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GROWING UP BUTCHONA ON THE TEXAS-MEXICO BORDER

A MARIMACHA MEMOIR

A Thesis

by

JULIETTA RIVERA

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirement for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major Subject: Creative Writing

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

December 2022

GROWING UP BUTCHONA ON THE BORDER

A MARIMACHA MEMOIR

A Thesis

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JULIETTA RIVERA

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December 2022

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ABSTRACT

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Master of Fine Arts (MFA), December, 2022, 71 pp., figures 21, references 5 titles.

Growing Up Butchona on the Border is a queer, Latina memoir that takes place on the Texas-Mexico border. This thesis is a journey in words and pictures that spans throughout an immigration crisis, a worldwide pandemic and the fallout that follows a world-wide lockdown; eventually leading down the rocky road to self-discovery. The thesis opens with a fictional account of Torita Torcida, a seven-year-old Honduran immigrant that makes her way across the Texas-Mexico border with her mother only to be ripped away from her when the truck they were smuggled in is seized by border patrol. Images and words come together to tell the story of Torita's struggles on the border and then pick back up thirty years into the future where Torita now goes by Torcida and finds herself in more elaborate predicaments.

At the outset, there was a clear vision of what the focus should be, immigration. The first part of this thesis was written during a border crisis when it was necessary to tell the story of countless refugees and the repercussions stemming from their encounters with border officials. The fever pitch with which the thesis was written was made easy by watching the crisis unfold on television, social media, and informed by journal articles; it essentially wrote itself. The images were drawing themselves and confidence that the thesis would be a successful account of the immigration/ border crisis was all but guaranteed. Feedback from workshop peers was

incredibly positive and it was clear that Torcida had the potential to be published as a full-fledged comic book. The future was bright and the possibilities endless.

It was then that the world went on lockdown with the news that a worldwide pandemic (Covid- 19) was taking the world hostage and humanity would be forever changed. During lockdown a shift took place, and the theme of the thesis took its first of a few turns. Challenges regarding inspiration amid the pandemic began to dwindle. As a result of the pandemic mental health began to breakdown and people began to use different coping mechanisms to deal with a ‘new normal’. The normalization of daily drinking and substance abuse became commonplace; it is here that the lens is turned onto the author and the realization that *she* is twisted, *she* is Torcida. The thesis concludes after her subsequent recovery and the experience of becoming a foster parent to her infant grandson where she sets out to uncover the roots of her demons by returning to the beginning, her upbringing on the Texas-Mexico border.

DEDICATION

This thesis would not have been possible without my wonderful maternal grandparents who immigrated from their hometowns in México, without their sacrifice I wouldn't be who and where I am today. To my Weslaco, TX. family, thank you for always being a soft place to land when times got tough, I am forever grateful. Thirdly, to my mentors, professors, friends, colleagues, and everyone that had a hand in helping me throughout my pursuit of higher education, your support is everything. Lastly to my loving partner, thank you for being my rock through this experience and for your unwavering patience. My love to you all.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Dr. Jean Braithwaite for mentoring me during this most challenging of times. Deciding to acquire a master's degree at the age of forty-four is a challenge, add to it a pandemic, and you have yourself a recipe for disaster. Had it not been for Dr. Braithwaite's grace and support, I would not have accomplished this feat. To Lilia Cabrera, I thank you for being a mentor and colleague, but most importantly for being my friend, I am eternally grateful, amiga. To Noreen Graf who taught me that I could always draw better if I only tried, thank you for your example. To Britt Haraway, many thanks for the countless meetings to assure me that I was on the right track, I'll always appreciate your quiet confidence in me.

To the many wonderful people at the Graduate College and throughout the university system and the many friends and colleagues I have collected along the way, this experience would have been nothing without you.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When I first sought to create a graphic novel, I had originally thought of making a comic about a crew of reluctant super-heroes who were drunk all the time or otherwise inebriated. I would call it ‘GODDAMIT!’. Every time the drunk heroes are called to action they are pried away from whatever mode of escapism and shout out, ‘GODDAMIT! Mind you, I had been cooking up this idea with my buddies for quite some time. I even had a cast of characters fashioned after some of my friends. It wasn’t until I was accepted into the Creative Writing Master’s program that everything would change for me. The humanitarian/immigration crisis at the U.S/ Mexico border started to make local and international news and I knew then that ‘GODDAMIT!’ would have to take a backseat.

Watching the endless barrage of images depicting caravans made up of South American refugees is like a dagger in my heart. Immigrants are escaping gang and cartel violence and abject poverty in hopes of giving their children a brighter future. I can very much relate to their stories. Thanks to my grandparents, who also braved unsurmountable conditions to give their children a better life, my family was afforded the American Dream. I knew that I would have to switch gears and tell a story that people need to hear.

Since the beginning of the crisis at the border, the situation has only been degrading. The then president of the United States had made it near impossible for refugees to receive asylum. Instead, he and his administration separated children from their families and now the term ‘kids in cages’ is sadly, just another sound bite in the news and in our daily conversations. Tent cities

have cropped up on the Mexican side of the border where refugees take shelter awaiting asylum hearings. Others are shuffled across the border only to have their children ripped away from them and housed in detainment camps. Controversy abounds when these ‘detainment camps’ are compared to Hitler’s concentration camps.

The conditions at these Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) detention centers are deplorable. Children as young as 2 and as old as 17 are being piled one on top of the other in wire cages that we wouldn’t deem acceptable for our pets. In Lizzie O’Leary’s article, ‘Children Were Dirty, They Were Scared, and They Were Hungry’ she interviews Elora Mukherjee, a professor at Columbia Law School and the director of Columbia’s Immigrants’ Rights Clinic. When asked about the conditions inside one of these facilities in West Texas she responded, “It was filthy and disgusting and there was, as of last week, a flu epidemic at Clint and a lice infestation. And children do not have the ability to wash their hands with soap at Clint.” To date seven children have died in Border Patrol custody since the crisis began.

As a queer woman of color and a survivor of childhood sexual assault and interpersonal violence, I feel compelled to give voice to the voiceless. To remember the forgotten, defend the defenseless and embrace the marginalized. Consequently, I like Marjane Satrapi (*Persepolis*) and Art Spiegelman (*Maus*) before me, will tell the tale of the latest humanitarian crisis to plague modern society with the illustrated story of seven-year-old Honduran refugee, Torita Torcida. Along with Satrapi and Spiegelman, I have also been influenced by the work of the Hernandez brothers: Jaime, Gilbert, and Mario. Lynda Barry and R. Crumb also round out the top five of my most influential artists in the graphic novel genre.

When explaining the story of Torita Torcida, I got responses like, “Wow, that’s a pretty wide net you’re casting.” or “That’s a lot of issues you’re trying to address.” The truth is I *am* casting a wide net and I *am* tackling a lot of issues that are painful for people of all shapes, colors, and sizes. I believe, however, that by addressing these difficult issues in graphic literature form, it is easier to tell these stories and they are easier to comprehend by a wide variety of discourse communities.

I echo those sentiments; life is multi-layered, and we are indeed influenced by our

“To survive is messy, elaborate, layered,” contingent as it is on biological, political, and material conditions that support life or liveliness. The claim for the renewed centrality of survival in modern times rests on the recognition of widespread threats to human life, social, and physical environments brought about by political violence, social persecution, and ecological crises.

Domestic violence, the right to abortion, and equal pay are only a few of the additional issues that disproportionately impact women’s lives.” (Nabizadeh 2016)

experiences/issues and the feelings attached to them. In Vanessa Jones’ article, ‘A Life in Graphic Detail: *Iranian Exile’s Memoirs Draw Readers into Her Experience*’ Satrapi was asked about the ability of graphic novels to convey feelings ranging from homesickness to isolation. Satrapi argues, “But saying that the graphic novel is not able to do that is absolutely false because...there are so many graphic novels that talk about internal feeling.” (Jones 2004)

Marjane Satrapi also casts a wide net in her two-part graphic novel, *Persepolis*. Marjane penned a memoir about her life in Iran as a young girl living through the Islamic Revolution in Iran. She documents her experiences and those of her parents and grandparents in touching detail. Satrapi also drafts stunning black and white post-modern depictions of the unrest in her country. The memoir follows Marjane through her adolescence and through to adulthood. Satrapi's novel was inspired by Art Siegelman's *Maus*, a graphic novel that also has a poignant story to tell.

Art Spiegelman also took on an extraordinary undertaking when he decided to tell the story of his father's experience through the Holocaust. He also employs a monochromatic approach to his graphic novel experience. *Maus* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992 for Special Awards and Citations.

Where Marjane Satrapi was influenced by Spiegelman to create her novel, Lynda Barry was influenced by R. Crumb. In an interview with Hillary Chute, Barry credited Crumb with giving her license to create whatever she wanted however she wanted. "What R. Crumb gave me was this feeling that you could draw anything." (Chute 2018) Both Lynda Barry and R. Crumb influenced me to let up on having to make something that is aesthetically pleasing. Until I discovered this pair, I was under the notion that what I created had to be nice looking. After experiencing their work, I know now that there is room for any and every type of artwork in the graphic literature genre.

So, what do these four artists have in common? I am inspired by Satrapi and Spiegelman in that they had the courage to take on broad and heavy topics and turn them into illustrated novels to tell their stories. While I know that telling Torita's story is an epic undertaking, I have accepted the challenge and plan to keep telling this story well passed graduate school. Barry and

Crumb have given me the agency to create my artwork however I see fit, even if it's a bit gritty and rough around the edges. I will continue to let these artists and others like David Foster Wallace, Anthony Bourdain, Susan Orlean, and Stephen King influence and inform my process for years to come.

I find it necessary to mention that while I was once very focused on telling the story of Torita Torcida and her many trials and tribulations, unforeseen trials and tribulations on *my* personal journey knocked me off course more than once. I would also like to acknowledge that my original vision for Torcida was to have corresponding artwork to go along with the written text. Regretfully, I was not able to complete all of the panels of artwork that I had drafted. However, it is my chief aim to do so as I continue my quest to make Torcida a fully-fledged, stand alone, piece of graphic literature.

While Spiegelman, Satrapi, Crumb, and Barry informed my artwork, it was the above-mentioned Wallace, Bourdain, Orlean, and King that influenced my writing. Their raw, colorful, descriptive, fast paced writing informed my writing style, more so while I wrote the memoir portion. I struggled with trying to sound like other more polished writers, but it was simply coming off inauthentic and disingenuous. When I made the decision to write more like I speak and write about what was happening in my life and the world around me is when my thesis took a turn for the better. Personal, bare, and raw, but more authentic and genuine as a result. What follows has its share of twists and turns, but such is life and I thank you in advance for coming along for the ride.

