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## Generational Gap: Tales from a Vaquero Fracasado

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GENERATIONAL GAP: TALES FROM A  
VAQUERO FRACASADO

A Thesis

by

SHAWN MICHAEL GONZALEZ

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

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The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

May 2023



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VAQUERO FRACASADO

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May 2023



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## ABSTRACT

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Mexican American culture holds a strong grasp in the roots of South Texas. The proud Latino heritage is at the forefront of The Valley's metaphorical cover page. Naturally, with such strong cultural influence comes adaptations of antiqued ways of living and the morality of a dying generation which is slowly losing their stronghold on the throats of the youth. The elders are used to a specific, and sometimes socially problematic, lifestyle that includes machismo, patriarchal sovereignty, and gender based roles that are fitting to a specific generational expectation.

This collection of writing aims to highlight the differences between the old generation of Mexican Americans and how the new generation is beginning their own influential take on the customs and norms of the former. Each chapter, an isolated story within an overarching theme, relies on the passage of time to elevate the understanding the stark contrasts between social mannerisms and expectations set by differing minds. Specifically, how much of the older generation seems to look down upon the younger generation due to the fact that their standard of living is much more "underwhelming" than what they had to live through during their time.

Ultimately, my goal is to bridge the gap between these spaces of thought in hopes of finding a balance between a proud heritage and an adaptable one. Time may change perspective but it does not change history, it may only influence it.





## DEDICATION

To my parents, Erica Sanchez and Miguel Gonzalez. Mom, thank you for pushing me to continue my studies and believing in me from the moment I was brought into the world; this would have never been possible without your love and encouragement. The toughest love from the world's greatest mother. Dad, thank you for believing in what I do and showing me the joys of following my dreams, especially in the pursuit of education and athletics; you have always made sure I was enjoying what I do and never left a single regret down my path. To my family, thank you for your continued love and support throughout the years. You have all been with me through my highs and my lows and I could not be more grateful for everything you all have done for me. To my girlfriend, Mallory, thank you for believing in me even when I was close to giving up on myself. You have been nothing but good to me and I am blessed to have you in my life.

Thank you all. I love you.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

What causes humans to develop the need to please others? Why do we constantly feel the urge to seek approval from those whose opinions, in reality, should carry no weight in the equation of our personal futures. We alone carry the burden of developing our lives and molding ourselves into a reflection that embodies our morals and values. We hold an unbiased truth; we are who we are based off of the choices we make and in doing so are the sole proprietors of our actions and influences. Yet, we care more about what others think of us. An image, a blank canvas, a beautiful mess.

This is not to say that opinions do not play a role in one's emotional state of mind, and could also lead to developing a strong sense of, or lack thereof, self-esteem. Although, depending on the source of these opinions, the weight may vary and could emotionally incapacitate one to the point of denial or self-doubt. With that being said allow me to trace this argument back to the root cause, family.

In a typical Mexican American household, especially one with a proud and deeply rooted heritage, there is a range of ideals that get tossed around back and forth more often than the times a rooster crows in the day. Machismo, social patriarchy, and morality all are deeply embedded in the Mexican culture and is very prevalent in the dynamics that are visible to the outside onlookers. The stereotypical workaholic father who is also the bread winner for the family. Who strikes down the familial law with an iron fist, or his belt, and is both feared and loved by



everyone in the household. The soft spoken mother who is expected to have food on the table, care for all the crying children under her husband's roof, teach the manners and moralities, as well as being emotionally available to anyone who needs her comfort.

Stereotyping is not a new concept and, speaking from personal experience, it holds some truths to what I have observed growing up in my own household. Many of our meals follow traditional recipes brought from Mexico by my great grandparents and my ideals and morals follow a similar code of conduct as well. As a third generation Mexican American / Tejano man, I feel the necessity to, in some capacity, continue the tradition of passing on my cultural knowledge to my children. Instilling my family's ideals to the next generation. But, as I've noticed, with each passing generation the line between heritage conservation and heritage assimilation has become more askew. This relates back to the fact that ideals, acceptable behaviors, and social norms are in a constant fluctuation. We are now entering a time in human history where the social media juggernauts hold the power of influence and have wrapped their tendrils around the minds of the young and unaware.

However, a shift such as this is not uncommon. Especially in the cultural melting pot that is Texas. More specifically, bustling hubs and points of entry such as the Rio Grande Valley. The Valley has always had its fair share of change. Long gone are the days of solely working the fields and heading to the cantinas after hours of underpaid labor. Instead, most people now a day's head to the local coffee shop to grab themselves a nice macchiato or head down to a new ramen joint that just opened up in downtown. These flashes of cultural shift can be traced back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, around the same time Gregorio Cortez, a Mexican Folktale hero, lived along the Rio Grande Valley. Back then, it was solely known as the "Border".

In his novel, *With His Pistol in His Hands*, Tejano author Americo Paredes introduces some of the mystery that surrounded this well-known figure in Mexican history. Though a Mexican native by birth, Cortez spent the majority of his teen and adult life on the American side of the border. He would work as a cowboy and farm hand on ranches all along the Rio Grande Valley. Now you may ask yourself, what does any of this have to do with cultural identity or cultural shift? The fact of the matter is, though he was a Mexican man, he spent most of his time on the opposite side of the border, which also made him a product of the American way of life. In Paredes' book, he takes the opportunity to generate some skepticism held by others who thought they knew Cortez's appearance. To paraphrase Paredes' work, some people were under the belief that Cortez was a tall man, while others believed he was short. There were contradictions between his weight and even his skin color. Some believed he was born with fair skin and blond hair while others believed he was "Indian brown". Regardless of the fact, Paredes summed up his personality in an all-encompassing phrase, "He was a man, very much of a man; and he was a Border man". (Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand*, pg33.)

Cortez's identity belonged to no nation, it instead became an amalgamation of two differing identities and cultural ideals blending together in the best of ways. Honesty, integrity, hardworking, and loving were all words used by Paredes to describe Cortez's character. He was the embodiment of what cultural shift could become and should become. However, it is hard to find these exact qualities amongst individuals, especially in today's social climate.

The older generation looks at us and laughs. The tried and tell all phrase of "Back in my day..." has become synonymous with our elders. The long and forgotten times of yesteryear are now nothing more than vague stories passed down, retold, and barely listened to by the next generation. The ignorance of it all cumulates into the equivalent of a metaphorical wedge being

driven deeper and deeper between the generations, and in turn causes the feuds to increase greatly. Neither side wanting the other to have their way in the world one has shaped and the other is set to inherit. In a world full of twists and turns, who has the right of way?

Well it all depends on who you ask. The younger of the generations will argue that the antiquated way of thinking, especially in Mexican culture, derive from sexist, patriarchal methods that hold no candle to the current social referendums of the world. The new norms of today would simply not allow for a woman to just be considered a mother or a housewife. Why can't a male play the loving and supportive role at home and why should the burden of earning the family income solely rely on his ability to hold down a steady, respectable job? This nuance form of thinking may seem logical to a Millennial or a Gen Z'er whose mannerisms have been deeply influenced by the social cues of modern American society.

