pointing to the street across the bar.

“I can drive it like this?”

“Yes, you just have to drive it very slowly.”

“Right now?”

“Yes, right now.”

“Will I get towed for parking there?”

“You won’t. Try to pick it up in the morning and you’ll be fine. If you can find a way to tie the bumper up, you could even drive it home, too, if you go slow with your hazards.”

I got into my car and turned it on, surprised when I saw that it was working fine as I slowly drove it to where the officer pointed. The bumper and headlight dragged in front of the tire, but luckily it was only a few meters away. Once I had parked, he asked me more questions as he scribbled into his device, like where I lived and what I did for work. At the end, he handed me a citation and said that was it, for me to call the municipal court the next day to figure out payment. When he left, I walked over to Stevie.

“Ya, friend? So what happened?”

“I got a ticket but everything’s ok.”

“I told you it was gonna be okay! Are you gonna leave your car there?”

“Yea. He said I can park there so I’m gonna leave it for now till I figure out what to do. I just don’t wanna think about any of it right now. I was so scared, dude. And it’s embarrassing, I ruined the whole night.”

“Stop, you didn’t ruin anything! Accidents happen. Let’s go order something so you can calm down.”

As I quietly sipped on a glass of wine, Stevie chatted with two other friends of hers that sat on our table. I wondered if perhaps the policeman had visited the Santa Ana Wildlife Refuge, or if he’d read about how the proposed border wall was going to run right through it, cutting the home of endangered ocelots and migratory birds in half. Or perhaps he had family that migrated from Mexico. Or maybe he was going to vote for Biden in the elections.

At the end of the night, Stevie asked me if I wanted a ride home. “No, I’m going to call my brother to come see my car and take me home,” I’d said, but I had lied. I didn’t want anyone to come get me or feel sorry for me or my car.

When I got back to my car, I turned it on, plugged in my phone to the radio to listen to music, and I sat there for a long time thinking about what had happened and how lucky I’d been. Had this exact situation taken place somewhere not in the Valley, I surely wouldn’t have had the same outcome. We’d just had nationwide protests about confrontations with police that had ended in losses of life. We’d just protested against abuse of power towards people of color, and there I was, darker skinned than most in the Valley, leaving an accident scene with three cop vehicles, with my life, without deportation.

Was I let go with just a citation because I was so close to Mexico that police regularly came across other Mexicans like me, driving with identification but without a license? Was it because I was a female? Was it because of how I spoke to the officers or how I carried myself?

As my music played, I thought back to how fearful my family and I had been to drive just a few years prior when there were Valley-wide retenes being held by the Texas Department of Public Safety, who had been setting up the checkpoints to ask drivers for their license and car insurance. We followed pages on Facebook like “Alertas de Retenes 956,” where they sent out alerts of the location and time of retenes so that people stayed clear. “Ponganse trucha,” some people posted on the page, looking out for their family and friends after many had commented that they’d seen border patrol showing up to the scene when a driver hadn’t been able to present a driver’s license. The retenes lasted a few months and during that time, we’d send out my little sister Judy or my little brother Erick to buy our groceries, since they’re American citizens and didn’t run the risk of deportation for going out to buy eggs, like the rest of us did. Yet even after the retenes stopped, the fear of deportation during traffic violations stayed with me, with us.

After a while I decided that I should try to put my bumper back together as best as I could for the night, then call an Uber to take me home.

Standing in front of my car, I realized that the damage was minor like they’d all said. All I had to do was stick the fallen headlight back into its spot first, then pick up the bumper and do the same. I was able to click most of it back into place well enough that I felt comfortable to leave my car overnight because it didn’t look crashed.

I marveled at how nice the Uber vehicle was on my way home. The driver was playing Luke Bryan on the radio at a very low volume. He had a thin plastic drape between the front seats and both rows of seats in the back, and a printed sign on the drape that read, “Thank you for keeping your mask on.” There was a light vanilla scent floating in the air and the carpets were

vacuumed to perfection. I tapped my nails on my phone and bounced my knees, anxious to sleep and wake up already to pick up my car.

As soon as I got home, I looked in my bin of tools for zip ties and duct tape. I put them in a plastic bag along with scissors and set the bag next to my purse and car keys. Before the sun rose the next morning, I ordered another Uber to get to my car.

I was so relieved when I could see from inside the Uber the little orange dot that was my car way at the front end of the street. It was so early that the people who tow cars were probably sleeping, and I was thankful for that. Downtown looked so different with no neon lights or crowds of bar hoppers on the streets.

I thanked the Uber driver and set my supplies down in front of my car. I needed to work fast before there were people on the road. The top and bottom ends of the bumper had little holes where the zip ties could fit into, so I looped several of them and tightened them as much as I could. Only the right side of the bumper and the right headlight had fallen off, which was a lucky break. I tugged on the bumper to make sure it was secure enough. I just needed luck so that the headlight wouldn't pop out on the way home, since there was no way to zip tie it. I turned on my car and made sure that both of my headlights were on. They were! I took my neatly folded citation out of my purse in case anything fell off on the way home. I said a prayer and put my car on drive, rolling the windows down so that I would be able to better listen for falling bumpers or headlights, and I drove very slowly. I was so glad to live ten minutes down the main road from downtown.

When I called the municipal court later that morning, I gave the lady who answered my citation number and she looked up my case. I was worried about what she would say with all the information they had and didn't have about me.

"How will you be paying?" she asked.

"Is there any way I can do a payment plan? Or community service? I'm sorry. I'm a full-time student, I don't have much money."

"Yes, of course." I could hear a smile on her voice that I certainly wasn't expecting. "You have to show proof that you qualify for paying with community service. I'd be glad to send that packet of info over to you. You can't come here because of Covid safety measures."

I was so glad to hear that. "Can I choose where to do community service?"