CHAPTER II

BEGINNINGS PART 2

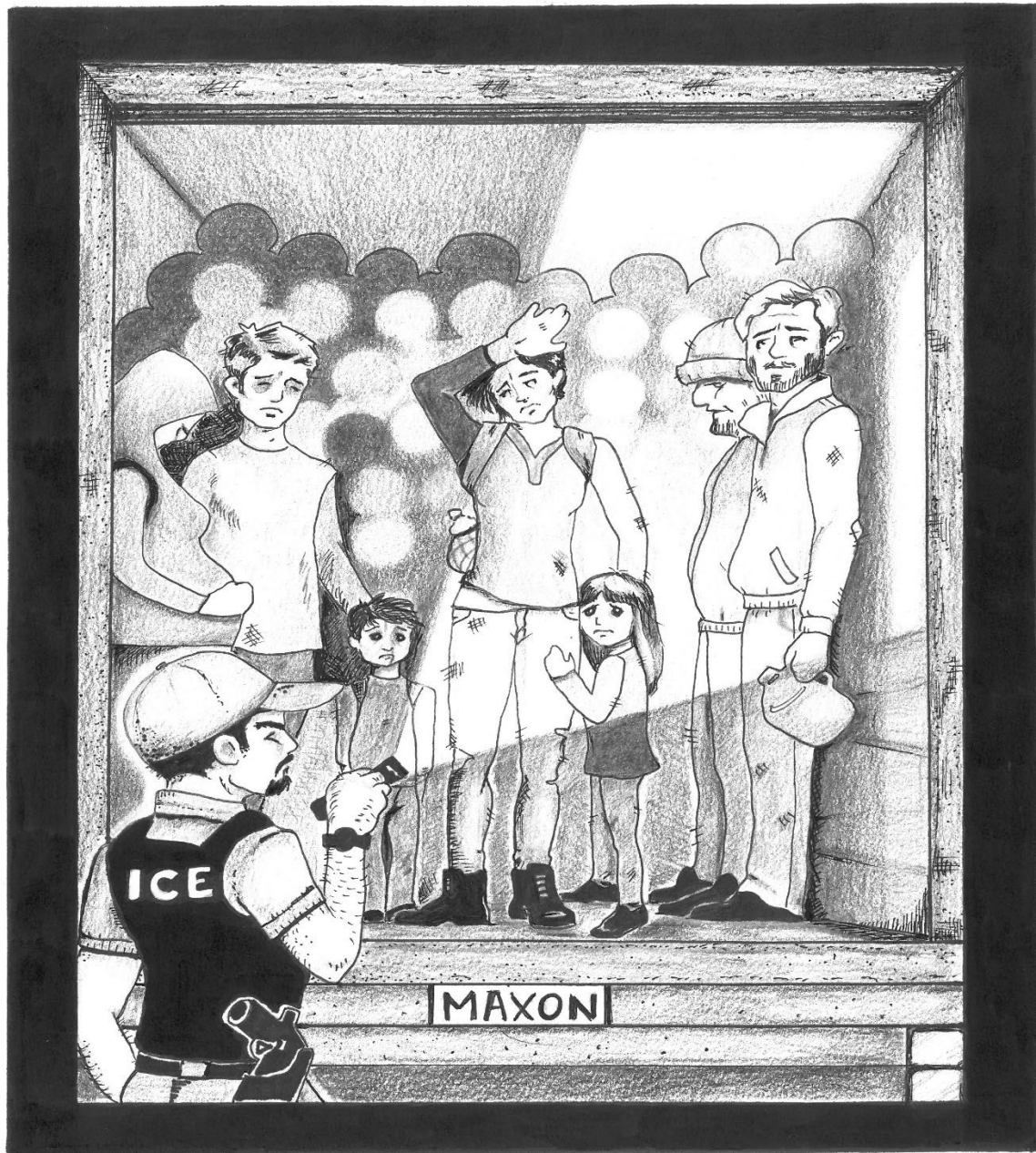
Torita Torcida was born in mid-November of the year 2012 in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. She is one of two children born to Theresa and Antonio Torcida. She was seven years old when her father went missing and witnessed her brother Thomas' murder in the same year. After the street gang, Mara Salvatrucha commonly known as MS-13, gunned down her brother they immediately set fire to their family business.

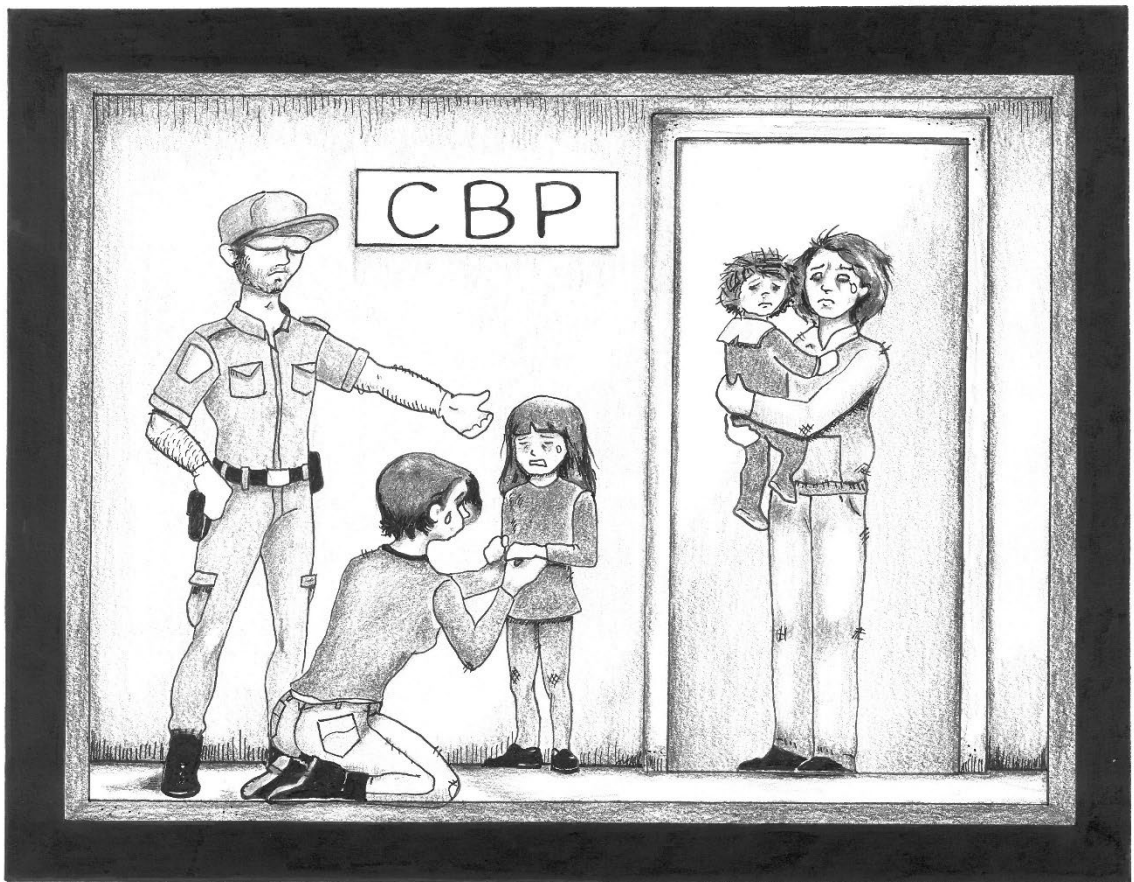
Theresa had no choice but to take what little money she had saved and her only child, Torita, to the U.S in search of asylum. Their journey from Honduras was fraught with incredible hardship. Many times, throughout their pilgrimage, Theresa would go hungry and thirsty in order to feed her little girl. Misfortune would follow the pair through the arid Mexican landscape and Torita would yet again bear witness to another unspeakable crime.

Theresa and Torita's excitement is short lived once they make it to the U.S/Mexico border. While being loaded onto a semi-truck for transport into the U.S Theresa is raped and beaten by a coyote while Torita watched in horror nearby. Once reunited with her daughter she gives her an important piece of advice, "Nunca dejes que ni un pinche hombre, hijo de puta, te maltrate! Siempre cuídate, hija, porque yo no puedo estar contigo siempre para protegerte." Torita vowed from that day forward never to let anyone mistreat her or anyone she was close to.

Sadly, while entering the U.S the truck Theresa and Torita were riding in was apprehended by the U.S Border Patrol and Torita and her mother were informed that they would be separated. After a few tortured minutes of goodbyes and last-minute hugs, the pair were

ripped apart. Torita would never see her mother again. The pain and anguish of this moment would follow Torita for the rest of her days.





CHAPTER III

PIOJOS

Torita wakes up from a terrible nightmare. She dreamt that she was in a cold dark cave slithering with snakes and worms. She is crying out for her mother but all she hears is her voice echoing back to her in waves, the snakes writhing against her. When she begins to come out of her restless sleep, she realizes that what she thought were her own cries for her mother are, in fact, the cries of a two-year-old just a few feet away.

Torita has been in the detention center long enough to tell what a baby needs just from its cries. One type of cry means the baby has a dirty diaper and needs to be changed, another type of cry means the baby is hungry, and yet another means the baby is sleepy. This cry is something entirely different, it is a yowl. A howl, something unhuman, wolf like. It is a sound that Torita is all too familiar with. The two-year-old boy has been taken care of by Torita and some of the older children since his arrival. Because of her steely resolve and cool demeanor, the Border Patrol agents have deemed her worthy of being a “Child Boss”. She gets extra rations for keeping the other kids in line.

Only today, she and some of her fellow detainees are being punished. A few days ago, some of the children in the pods were found to have lice. To prevent spreading the lice to the rest of the children the agents handed out lice shampoo and lice combs. They hand out two combs per pod, 25 children to a pod. They are warned not to lose the combs. Torita is tasked with keeping track of them. The plan naturally backfires, and this action only helps to spread the lice

throughout the pods faster. With all the chaos that comes with an outbreak of lice and children who are already fussy, Torita loses the whereabouts of one of the combs. When the agents find out what had happened, they proceeded to punish her and the older children.



Tonight, Torita and some of her elder pod mates will sleep without having had dinner and without their mylar blankets on the cold bare floor. She doesn't even flinch, the atrocities that she witnessed in Honduras and throughout her journey to the U.S are far worse than anything the agents can subject her to. Adding insult to injury, a flu epidemic has also broken out amongst the detainees. One boy was quarantined to keep the virus from spreading and was later found dead

by his cellmate in a nearby restroom. He had been dead for more than four hours when he was discovered. He was sixteen, his name was Carlos Gregorio Hernandez Vasquez. He was Torita's friend and protector. Since her arrival Sister Mariela has been visiting Torita regularly and has taken a shine to the steely little girl. This particular evening Sister Mariela is surprised to find out that Torita has been moved from her usual pod to a nearby detainment center to be quarantined.

Coming off the heels of the death of a sixteen-year-old boy due to the flu, Sister Mariela gets to Torita as fast as she can. When she arrives, Torita is feverishly ill and in serious need of medical attention. Sister Mariela then gets the attention of one of the guards and an ambulance is called. Fearing Torita may die on the way to the hospital she rides along with her to keep her company. Torita eventually makes a speedy recovery and is scheduled to be released and transferred to the detainment facility in Clint, TX.

She pleads with Sister Mariela to find her mother so that they may be reunited. Torita seems to be losing faith and Sister Mariela realizes that she can't bear to see Torita placed in custody again. What she does next will change the course of Torita's life forever. While the guards and hospital staff are distracted cracking jokes and making happy hour plans, Sister Mariela inconspicuously walks out of the hospital room with Torita, and they board the elevator down to the first floor where they slip out of the sliding glass doors never to be heard from again.

CHAPTER IV

BOURBON AND ICE CREAM

The cold glass of bourbon feels good against my badly battered hand. It always feels good, especially after about four drinks, but tonight the large chunks of ice swimming in that smoky nectar are soothing my throbbing hand. I don't even want to look at it, I know what it looks like, bloodied knuckles with small teeth imprints, swollen. I can feel that the knuckle at the base of my right pinky finger has been pushed up towards my wrist. A few more and I won't feel a thing. The first swig is the best, but not tonight. He must have gotten in a good shot at my mouth because what usually stings so good, hurts like a bastard. I pick up my phone to see my reflection, yeah, that's a split lip alright and another shiner. I don't mind it so much, girls dig scars. Normally I would have blamed my partial blindness on the booze, but I've only had one sip.

I take another sip, this time it stings *all* the way down. I told myself that I wouldn't do this anymore, it's getting way too conspicuous and out of hand. The guys on my unit want to know if I'm a part of some secret fight club. I say, "Yeah, it's called Valley Cats" and they laugh, they think I'm joking. It's the second time in two months that I show up to work looking like I've gone a few rounds in the ring with Rhonda Rousey. Looking out of my one-good eye I can see that my apartment doesn't look any better, even in the dark. I should get someone to come and clean up but, I don't need anyone coming in and judging my pigsty. Clothes strewn about, old take-out boxes, empty beer bottles. Not to mention the ashtrays full of cigarette butts and roaches. I pour more bourbon in my rocks glass and some on my knuckles. The human

mouth is a disgusting petri dish, the last thing I need is an infection leading to an amputation or worse. Gradually, I make my way from the kitchen to the couch, everything hurts.

Slowly I lower myself onto the couch in front of the TV. Tonight, I need a little something extra for the pain, I reach into the ash tray and pick up one of the longer roaches and fumble with my Zippo to light it. I inhale deeply and hold the acrid smoke in my lungs until I can't anymore. I exhale two streams of smoke from my nose and take another hit. The cherry is starting to burn my fingers, but that's the least of my worries.

It has started to thunder, and the pitter patter of rain on the roof brings me peace, if only for a short while. The rain should be doing a good job of washing away the blood and teeth from the sidewalk into the gutter now. My headache begins to subside, weed never lets me down in the pain department. I take another drink; it's starting to go down a lot smoother and it's a matter of time until the relics from my past, festering in my mind, start to come crawling back. It's nights like these that transport me to where it all began and I fucking hate it...