But to an older generation, such as the Baby Boomers, this goes against their beliefs that were instilled by them through the traditional household of the mid 1950's or earlier. This is especially prevalent in the machismo culture of older Mexican-Americans. A man's rules for the man's world. There were no other options, and if the ideas were differentiated, either by a Latino or Latina, they were labeled as outcasts and zealots for refusing to conform to the morality and cultural traditions their ancestors worked so hard to preserve. Social acceptability or former ideals? To each their own, but in my case I try to fall between the sweet spot. A neutral zone in which the civility and morality of each differing view may be highlighted and praised for its efforts in the shaping of society.

In this three-part series, I combine fictional recounts of events and stories that have been passed down to me through other family members along with interconnected themes that are intended to highlight the struggles of an older generation, specifically what it entails to create

opportunity and a strong foundation for the future generations of one's family. Then, shift focuses to the struggles of a modern generation, whose issues are a stark deviation from that of their ancestors and elders. Highlighting the differences between the two and giving them each their own side of the story allows for the reader to gain a sense of mutuality and connectivity between the two opposing forces without coercing them into picking a right and a wrong side.

In a conjunction with the Shakespearean Tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*, I wanted these stories to reflect the growth of a generation where the sins and misfortunes of the past (conflicts between the Montagues and Capulets) should in theory have little to no effect on the futures of the new generation (Romeo and Juliet). However, it is this depth of familial history that haunts them up until their final moments before the last curtain falls, even though throughout the play we witness their attempts at growth, love, and deterrence from their family's ideals. Overall, they do break free from the past but not without consequence. In turn, their sacrifice paved the road for the idea that old bonds and traditions were sometimes meant to be broken in order to achieve one's personal attempt at the pursuit of happiness.

With that being said, I wish to encapsulate successful balance of ideals from multiple generations in a matter that pays homage and respect to the stark ideals in Mexican-American, Tejano, and Latino culture and in turn gain a new appreciation from where we stood as a culture to where we now currently stand. With respects to my roots deeply embedded here along the border of The Rio Grande and how the region itself forces cultural change due to its nature as a point of entry for many diverse cultures.

## **Part One: Induction.**

When splitting my stories into unique sections, the first thought that came to mind was finding a single word that could encapsulate the theme of each section without overbearingly and blatantly stating what it was I wanted my audience to focus on. I pondered for some time, chewed on the thought for a bit, and suddenly the word came to me out of the blue “Induction.” As stated in the Oxford Dictionary, Induction is “the process or action of bringing rise about or giving rise to something.” When I read this, it mirrored the exact image of what I wanted this section to represent. Mexican, Hispanic, and Latino culture all can be primarily traced back to proud heritages that descend from the combination of Spanish conquistadors and Native American tribes that slowly spread their influence throughout Latin America. These influences brought forth the common ideals most traditional Hispanic households carry today. The stereotypical working class household that tends to abide by the same patriarchal cycle that seems to be on a continuous loop, playing the same rhyme and reason with each passing generation. Up until about the late 2000’s and early 2010’s, common trends amongst Hispanic households fit into the stereotypes.

The misconceptions about Latino culture, not just Mexican-American culture, stem deeply from the division that once ran rampant along the U.S. / Mexico border. When the United States annexed Texas in 1845, there was much debate on how the new border lines would be drawn. Mexico did not want to lose such a large portion of land and delegated that the border should be drawn along the Nueces River. The U.S., however, believed that the Rio Grande River should be the final line drawn to separate the two nations. This ultimately resulted in the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) to take place until the inevitable signing of The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and the Rio Grande was the ultimately decided as the border line between

nations. This conflict however left a bad taste in many American's mouths and, under the terms set in the annexation, the newly indoctrinated Mexican-American's who decided to stay this side of the border. There were many conflicts between the Mexican-Americans, who by all means by this point are fully fledged American citizens, and the Anglo Americans who ridiculed and relegated them as second class citizens.

The social boundary was quite substantial and it was well known that the Mexican people were not wanted on this side of the border unless they were here to work for the wealthy, White farm owners. Multiple instances of lynching's and mistreatments were documented along the border. This brings to mind the "Ballad of Gregorio Cortez", a Mexican *corrido* (folksong) based on the life of Gregorio Cortez and the misfortune he faced during his life. The corrido dramatizes the real life conflict Cortez faced when an accusation of a stolen horse turns sour and Cortez ends up killing an Anglo Sherriff in self-defense. In doing so, he also loses his brother in the ensuing gunfight and ultimately leads the Texas Rangers on a man hunt where he alludes capture by search parties of up to 300 men. He becomes a martyr and an inspiration to many Mexicans and Tejanos alike due to his ability to embarrass the same people who had been systematically oppressing their people for years. All this because of a misunderstanding.

Ultimately, this ballad shows how intrinsically connected and important cultural understanding is and why the changes over the years have strengthened and solidified cultural and social change. It has become apparent that, if there was more cultural acceptance at the time, many of the situations our ancestors found themselves in could have been avoided all together.

With that being said, is easy to assume that this is interconnected with the cultural variables that come with growing up in a Mexican-American household. During my childhood, I was always told to eat all of my food, do the yard work because that's the "man's job" and to

make sure I get my education because no woman would ever want to date a man with no money. How was I supposed to take care of my wife and support my family without a high paying income? Impossible.

Yet, when I would speak about these expectations to my friends, it seemed as if they too had just finished having these same conversations with their own parents and were forcefully made to subjugate themselves to their respective family's ideals.

"My father didn't go to college," one friend would say. "He said it was a waste of time and money and when I turn 18 I'm just going to end up working in the refineries just like him." Whereas some of my female friends could never go out with me alone because "It didn't look right that two teenagers who aren't dating or married are going out alone."

These are just some of the few examples I encountered growing up in the Rio Grande Valley. The strong Hispanic heritage and old school ways of raising children often collided with what we would see on U.S. television. Teens and pre-teens heading off on adventures through the city alone, making grown-up decisions, and often learning from those mistakes and growing as people. It felt that we were often never allowed to make mistakes, and instead we were made to learn from the mistakes of our ancestors. Too many times had I heard the phrase "When I was your age..." told to me over something I had done. The mistakes couldn't be made, no lessons to be learned; at that point it was just a matter of taking my elder's word for everything. In other words, they experienced the hardships of the world for us so we wouldn't need to suffer through the cruel and unfair nature this world is well known for.

When determining the theme for this collection the term coined by the great Mark Twain "write what you know" circled in my head over and over again. However, as one with an act for

all subjects (seen more as a curse than a blessing), I found myself in a tight spot trying to pinpoint what exactly it was I wanted to write about. My family and heritage is something I am very proud of and when I say my last name, I pronounce it with a weight that carries the pride of being a fourth generation Gonzalez man from the Rio Grande Valley.