"What's your address?" I gave it to her, she typed it in and searched. "Hmm. Let's see. The closest place would be the airport."

Holy crap. The airport? The only time I'd ever stepped foot in an airport was when we'd dropped off my younger sister, Nancy, off for her trips at the Harlingen and Brownsville airports. Mom and I hadn't even known where to park when we dropped her off, but Nancy had been on plenty of flights so she led the way. "Park over there," she had said, pointing to the spot across the sliding doors, in between several border patrol vehicles. She was going to start a new semester of college in Delaware. Mom and I were nervous as Nancy unloaded her suitcases from the trunk, but we acted casually, as if going to airports was something we regularly did as a family.

“The airport?” I asked. “Is there another place nearby? What about the animal shelter? I don’t mind going farther.”

“Sure. As long as they’re accredited with the county for community service, that will be fine.”

“Great, I’ll call them and send you back all the info so that I can start as soon as possible.”

“Well, you can call them, but you still have to wait to get the packet in the mail. You’re going to need to fill it all out and provide proof of address, lease agreement, proof of income, all your utility bills, and then we’ll verify it and see if you qualify for community service.”

When I hung up, I called the animal shelter, but they weren’t accepting any volunteers due to the pandemic and new safety protocols. I called a local center that does humanitarian work, but they also weren’t accepting volunteers. I would have to complete my hours at the airport.

I called the direct line of the man whose number I was given by the lady at the municipal court and was glad to hear that he sounded jaded.

“Yea, you can come in whenever you have time, basically. If you wanna work one hour, three hours, eight. It’s up to you. You sign in when you get here, sign out when you leave, and then I have to sign it, too.”

“Great. Do I need to bring anything with me?”

“The paperwork from the court, that’s it, and I’m going to keep it until you finish. How many hours do you have?”

“About forty.”

“Oh, okay. Yes, just bring that paper.”

“Where can I park while I work?”

“You’ll park in the short-term lot. We’ll give you a pass so they don’t charge you when you leave.”

“Okay. And how do I get to your office to give you the papers?” The last thing I wanted was to look suspicious wandering confused around the airport. I wanted to get there and look like I had been inside plenty of times before.

When my paperwork for community service had been approved, I got ready for my first day. I had written down on a small paper every turn the man had told me to make, along with the name of his department, but still when I got to the airport, my nerves had set in and I couldn’t read signs. I played it off by sipping on my iced coffee and browsing through my phone as I walked, as if I was waiting for a flight. I looked up every few steps to read signs inconspicuously.

I saw an older Mexican man with a light blue collared shirt pushing around a yellow cart and I asked him where the department on my piece of paper was.

“Está allá, al pasar la foto del cotorro.”

A parrot? I couldn't see a parrot. I could only see security guards by the doors and airport employees behind their counters looking at me.

"Mira. Allá."

I finally saw the banner that he was pointing at. It hung from the ceiling and there indeed was a big parrot on it.

"You turn left there and you'll see the office in the back."

I thanked him and was grateful to be able to walk more assuredly now that I knew where I was going. I sipped my coffee as I crossed through a seating area with my folder in my hand. Twenty minutes later, I was wearing a lime green vest and vacuuming that same seating area, wiping down its seats with disinfectant spray. I hated the bright vest but at least everyone ignored me now because I was just another member of the cleaning crew.

The staff that had given me my own yellow cart, vest, and vacuum had informed me that I would be sweeping, cleaning bathrooms, wiping down mirrors and sliding doors, getting trash out from bins, setting them up with fresh bags, helping take down the Mexican, Canadian, and American flags for the night, and picking up trash outside.

"You can clean whatever you see needs cleaning, in whatever order you want. As long as you keep moving, mija. You finish one thing, go to the next, cause they got cameras and they're always watching," one of the ladies had said to me.

After vacuuming, I chose to go outside to wipe the sliding doors because the heater inside the airport was turned up high. The cold air felt nice as I wiped all three of the entrance doors

and the windows next to them, rushing as I cleaned because I was scared that the cameras were noticing I wasn't working fast enough. Once all the glass was shiny, I wanted to remain cleaning outside as much as I could, so I took out my trash grabber to pick up every piece of trash that had fallen on the grass and that people had left behind on the benches, and then I cleaned out the trash bins by the doors and set them up with new bags. It was already night out and I had been cleaning for about two hours, when another lady from the cleaning crew called me over to the bench she had just sat on.

"Girl, come take a break," she said to me. "Cómo te llamas?"

"Nataly," I answered.

"My name's Vero. Come sit down," she said, pointing to the bench by the sliding glass doors, right behind three empty border patrol trucks. "I'm going to smoke, you want one?"

"No, thank you," I said, standing next to my cart.

"Ok. Well, take a fifteen-minute break, ma. You're allowed to take breaks. In a little while you help me take the flags down. Pero siéntate un rato. Oye muchacha loca, no trajiste suéter? Está frío." She shivered dramatically.

"No, I'm okay, I like the cold. It's really hot in there."

"Yes, I know. The ladies at the desk keep the heater on very high. How long are you going to be here today?"

"I'm planning on two more hours."

"See, you're going to be here for a while, so just relax. Take your time cleaning. There's three shifts here, so when you leave, the other crew is coming in and they don't really have flights overnight. What times are you gonna be coming?"

"I was planning on the afternoons, that way I can get my homework done in the mornings."

"Good. I don't recommend the morning shift. Esas viejas son bien canijas. They think that just because you're community service, they can make you do all their work. Pero no, they're getting paid and you're not so it's not fair."

"What times are you here?"

"We start at 3 and end at 11. You already met Karina, the crew leader. She's always nice like that. If you come while we're here, you can take it slow. There's not a lot of flights in the afternoon either, because of the pandemic. Just look like you're always cleaning and you'll be fine."