Flashback to Honduras

Torita and her mother Theresa had been part of caravan making their way up from Honduras. Theresa was the owner of her family's business in their hometown of San Pedro Sula until the street gang known as La Mara Salavatrucha, aka MS-13, took over and started to extort money from them weekly. Her parents had owned the small bodega until her mother fell while fighting off a local thug and later died from complications. Theresa's father would follow only two months later from a heart attack. Word around town was that he died of a broken heart. Despite losing both her parents Theresa forged ahead and kept the small corner store afloat, she

had no choice. Her husband had gone missing, she hadn't heard from him in months. The store was all she had to put food on the table for her two kids.

It was a Friday afternoon, Theresa and her children were getting ready to close the store for the day, it is unwise to stay open passed a certain time in San Pedro. Torita is sitting on an ice cream cooler enjoying a popsicle across from Tomas, her 15-year-old brother. He is tall and thin with barely a hint of peach fuzz above his upper lip. He wears his hair neat, slicked back, today he is wearing his favorite, blue button-down shirt as he plans to meet his new love interest, Marisa in the plaza after the store closes. He smiles at little Tori and the chocolate smeared on her face. He looks back down and continues to count the register, he aspires to be an accountant one day.

Just as Theresa begins to pull down the metal gate to the store a couple of MS-13 thugs barge their way into the store. They both have MS-13 tattoos on their necks and faces, they reek of gasoline, sweat and cheap cologne. The bigger of the two, Panzon, grabs Theresa by the waist and pulls her towards him and asks, "Cuando te casas con migo, chiquita?" His breath is hot against her cheek, and she gags from the rotten stench that is coming from his gold-plated mouth. She struggles against his embrace, but that only serves to excite him further.

The shorter darker man walks up to Torita and pulls out a handkerchief to wipe the ice cream from the corner of her mouth. He is dark skinned and has a greasy black mullet with straight bangs that resemble a black toothed comb. He is about 5'4 and 130 lbs. give or take. His oversized clothes only make him look shorter. Theresa stops struggling and is horrified by the proximity of this scourge to her baby girl.

He turns his attention to Tomas and the open cash drawer and asks, “Cuanto ganamos hoy?” Theresa answers and exclaims, “Ya te pagué tu ‘mordida’ por esta semana, ¡Feo!” ‘Feo’ literally translates to ‘ugly man’ in Spanish. Feo pulls out a .22 caliber pistol and points it at Tomas. “Listo para jalar, Tomi?” This isn’t the first time Feo asks Tomas to join their gang.

Torita is frozen with fear as she looks on, her popsicle melting in her tiny hand. Tomas straightens his back and says, “Primero me muero que junta-” Before Tomas can finish his sentence Feo shoots Tomas in the forehead, killing him instantly. Blood spatter blows back at the thug and onto Torita’s face, she drops her popsicle to the floor as Theresa lets out a blood-curdling yowl. The thug takes the blood-stained money out of the cash drawer, tucks the gun back into his waistband and walks out of the store. Panzon releases Theresa and she crumples to the ground. He winks at Torita and follows Feo out the door. Young Torita sheds a single tear that rolls down the side of her bloody, ice-cream-stained face.

CHAPTER V

MEANWHILE ON THE BORDER

The year is 2019 and the border crisis along the U.S/Mexico border is at its boiling point. Thousands have fled unspeakable violence, poverty, and death threats. Cartels have never been more powerful, and they are chasing innocent people away from their homes in countries like El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Families are seeking asylum in the United States and risking their lives to save themselves and their children. In countless cases adults and children alike have died in route to the U.S. It is the largest humanitarian crisis in recent history and there doesn't seem to be an end in sight. What's worse, the U.S seems to be on the verge of a new civil war. Police brutality and the uprising of white supremacy threaten minorities across the country.

Detention camps have become centers dedicated to separating children from their parents and guardians. The adults are being deported or housed in adult shelters while children are forced to sleep in crowded cells with other children. Some of them as young as four months old. The conditions are detestable. In an unprecedented move by U.S immigration and fumbling government officials, children who don't speak English are forced to represent themselves in court accompanied only by a court appointed attorney who translates for them.

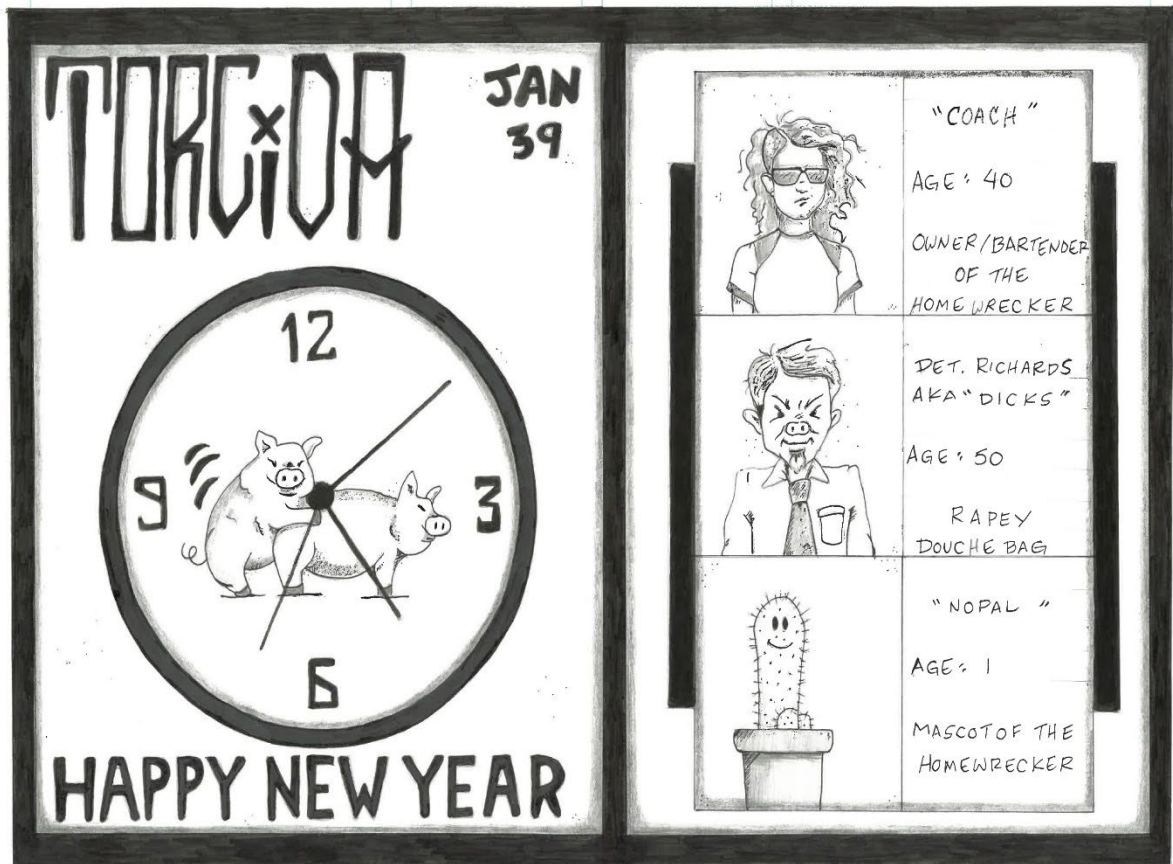


Sleep in these facilities is a luxury not known to many detainees, the officers keep the facility freezing cold and keep the lights on day and night, creating physical and cognitive dissonance.

Seven-year-old Torita Torcida has been in a juvenile detention center in McAllen, TX. for over six weeks now. McAllen, Tx. is a bustling city on the border just across from Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mexico, with a population of 142,347, eighty-eight percent who identify as Hispanic. Without the news or access to the internet people of the Rio Grande Valley would be painfully unaware of “The Border Crisis”. Business along the border doesn’t stop for anyone or anything. Mexican nationals and Americans alike crowd malls and restaurants as if the government isn’t keeping kids in cages. Luxury cars and affluent neighborhoods are only a stone’s throw away from the detention centers, adding insult to injury.

CHAPTER VI

NOPAL

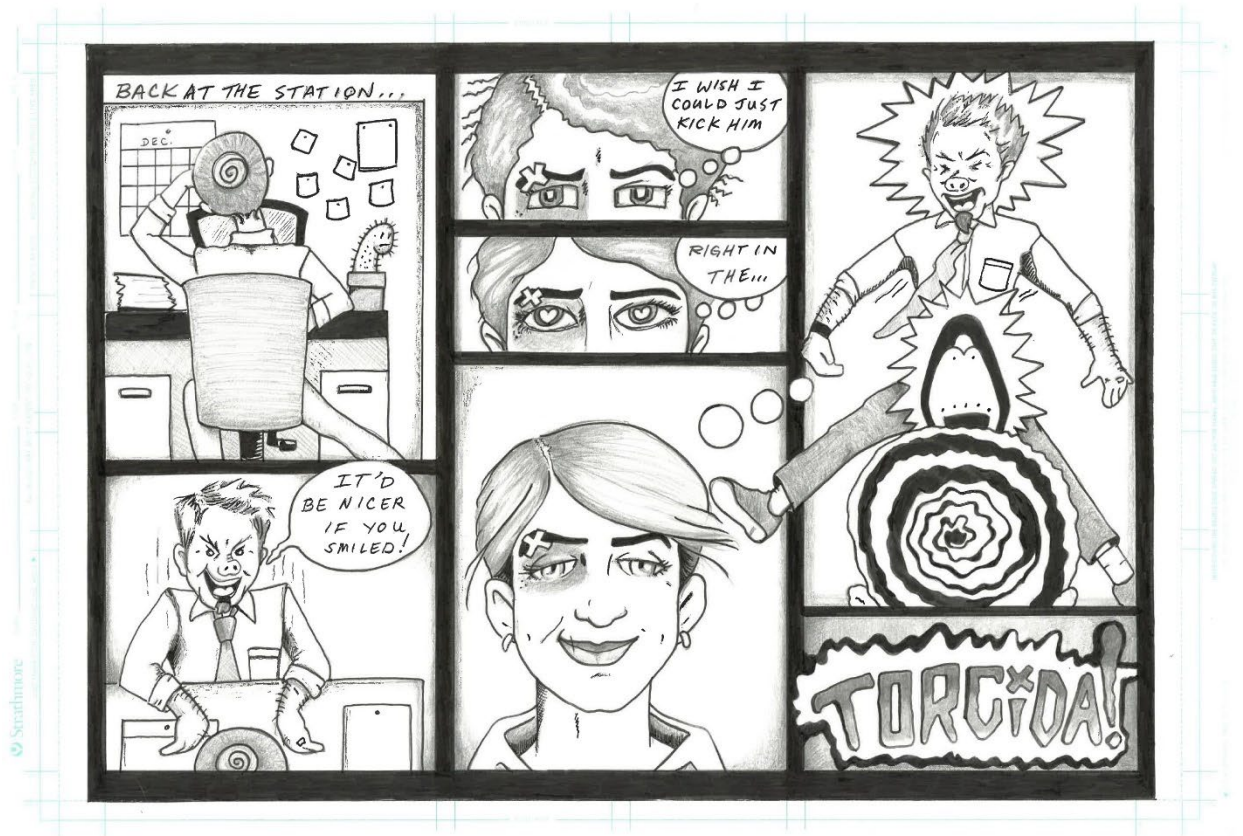


FUCKIN' ASSHOLES!! I don't know who I detest more, the maggots I investigate or the pieces of shit, cops I work with! They think I can't hear what they're saying but, my cubicle is a sorry excuse for a sound barrier. The walls barely cover the top of my head, I feel like I'm always being spied upon. I didn't bother to decorate either. No pictures, no personal items. Just my desktop, a stained white coffee cup, a calendar on the wall by the tinted window, and a dying six-inch cactus. The less my co-workers know about me the better. I stare at the calendar and can't quite remember why there is a star by today's date. This hangover is no joke.

"Well, did you see what the new receptionist was wearing the other night? She was practically begging me to brush up against her. Let's just say it feels as good as it looks, boys." I saw Richards with his wife at 'The Wrecker' last week. The turtleneck she was wearing in 100-degree heat and her broken spirit told me everything I needed to know. He's too smart to hit her in the face. Wouldn't want to leave any marks that could be traced back to him, coward.