I also love my culture and the struggles many of my family members and close family friends have faced in order just to plant their roots here along the U.S. – Mexico border. I look back at all these stories and wish that each could get the shining moment they deserve, so others can see that our people did not just magically appear here in the States, but instead risked a lot just to have hope in living the American dream.

When taking a special topic course on Americo Paredes, I came across a poem entitled “The Mexico-Texan” in his book *Between Two Worlds*. The poem itself reflects on the situation most Hispanics find themselves in, especially after crossing the border. Belonging to neither side and having to create their own social climate, in turn becoming their own source of traditions and support. I couldn’t help but to relate to a lot of what he had to say on the geo-political state of the early settlements here in the Rio Grande Valley and having many of his stories take place right here in our own back yard helped push me towards my overarching theme for my thesis. Much like how Paredes is able to reflect on how the early Mexican-Americans, the poem goes to show that they were neither here nor there.

“Go back to the gringo! Go lick at hees boot!...

...But efter elaction he no gotta fran”

(Paredes, Mexico Texan)



This is an excellent reflection on how the Mexican people felt betrayed by those who decided to stay on the American side of the border, rather than to come and re-join their people. It also highlights how the Mexican-Americans were seen more as political pawns to push the agendas of American politicians and then left and forgotten about once the votes had been casted. We were inevitably stuck between two worlds.

We are not just Mexicans, we are not just Americans, we are Hispanics, the perfect blending of two differentiating societies and take only the best of what each has to offer. We are the balance. Just like in “The Mexico-Texan” we are the consistent balance and blend that contributes to both societies equally, we embark on the special path created when two conflicting societies find the middle ground. We pick a side yet we stand for no single flag, ostracized from both regions, unworthy of carrying any title yet still representing both holistically and proud.

With that being said, knew I too wanted to tell stories that are rooted in The Valley, only this time I wanted them to have a more personal touch, something more grounded, and something that especially focused on how times have changed, and our own ways of thinking too have starkly contrasted to the antiquated style of life.

My first story, titled “Freedom Floater”, is the story of a young woman who must escape her dark past in Mexico through the use of illegal entries and smuggling across the border into the U.S. with the promise of a better life for her and her unborn child. I wanted these stories to be separated into their own entities much like Paredes’ *Uncle Remus con Chile*, in which each story is its own isolated tale yet still carries a strong focus on the cultural and internal struggles of the different characters that are navigating their way through life. “Freedom Floater” just naturally felt like the proper introduction to these stories because it depicts the nitty gritty and struggles many immigrants face when attempting to enter the U.S. Not only that, but I also determined that

this story could also strike a chord with a plethora of Latino rooted communities, whose ways of living and life in the U.S. was only made possible due to the struggles their ancestors made in order to trek across the Mexican landscape, through the rough waters of the Rio Grande, and hopefully able to find peace in their new country.

In this story, I took portions from second-hand accounts that my Great Grandmother Inez would tell me about what life was like living and working in cotton fields and plantations, where the language barrier made it somewhat difficult to communicate with any Anglos in the area. The difficulty of leaving one's own country to start a life elsewhere is a drastic change for anyone who is trying to just live their life and make an honest wage, but she did it. The thing is, we really do not know what people are trying to escape when they are seeking new beginnings, especially those who make the perilous trip across the border.

When speaking to one of my friends in undergrad, I recalled a story she once told me of her pregnant mother who made the trip across the river while she was still in her belly. Not only that, but she was forced to use a tire to help maintain her balance and float above the water's rushing currents and crashing debris that floated on down the river. The image of a heavily pregnant woman, who was willing to risk her entire life for something better, was instilled in my mind and used that as inspiration for recounting this made up story.

"Freedom Floater" was built on the foundation that nothing in life is free and the judgement of others who flee their country of origin in search of a better life should not be ridiculed or frowned upon. It is a great sacrifice that one must take all aspects of their personal lives into account before making the ultimate decision. This goes to show that we truly do not know what all our ancestors risked to get us Hispanics to the position we are in today. They have that right to feel as if they know it all because at the end of the day, they were the ones who took

the plunge and risked everything on the offset chance that they may lose or gain a great amount of time, wealth, and potential for their future generations.

When crafting this story, I wanted a genuine and authentic voice to carry throughout the story. In doing so, I incorporated the Spanish language into the dialogue of the story. I knew this decision would be off putting to some non-Spanish speaking readers, but I wanted the conversation to flow much like it would in real life. Much of mainstream media's "Spanish" is mostly the exaggerated pronunciation of English words, rather than just having the actors perform the actual dialogue in Spanish. I wanted the narrator's voice to feel authentic and in turn placing my audience in a first person perspective of what it would sound like if you were having these conversations in Spanish. It was for the sake of craft and with respect to my culture.

Moving on to the second and final story in the first part of my collection, "Route 66-6", I determined to view the outlook on Hispanic culture on the American side of the border. After the border hopping, after the settling, after finally becoming part of the American dream comes the realization that our heritage carries a large amount of machismo and hardheadedness that is deeply embedded into the minds of most old-fashioned Hispanic males. My uncle told the horror stories of Hispanic migrant workers who would go around the country, looking for an opportunity to work the fields for pennies on the dollar, a much lower and unfair wage compared to that of an average blue or white collared job most Americans would have. These workers would spend days on the road, bound state from state just to make their ends meet and slightly more; it was just enough to live, work, pack up, and eventually move to the next potential job site. If you were one of the lucky few who learned English, was well spoken, and liked by the Anglo farmers who ran the majority of the plantations, you could potentially be offered a

permanent job as a field or ranch hand and even have seniority and oversight of your own crews. But again, those were few and far between.

Many of these stories involved cousins who went missing on the road, workers who were deported back to Mexico, or people who got lost and had to self-navigate on what little they had before missing their reporting deadline. Money was scarce, resources the same, the only guarantee was the laborious workload that awaited you once you arrived. Many of these mystery stories reminded me of ghost tales and the mysterious disappearances always led to speculation on what really happened on those roads, where did many of these people go? According to an uncle of mine, many a worker attempted to cross the dreaded Route 666. This route was synonymous with the term “Devil’s Highway” and along with the name, carried a strong sense of dread and urgency to cross and exit as soon as possible.

According to The Department of Transportation - Federal Highway Administration website the large portion of the highway was connected between Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico and as of May 31, 2003 has been re-designated as U.S. 491 in connection to many people recollecting the negative connotation attached to its original name. The Biblical connection and association of the term 666 sparked speculation on travel through the highway, especially for Christian believers. It was said that the paranormal activity that plagues the highway is all due to the connection to its Biblical reference. I had the pleasure of talking to an uncle of mine who told me recollected stories told by some of the migrant workers he and his father worked side by side with in Idaho. They had their own paranormal accounts and testimonies that they would recall by the night time fires before the kids all went to bed and the working men started drinking. He too also had the opportunity to travel alone down the highway. Many of the stories told to me involved a woman in white who trekked across the highway

searching for her victim of the night or the demon truck driver whose sole purpose was to ram drivers off the side off the road, hopefully off a cliff and down to their impending doom.