At the end of each four or five-hour shift, my feet were very tired and my body was sore. I was used to cleaning; I'd cleaned many houses for cash before. But it was different to clean someone's house in front of a nanny cam than it was to clean an airport with dozens of security cameras.

What I loved was that I was killing two birds with one stone because I listened to my audiobook for my literature class while I cleaned. I hid my headphone strings under my vest like Vero had shown me, and I played *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac.

Getting lost in Kerouac's adventures while I wiped glass doors and changed trash bins genuinely made me feel happy. I found myself at that moment in life having much to be grateful for. Not only had I not been deported, but I had been allowed to do community service, I was getting my master's degree, I could do my hours and not get too behind in school thanks to audiobooks, and the ladies in the cleaning crew were kind to me. Mostly everyone walking into the airport was friendly, too, greeting me or thanking me as they dumped in their trash.

I wondered what they thought about me when they walked past me and my trash grabber. Did they automatically assume I was an employee? Did they have any idea about airport community service? There weren't many flights during the day but there were two or three at times. While I disinfected the seats in the seating area, I liked to glimpse at the screen that announced the arrivals and departures and I liked to observe people as they waited for their luggage. I saw people that looked young and hip, like they were university students coming to visit their families for the holidays. I saw men in suits with briefcases. White families with little blonde kids. I saw people that looked like they lived here in the Valley. Depending on how they were dressed, I liked to imagine their stories and why they'd taken the flight, and who they were about to hug. I wondered if they assumed things about me too. Did they see my brown skin and automatically assume that I was employed as a janitor?

I'd been raised to believe that every honest job was respectable, especially since my own mother and I had worked cleaning houses too. I now knew there was a difference though, in

cleaning somebody's house and cleaning a place like an airport, or perhaps a doctor's office. I hadn't stopped to think much about how a janitor felt when you walked on the carpet they'd just vacuumed or touched the glass doors that they'd just wiped down. I didn't have to worry about that when I cleaned houses because I only had to do it once and then I left until the next time they called. I didn't have to clean the same spots on the same airport, several hours a day, every day of the week.

Due to all the odd jobs I'd had, my schedule was never constant. Sometimes I cleaned someone's house, sometimes I nannied babies, sometimes I babysat for date nights, sometimes I house sat or dog sat, sometimes I worked as a personal assistant, sometimes I'd cooked or baked food to sell, sometimes I handled kids' drop offs and pick-ups or took kids to the museum, bouncy house, or park for the day, sometimes I'd worked at raspa stands, sometimes I'd worked at carnivals, sometimes I'd gotten under the table jobs as a cashier or server.

It's bittersweet to not have a constant schedule. The money is never stable and that causes anxiety, but there's also a lot of change constantly happening, which gives me more freedom with my time in between jobs when I'm not called. It's also made me wonder about what job I'd choose and could be happy with if I obtained a working permit. Would I be too used to the constant changes in my life to be able to hold down a Monday through Friday 9-5 job doing the same task day in and day out?

I asked Vero about it once when we were outside lowering the flags half-staff for all the people who had died due to coronavirus. She was a middle-aged Mexican American woman, fully bilingual, and I wanted to gain perspective from her.

"So, how long have you been working here?"

“A little over two years.”

“Oh cool. And you like it?”

“Yea, I like it a lot. My day goes by pretty fast.”

“I don’t know how you do it. I’m only here for like four or five hours at a time and I get home so tired.”

“Nah, you get used to it. There’s always something happening here so it keeps you on your toes. I’ve seen some crazy stuff go on. I can be on one floor cleaning, then I get called to go up because someone spilled something on the floor. Or someone lost their ID and we have to look for it. Or someone got hurt and we have to call the ambulance. Or someone trying to get on an airplane and they’re illegal, so they get stopped.”

“Really?” I interrupted. “When did that happen?”

“It’s happened a couple of times. One time it was these two ladies, they were young. They came and asked me how to get on a plane because it was their first time. So I go over there and show them how to buy the tickets, but since they didn’t understand, I did it for them. They’re sitting on the benches waiting for the airplane all night. When it’s time, one of the ladies gets in line first and they ask her for her papers but she doesn’t have any. Or I don’t know, but she’s screaming because they get her, and the other lady is still waiting and I want to go tell her, Hey, you better leave before they get you, too. Pero pues I can’t do that. They end up getting them both and then there were a lot of border patrol trucks outside. Y así pasa a veces. It’s not the only time I’ve seen illegals trying to get on a plane and they get stopped. I felt really bad for the ladies, they were real nice.”

“Wow,” I said, taking in a deep breath.

“But yes I like the job. Como te digo, something’s always happening here so your day goes by fast. I went to college a long time ago, but I never finished. It wasn’t for me,” she said, sucking her teeth. “I like to be on my feet, moving, active. Come on, let’s go inside, it’s cold,” she said, and we rolled our yellow carts back into the airport to find something else to clean.

A late flight was getting in, and Vero said we should clean the bathrooms together but we’d wait until everyone had left the airport so that we didn’t have to do it twice. We set up our carts near the bathroom entrance and stood off to the side, smiling at people as they walked in to use the bathroom or walked past us to get their luggage.

An old couple walked by us arm in arm. The old man wore a hat, sweater, and brown pants; I didn’t notice what the lady wore. I noticed him because he’d smiled as he shuffled past us and said, “It must be nice to get paid for just standing around. Ha! I wish I got paid to stand.” Vero gave him a courteous chuckle as they walked past us.

I rolled my eyes and told her, “Wow. I can’t believe he just said that. He has no idea.”

“Déjalo, está viejito. He didn’t mean it like that. Just smile at them and wave. Don’t take it personal.”