Just then, Richards walks by Tori's cubicle with a rookie cop and says, "Hey Tori, it'd be better if you smiled, amah right, rookie? Ooops, sorry, I think that was inappropriate." They both start chuckling and the rookie says, "Yeah, ME TOO!" causing them to burst out laughing even harder as they walked away. The #metoo movement was in the headlines with swarms of women publicly coming out against powerful men the likes of Harvey Weinstein and Jeffrey Epstein with accusations of sexual harassment and assault.

Tori squints her eyes into tiny squares and lifts one corner of her mouth as she glares at them both in disgust. She thinks to herself, "Yeah, they should have thought twice before giving us both a badge. Life in prison is the only thing that keeps me from fucking this guy up, PERMANENTLY. I'll settle for taking Richards outside and giving him what's been a long time coming, a good swift kick in the balls. A smile begins to form on Tori's face as she begins to daydream. "Yeah, 'Dicks' rolling around on the ground, gasping for air, and squealing like a pig, now that's a pretty sight." Her mind twists and turns with images of Richards on the ground in a fetal position holding his junk, red-faced like a tomato.



Suddenly, Tori is startled and jolted back to reality, “Torcida! I need you in my office-now!”
Tori pulls at her hair and thinks, “Fuck, what now?”



I'm confused as to why he's pissed at me; I can't think of a time when I *wasn't* in some sort of trouble with Sergeant Lopez. He's about fifty but looks like he's pushing sixty. He always looks sweaty even in the freezing-cold office. His shirt buttons are the hardest working buttons I've ever seen. He stands 5'10 and looks like he's in his third trimester, easily 300 pounds. A diet of Shipley's Donuts and McDonalds will do that to a man.

"You know, I have you on desk duty for a reason! What the Hell is wrong with you?" he shouts at her, spittle shooting through his mustache and out of his mouth.

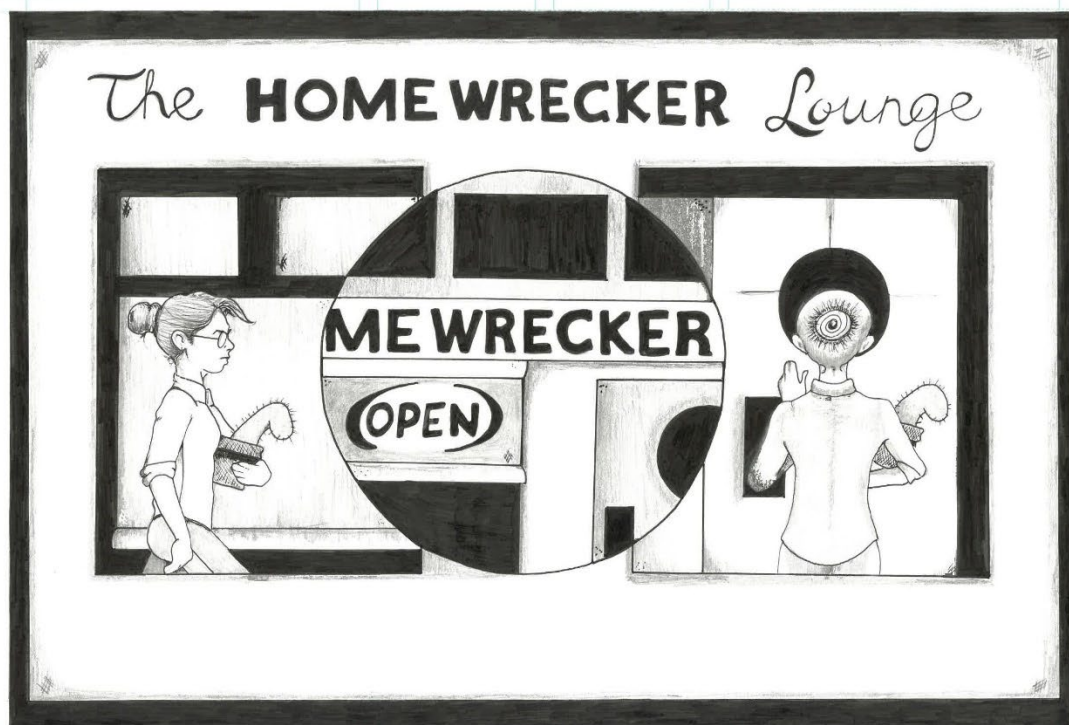
"I don't follow sir." Tori says with her back so straight that you'd swear her spine was made of glass.

“Why are you down in records asking for cold case files? Also, do you know what day it is? Internal affairs called up here and said you missed another appointment. I’m going to have to suspend you with pay! Do you follow me, Torcida?!”

Tori purses her lips and says, “Yes sir, won’t happen again. Am I dismissed?” After a brief pause Sergeant Lopez squints his eyes, rubs his oily mustache, and says, “Yeah, get out of here, stay away from records and I’m serious, make your appointments! I don’t need THAT woman calling every time you space out. Go home Tori, dry out!”

Tori walks back to her cubicle and takes a manila envelope from her desk drawer. She grabs her cactus, her jacket, and heads out of the double doors out to the parking lot. Although she has just been told to go home and dry out, she thinks to herself, “Ugh, I need a drink!”

CHAPTER VII
HAPPY NEW YEAR



12/31/2039

With her yellow-green, phallic-looking cactus in her arm, Torcida swings open the door to 'The Homewrecker Lounge'. 'The Wrecker' is dark and narrow and there are only three other people in attendance. It reeks of cigarettes, stale booze, desperation, and the faint smell of Fabuloso. Torcida finds solace at 'The Wrecker', it's her second home. She sets her sights on her favorite spot. It's tucked away at the end of the bar top, next to a wall. On the wall is a clock that

depicts a pink pig mounting another pink pig. The male pig thrusts in time with the second hand, tic-toc, tic-toc, tic-toc.

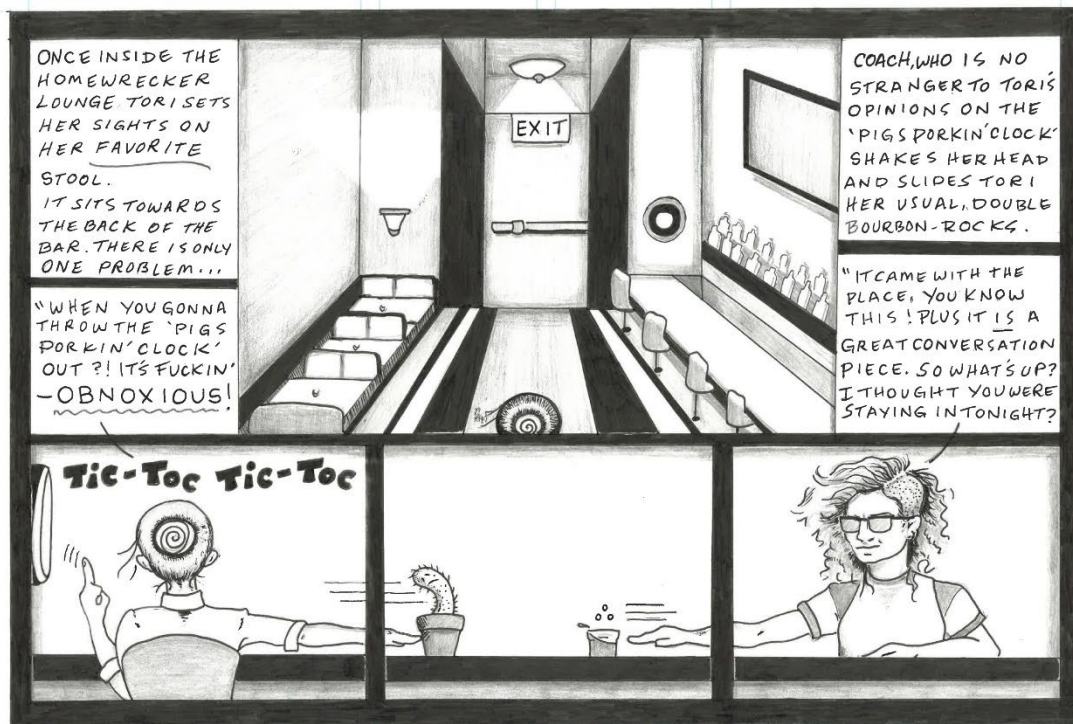
“God, I hate this fuckin’ clock, throw it out already!” She sets the cactus down and slides her sunglasses up across her forehead, a voice booms from behind the bar. “It came with the place, you know this! Plus, it *is* a great conversation piece. So, what’s up? I thought you were staying in tonight; you look like dog shit warmed over!”

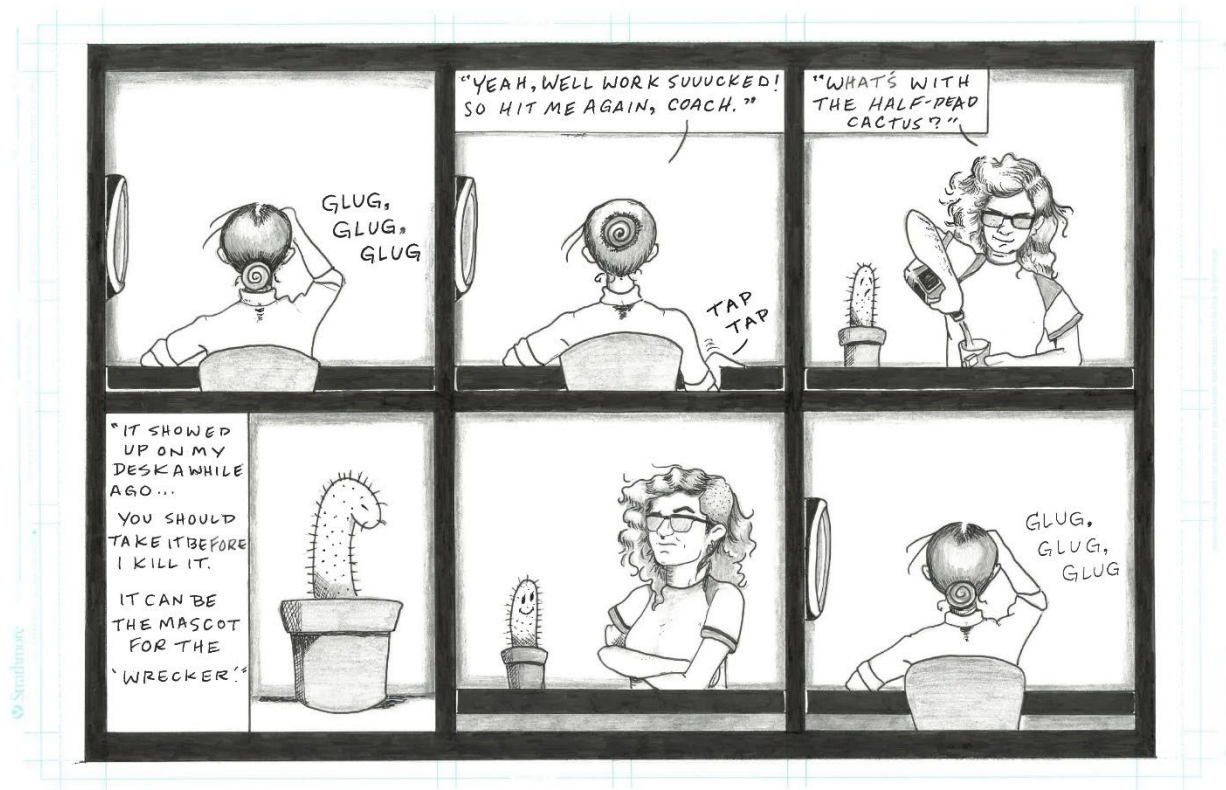
Fed up with the day, Torcida lightly touches her black eye and foregoes her usual list of insults and obscenities.

“Yeah, well, worked suuuucked, hit me.”

“The usual two fingers of Jack, or is it Jose today?”

“Surprise me, I don’t feel like making any more decisions today.”