I found a drastic similarity between the “Woman in White” and a well known Mexican folktale “La Llorona”. When listening to the descriptions of the woman in white (pale skin, black hair that covered her face, long flowing white gown) the first image that came to mind was that of La Llorona. I couldn’t help but wonder if maybe the migrants who would use this highway as a means of travel would project their childhood fears onto the roads in front of them or even verbally passing these tales down to some Anglos, in turn creating this new story of the Woman in White. La Llorona still holds a partial part of my childhood fears, especially when I think back to the loud wails I would hear during our cookouts at the family ranch. Whether they were real or just a prank being played by my cousins, there was genuine fear that made me believe that she was a true possibility and not just a figment of my imagination.

These stories would send chills down my spine and my hope in writing “Route 66-6” was to instill and encapsulate that same uneasiness and anxiety I felt whenever I heard those stories. This story was inspired by a radio play written by Lucille Fletcher called *The Hitchhiker*, in which a man must outrun a mysterious stranger who seems to be following him across the Route 66 highway. The eerie nature of Fletcher’s storytelling, along with the horror of the unknown, empty road gave way to the creation of this second story. Although this was a play and had a few more liberties to add, including the music and the voice acting, I wanted this story to capture the essence of fear and the sensation of running. The hidden agenda of the story does not solely focus on the horror aspect but rather allows it to amplify the message instead; running away from something you fear.

Stephen King once stated that, “We make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones.” This ties in well not only with the atmosphere of the story but also to the real-world ties that anchor the character who may be on the edge between sanity and insanity. As the story barrels towards its abrupt conclusion, it is blatantly obvious there is more to our protagonist’s adventure than just outrunning a ghoul or a demon.

The protagonist of this story is an older uncle recounting a time in his life in which he feared what lurked on the open road. It talks about the countless road trips he had made with his family throughout his childhood while migrating from place to place in search of decent wages. He battles the idea of growing up in a testosterone-fueled, masculine toxicity infested household in which his drunken father would demean his family in during his nights out. He decides to stand up to this figure of authority for the first time before succumbing to the thought of leaving this life, and family, behind him for a while so he can return to their home and plan his own way of living. I wanted the horrific encounters along the route to represent his exhausted fears and past pains that he must endure as he attempts to steadily outrun them, eager to leave everything behind him so he may begin his life anew. No matter the distance he puts between himself and his family, those ties still hold strong and even though he can outrun them all he wants, he must continue to run from them for the rest of his life in order to keep those images from taking him over completely.

In keeping with King’s quote, I aimed to include a story that highlights a bridge between real world trauma and the psychokinetic link it has to the paranormal happenings throughout the text. I sincerely wanted this story to personify the young culture that is arising from the Hispanic heritage, one that is haunted by the past actions and thoughts of the old class and must continuously push forward towards their new goals they wish to set for themselves. This text was

meant to be the binder that would bleed into the second section of the collection in which the seeds are planted for change, now it all would depend on those who are still running from the past to decide in which direction they shall go.

These two stories make up the bulk of part one in my collection and I feel best represent the antiquated ideologies of the past and begin stemming out towards the new opinions that transpire with a younger, more aware community of Hispanics. Which brings me to my next point and the second part to my collection.

## **Part 2: Deviation**

When coming up with a name for this second portion of the collection, I determined that deviation encapsulated the effect I was aiming to achieve. When one is out of line, disruptive of the social norm, and is outright defiant of the rules set before by others, it is known as deviation. This is also, where I believe my writing shifts from building the background of Hispanic heritage and laying the foundation of the direction in which my collection is taking and begins to speak through a voice more concurrent to that of the younger generation.

The language used in this next portion of stories is more reminiscent to that of a younger audience and is geared to spark a connection between a plethora of situations young Hispanics end up in due to familial decisions or of their own accord. It moreover is supposed to divert from the strong willed and level-headed decision making of the past and highlight the modern decisions being made by the new common norms in society. For many like me, gone are the days of child labor and the dangers of border crossing, and now we focus on familial, personal, and

social relationships that further identify the new encompassing body of the younger generation bleeding through the metaphorically constructed walls of rules placed by their ancestors.

I begin this section with “DRIP”, a story about a young man’s ever changing lifestyle and the issues faced when his family dynamic is destroyed by a new factor, a step-parent. In modern society, it is not uncommon to see single parent, co-parent, or divorced couples raising their children as they see fit. These dynamics are common in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and have been embraced by society as necessary decisions made to avoid unnecessary mutual destruction. It has become common practice, and knowledge, as to the point that 50% of most marriages in the U.S. end in a divorce. Even though it is not uncommon to see a child with divorced parents, the fact of the matter is that it is often overlooked to see how this affects the child and more so how it affects the adult’s social life. The Hispanic culture holds marriage with a high regard and it is viewed as a lifetime commitment between partners. We have seen traditional weddings ranging from mutual agreement and love, to those under the table shotgun weddings brought forth by an unexpected pregnancy. It happens.

What people don’t realize is that the Hispanic community, especially the antiquated generation, see this as life binding and socially damning if handled incorrectly. Heaven forbid a child be born to a Hispanic couple out of wedlock and by any means necessary, do not allow your relationship to end up in a divorce.

Before, these factors played a major role in how a family would be seen socially and judgement would be passed on by close friends and even those who do not know the family well. At the end of the day, gossip is gossip and many people can’t wait to have their hands on the story of the week. Had this taken place just under a century ago, the outlook people would have on a story like this would be much different, but now through the lens of a contemporary



audience, we can focus more on the perspective and effect this circumstance has on a child rather than focusing solely on the social acceptability of the situation.

In other words, its ok for Hispanics to divorce now. Before, it was not uncommon to see an older Hispanic couple married since they were in their young teens and stay together for the rest of their lives. It was embedded in their culture! Now, it's ok to leave, it's ok to do what you believe is best. However, there is a need to recognize who this truly effects.

The unnamed protagonist in "DRIP" finds themselves in a difficult spot when having to deal with the overbearing pressure of not just conforming to the new family unit but to the changes in the dynamic, especially with the mindset of the traditional household being shattered by the intrusion of a new adult figure. The impression left on the child's mind becomes the main focus and the use of repetition in the story is meant to symbolize the never ending cycle of regret and animosity felt by the narrator, the ever growing intensity of emotions they are too young to understand, yet understand well enough to know that what they are feeling shouldn't be undermined by others. The final scene in which they look back is the total acceptance of their failure to secure what was rightfully theirs, a complete family, and shows the willingness to put one's happiness over conformity to an uncomfortable situation; which many in a toxic household would subjugate themselves to for the sake of saving face and keeping their familial problem to a bearable, yet deplorable level of "serenity".

Following this story comes "Three Teachers", a story based on a first-year college students trip across the country to see their family. Though I was not a first generation college graduate, I was the second person in my family to not only pursue a degree outside the state of Texas, but the first to do so on a football scholarship. This allowed for me to see a multitude of both cultural and idealistic normality that isn't synonymous with the Rio Grande Valley and the

Hispanic community. Instead, I found myself learning that there is more to life than just following a cultural block.