The day finally came when I finished my hours. I didn’t want to say bye to Vero because I get awkward with goodbyes with people I like and care about, so I looked for Karina instead. She took me to her boss’s office to get my court paperwork signed.

While he added up the hours on his calculator, I emptied out my cart for the next shift and threw my full trash bag in the large bin behind the airport. A few members of the cleaning and maintenance crews sat there taking their smoke breaks.

"Ya te vas?" asked an older man whom I'd made acquaintance with.

"Yes, I'm finally done with all my hours."

"Oh okay. That's great. Well, good luck with everything," he said.

"Thank you, you too."

I walked back in and hung my lime green vest on its hook, and Karina's boss gave me my paper with his red signature. "Well, that's it. Thank you," he said.

I took my paper and walked out of the airport, feeling the cold air whip through my sweaty hair. I felt thankful for the experience because it had made me learn so much.

Through it all, good things had happened. My mechanic said the damage to my car was very minor and had only charged me fifty dollars to properly secure the headlight and bumper back in. More importantly, it had just been announced that Biden won the election and his administration had opened DACA back up again for new applicants. The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), had been an executive order issued by President Barack Obama, which granted working permits and temporary protection from deportation to young people who had entered the country as minors. In order to qualify, applicants needed to prove they were enrolled in high school or college, and prove that they had clean criminal records. DACA had been closed to new applicants under the Trump administration -- when I'd gathered all my

paperwork, money, and courage to apply. When DACA had first been announced, many immigrants had feared that it was a way to get all of our information and that it would lead to mass deportations of ourselves and our families.

I was excited to be able to apply for the first time and that week, I started gathering all my documents and evidence to submit my DACA packet. I'd be able to get a driver's license and never have to worry about citations or community service again. And the next time I visited the airport, it would be to get on my own flight.

✦

I got in touch with my cousin, Nelly, whom I hadn't seen in a while. She had DACA and I'd asked her if she would meet me for lunch and give me any advice she had as I submitted my own packet. Over birria tacos, we caught up on the past few years of our lives and she shared her experiences with DACA. I also mentioned my recent car accident and the airport community service.

"Are you serious?" she asked, putting down her birria taco.

"Yea, why?"

"I work there. I never saw you."

"For real?"

"Yea, I'm there almost every night. What times were you there?"

"I usually went in the afternoons and left around 10 or 11."

"If you'd been there later, you would have seen me. I work overnight, reuniting immigrant kids with their parents. I get on the flights with them."

The last time I'd spoken with her, she'd had a different job. I'd known she was working with migrant children, but now she had leveled up in her job to travelling all across the country, reuniting minors with their families or sponsors. I had no idea she was getting to travel like that, and at first I felt a sting of jealousy. We'd grown up together, even sharing a house at times, yet now we'd drifted apart and our lives looked so different. We were both DREAMers, but over lunch, I realized she was doing much better than me in life.

I'd been raised by my mother to not be envious of others or covet what others had; "*What good is wanting something you didn't work for yourself?*" she'd always said. She had swallowed the lump in her throat when my Abuela Concha left everything in her will to my Tía Norma, who owned a two-story house and had a husband to provide for her and their one child, while my mother raised seven of us alone. Being the older sister, she'd only learned to be protective of Tía Norma; she couldn't be mad at her for having been the favorite daughter. My mother resigned that in life she'd have to work harder for the things she needed, and in doing so, she felt more proud in her ability to keep surviving. My mother has one of the purest hearts that I know. No matter how low she has felt in life or how many times she's been wronged, she taught my siblings and me to strive to have pure hearts and intentions towards others too. Knowing this, I swallowed the lump in my own throat and felt happy for Nelly, my childhood best friend who now had this amazing opportunity for herself through DACA. I just needed to put all my efforts to have it for myself, too.

Nelly beamed as she talked about how good it felt to help kids who she could deeply relate to. “Immigrants kids just like us,” she kept saying. She never showed off or made me feel inferior about our different paths in life and types of jobs we had. She told me she hoped everything worked out for me with DACA so that I could get a great job once I finished my degree. The rest of the lunch date, we cracked up at memories of when we were kids and made plans to see each other more often.

✦

After my experience at the airport, I kept having dreams about traveling. Dreams that I’d board a flight to Costa Rica with Nancy and some of our friends from college. Dreams where my family and I would go on vacations to Hawaii and to Mexico. I realized that my mind had been opened to a yearning for traveling much stronger than I’d ever felt. Not being able to board a flight yet caused me anguish during the day and showed up in my dreams at night.

I had been so grateful to clean the airport, so grateful that I hadn’t been deported thanks to living in the frontera where we all knew someone who was an immigrant and more often than not, we saw each other as raza no matter the legal status. I knew it was a frontera thing, because my older brother had recently gotten deported after having been stopped in Corpus Christi for going five miles over the speed limit on his way to work. He’d had his wife on the phone over the speaker. She was down here in the Valley and my brother would talk with her on his way to and from work so that conversing with her kept him alert after the long hours he worked in his construction and paving jobs. He’d kept her on the line when the policeman pulled him over so that she could hear everything just in case things went bad. The policeman called the border patrol and my brother was then taken to a detention center and deported.

Now with my recurring dreams of traveling, I wondered if seeing the Valley as my haven throughout my life had actually transformed it into a prison instead. A place I clung to, glad to be allowed to stay in, while richer life experiences I could be having passed me by.

✦

Needless to say, a few months after DACA was opened for new applicants, a court in Texas ruled that DACA was unlawful and USCIS had to immediately reject new applicants. Due to the pandemic, tens of thousands of DACA applications had sat in backlogs for months without ever having been reviewed, and with the new ruling, those applications and the DREAMers who'd sent them would continue to sit there, waiting.