The swarthy, foul mouthed, voice is Coach, a forty something year-old bull dagger who's been running the bar for the better part of sixteen years. She has a classic early 2000's butch aesthetic. She sports a chain wallet with a cock fight emblazoned on its worn brown leather, basic t-shirt, torn Levi's, Doc Martens, and curly shoulder length hair shaved on one side. She's not thin or fat, she's thick and strong enough to carry kegs and break up the occasional bar fight. Tori doesn't know her actual name, she just knows that she gave up a career coaching high school volleyball after the 2022 pandemic and has been called Coach ever since. She keeps talking about how she's saving up to move to a remote Mexican beach to open a beach bar.

“I can wear shorts and chancas, and flirt with rich white women, all day-every day, all while looking out at the ocean. I can go fishin’ at dawn, serve cold beer and grilled fish until they both run out and then retire to my casita nestled away in the lush vegetation and palm trees of the coast. And you know what the best part will be, Tor...? I won’t have to deal with your crazy pig asses anymore!” She laughs a deep guttural laugh as she slaps the bar top.

Coach then reaches for a rocks glass and an unopened bottle of Jack. For all intents and purposes, Coach should hate Tori simply because she’s a cop, but she has a soft spot in her heart for her, plus she tips well. As Tori waits for her favorite neighborhood bartender to pour her a drink, she notices the banners that Angel and Biscuits are hanging up. They have been working at ‘The Wrecker’ for six years, collectively.

“Ha-pp-y New-Year. Ahhhh fuck, I forgot it was New Years’ Eve! Guess I’ll only have a couple, the last thing I need tonight is to get stuck in a crowd.” she thinks to herself.

She spins her stool back around to face the rows of bottles. The mirror behind the shiny glass bottles make it look like they go on forever. Endless bottles of Bulleit, Jack, Cuervo, and Bombay Sapphire. In front of the bottles is a trough of ice-cold beers. She looks down to find her four fingers of Jack Daniels floating in a rocks glass with a large, jagged piece of ice. She lifts the glass up as if to cheer Coach who looks up briefly from the POS system.

“This day is about to get way better, Coach! Por Ellas!”

Tori takes a healthy portion of bourbon into her mouth and the hair on her arms stands at attention. Coach nods at Tori while looking at the half-dead cactus sitting on the bar top with a quizzical look on her face.

“So, you know I don’t usually ask you about your personal life, but this right here, is too damn much. I must say, I’ve seen you in here with rougher looking trade, but a dying cactus?” Coach cocks her head to one side and asks, “What’s with the cactus, Tor?”

Tori takes her snout out of the rocks glass and watches the legs of the bourbon sink back into the caramel-colored pool.

“I’m donating it to your fine establishment, It’s all yours!”

Besides making a mean michelada, Coach also has a mean green thumb. She can bring anything back to life. She gives Tori a bit of side-eye, grabs the cactus and places it next to the register under the lamp.

“I shall call you ‘Nopal’!”

Tori takes a final swig of her drink, sets it on the bar, and taps the bar twice.

“Hit me again, Coach.”

Pour, drink, tap, repeat. Pour, drink, tap, repeat. The obnoxious pigs-fucking-clock now reads seven-thirty and Torcida is about 5 doubles in. For the average person 5 double shots of bourbon is enough to set them on their ass. Not Tori, she can take a hit in more ways than one. As more people have started to come in, Coach turns down the TV and flips a switch beside the cactus.

Tori’s arch nemesis and best friend, the Touch Tunes Jukebox, springs to life and startles her.

“Welcome to the Jungle” by Guns-N-Roses comes on half-way through and at full volume.

Apparently, that was the song that was playing on the vintage juke box the previous night when Coach gave last call.

A hologram of compact disks spin within the compartment above the digital screen that holds every genre of music ever made. Colored lights go ‘round and ‘round around the outside edge of the wall mounted juke box, attracting even the steeliest of people. With a few clicks on your phone, you can link up to the juke box. Tori is out of Touch Tune tokens, so she decides to take it old school. She pulls a waded up twenty-dollar bill from her front pocket, flattens it out as best she can, and asks Coach for some ones.

“Ay, best I can do is a ten and two fives, I don’t have change yet. Make do, carnala! And please don’t put on your sad-ass, bullshit-ass songs, tonight we celebrate! Goodbye, 2039! Hello, 2040!”

With heavy eye lids and the beginnings of slurred speech, Tori agrees. “Okay, ok, no bullshit tonight!”

She takes her change, and just about makes it to the juke box, when a douche bag bumps into her spilling his pint of beer over the front of her jacket.

“Hey! Watch where you’re going!” he exclaims, as he begins to slip a twenty-dollar bill in the slot.

Tori takes note of the bill he is ready to insert into the juke box, she’ll have to wait a while to hear her selections.

“Sonofabitch!”, she thinks to herself.

Wet and angry, Tori takes another bathroom break. When she returns to her stool there is a fresh bourbon waiting for her.

“Damn Coach, you trying to get me drunk, or what?”

“You’re not my type and young enough to be my niece, Tori!”

They both laugh.

The douche in the scrubs has man-spread himself onto a stool nearby in Tori’s absence. She looks at him in disgust while still wiping beer from the front of her jacket.

“Some fuckin’ people, man. No sorry, no nothin’.” Tori says aloud.

Just as she puts her hand up and makes an invisible check in the air, the Ten o’clock news comes on. The crawl at the bottom of the TV reads, “Tonight, a San Juan woman is dead after her estranged boyfriend is accused of strangling her to death. More details from the scene in San Juan after the break.” It’s not surprising that women are far more likely to be murdered by an intimate partner than by a stranger. In Tori’s line of work, she is all too familiar with the statistics and what affects her the most about tonight’s broadcast is that this woman is the fourth woman Tori recognizes from DV calls she has responded to this year.

“Fuck it. Coach, give me another and keep my tab open.” Tori says with a stone-cold look on her face. Coach looks at the TV and back at Tori, she can feel a storm coming.

The lead story of tonight’s broadcast has cast a shadow over the nights’ festivities. As more people start to pile in for the pre-party before the countdown, the bar becomes abuzz with loud conversations, laughter, and even louder music. The wait staff is busy filling patrons’ orders and returning to the bar with new orders for Coach and her barback, Lisa.

From the corner of her eye Tori notices the douche bag motioning to Angel who has her back turned to him. “Damn she fine!” says one of his friends, the other just bites his bottom lip to keep from saying the first thing that comes to his mind. ‘King Douche Bag’, as Tori has named

him, extends his hand just shy of her right butt cheek and his douche bag buddies laugh. Angel turns around abruptly, and he pretends like he's done nothing wrong with both his hands up in the air. She gives him a glare of death and proceeds to make her way through the crowd.

Tori is becoming more and more angry with every sip of bourbon and it's almost time for the countdown to 2040 to begin. The obnoxious 'Pig's Porkin' Clock' reminds her with every tic and every toc. Coach flips the switch again and the TV comes on at full volume.

"Hello and welcome to Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve, I'm Ryan Seacrest live from Times Square in lovely New York City! The countdown to 2040 is only moments away, so grab your loved one, pour a glass of champagne and get ready to toast!"

Tori thinks to herself, "Damn, how old is Ryan Seacrest? It feels like he's been hosting the ball drop for what seems like forever!"

Images of the six-ton, crystal, Centennial ball hoisted atop a steel pole in the middle of Times Square flash across the screen. Coach sets down a glass with twelve grapes soaked in vodka, a party hat, and a noise maker in front of Tori. According to superstition, twelve grapes represent the twelve months of the year and if you consume them one after the other it denotes a year of good luck. Coach goes back to popping bottles of cheap champagne for the big moment. Reluctantly, Tori takes the pointed glittery hat in her hands. She stretches the rubber band attached to it and slips it under her chin and onto her head in a crooked fashion.

Tori takes a final swig of bourbon in the year 2039 and begins to count backwards from ten with Ryan Seacrest and the crowd assembled at 'The Bar'. 10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1! Happy New Year!!!

As noise makers sound off and glasses clink, Tori watches as King Douche grabs Angel by the waist and rams his slimy, thrush covered, tongue into her mouth. Superstition also states that kissing someone at Midnight on New Year's Eve brings luck in love. As she struggles against his confining embrace, Tori flashes back to a familiar memory of a woman in a similar situation. Within 2 seconds Tori is airborne and has begun punching King Douche in the face repeatedly with her noise maker in hand. Blood and champagne are flying everywhere as the scuffle begins to grow in circumference.

Coach jumps out from behind the bar with the agility of a puma, and grabs Tori before she can do any more damage. She hustles her to the back of the bar, throws her out of the emergency exit, and into the alley. Tori stumbles and trips over her feet and launches herself into the pavement, skinning her knees and palms in the process.

“WHAT THE FUCK, TORCIDA?! I TOLD YOU, NO BULLSHIT TONIGHT! WALK IT OFF!!!”

“I'm sorry, Co- “

The heavy metal door slams shut before she can get out a full apology. Tori knows this alley well. Standing there out of breath and disheveled she begins to assess the damage.

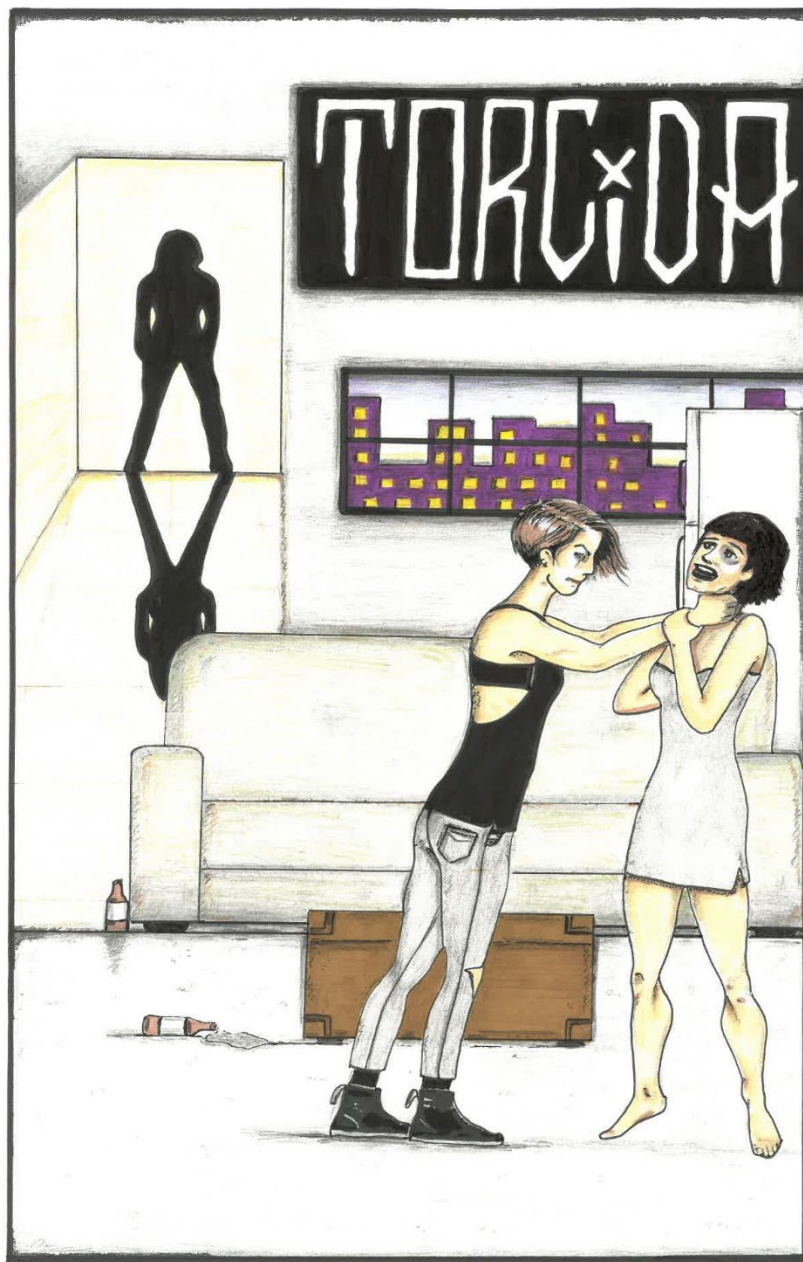
She looks down at her hands and thinks to herself, “Throbbing knuckles, check. Gravel in palms, check. Warm, sticky, feeling going down the shins, check. Torn pants, check. Damn, torn pants?! Oh man, I just bought these, bummer.”