Comfortability is the biggest issue when leaving our cultural bubble and often leads to people returning to the Valley after a few months or years gone due to culture shock or home sickness. It revolves around the idea that you are only okay with what you know. After earning my Associates Degree during my high school years, I found myself sticking through my two years of undergrad in order to not only make my family proud, but break the stigma that we must always return to what we know, the easiest life to live is one we are already familiar with.

In this story, the protagonist is a homesick college student who is also observant of their surroundings and the people who make up this atmosphere they must endure during the ride home. Through the eyes of someone who is trying to gain knowledge in the traditional sense, we also see the lessons that come from observing and learning from the mistakes of others. As the protagonist inches closer and closer to home, he finds himself closer and closer to the undeniable truth, at least through his perspective. With each lesson comes personal growth that correlates to life skills that may not seem like newfound knowledge or groundbreaking in any way, but to this budding adult it is essential to become self-aware of the important aspects of life. Aspects that, when put into perspective, play a larger than life role in the social emotional development of oneself and may not always be apparent when having the same ideologies pushed upon you by your own kin. Ideologies that may be faulty, by no fault of their own, but lost in translation as the generational gap expands and time continues its endless march forward; bringing forth the open-mindedness and shifted perspective of the newer generation.

One of the biggest influences for the deviated thought process actually came from one of my favorite films, *Forrest Gump*. Forrest is a mentally challenged individual with a troubled

background that included bullying, being looked down upon for his intelligence (or lack thereof), and consistently chasing after a girl who may never love him. All that plus his upbringing in rural Alabama during the late 50's early 60's. Forrest had everything plotted against him yet even with all of these factors surrounding him he was able to go to college, join the military, unknowingly becoming a civil rights activist, and even having a family of his own. He could have easily conformed to the segregated and closed minded nature of the deep South, but instead he broke all the norms of his societal upbringing and made those who surrounded him and every community he visited better off for knowing him. Though he is a fictional character, his break from societal norms influenced those around him in a positive manner and in turn, created a better world of understanding and gratitude.

Again, this is all to highlight the importance of understanding oneself and becoming one's own person. Someone who has individualized goals, perspectives, and ideologies that do not necessarily mirror that of their ancestors, but instead modifies it in a manner that fits the social shift and leaves room for growth. Highlighting the lesson of "deviation", it does not always necessarily mean deviating for the wrong reasons. Instead, it is meant to highlight the benefits of deviation and being able to become self-reliant and self-sustaining.

The final story in this section is called "How to Lose It All", modeled after a step by step directory that one may find in recipe or self-help books. This story shifts ever so slightly from the cultural aspect and focuses more on the modern worries of an average teen/young adult attempting to navigate life after a hard break up. Again, a highlight of some of the luxuries the new generation is afforded due to their lifestyle. We as a young generation of Hispanics can worry about trivial things like relationships because we truly have minimal worries outside of our social lives. We go to school, hang out with friends, and allot much of our time towards

social media and other platforms that connect us more to others, and yet we are still isolated as a generation. We are, on average, socially inept and unable to process many of our emotions. Most of the times we are told to “just get over it” and “move on”, because that was what was the commonality back in the old days. The older generation didn’t have time to worry about trivial matters because they were too busy working to support their families at such a young age. This story was written with the idea that someone who may not know how to deal with their own stresses or social-emotional matters could read and follow along in a manner that helps lead them in the right direction.

I am in no saying this story is a one size fits all for every situation, as a matter of fact, this particular story is situationally specific but it guides the reader in a manner that most younger audiences can understand and relate to. We want to be told what to do because, for the most part, we were never given examples on how to tackle these emotions and situations. We are observational learners; we need to see something at least once before we can learn from it or at least copy the adaptations we picked up from it. I decided to close the section with this story because I strongly believe that it is the portion that is most representative of how far we have fallen from the traditional path set by our ancestors. We can’t handle everything on our own, and we truly do not know everything. But, with the proper guidance and understanding, we can be successful in our execution of this game of life. We just need that initial spark or push in the right direction.

### **Part 3: Acceptance**

The third and final section of my creative thesis incorporates the idea of acceptance. Acceptance is a holistic human approach to what they try to achieve throughout their lives. We desperately want to be accepted by others, it’s in our nature. Hispanic cultured individuals often

seek this acceptance from their elders and family members. They want to embrace their heritage whole heartedly without being judged for the fact that many of the newer generation of Hispanics are lacking in certain areas of appeal to the older generation.

Language gaps and barriers are the most common of these issues. When we as Hispanics cannot speak proper Spanish or speak it too “mocho” or cut up, we are chastised by those who can speak Spanish fluently. Often, the ostracizer often follows this with comments such as “Are you even Mexican?” or calling someone a “No sabo” kid, a term that is being thrown around more and more frequently to ridicule those who cannot speak the language well or at all. Or even vice-versa, when a Spanish speaking Hispanic struggles with their English pronunciation of words they too are ridiculed for not being able to speak “American”.

In a call back to my earlier inclusion of Americo Paredes, he did an excellent job in highlighting the vernacular used by the “Mexico-Texan”.

“If he cross the reever, eet ees just as bad,

On high poleeshed Spanish he break up his had,

American customes those people no like,

They hate that Miguel they should call him El Mike” (Paredes, *Between Two Worlds*).

The use of the dialect spoken, and the dramatized written expression exaggerates the way non-native English speakers may talk on this side of the border and of course there is that barrier that comes with developing new language skills and the overall language acquisition is a difficult barrier to overcome. Paredes does well on himself to highlight the difficulty that Hispanics face not just socially but linguistically overall and tackles both issues in one single poem.

In contrast to Paredes' poem, I use the Spanish language as the authenticator for my narrator's voice. I want to move beyond the dialect and stereotypical accents and emphasize the importance of language and how the differentiation of use, especially in Spanish speaking cultures, adds to the identity rather than just grouping all Hispanics under one umbrella. Language is the key to a strong voice and my use of Spanish throughout my text is aimed to authenticate my experiences and my writings, rather than conforming to a solely English form of writing.

We often find ourselves having to prove to our elders that we are Mexican "enough" to carry that title with us and embrace our culture. It's almost as if we are the stain on which this culture blames most of its issues on. We cannot be integrated into the culture because we are not well versed enough in it to matter. Yet, we are the next generation of Hispanics. What happens to the culture and the direction it takes depends on a multitude of variables that live and die with each passing birth and death of a generation.

I introduce this state of unworthiness and change in my first story for this section entitled "Trial Run". Being the first born in my family's line of grandchildren, I was often viewed as the trial and error child. What worked and didn't work with parenting that awaited my own cousins all depended on the actions and reactions I had during this time period. Slowly but surely, my family was narrowing down what did and didn't work when raising a child such as myself. It became a trend that I noticed as I grew older. The belt whoopings and scolding began shifting by the time my third born cousin came around and a much softer tone was taken by my family. The endurance of said parentings transgressed into a more sympathetic and emotionally charged approach to child raising.