SUEÑOS DE NEW YORK CITY

I had a dream that "A Day Without a Mexican" protests were being planned nationwide. Everyone was talking about it in my university classes, especially since we were nearing Spring Break. I was chatting with a group of three girls after class and one of them asked me if I wanted to go with her and her cousin to New York to protest and spend time there.

"Fuck the border wall!" she shouted. "We're packing up tonight and leaving tomorrow. Come!"

I then went through the same lying routine that I've gone through plenty of times with acquaintances when it comes to trips. I've got the routine down in real life and in dreams. Act like I'm truly considering it. Eagerly say something like, "Yesssss!! I'm so down, dude." A few days later find an excuse to cancel. "Damn, I can't cause I got this crazy exam. / Damn, I have a family birthday party. / A wedding. / My car broke down. / I'm scared of flying." Sometimes I make all the plans and ghost before money gets involved with hotels and planes, before it gets too real.

I tell the girl from my dream that I'm considering going to the protest with Danny, our classmate who's going to one in San Antonio. But I really am considering it in my dream, though, because it's here in Texas. Less risky to travel shorter distances. Danny's standing close to me, talking with another girl about how she's gonna get her mushroom haircut over there.

But if I did go with Danny, I'd have to lie to cross the checkpoint. When the uniformed man asks me, "American citizen?" all I'd have to do is say, "Yes, sir." He'd ask us, "Where are

you all headed?" as he does a quick scan into our car where he would see duffle bags with clothes, posters, and markers in the backseat. "Going to San Antonio for the weekend," we'd tell him. Danny wouldn't know about me. I wouldn't tell her because then she can't get in trouble if they get me. "Go ahead," the man would say, waving us away before stopping the car behind us to ask them if they're American citizens, too.

If I had the guts, I'd do it; risk it all for a few days of travel. But if I got caught lying, I'd lose everything. If instead of just accepting the "Yes, sir," the man asked us to pull out papeles, I'd lose it all, forever. No chance of ever legalizing my status in the future.

"Yea, dude. I'm just gonna go for it," Danny says, playing with a handful of black hair that had just been resting on her waist.

"Yes! Just do it. You've been thinking about it for a while," I tell her as I put my notebook and pens into my backpack.

"You should really come. We're gonna go to the protest downtown and then we're gonna stay for the weekend to hang out."

I throw my backpack over my shoulder and tell her that yea, I'm down and I'll text her when I get home. I walk across the university to get to my car in the parking lot on the other side of campus. It's very hot out and I'm stressing, wondering if I should go with Danny or not. Of course I shouldn't, I tell myself. Why would I risk it or put Danny in that position against her knowledge? I'm sweating through my shirt because it's hot, because the parking lot is so far away, because I'm frustrated and wish I could just fucking go.

I get to my car and sit in there for a few minutes while the a/c cools me down and reels me back to reality. I decide I better not go & I'm gonna text her later that I have a quince to go to. I'll go to the protest here in the Valley.

When I wake up, I lay in bed staring up at the ceiling. My bedroom is pitch black but I can feel the cool breeze of the ceiling fan cooling down my face. The stress that I felt in my dream as I had walked to my car made me wake up hot, gasping for air. I think about Danny and her jet-black hair. Danny who doesn't even exist. I think about how I've always wanted to go to New York City, see Times Square, wander around the city all night long.

Long, long ago, before I was old enough to realize how hard it was to obtain legal status, I'd seen a movie about a thirteen year old girl who, through magic, wakes up overnight as a thirty year old woman and realizes that she ended up landing her dream career: an editor for her favorite fashion magazine. The woman in the movie had the life and career of my own teenaged dreams. New York City was where I was also going to live and work when I was thirty. Writing for a magazine, typing on my laptop in a fancy coffee shop, a different one every week. I'd make a lot of money, visit museums, catch snowflakes on my tongue under the lights of Times Square on Christmas Eve. Teachers always said that as long as we stayed out of trouble, worked hard in school, and went to college, we could set our futures up for success like that and have it all. But I'd done all of that.

As the fan cools me, I make up my mind that the next time I have to cross the checkpoint in my dreams, I'm gonna fucking cross it.

THOUGHTS OF REPATRIATION

On my way home from work, I spontaneously decided I wanted to go to South Padre Island for spring break. I would have rather worked during my break to make more money to pay off my tuition balance and rent, but my nannying job told me they didn't need me since the kids were on break and they were planning on going out of town. It had been a while since I'd had time off from both work and school, so as I drove home, I tried justifying the trip to myself.

Instead of earning money, you're gonna be spending money. And what about the hour and a half drive? It's dangerous. Just stay home.

By the time I arrived at my apartment complex, I had convinced myself that a trip to the beach was well earned. Why couldn't I feel like I deserved it? Plus, my getaway was going to be productive. I wanted to finish my writing by the ocean, not at the same local café in McAllen that I frequented most days of the week. I had the perfect solution to save money as well; I'd sleep in my car. During spring break, hotels at the beach jump in price two or three times their normal rate, but sleeping in my car would cost nothing. I just needed to find a good place to park when I arrived. I hurried up the stairs excitedly to pack my things. I wanted to leave right away because driving at night felt safer to me since the highway was more solitary.

I picked up my blankets and pillows from my memory foam pads on the floor of my bedroom. I'd recently given my bed away, so sleeping in the car wouldn't be hard for me because my body had adjusted to sleeping on a three-inch-thick bed for a couple of months. I stuffed clothes, toiletries, and snacks into my duffel bag and headed downstairs. When I got to my car, I put the back seats down and opened the trunk so that I could spread out my blankets and try it out as a bed. The Prius was roomy enough to not feel claustrophobic and I could stretch out

without having to bend my legs. I took a photo of my bed all set up and sent it to my mom. “Ay mija, estas bien loca. Ten cuidado, eh! Y me dices cuando llegues a la playa por favor,” she replied.