She struggles to stay vertical and stumbles as she picks the gravel out of her palms and dusts herself off before making her way through the alley and out to the street.

The warm sensation going down her shins is becoming colder as her pants stick to her legs. The adrenaline is starting to subside, and her buzz is coming back slow but strong. She takes the opportunity to lean against the lamp post and reaches into her jacket pocket for her cigs. Clumsily, she fishes a cigarette out of its box. She feels around for her Zippo and finds it in the front pocket of her now torn pants. Steadying herself, she lights the business end of the square. She takes a deep drag exhaling the smoke through her nostrils. The ruckus from inside the bar is dulled by the concrete walls.

Occasionally a burst of sound cuts the midnight air as patrons open and close the door. Tori is licking her wounds with every drag of her cigarette when she hears glass breaking nearby. She takes one last drag and flicks her cigarette clear across the street. Curious, she begins to walk in the direction of the sound. As she gets closer, she hears yelling and screaming from a loft apartment that sits above Rick's Barber Shop. Glass continues to break and screams from an unknown female suddenly go silent. The cop in her is telling her to call it in. The vigilante in her is telling her to go up the narrow staircase up to the apartment.

She removes her tilted party hat with one hand and pulls the hood of her jacket up over her head. Slowly, Tori reaches down into her ankle holster to retrieve a .22 caliber handgun. As she ascends the dark stair well, she removes the safety from her handgun and grips it with both hands pointing it down at the ground. Slowly she rounds the corner to find the door to the apartment ajar. It is eerily quiet now as she gently pushes the door open. The apartment is dark except for a lamp that has been knocked over and is illuminating shards of brown glass all over the hardwood floor. Full and empty bottles of beer line the bar as she steps further into the apartment. As Tori takes inventory of the space, she hears what sounds like feet kicking a wall in an un-syncopated way.



Her eyes focus on the darkest corner of the loft and witnesses a female strangling another female against the exposed brick wall. She is holding the victim about seven inches from the ground with what looks like super-human strength. In a flash Tori descends upon the pair and smashes the offender over the head with a full beer bottle. Knocking her out cold. Beer, blood, and brown shards of glass explode into the air like confetti.



The victim then takes in a labored breath and slides down the wall. Tori, still holding her .22 in one hand and the neck of the bottle in the other, drops the bottle neck to the floor and tucks her gun back into her ankle holster. Flicking broken glass and beer off her hoodie for the second time tonight, reaches out her hand to help the victim to a standing position. Once the woman is on her feet, Tori grabs an unopened beer from a nearby coffee table and twists the cap open.

“You, okay?” Tori asks.

With all the breath and strength, she can muster with her hands around her neck, the victim whispers, “Yes, thank you.”

Tori chugs half of the bottle of beer, slams it down on to coffee table, inhales deeply and says, “Call the police and forget that I was ever here. Happy fuckin’ new year.” and limps out of the apartment, down the stairs, and into the cold-dark-night.

CHAPTER VIII

SIDESWIPED BY COVID-19

I had been plugging away at my graduate research assistantship and making good headway. I was beginning the student teaching portion of my scholarship requirements, I felt like I was really coming into my own as I began to lead class discussions while my mentor/professor started to take on more of an observational role. I was truly coming into my own and feeling confident in my abilities as I walked throughout campus. My favorite part of the day was picking up my morning coffee and stepping into class a few minutes before my students started trickling in. I took great delight in emptying post-it filled books and folders from my brown leather satchel with my initials pressed onto its flap. The view wasn't too bad either, I had a lovely view of the quad and the pathways to the library. Students bustling to class resembled ants cutting new pathways into the grass trying to get around each other.

At lunch time I would meet with colleagues or friends and discuss current events or just the latest office gossip. It was the middle of the semester and campus life was in full swing when murmurs about a flu that had its origins in China began to circulate. Wuhan, China was being overtaken by a curious flu that seemed to be attacking the elderly and people with compromised immune systems. In the West we thought nothing of it as there had been epidemics in other parts of the world that never quite made an impact here. However, as the days ticked by it was becoming apparent that this "Wuhan flu" was more virulent than anyone would have ever expected. I remember having an evening class with a good friend who had incidentally just returned from China, Wuhan in fact. She mentioned that she and her husband had been under the

weather since their return, but they weren't 'too worried about it'. We all joked and covered our mouths with our shirts as she coughed and laughed along with the rest of the class.

What happened next would spell disaster for a world that didn't know what was coming its way. A worldwide pandemic was bearing down on humanity at an alarming rate. Soon panic began to set in as more and more people began to get sick. Symptoms: trouble breathing, new loss of smell or taste, fever, chills, cough, fatigue, headaches, body aches, sore throat, congestion, runny nose, nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea. It seemed the world shut down overnight with the Center for Disease Control (CDC) ordering everyone to stay home and only venture out for groceries and medication. The first time we left our home to gather provisions I cried at the sight of empty streets that would normally be bustling. It looked like a scene out of an apocalyptic film, the silence was deafening, and I felt a profound sense of dread.

Face masks and face shields were made mandatory, and six feet of distance was recommended between people to avoid the spread of the virus. Businesses and restaurants were immediately shuttered as people began to work from home and no-contact to-go orders became normalized. Hospitals were overrun with the sick and dying and in some parts of the world people were burning their dead in the streets or in mass graves because funeral homes were at capacity or others refused to pick up the dead, afraid that the virus was still able to spread even after death.

For the first time in the history of education, online learning quickly became the new normal and I went from living the ideal graduate school experience to sitting in front of a computer screen teaching to students who left their cameras mostly turned off and their microphones muted except for when they were called upon (if that). As if student engagement wasn't already a challenge, add to that home distractions and impending doom. Repercussions of online learning and isolation due to the pandemic are still coming in, but everyone in some way or another suffered. For some working from home and being in isolation was a Godsend, for people like me it was a Hell hole that I almost didn't recover from.

My first semester in the Creative Writing Graduate Program at UTRGV my classmates and I were given a workshop to address the possible pitfalls of being a student pursuing a master's degree in creative writing. My professor and a representative from campus counseling warned us about possible problems with addiction, mental health, suicide rates, and went so far as to mention that most relationships and marriages don't often survive when one of the parties is in pursuit of a master's degree. I was surprised by the statistics that were shared with us, but thought to myself, "Surely they are exaggerating!"

I couldn't have been more wrong. Again, add to that A WORLDWIDE PANDEMIC, normalization of heavy drinking, substance abuse, zero contact with family and friends, no funerals, no grieving, and NO WAY OUT. I was on a collision course with demons I hadn't dealt with in decades, and it was not pretty. I was locked up and much like a real prison, I didn't have the luxury of picking my fellow inmates. Suddenly I was surrounded by virtual strangers. My partners children were ordered to come home from college one by one and the woman I knew as my fiancée became unrecognizable. It's all well and good when life keeps us so busy that we

hardly spend any time with our loved ones but lock us all up together and you get to know people warts and all whether you like it or not.

At first, I began to cope with my circumstances with a drink here and there throughout the week. Then that wasn't doing its trick anymore, so I had to ramp up my efforts. Beer and hard seltzers were replaced by whatever hard liquor I could get my hands on. My poison of choice? Bourbon and LOTS of it. I began to write my substance abuse into my fictional characters life as a coping mechanism. Torcida began to indulge in the same behavior as her creator; slamming rocks glass after rocks glass until the pain went away. My paranoia grew unbearable, any noise that was made outside of my office door was a perceived threat. Laughter, loud conversations, even the jingle jangle of the dog's collar infuriated me. The angrier I became, the louder the cacophony, the easier the booze went down.

Between excavating my past trauma through the written word and teaching college students to do the same, I began to spiral out of control. The line between my self-destructive, paranoid, alcohol addled self and reality was getting blurry. Was Torcida informing my behavior or was I drawing from myself to inform Torcida? For the better part of two years, I had been writing chapters of Torcida and hadn't realized that I was getting the fictional character tangled with myself. When I could no longer write another stitch of my vigilante super heroine's life, I realized it was me. I am twisted... I am Torcida. I had a moment of clarity; some call it a 'woah moment' others call it a 'come to Jesus' moment. I'm just glad the epiphany came when it did, otherwise I may not be sitting here writing this.

After the realization hit that I had a gang of demons to face and contend with I made the choice to turn the lens on myself. The topic of my thesis would take yet another direction and despite the perceived backlash that I would inevitably receive, I forged ahead. Instead of writing about my life through the filter of a fictional comic book character, I would have to look inward. I was lost deep inside a black cave, suffocating, scratching, and peeling at my skin, yearning for even the teeniest pin hole of light to guide me out of my self-made prison.

I put down the bottle and sought much needed therapy. I did the work, it was dirty, dank, messy, itchy, grueling work. I made my apology tour, took accountability, and even began an exercise routine. I started small. Get to the back gate and back to the house, small. To a normal, sober, functioning, person that sounds like a breeze; me, I felt like I was learning how to walk all over again. When I was high or hammered, I was seven feet tall and bullet proof. I feared nothing and no one. Detox is brutal; I don't recommend going it alone or cold turkey. It's a miracle my partner didn't find out the severity of my substance abuse and consequent addiction. I resented that there was a world where she missed all the signs, all the calls for help. Instead, I waited until I was clean for six months and then came clean about how bad it had gotten and that I had been detoxing and had even begun to see a therapist.

CHAPTER IX

“PAPO”

On the road back from what had been the most hellish year of my life I was finding myself healing little by little and was returning to a more normal way of life. I was keeping up with my writing and was making some poignant connections between my fictional character, Torcida, and myself. I had come to the conclusion that while the pandemic had seemingly robbed me of my sanity it also clarified what it was my thesis was lacking, the drama, the conflict, the character arch. I would have to be as transparent and vulnerable with my experience and the chronicling of said experiences. My thesis was about to take yet another turn. From the immigration crisis through the eyes of seven-year-old Torita Torcida, to Torcida twenty-years later as a drunk, vigilante, detective; to the worldwide pandemic no one saw coming and my experience in lockdown and everything that brought with it.

It had only been a few months since my stepson had called with the news that he had become a father. My partner and I had no idea that his girlfriend was even pregnant, but we were excited to meet Baby Jacob. So, when Child Protective Services (CPS) called a few months later and asked if we would be able to take custody of our four-month-old grandson we were that much more shocked and confused. Why? What had happened that led to this phone call? My partner left it up to me, “it’s either us or foster care”. Both my stepson and his girlfriend were foster kids and were trying to navigate their lives. We couldn’t bear the idea of leaving Baby Jake in the hands of strangers when we were more than capable of taking him in, regardless of

how long he would be with us. It could be anywhere from ninety days to several years. We had no idea. My partner and I went into the situation blindly not knowing what was ahead of us.

What we did know was that our relationship would never be the same. After jumping through CPS hoops, we were cleared to become foster parents and made our way to San Antonio, midway between the RGV and Elektra, TX., to retrieve a very sick baby. Because he was born prematurely, malnourished, and exposed to smoke, he was in very bad shape. We drove to San Antonio and hardly said a word to each other. That night, in our hotel room, we held one another and cried for most of the night. We were mourning the imminent death of our current relationship as we knew it, we cried out of fear that we were incapable of caring for our then premature grandson, and we cried and cried and cried until daybreak.

After what felt like an hour's sleep, I woke with my stomach in knots. I took one last look at my partner and took a mental picture of what she looked like. The morning sun was coming through the high-rise window, and she was radiant and nervous, glowing with trepidation. We arrived at the shopping plaza where we were to retrieve Baby Jake. I sat in a sandwich shop and watched while my partner met with her ex-husband and his mother to do the craziest parking lot swap I had ever been a part of. I was still coming to terms with the fact that I had no earthly idea of how to be a good parent and the idea that my studies would have to take a backseat to being completely present for this helpless baby. I can still feel the sensation of my heart beating out of my chest with every step my partner took holding a diaper bag and the car seat with its precious cargo as she walked up to the shop entrance.

My nerves were completely frayed and a pair of older women adjacent to our table could feel my energy. They started making small talk with me while they waited for their order and the reason for our being there blurted out of my mouth. Instantly, they too, began looking out for my partner to approach with our new, sickly, bundle of joy. It turned out that they were cousins who were attending a family reunion and they had not seen each other for over two decades. Somehow, I found comfort in these two strangers as I readied myself for impending parenthood. When my partner came into the shop it was as if time had stopped, all I could hear was the sound of my heartbeat and the muffled murmurs coming from the elder cousins cooing at the infant in the car seat. My partner's smile was wide, her eyes filled with tears as she turned the car seat towards me. I'll never forget the quizzical look on his face. He was sizing me up as if to say, "And who the fuck are you?". I fell instantly in love with him, "I will call you Papo", I thought to myself.