In “Trial Run”, the narrator recounts his early years growing up in a household in which all standards are placed solely on his shoulders and he must carry the weight of not only being the perfect child, but endure all the burdens that come with the title of first born. No mistakes, no failure, no excuses. Speaking by experience, I found that the voice of this character resembled much of my own and expressed the frustrations that come with having to be that all-encompassing child, the one that could do no wrong; not by their own accord but because systematically and realistically, they had no choice in the matter. That decision was already made for them. In stepping into this role, he has accepted his role in the family and will play the part to the best of his ability, willing to be what is expected for the betterment of his family.

Keeping with the theme of acceptance, I move on to the penultimate story in this collection, “Cowboy Identity Crisis”. A young rancher finds himself dealing with the yearly occurrence of breeding and delivering calves on the ranch, but it just so happens that this cow holds a special place in his heart and his upbringing. In keeping with what was taught to him by his own grandfather, he has taken over as the prime caretaker of the animals but must also learn to cope with his own anxieties on the unsure nature of this birth, the potential loss he may face, and his own inner battles with stepping into the boots as the new rancher.

The anxiety fueled existential crisis is only elevated as the birth is potentially going wrong and he must not only battle to keep his cows alive but keep himself from sinking deeper and deeper into the recesses of his own mind. The physical and mental battle he finds himself in signifies a sort of baptism by fire, being thrown into the fray and having to come to terms with one’s self as well as handling a stressful situation. Does one break under pressure? Or can they endure the pain just enough to come out the other end better than they were before? Questions that are consistently asked, these tough decisions must be made at some point. We will inherit

the wills of others. Eventually, we will have to find our own way in life, and we may not have anyone there to help. The best we can do is take what we've learned from ourselves and from our elders and incorporate that knowledge in any manner we see fit. Embrace yourself and embrace where you came from. After all, it's what makes us humans unique from one another.

The final story in the collection also happens to include the namesake included in the title of this creative thesis. For context, the term *fracasado* is a Spanish term meaning "failed or disgraced" and has become a synonymous nickname my family has dubbed upon me. I am the *vaquero fracasado*, or "failed cowboy", and I have endured this nickname for quite some time. I understand that it was given to me in jest: how could someone with little background in agriculture suddenly want to start their own ranch? This was the curveball I threw to my family and they ran with it. I hated the connotation carried with the name; it was almost as if they had doomed me to fail. However, over time it had become a term of endearment and I embraced the idea that, yes, though my knowledge may be limited at the moment, my passion has not waivered and I am willing to accept the burden of a name if it means that through that, I can gain the respect I ever so wanted.

The story itself focuses on a young man who returns from college and wants to begin working on his family's ranch as a rancher, even though he is met with the disapproval and scowls from others. He is given the name *ranchero fracasado* by his family and is consistently made fun of in his attempts to pursue a passion of his. Think *Matilda*, but erase the powers and replace the conniving, inept parents with a criticizing family that continuously questions and undermines any ambitions that do not fall in line with the expectations they were previously self-established in their own minds. He is often misled and set up by his family members for failure and is again met with reminders that he is nothing more than a failed rancher. When a joke gone



wrong turns into a battle with a feral coyote, he must come to terms with his own identity and prove that he is more than just a name. In a last ditch effort, he rolls the dice in a battle for his life, not allowing this to become another reason for disapproval and in turn embraces the idea of being a vaquero fracasado, accepting the name as a term of endearment rather than allowing it to negatively affect him. His final words, though few, speak volumes to who he is meant to become and finally taking control of the life that is rightfully his.

Overall, though the tales may vary in their approach to storytelling, I believe each encompasses the idea that we are not bound by our heritage. From the embedded Spanish dialogue in “Freedom Floater”, to the vaquero focused “Chasing the Wind”, I wanted each story to reflect the internal conflict of each character and how their environment influences their overall growth as individuals, while paying respect to the cultural aspect of the stories. Each story, though isolated, carries itself in a manner that delivers the final theme of this project. Highlighting each aspect of the differing ideologies of each generation, analyzing the stark contrasts between them, and slowly learning from them and adapting them in a manner that best suits the individual. In separating these stories into three sections, I am able to isolate the connecting themes in a manner that is both meaningful and sensible. In turn, giving my audience insight to the differing nature of each generation while still being able to highlight the highs and lows that follow.

There is always room for argument, as well as room for improvement. No one generation of Hispanics has ever been able to have the all-encompassing ideals that satisfy everyone’s social and generational expectations, and there never will be. Our circumstances shift our perspectives and as we continuously grow and learn between the generations, we come closer and closer to understanding one another, even if we may not always agree. At the end of the day, we are one

heritage, one group, one family. Though our ideals may differ, our stories will always be interconnected. This creative thesis is my first step in connecting these ideals and reaching out to those who may be dealing with similar issues. The stones have been casted; the decisions have been made. Conform or reform, the choice is yours.

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## APPENDIX

## PART ONE: INDUCTION

## CHAPTER TWO

### Freedom Floater

*El amor de una madre es más profundo que cualquier río, se extiende más allá del cielo y siempre perdura en la vida de todos aquellos con los que se encuentra.*

2000 Pesos, that's all he said it would take. Coyote. That's what they called him, the others and I couldn't get on a first name basis, plus it didn't matter to me. We had so many questions to ask. How much longer until we get there? Where's our water? Will we survive this crossing? At this point I couldn't turn back. We had already traveled 17 hours from Guanajuato and were just outside the border of Ciudad Juarez in Chihuahua, Mexico. I lay my head back down on the splintered bed of the trailer hitch, hands covering my swollen belly. I attempted not to kick one of the other crossers as the truck made its way down the rocky desert road.

There were seven of us in total, three women no older than 35, an elderly woman in her mid-sixties who swore her son would be waiting for her on the other side, two young men who were looking for decent work, and me; a twenty-year-old pregnant mother just looking for a way out.

There wasn't much to see except for the hay stacked over us, just hallowed out enough for us to lay down sideways. I was constantly trying to keep the tufts of hay from falling on my face every time we hit a bump, but after the first two hours, I just decided to give up. My back ached from the drive and I was nauseated from the heat. Sleep came in cycles, maybe a small 10-

minute nap every hour or so, I was too worried to get some decent rest honestly. To my right was one of the young men, Juan I think, and to my left, the elderly woman Estella.

Estella would constantly yammer on to either herself or others in the hitch.

“Hay mi hijo ya me –sta esperando en Laredo, yo se que me va a ayudar, es un abogado y si ustedes necessitan ayuda nomas preguntan me cuando llegamos.”

We honestly didn’t care. I tried to avoid any conversation with anyone. I just wanted me and my baby to get somewhere safe, away from this...away from him.

The abrupt stop of the truck made everyone on the hitch slide forward just to resettle in our original positions.