The highway from McAllen to San Benito had been clear for the most part. I’d played my music loudly, getting more and more excited the closer I got to the beach. I was obsessed with one song lately, “Boston” by Augustana and I sang it at the top of my lungs, almost shouting:

She said I think I'll go to Boston / I think I'll start a new life / I think I'll start it over / Where no one knows my name. / I'll get out of California / I'm tired of the weather!”

I exited the highway when I saw the sign for South Padre, and I was very happy that I’d made it that far safely. Just twenty-six more miles to go, but no more highway thankfully. I could relax.

“Oh, yea! I think I'll go to Boston / I think that I'm just tired /

I think I need a new town / To leave this all behind!”

There was a lot of construction happening on the roads in Los Fresnos, and half the main road had been closed off, so it was very constricted where I drove with one lane going north and one lane going south.

Not ten minutes after I’d gotten into Los Fresnos, I noticed a policeman driving behind me. I always drove speed limit and I’d double-checked to make sure I had been going thirty as soon as I spotted him in my rearview mirror. I was, but I still felt severe anxiety that he was right behind me on that very constricted road. I turned my music down and stopped singing. A car pulled out of the gas station and turned into the road that I was on, heading south while I headed

north. “Ooh, that car’s headlights are turned off. I hope the cop doesn’t stop him,” I whispered to myself. I blinked my lights at him once in order to alert him to turn his lights on and just as I did, the policeman behind me turned his lights on. “*For me or him?*” I asked myself. The car kept driving south with his headlights still off, but the policeman’s lights kept flashing red and blue behind me. They were for me. Crap. *What did I do now*? I felt like a balloon deflating. I was going thirty, I was certain. I pulled over to the side, rolled my windows down, and put my hands on the steering wheel.

He walked to the passenger side and said, “You know why I pulled you over, right?”

“No, sir.”

“One of your tag lights is out. Hand me your license and registration and your car insurance.”

“I have my passport with me in my bag and my insurance is in my glove box. Can I grab em?”

“Go ahead. Do you sleep in your car, ma’am?”

“No, my address is there in the insurance letter. I live in McAllen, I just came to camp out at the beach,” I said, handing him everything.

I waited a long time while he stood by my window announcing my name and birthdate over his radio, spelling my whole name and address out to the lady receiving it on the other end. It made me nervous to wonder who else was listening in on all of my personal information. I’d been respectful to him at first, but after twenty minutes or so had passed, I’d started to grow more nervous that he still had my Mexican passport, and more upset that things like this kept happening to me.

“Is everything ok? Asking since it’s taking a while.”

“You don’t have a license so I have to put everything in manually.” Then he went into his vehicle, where he remained for another ten or twenty minutes. When he came back, he handed me a citation for not having a driver’s license and told me he’d only given me a warning for the tag light that was out. I was relieved as I took the ticket, thinking I’d be back on my way.

“Go ahead and step out your vehicle and hand me the keys.”

“My keys? Why do you want my keys?”

“Step out the car, ma’am. Now.”

“Okay, but why do you need the keys?”

“Stand over here on the grass, I don’t want you to get hit on the road. I’m getting your vehicle towed because you’re not supposed to be driving without a license.”

“You’re towing my car? No! Please, sir! What am I supposed to do now?” I asked him, my tears bursting out abruptly as he reached for my keys. I didn’t want to give them to him.

“If you don’t give me the keys, they’re still going to take your car and charge you more.”

“You know I was going to camp out in my car. I don’t know anybody here. Where am I supposed to go?” I asked, giving him my keys.

“I can give you a courtesy ride to the Stripes over there.”

“Please. Don’t tow my car. I can leave it there at the gas station and I’ll call my brother to come get it in the morning,” I begged.

“Sorry, can’t do that. How can I trust that you won’t drive off if I leave the keys with you? You already drove here from McAllen. Plus, I already called the towing company and they’re on their way.”

A second policeman pulled up and when he exited his vehicle, he told me to get away from my car and stand by him. The first policeman opened up all the doors in my car and checked every last item I had in there, listing them down in his records. The second policeman seemed a little more personable so I vented with him.

"What am I supposed to do? I told him I was going to camp out in my car. I don't have a hotel and I don't know anyone here. I came by myself. He doesn't even care. And all for a tiny little tag light. I understand the citation, but why did he have to tow my car, too?"

"Well why don't you have a license?" he asked, while I wiped my angry tears from my face and glared at the first cop, who was looking through my backpack.

"I'm not even here to party. I haven't had any drinks. I came here to finish my work for school. Look in my car. I just have my laptop and my books and my blankets."

"Okay, and I understand that, ma'am. But why don't you have a license? How old are you?" I told him. "You've had plenty of time to get a license. Why haven't you?"

"I would have one if I w---"

"Nahhh nah. No nothing. In this state, you're supposed to have a Texas license to drive, you know that. You brought this upon yourself, ma'am, and this is what happens. Sorry."

I was glad he interrupted me right when he did because I was feeling so angry and defeated that I had been about to say "I would have one if I was allowed to apply for one," which might have gotten me in even worse trouble than a car towing. But at that point, I felt like nothing went well for me anyway, so what was the use.

"What do you have in this bag?" the first policeman asked, pointing to my duffel bag.

Without replying I walked over and opened my duffel bag, grabbing articles of clothing and tossing them beside the bag.

“You don’t have to do that--”

“Nah. Let her,” the second policeman said.

“Okay and in that small bag?”

“Makeup.” I opened it and spilled all the contents out.

“And there on the side?”

I pulled out my travel shampoo bottles.

“Okay, it’s all cleared. What are you going to take with you?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. I don’t have anywhere to go. I’m not gonna be carrying my things with me all night.”

“Well whatever you take, I have to write it down, that’s why I ask.”