The elder cousins fawned all over us and the baby; they offered to take pictures of us with Papo and then left us to the business of bringing home baby. Until this point I had led my life rather recklessly but making sure our grandson made it back home in one piece became of paramount importance. He was so strong and frail all at the same time. I became the worst kind of parent I could imagine within an hours' time. I decided to ride in the backseat with him and I became a helicopter mom. Every perceived cough I turned into him choking on his formula. If he slept too soundly or for too long, I would check for the rise and fall of his little chest. I was a wreck, and we hadn't even made it home yet.

We drove straight to Driscoll Children's Hospital once we got into town and had Papo's heart and lungs checked. His breathing had been rough and labored and there was a purple hue around his eyes that led us to believe that he wasn't getting enough oxygen. That initial visit to the hospital marked the first of many doctor visits, visits with developmental therapists, and pop-by visits with his CPS worker. Our whole world had been turned upside down within twenty-four hours. Baby bottles, formula, nebulizers, play pen, crib, clothes, DIAPERS, oh my God diapers! My partner had raised three college aged children of her own and was unsure that she would have the gumption to raise a fourth, he was an infant after all. Being slightly younger than my partner and never having had the opportunity to raise a child, I was up for the challenge. I was ready to do for Papo what Ma did for me.

Keep in mind that the pandemic still has the world on lockdown and my partner and I are still working from home. I feel that was both a blessing and a curse. My partner's work schedule remained the same, ZOOM meetings ALL day and emails in between and I had the flexibility to teach from home a couple days a week while attempting to finish my thesis. Ultimately, the stress of caring for our grandson took its toll and I had to postpone my thesis defense and graduation. We played hot potato with the baby all day. If my partner was working, I watched him, when I was teaching, my partner took care of him. The nights were by far the worst as I am a very light sleeper, and my partner is not, so you can guess who was on night duty. The days were blurring together, and I found myself as most new parents do, exhausted, disheveled, and depressed. I was convinced that I had some post-partum depression by proxy situation going on.

If I had to do it all over again, I would. Papo was a very happy baby and I loved sharing my day with him. It's amazing how one's maternal instincts just kick in when a helpless baby is placed in your care, at least for me it did. We watched him go from a very sick baby to a healthy, chubby, ball of energy over the course of six months. Caring for Papo was easy in comparison to the bi-weekly ZOOM visits CPS had scheduled with my stepson and the 'baby mama'.

Sometimes only one of them would show up, sometimes they were both absent, and when they did join the meeting, their camera was off, or they were on mute. It was disheartening that we would go to great lengths to make sure the baby was bathed, dressed, fed, and ready for his ZOOM calls with his parents only to have them not show up or literally fall asleep while on the call. The calls were twice a week at nine in the morning for fifteen minutes at a time and they still couldn't get it together to be present for their child.

The idea that Papo would be staying with us long term began to become a reality when we got word that Papo's former "babysitter" had been arrested for concealing a dead body in her apartment for over two weeks. Along with the man's corpse they found that the apartment did not have running water and the occupants had been defecating in Home Depot buckets that were full and strewn about the apartment. We knew that he had come from drug addicted parents, abject poverty, and miserable living conditions, but this was a new low. My partner and I began to weigh the pros and cons of having Papo live with us for the unforeseeable future and we started to differ in opinion. At the same time 'baby mama' had tested negative for marijuana and had started to comply with CPS requirements to potentially get her baby back. By this point my stepson had completely wiped himself out of the picture.

My world had become a pinhole where all I could see was the baby before me; making sure he was safe, secure, happy, and healthy. At night I would often cry myself to sleep only to wake three hours later to a screaming baby. There was much insecurity in the situation. As the days passed, we fell more in love with Papo, more attached, and more fearful that he would one day, suddenly and unexpectedly, leave us and return to his broken home. Those fears and insecurities would become the catalyst for what was about to take place.

The stress of 'not knowing' began to take its toll and I found myself looking in the mirror and not recognizing the person staring back at me. Alcohol wanted back in, and I found myself self-medicating again while the baby slept at night. I could see and feel the slippery slope trying to take me down, but I fought hard against it and put the bottle down again. For the first time in my life, I wanted to change not only for myself, but for this beautiful baby boy that we were charged with. Months went by and everything had started to take a turn for the positive when everything came crashing down.

We were going about our usual day when my partner and I received word from CPS that Papo was going back to his biological mother and that he would be leaving in three days. We had no say in the matter, his mother had complied with her responsibilities to get her son back. We were devastated and I was gutted. If ever there was a time where I wanted to drink myself into an abyss this would have been it...I chose not to. I chose to spend every waking moment with whom I had begun to consider my son, coherent and with presence of mind. I drank him in. Every giggle and babble, every long stretch when he woke up from a nap, every crying fit...every little aspect of his beautiful little soul, I drank him in.

The day he was to leave I woke him up as I usually did every morning, with kisses and cuddles. I changed him, fed him, and played peek-a-boo just to hear his funny little laugh over and over again while I held back tears. We bathed him and gathered his belongings; toys, clothes, car seat, and his diaper bag all while quietly sobbing. The day was cold and rainy, so I made sure to dress him in warm clothes. When Ruby, the CPS worker arrived she too had tears in her eyes, she of all people knew how attached we had grown to Papito, her heart broke for us. I took my time wrapping Papo in a warm blanket and walked him slowly down the long sidewalk to the CPS van with tears streaming down my face. I have been through my share of heartache and heartbreak in my 48 years, but all the deaths and break-ups I've experienced in my life would pale in comparison to kissing Papo one last time, putting him in the CPS van, seeing him smile at me one more time, and then watching the van disappear with him in it.



“PAPO”

CHAPTER X

THE ORIGIN STORY OF THE REAL TORCIDA

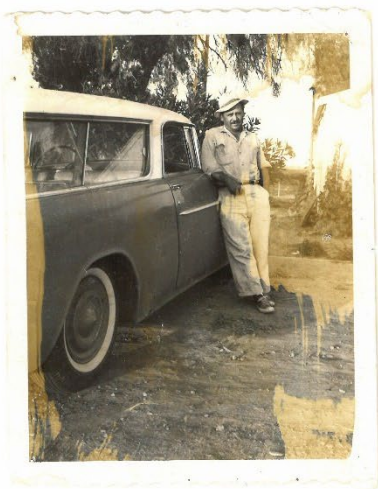
“There is a rebel in me-the Shadow-Beast. It is part of me that refuses to take orders from outside authorities. It refuses to take orders from my conscious will, it threatens the sovereignty of my rulership. It is that part of me that hates constraints of any kind, even those self-imposed. At the least hint of limitations on my time or space by others, it kicks out with both feet. Bolts.”

-Gloria Anzaldúa

Manflora, butchona, marimacha, tortillera, maricon, mariquita, bofe, bollera. Dyke, bull dagger, diesel, lesbo, bull dyke, muff diver. You have probably guessed by now what these words and terms all have in common. If you are still foggy on the connotations, this litany of derogatory words and terms are all used to describe a homosexual woman otherwise known as a lesbian. Growing up butch on the border is a unique experience in that if you identify as gay or lesbian you are subject to homophobia and prejudice in English *and* in Spanish.

Upon reflecting on my time down the booze soaked, pandemic induced, rabbit hole I began to ponder how I got to this self-discovery, the realization, that *I am indeed* Torcida. I began to question my origin, identity, intersectionality, and the repercussions of growing up on the Texas-Mexico border, I realized that I know more about where and who I came from than I had originally thought. And as the adage goes, “you don’t know where you’re going if you don’t know where you’re from.” Having been raised by my maternal, Mexican grandparents I came to know my Mexican roots, customs, culture, y que hacer, for that I am forever indebted. My grandfather Jesus “Chuy” Rivera hailed from Michoacan and my grandmother Antonia “Ma Antonia” Martinez, was from the great state of Guanajuato, Dolores Hidalgo (where El Grito De La Independencia was born) to be exact.

They immigrated from Mexico separately but found one another on the other side of the border in Weslaco, Tejas while working as farm workers. By default, their children were migrant farm workers as well, this is where *my* origin story begins.



“Mama Antonia y Papa Chuy. Weslaco, TX.”

It all started when my mother met my father while picking strawberries in early 1973. My grandparents, my aunts, and uncles spent most of the year following crops to harvest like a lot of Mexican families at that time. Uvas in California, toronjas y pepino in Tejas, y fresas en Florida. In the summertime the family would go back to Mexico and bring back gifts and their gains to share with those they had left behind, as did many migrant families. I digress, back to fresas in Florida and my mother’s brief entanglement with my father in February.

My mother, Elena, had been in an abusive relationship with a man who I was made to believe was my biological father, Ricardo 'Riche' Dominguez. Riche was a fair skinned, green-eyed man, short in stature, with a reddish beard, and mustache. The truth about the identity of my father would not be revealed to me until my eighteenth birthday. Manuel Valentine, a fellow farmworker had witnessed the abuse my mother had endured by her boyfriend, Riche, and offered to rescue her from him once the strawberry picking season was over. Manuel had taken a shine to my mother and had begun to develop romantic feelings toward her. Having worked with her side by side in the fields gave them ample time to get to know one another. Manuel was from Hoboken, NJ. by way of Puerto Rico and also followed different crops throughout the year. This crop would come to yield more than just strawberries that year.

One night after a particularly brutal attack Elena took Manuel up on his offer and slipped away with her earnings and her strawberry crush as Riche slept. Soon after arriving in New Jersey my mother found out she was pregnant. While Manuel was thrilled with the prospect of being a father, it was bittersweet news for my mother as she was still in love with Riche and was convinced he would change. After being in Hoboken for six months Elena slipped away again, in the middle of the night, while Manuel slept. She had grown homesick and despite her better judgment decided to return to Riche. She packed a bag, left Manuel a Dear John letter, and vanished, never to see him again.

She arrived in Reedley CA. where my grandparents were wrapping up uva season. Disappointed with my mother's delicate condition my grandparents decided it was time to come back home to Weslaco. I was born Sunday, November 18th at 8:53 in the morning after seventy-two hours of labor. My mother almost lost her life during childbirth due to blood loss and spent two weeks in the hospital; I was taken home by my grandmother. Sadly, my mother suffered

from post-partum depression and my grandparents made the executive decision to take me back to California and raise me as their own out of fear that my mother would neglect me or worse.



“Me and My Grandparents, 1978”

This arrangement would last for five years. Upon my return to Weslaco, I was told that the woman I thought was my aunt was really my biological mother. She expressed to me that she was not ready for motherhood and that to her dismay I was born a girl when she was hoping for a baby boy. This conversation marked the beginning of my checkered past with 'Len' as I referred to her until the day that she died.

One of my favorite photos from my childhood is the one where I am pictured sitting on the front steps of my grandparents' home sitting between them in a pink dress with my favorite brown boots on. As you can see from the look on my face, I was not happy about wearing this monstrosity of a dress. I feel that I most resemble my grandfather in this photo, and it makes me happy. He was a giant of a man and the most amazing father figure a girl could ever ask for. It was the first and last time they made me wear it or any other dress. Any attempt to put me in 'girl' clothes would result in my destroying the garment either by tearing it while climbing trees or soiling it by wrestling with my cousins in the grass and playing marbles with boys in the school yard. The tomboy in me was kicking out with both feet, Bolts! I began to wear hand me down clothes from my slightly older male cousins and opted for a shorter hairstyle over my pig tails.

While my 'mother' and my aunts hoped that my tomboy phase would be just that, a phase, my grandparents accepted me just as I was. I was content in my little tyke identity and looked up to similar role models like Cristy McNichol and Jo from the Facts of Life. My favorite literary character was Ramona Quimby from the Beverly Cleary books because she was a rough and tumble girl much like myself. However, over time, I began to see societies' negative reactions to my style of dress.