“Mierda, nos encontraron los pinches federales!” said Juan.

I could feel my heartbeat leaping out of my chest.

Not here, I thought to myself, the feds couldn’t catch us out here. We’re so close!

“Horale, apurensen!”

Coyote. Why is he calling out to us? Why did we stop? Who’s out there?

My body went stiff, a sharp pain shot through my abdomen. I didn’t want to go back; I couldn’t go back. The sound of gravel shifting grew louder as someone approached the hitch. You could hear the grunting of men as the bails above us slowly began plopping onto the desert ground. The one right above my face was moved and I could only see the silhouette of a man, the starry night sky outlining the shape of his head. A bright light was flashed on my face and I was almost certain los federales had caught us.

“Salte!” said Coyote.

I let out a sigh of relief. For some reason the voice of a narco was actually music to my ears.

The rest of the group were soon pulled out from the hay cave. I walked around the truck and surveyed the area, only to see the headlights focusing on a small, beaten, wooden shed with chipped red paint and a half built roof. In the distance, Ciudad Juarez. Coyote congratulated us on making it this far without dying or giving him a hard time. I was confused on why it was that we were still on this side of the border.

“Yo pense que nos ibas a llevar asta los Estados Unidos.” I told Coyote.

He looked at us and told us that plans had changed.

“Miran aya!” he commanded.

When we turned around, we could see the lights from Ciudad Juarez. The city looked peaceful for a moment, almost suspended in time.

**BANG! BANG! BANG!**

Red tracer shots and muzzle flashes began going off in the distance, the smell of gunpowder carried towards us, riding the dry breeze of the night. My heart dropped, knowing well that someone is at the receiving end of those bullets. I ached for the people who must deal with this every day and night. Living in fear of whether or not your husband, mother, or child would make it home. The fear of not knowing if armed men in masks would march into your home and hold your family at gunpoint until you give them what they want. A life of fear is not a life worth living.



“Los Carteles decidieron a tener una fiesta y ahora el puente esta cerrado por tres dias. Nadien cruza de ningun lado.” said coyote.

The bridge we were supposed to take was now closed for the next few days due to elevated levels of cartel violence, but Coyote said there wasn't time to waste. If we didn't cross the border by tomorrow afternoon, our escort on the other side was told to abandon us. Coyote told us to sleep in the shed for a few hours, and we were to cross the river at dawn.

The inside of the shed was nearly empty, except for a few tattered and torn blankets. No beds, no sofa, no commodities, nothing to separate us from the cold, wooden floorboards. The walls were warped at odd angles and dry rot was setting in on one of the walls. The moon shining through the broken ceiling was our only source of light. I tugged on a torn piece of blanket and rolled it up into a makeshift pillow to rest my head on.

I was never too fond of sleeping on my back, but I'd rather live with the discomfort than have one of these people accidently hit me in the stomach. As the two men began snoring, and even some of the women too, I could feel my chest tightening with every breathe. I paid to get across but I never thought I would ever have to cross the Rio Grande. I heard stories when I was younger about my uncle who tried to cross the border. We never heard from him again. My mother would always tell me how, on a good day, the river's undertow was enough to drag down a large group of people. We just assumed it did the same to my uncle.

When I slightly tilted my head to the right, I was met with the gaze of Estella. Her brown cocoa eyes glaring back into mine. She raised her silver eyebrow and asked “Porque una nina tan hermosa como tu quiere cruzar a los Estados Unidos?”

I looked up to the ceiling; with a deep breath and a sigh, I told Estella everything.

I grew up in San Ignacio with my mother and alcoholic of a father. My father was out of work most of the time and my mother got us through hard times by selling jewelry and empanadas in our community. My father would beat my mother constantly and when he would look to me, she would always find a way to turn his attention back to her. I was too poor to attend a university when I was 18 so I decided to run away. I begged my mother to come with me but she stayed out of fear. Fear that my father would track us down and do much worse than beat us.

So, I took the next bus from San Ignacio to Guanajuato, where I looked for work upon arrival. After two weeks with no food, barely enough to drink, and down to my last 10 pesos, at one point I was close to resorting to prostitution. I found myself sleeping on park benches, stealing food from the local markets, and even begging on the side of the road with a sign that read “Will work for food”.

That’s when he found me, Jose DeRoman Torres. I was on a curb side, my sign slowly deteriorating from the morning storm. My hair was tangled mess of black vines and my clothes stuck to my body at unflattering angles. In the distance, I could hear the sound of boots clicking on the pavement. I looked up slowly to see the thick, brown, cow hide leather boots belonging to Jose. The boots were intricately stitched with golden lacing. The jagged head of a rattlesnake was beautifully embroidered onto the front side of the boot leaving about a quarter inch of space between the snake and the squared off boot tip. The rest of the serpent’s body wrapped itself around the shaft of the boot.

His blue jeans were tucked into his boot shafts and had a whitish tint to them. His black leather belt held was held together by a four-inch golden buckle with the words “Moriré En Mis Términos” engraved into it. The sleeves of his blue and black plaid shirt were rolled up to his

elbows, revealing on his right arm a tattooed sleeve of La Santa Muerte and on his left arm a leather strapped Nautica watch with silver plating on the numbers.

The top portion of his face was covered by a black straw cowboy hat, leaving only his crooked smile and five o'clock shadow visible to me. As he tipped his hat up, I could see the rugged edges of his cheek bones jutting out like cliffs on opposite sides of his face. His eyebrows were clean and kept and his eyes were snake-like, small and brown but as sharp as knives. When he looked at me, I didn't know if I should've been scared or entangled by his beauty. When he spoke however, his voice carried itself like a choir of angels. He was soft-spoken and each word was melodically connected to one another. I felt my heart drop when he said, "Hola preciosa, como te llamas?"

"Yazmin," I responded.

He took me by the hand and offered me a place to stay for the night. One night turned into two, two turned into a week, and a week turned into months as I felt myself falling deeper in love with this man. For the first year, I was genuinely happy. He would take me on trips to places like Costa Rica, Belize, and Cancun. He gave me gorgeous pieces of jewelry: black diamond earrings, pearl necklaces, and golden watches. My clothes were all designer, Gucci, Prada, Vera Wang, you name it.

After our first year together, things started changing. Jose began to act sporadic. He would drink all day, at night he would peer out through the windows, and he even started carrying a pistol with him everywhere we went.

"No te preocupes mi amor. Nomás es por protección," he would tell me.

I was too afraid to ask what we needed protecting from. Jose had told me his fortune came from his father's investments with Mexican and American oil companies. It seemed to be none of my business to intrude on the family's economic problems, so I never made it an issue to go deeper into detail.

Jose's drinking got worse as the year passed by. He became less passionate and more abusive towards me. The first time he ever struck me was when he had been doing his nightly routines; checking out window by window, gun in hand. I made my way toward him in the living room. I called out to him but he just told me to go back to the room. The empty bottle of tequila laid on top of the glass table next to him. I began to rub his shoulders, begging him to come to bed when all of a sudden he turned around and whipped me across the face with the pistol grip.