I picked up a small tote bag that had a couple of yogurts in it, my phone, wallet, and my sweater since it was cold out.

“Go ahead and wait inside,” he said, pointing to his vehicle.

I climbed in and then the second policeman drove off. A minute later, the towing trailer arrived. On the back of the trailer in huge letters read “Blue Lives Matter.” I shook my head. “Hmmph. Now I get it,” I scoffed, noticing the little camera on the door to the right of my face. I watched as the old white man put the keys in to start my vehicle and as he loaded it onto his trailer. As my car disappeared down the road, the policeman came to sit in his seat.

“Where am I taking you? I can drop you off at a hotel or at the Stripes.”

“Stripes.”

“Which one? There’s two around here.”

“Sir, it doesn’t matter. Whichever.”

Three minutes later, I was stepping out of his vehicle onto the parking lot of the gas station and he was about to drive off.

"Um, hold on. You never gave me my passport back."

"Here you go. I couldn't give it to you until I dropped you off. Anything else?"

"Well who has my car? What's the name of the towing place?"

"Oh, do you have something to write with?" I told him I'd type it into my phone. As soon as he left, I called the towing company and a lady answered.

"Hi, my car was just towed like five minutes ago. What do I need to get it out?"

"Sure, let me look it up. Why was it towed and where?"

"Los Fresnos, I don't know the address because I'm not from here. It was towed because of a tag light that was out," I responded, not wanting to say it was because I didn't have a license.

"They don't tow cars for that. What's your name and which car was it?"

I told her and she looked it up. "Oh, no license. $305 to get it out but since it has a no license block, you're gonna have to come in with someone who has a license so we can release it."

I walked into the gas station and approached the young cashier, who was sweeping the floors. "Hi. Weird question. What time do you get out?"

"Seven. Why?"

"Just a question. Can I wait here? My car got towed."

"Sure, no problem."

I made small talk with him as I tried requesting an Uber on my phone, but none were available in the area. I was given an option to get a Lyft for an upscaled fee of around $50, and it would be available an hour later since the driver would be coming in from another town. I rolled

my eyes and closed the apps. Instead, I started observing the people who were walking into the store. They were all middle-aged Latinos.

One younger man rushed into the store, headed to the refrigerators, grabbed three Gatorade bottles, and went up to the register to pay. He had a deformity on his right ear; a large protrusion of skin. He rested his weight from one leg to the other anxiously as he waited to pay. Him. I'd ask him. He seemed safe. As his Gatorades were getting bagged up, I walked over to him and met him at the door.

"Hi, sorry to bother you, but can I ask you for a favor?"

"Okay."

"My car got towed. I looked up the address, it's literally like four minutes down the road. Could you please take me so I can get my car back?"

"Okay."

We climbed into his car and he took a sip from his Gatorade.

"I'm sorry to bother you," I said again, praying that he took me straight to the towing place.

"It's ok, I just got off work so I was on my way home. What's the name of the place?"

I told him. "Oh, that one. I know exactly where it is."

I followed along on my phone map anyway to make sure we were heading there. Four minutes later, we were outside the place but all the lights were off. I called the number back and the lady said the line was on, but the place was closed. I'd have to wait until the morning when they opened.

"I'm sorry, I thought they were open," I said to the guy who had driven me there.

"It's ok. Where do I drop you off? There's a hotel nearby."

“Sure, that would be fine, thank you.” Perhaps the hotel wouldn’t be so expensive that far away from the beach. We arrived to the rickety hotel and he left as soon as he dropped me off. The front desk told me that the hotel was $65 for the night and I decided to not get it. I’d sit outside. It was just eight hours until the towing place opened.

I didn’t want to tell anyone in my family what had happened, much less burden them to drive two hours round trip just to save me. *Nadie me mando a la playa*, I told myself. I’d figure it out.

Morning came and I’d found another person to take me to get my car, but when I told him why my car had gotten towed, he mentioned he didn’t have a license either; that he’d never gotten around to it. I could now only hope that the people from the towing company showed me mercy.

Once there, I explained to the lady what happened and after providing her a photo of my car title and my identification she said, “They shouldn’t have towed your car just for not having a license if everything else was in order. I’m not going to charge you the storage fees but I have to charge you the towing fees, mija. $288. Will you be paying cash or card?” I took my card out of my wallet and handed it to her before she changed her mind.

“Here are your keys. Go outside to the gate and I’ll open it for you.”

✦

“Mija, nunca me mandaste un texto anoche para decirme que llegaste bien,” my mother texted me.

“Si, Ma, llegue a la playa bien,” I responded.

“Que bueno mija, cuidate.”

✦

As I drove away, my hands were shaky and my eyes strained to look out for any police vehicles in the distance. What if they remembered my car and towed me again for continuing to drive? I wondered if I should just head back home.

I didn't understand what the reason was for the policeman to have gone to that extent when I'd been pulled over in Hidalgo County and had only gotten a citation.

What was the lesson that the policeman, or life, had tried to teach me? Because I didn't want to listen anymore. What lesson was so important for me to learn that I'd been forced to have a very expensive parking spot overnight while I reclined against a cold hotel wall alone in the middle of nowhere? I'd been be allowed to pay $288 to take my car back out, though I still didn't have a license eight hours later.

I decided I was going to continue driving to the beach. I connected my phone to my car and the last song came back on.

"I think I need a new town / To leave this all behind"

I put the song on repeat as I drove down Port Isabel and cried. I was happy to have my car back and I was happy to see the ocean ahead, but I realized how exhausted I felt. I realized that surviving was more and more draining, and situations like this exacerbated that feeling, reminding me how hard it was to be undocumented in the United States even in a place like the frontera. As close as we were to Mexico, it was an entirely different country. The policeman that had stopped me had a Mexican first name and a Mexican last name; it was printed at the top of my citation. The proximity of the countries didn't matter and being raza didn't matter. Laws were

laws and Mexican American police officers and Mexican American border patrol agents had to enforce them. I was in the wrong for being undocumented.