Valley perceptions of gay people, butch lesbians particularly, can either be positive or negative, more often the latter. Because of the dominant Catholic influence in El Valle, queer people are often seen as an abomination, *una desgracia*. The belief that gay people go straight to hell allows people to discriminate indiscriminately against flamboyant, in your face homosexuals, the other, the unknown. I quote Gloria Anzaldua, “Humans fear the supernatural, both the undivine (the animal impulses such as sexuality, the unconscious, the unknown, the alien) and the divine (the superhuman, the god in us). Culture and religion seek to protect us from these two forces.” (Anzaldua, 39)

So why not ‘butch it down’ or ‘girly it up’ to fit societal norms? If it would be easier to traverse a homophobic landscape, would it not be easier to just “straighten up” and fly right? “Straightening up” is the act of wearing a disguise to continue to be a part of the Latino culture and as a way of adhering to gender norms. To quote Eithne Luibheid’s article, “Looking like a Lesbian”: *The Organization of Sexual Monitoring at the United States Mexican Border*. “Straightening Up includes practices like growing one’s hair and nails, buying a dress, accessorizing, and donning makeup. Clearly there is privilege involved in the fact that the visual markers of lesbianism-unlike visual markers of race or gender-can usually be altered or toned down, so as to pass homophobic border guards.” (Luibheid, 78)

Gloria Anzaldua speaks on growing up queer en El Valle and how she was an anomaly in her family for not submitting to cultural and gender norms. “Nothing in my culture approved of me. *Habia agarrado mal pasos*. Something was wrong with me. *Estaba más allá de la tradición*.” (Anzaldua, 38) In “Borderlands La Frontera”, Gloria calls back a time when she was asked if she would ever marry, and her response was met with disdain and deaf ears.

“¿Y cuando te casas, Gloria? Se te va a pasar el tren.” Y yo les digo, “Pos si me caso, no va ser con un hombre.” Se quedan calladitas. Si soy hija de la chingada.” (Anzaldúa, 39)

I wish I had read Gloria’s writings earlier on and maybe it would have given me the agency I needed to stay true to myself. It would not be until the beginning of sixth grade that I would encounter bullying and homophobia for the first time based on my tomboy aesthetic. This was a time when puberty was starting to set in, my body began to betray me. Big tits are the curse of the butch girl, and my insecurity was at an all-time high, it was too much. I decided then and there to “straighten up” and even stuff down my same-sex attractions. For the next several years I played the role. ‘My mother’ and aunts were so relieved that I had made the decision to conform to my assigned gender role. I was a shell, a void, complicit in a farce perpetuated by my culture and by heteronormative tenets.



“Me Straightened Up, 1993”

Filling my time with drawing, schoolwork, and putting on make-up, I kept up my shaky veil. I even managed to avoid impure thoughts about my close female friends. I had talked myself into being straight. I dated boys, kissed boys, and did not get what the big deal was about BOYS. I would watch my girlfriends with their boyfriends, and they were enjoying themselves. I knew in my bones that I *did not* feel what my friends were feeling. There was no swooning, no

giggling, no unbridled passion. That is, until I graduated and decided to cast away my disguise, my costume, my grotesque facade.

Almost immediately I found my new and improved identity. It was 1994 and the little tyke from down the street with grass stains on the knees of her jeans became the dyke down the street with the chain wallet with a cock fight emblazoned on its worn brown leather. The Phoenix had arisen, and I was back! I finally felt whole enough to come out of the closet and confess to my mother that I was a lesbian. Her response to my news went as follows, “But, Julie, how do you know that you’re a lesbian if you’ve never even been with a woman?!” To which I replied, “You don’t have to taste a doughnut to know that it’s sweet.” In hindsight, I think the analogy I used to answer her question left more of a scar on her psyche that day than the actual news of my coming out.

It has been nearly 30 years since I spoke my truth out loud to ‘my mother’ (my grandmother had always known and wasn’t the least bit shocked to hear the news) Since then I have had the courage to present however I see fit even if it did cost me job promotions, job opportunities, and dirty looks while entering women’s bathrooms, to which I have to point at my breasts and say, “Yes I’m a girl.” Despite the discomfort and discrimination, I have faced for being a MASC presenting lesbian, I stand before you proud. Proud to embody both masculine and feminine qualities. To quote Anzaldua, “There is something compelling about being both male and female, about having an entry into both worlds.” (Anzaldua, 41)

As I began to conduct my research for this project, I started with the etymology of the word *Bulldagger* and was pleasantly surprised with what I uncovered. I chose that word because it sounded the harshest. To my surprise it was quite the opposite of what I was expecting to find. *Bulldagger*: Pejorative slang for a very masculine lesbian, which often carries a more racialized meaning than its synonyms bull dyke, bull diker, and diesel dyke. Bulldaggers are associated with physical strength, sexual prowess, emotional reserve, and butch chivalry. As I investigated further, I discovered Gladys Bentley and her identity as the most infamous Bulldaggers of the Harlem Renaissance.





In reading about Gladys Bentley and her life, I found some parallels between her experience and mine except that *she* started as an out and proud MASC presenting lesbian and then was later forced to go back into the closet and ‘Straighten Up’ to save her career. At the end of the Harlem Renaissance Gladys moved to California, married a man, and started donning women’s clothing. I found a newspaper clipping that shows Bentley in full female ‘drag’ exclaiming, “I’m a woman again!” I found this profoundly sad and thanked my lucky stars that my experience was quite the opposite. Where I spent the shorter part of my young life in the closet, I have been able to live my life as an out and proud bulldagger for the last 30 years.



I am privileged and proud to represent for all girly boys or boyish girls that may find themselves stuffing down who they are to fit societal norms. To these marginalized populations I say, you keep being you and dispel the machista heteronormative gender roles that prevail in this beautiful place we call ‘The Magic Valley.’ The magic behind the Valley is its people, their stories, culture, and pride regardless of gender, gender roles, or sexuality. My journey towards self-actualization traversing a mostly homophobic landscape has led me to stand proudly in my truth as a manflora, butchona, marimacha, tortillera, maricon, mariquita, bofe, bollera.



“Modern Day Bulldaggers 2022”

CHAPTER XI

REALIZATION OF TRAUMA: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

The last three years have allowed me to essentially go back in time and down a few rabbit holes to identify times and places when I experienced life altering traumas. I learned that I had repressed anger, resentments, and poor coping mechanisms. I recall dealing with anger as a child by coming up with a unique way to ‘numb the pain. When I became angry, I would grab a spoon out of the utensil drawer, fill it with Tabasco sauce, and eat it. I would repeat this process until my ears rang, was pouring sweat, and letting tears roll down my cheeks. I would go outside and let the saliva drain out of my burning mouth until the burning sensation would subside. I remember doing this frequently until my grandmother questioned us kids about what we were doing with so much Tabasco.

I have pleasant memories of my young life leading up to age seven. After that year I began to collect more bad memories than good memories. I began to lash out in school and was involved in many a schoolyard brawl. I was in and out of the principal’s office so much so that he began greeting me with, “Rivera, again?!”. My grades weren’t any better, I found it hard to concentrate in all my classes except English and art. I loved art and words equally and that is how I began to use that love to escape from my bad memories. I did my best to block out memories of my rape when I was seven. Ages seven through nine were a turbulent time that until now I hadn’t really stopped to address. My innocence and sense of security were ripped away from me; when I told my biological mother about what her boyfriend had done to me, she refused to believe me. Anger, mistrust, and abandonment issues were born that day and so the

pattern would become etched into every fiber of my being. These issues have caused me to become guarded, quick to perceive threats, and not being vulnerable in my relationships; consequently, becoming the reasons most of my relationships with women have failed. That realization was a hard pill to swallow.

The next big pill to swallow was the strained relationship with my bio mom. I spent two weekends out of the month with my mother as a child and the rest of the time I spent with my grandparents. My mother Elena was obligated to care for me for four days out of the month, this was the agreement she and my grandmother came up with. I remember overhearing conversations between my mother and grandmother (who I ironically called mom) where my grandmother would implore my mother to spend more time with me or “Te va agarrar odio!”, she would say. She was right, I had become angry with my mother. To be fair Len had her share of demons to contend with. She was a functioning, raging, alcoholic and often totaled out brand new cars and was charged with DUI more than a couple times. It’s a miracle she didn’t kill herself or worse, kill someone else.

She hid these facts from my grandmother pretty well, when I spent weekends with her, I had a front row seat to her shenanigans. She often left me alone to go drinking and sometimes wouldn’t come back until the next day. My mother had a good federal job that afforded her a nice house, nice cars, nice clothes, and enough money to pay my grandmother to raise me. Many times, I would dread spending the weekends at Len’s because she never had any food, and I was always alone. I began staying with her less and less, creating a deeper chasm between us. Sadly, our relationship was never one of mother and daughter as I felt like I mothered her most of the time. It would be that way until she died in 2009. She was fifty-six.

As the years went by, I experienced more and more trauma. The death of my grandparents, and ultimately becoming a victim of domestic violence when I graduated from high school. These traumas left me with a tough exterior and nerves of steel. Unfortunately, I too had started self-medicating with drugs and alcohol and was in a dead-end job and relationship for sixteen years. If not for my formative years with my grandparents, who knows what would have become of me. I shudder to think. Presently I have a deeper understanding of my trauma and the issues that surface because of it. I feel better about my future now that I'm doing the work of untangling the mess that trauma leaves behind. Therapy and mindfulness have helped me deal with my traumas immensely during the last couple of years. I know now that I have the tools to handle future traumas and to *not* go down the same road my mother did and dying at a young age.

While my path to getting to this point in my thesis has been one of many twists and turns, I am grateful for the catharsis. At the outset of this writing endeavor, I was struggling with how to write a fictional account of a twisted woman with tons of issues while simultaneously infusing the character with aspects of my lived experiences. Once I hit the wall and realized that *I* was Torcida and that the character was just an extension of me, is when I knew that I had to write a shortened memoir. I could no longer separate myself from the fictional character and instead set out to tell the true story of a 'Butchona Torcida' living on the Texas-Mexico border.



“Self-Actualization, Athens, GA. 2022”

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

“El Mandil” (A Poem for My Grandmother)

Mama Antonia wears her mandil,
in the ruffled front pockets, hard candy, and clothes pins.
She sits at the plastic covered kitchen table.
In her hands, soft and plump, una taza de chocolate
with a toasted, buttered, bolillo to dunk.

Her house isn't much, but to her, it's a palace.
It seems to me she should be drinking
her chocolate out of a chalice.

She's so regal with her thousand-yard stare.
I wonder what she's thinking about...
Is it Mexico lindo?
Is it her late husband?
Maybe something more rare?
No
She breaks from her stare and tells me
“¡Ve y traite la ropa del tendedero, Julietta!
¡Que ya va a llover!”

BIOLOGICAL SKETCH

Julietta Rivera was born on November eighteenth, 1973, in Weslaco, TX. Julietta has lived in several cities throughout the Rio Grande Valley, but now resides in McAllen, TX. where she lives with her partner. She is a proud stepparent to her daughters, a son and is a doting grandparent to two grandchildren, Melody and 'Papo'. Ms. Rivera is a graduate of PSJA North High School and holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree from The University of Texas Pan-American where she graduated *cum laude*. Upon acceptance to the Creative Writing Master's Program, she was awarded The Presidential Graduate Research Assistantship (PGRA) Scholarship in 2019. In the fall of 2022 Ms. Rivera was awarded the Center for Mexican American Studies (CMAS) Scholarship which afforded her time and resources to travel and attend conferences pertaining to her research. She earned her MFA in Creative Writing in December 2022.

She has spoken at several conferences about her work and her activism regarding immigration, LGBTQ+ issues, Latina empowerment, Nepantla (unrecognizable land), and domestic abuse/sexual assault. Ms. Rivera is currently working as a grant writer for Creative Arts Studio and teaches art to elementary students in after-school programs for underserved children. Most recently she had the pleasure of co-writing a Texas Education Agency (TEA) application for Creative Arts Studio's (CAS) to be awarded charter school status starting in Fall 2023. If awarded charter school status Creative Arts Studio Academy will offer core curriculum through fine arts to children K-8 in the PSJA area. The existing studios will continue to serve local students with their after-school programs and community outreach.

Ms. Rivera plans to continue to write her memoir in further detail and the story of Torcida, the anti-hero comic book character. She is excited to share her stories and the stories of struggle, culture, and resilience that makes the Rio Grande Valley and its inhabitants so magical.

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