✦

I found a campsite at the beach where I was told that groups of spring breakers set up tents for camping out. Every night when I was done working, I parked my car next to their tents to sleep. Luckily, there was also a building with showers and toilets and I was allowed to use it. I loved the experience of sleeping in my car. I shook my blankets out and set up my bed every night, getting quicker each time in putting up car shades on the windows, draping a beach towel across the front seats so that no one could see me sleeping in the back, cracking the windows slightly open, locking myself in. I wore a sweater to sleep and my blankets kept me very warm. In the mornings I was woken up by the squawking of loud, hungry seagulls and I loved it. I walked around the campsite enjoying the sunrise and the ocean view after I'd brushed my teeth and showered, wishing I could have more mornings like that, but then I remembered how shaky my hands were as I drove down Queen Isabella Causeway, seeing police lights flashing day and night as they'd pulled over one more spring breaker. How my eyes darted between my rearview mirror and my speedometer when I drove down Padre Boulevard, making sure I stayed at thirty miles an hour, not one mile under or one over.

South Padre had been my happy place, the only beach I could travel to for a getaway when I needed it without crossing checkpoints or borders, but suddenly it didn't feel like such a safe place.

Did I really want to keep clinging to a country that didn't want me?

✦

Last Dia de Los Muertos, I watched tv with my mother in the living room. A Mexican channel was showing a live viewing of a parade at the zocalo en la Ciudad de Mexico. A huge float of Frida Kahlo lying in her bed appeared, surrounded by folkloric dancers and other performers marching to the music. I told my mother how badly I wished I was there.

"Vamonos pa' México, Ma. Nos vamos o que?"

"Ay no, que voy a hacer yo alla? Ya estoy vieja. No voy a encontrar trabajo."

The parade on the screen wrapped around Palacio Bellas Artes next. "Como quisiera estar alli, la verdad. Es muy bonito de noche, el Palacio, con sus luces amarillas. Como me encanta la Ciudad de México."

"Ya vas a seguir, mija. Aplacate. Yo no quiero que te vayas. Si te vas, quiere decir que ya no nos quieres a tus hermanos y a mi que no podemos cruzar."

✦

With one more semester left to graduate, I'd started to think about what my next steps would be in life. I'd be getting my second degree and still had no working permit to put either of them to use. Over the holiday break, I started typing things into Google and YouTube like "DREAMers returning to Mexico." I quickly learned there was a word for it: repatriation. To my surprise, I found a big community of young DREAMers who had voluntarily left the United States, tired of waiting for immigration reform or a pathway to legality. I started following their channels, as well as other channels, like those of United States citizens and Canadian citizens who had expatriated to Mexico to enjoy the warmer weather, more affordable lifestyle, and travel destinations. I was most interested in the YouTube channels of those who had moved to Mexico

City because that's the place I would move to if I did decide to leave. I learned about the safer neighborhoods they recommended for living in, such as hispter Roma or upscale Polanco. If I left, I wanted to live in a safe neighborhood like that even if it cost more, since I'd be completely alone.

I learned that there were communities of support for the DREAMers in Mexico who had returned or been deported. These groups offered returnees help in their process of reintegrating into the country, help with Spanish if they didn't speak it, and help with finding jobs. In Mexico City, there are two places of community and support: New Comienzos and a neighborhood called Little L.A.

I felt inspired knowing that other people had realized the United States wasn't the end-all, now I just needed courage and to believe it myself. I could very easily walk across the border and get on a plane that would take me to Mexico City in my search for freedom, legality, and adventure, but I'd need to be ready to accept that there would be no return and that I'd have to give up my friends and family. It caused me great anguish and kept me up at night; all of it. Graduate school, hardships in staying undocumented, questioning whether I should leave or keep waiting.

I went through my closet and started decluttering, getting rid of small things like clothes and shoes I didn't use, and even big things like my bed. If I was going to leave, I couldn't take any of it.

I found myself saying "You're gonna miss this," over and over about random things, like when I sat by the Jesus statue at South Padre and gazed at the red sun over the ocean until it disappeared. Or as I was taking out the trash can for a family whose dog I was taking care of

over the holidays while they were out of town. A family I've house sat for for the past ten years. "Even this, you're gonna miss," I whispered to myself as I rolled their trash can to the street.

I think of Joaquin Luna Jr. The teenager from the Rio Grande Valley in Mission, Texas, just a few minutes away from where I live. How he took his life in 2011 when his anguish about his undocumented status had been too much to bear. How the DREAM Act hadn't passed and he didn't think he'd be able to go to college or get a job; how his world caved in on him. How a couple of days after he had taken his life, a letter in the mail came for him about his acceptance into UTPA. He could have been my classmate.

I grieve for Joaquin. Shortly after his death, President Obama announced DACA and Joaquin would have qualified since he'd been brought into the United States at six months old. What if I leave, and just around the corner was the immigration opportunity I'd been waiting for?

✦

The last time I went to an immigration lawyer to ask about my options he told me I had three: marry a U.S. citizen, have a child and wait 21 years, or DACA. Over the summer after I graduate, I plan on going to another lawyer to get a second opinion.

I also plan to breathe, to sip café with my Mamá, to adventure, and travel in whatever ways I can. I don't want to leave the U.S., but it's not the end-all. I still have México.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Natalia Salazar graduated with an MFA in Creative Writing and a Masters Certificate in Mexican American Studies from The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in May 2022. In 2014, she received a BA in English - Creative Writing from The University of Texas - Pan American with a minor in Communication Studies. Natalia lives in McAllen, Texas and you can reach her at findnatalyhere@gmail.com.