I knew what was happening, the same as my father. This went on for another year. He kept on his guard, always drinking. Some days he would beat me, other days he'd be too drunk to try. It wasn't until two weeks after my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday that I learned I was six weeks pregnant. It struck me that I didn't know if I was ready to be a mother. I saw what an abusive father could do firsthand and I didn't want the same for this child. I thought about abortion for a few weeks, but I couldn't find myself able to do it. I couldn't be like my mother. I had to run somewhere far enough that I could give my baby a fresh new start.

It took me about two months of looking to find someone that could get me into the United States. I walked into the dirtiest, sleaziest cantinas for information on anyone that could smuggle me. When those didn't work I went to clubs. I did everything in my power to find a person that could get me across. Coyote was a dark-skinned angel sent from heaven by the time I found him. Jose was at the point of no return. His alcoholism and anxiety had consumed him.

Two days later, while Jose was passed out drunk on our couch, I took 5,000 pesos from his safe and met with Coyote. He took his share of my money and packed me into the back of the flatbed hitch under the hay.

“Y asi es como llegue asta aqui,” I explained to Estella.

Estella nodded in understanding, and she explained to me how her son had made the very same trip we were on now. He knew Coyote well and was now living happily as a ranch hand in Colorado. Knowing that Coyote has been successful in his last crossings really raised my spirits. It was with that slight reassurance I was finally able to close my eyes and sleep.

When I opened my eyes a few hours later, it was still dark outside. One of the women had shaken me awake, and the others were already up and grabbing what little belongings they had brought with them. My vision was still blurry and my head was throbbing. It took me a few seconds to focus and wipe the crusty lagañas away. Coyote had given us each a small canteen of water to have on the hike ahead of us. The river was about a four-mile walk away from our campsite. We couldn't drive any further since the lights from the truck could bring some unwanted attention from U.S. Border Protection agents. It was all on foot from here.

We walked for about an hour and a half. During our excursion I couldn't stop myself from marveling at the cloudless night. Each star presented itself like tiny crystals as part of a bigger collection. The mountain ranges in the distance only added on to the beauty of nature, their rugged outlines perfectly embracing the warped skyline. About two and a half miles in is when Estella began to slow down. She was stopping continuously to drink from her canteen, which by now was almost completely empty. She would complain that her knees hurt and the gravel was making her slip. She wasn't wrong; the road in front of us was mostly composed of

loose gravel and large stones. Deadly scorpions, actual coyotes, and venomous snakes also mined the dessert surrounding us. One bad step, a piece of exposed flesh, or careless action could get us all caught or killed.

One of the men voted we leave Estella behind to fend for herself. She was only slowing us down and the first rays of sunlight were already peering over the horizon. No one agreed to his terms, but Coyote seemed a bit worried about our timing. He began to pressure us to move faster, since we still had about two hours to cover our trail before detection would become inevitable. Juan had Estella leaned into him and wrap her arm around his shoulder while he helped carry her the rest of the way. One of the three women carried her purse for her and I followed closely behind giving her water, as she needed it.

As we approached what seemed to be a divot in the road, I could hear the sound of rushing water. The salty stench pierced through my nostrils and that's when nausea hit. I heaved over and let out what little contents my stomach had, mostly water. While no one else seemed to mind the smell, I was left with this gut wrenching feeling after smelling that putrid river stench. We slowly made our way down the muddy slope; carefully miming Coyote's every move, putting our feet in small mounds he made with his heel just so we wouldn't slip. The woman in front of me stepped a little too far to her left and took a fifteen-foot tumble down to the riverbed.

She laid there motionless. Coyote jumped the remaining 5 feet to reach her. When the rest of us began to gather around her. She was breathing, but she had the wind knocked out of her and her eyes had a glossy coating to them. She was so confused she didn't even noticed the swelling in her ankle, which was already turning a shiny purple and could measure up to a small avocado.

Coyote looked around the area and sat us down near a small tree line near the river. We were told to stay out of sight while he and Juan escorted the hurt woman across and tested the river's current. Minutes passed and I began to worry that something might have happened to them, maybe the current was too strong or maybe they got caught and now were stranded by the border with no plan, no food, and no way of getting back to our homes. Just then Coyote and Juan emerged from the leaves, soaked from the chest down.

“El agua esta un poquito frio y el corriente esta un poco fuerte pero podemos cruzar sin problemas,” Coyote exclaimed. “Andale, todos atras de mi en fila.”

We all lined up behind Coyote. From his bag, he pulled out a ten-foot long, knotted rope and asked each one of us to get a hold of one of them. This would be our lifeline in the water; we were to follow Coyote's every move if we were to avoid being swept away by the undertow. Coyote looked at me for a second and looked down at my bump.

“El corriente esta muy fuerte para ti, pero cuando te metes vas a usar una llanta que encuentre por el agua y lo vas a usar para flotar en el agua.”

Coyote said the tire would help me float a little better in the water and made sure I was able to keep myself stable during the crossing. While everyone slowly waded into the rushing water I was last to get in while I slid into the tire and reached out for the rope. The water reached the bottom half of my chest and I could feel the current already tugging me away from the group. I placed my foot into a corner of stone at the bottom of the river and used it to anchor myself near the group. Estella, who was right in front of me, was barely able to keep her shoulders above the water. If the river were to get any deeper, she may not be able to stay afloat.

With a wave of his hand, Coyote gestured to the group to move forward and began pulling the group further into the river. There was about 800 feet separating us from the American side but trudging along the river was much harder than I expected. Keeping your eyes open was almost impossible; with each step the current would throw water into your eyes, constantly making you want to wipe your face. We could not allow ourselves to false step on the muddy floor, one bad step and you could be slipping under into the rivers clutches.

The current pulled at my feet, constantly sweeping heaps of mud from under my feet, making me misstep every now and then. Teamwork was key; if one of us failed to hold their ground against the weight of the waves then the whole group would be swept away. I could see the whites of my knuckles as I fastened my grip on the rope, the water already pruning my fingertips. It took us about five minutes just to make it halfway through the river. Mud was beginning to find its way into my shoes and began to weigh down every step I took.

Estella was panting as the water began to rise near her neck; everything except her head was submerged in the water. My hands were beginning to get sore from gripping onto the rope and I could feel my feet blistering from pushing against the current. The murky, brown water made it impossible to see anything below us, my legs and ankles were under constant attacks by stray branches, slimy fish that happened to have swam near me, and debris from garbage people had thrown into the river.

The rest of the group seemed to be faring well and continued to push towards the shore. I couldn't help myself from picturing the future that awaited me in America. Maybe I could find work in a diner, serving drinks at a bar, or even just in the fields like a lot of others who have made their way. Whatever it may be, it was only a mere 100 feet away from me. My baby would



be able to be born and raised as an American. He or she could have the best opportunity to succeed in life. Opportunity. That is all we needed.

20 feet away now, Coyote has climbed onto the shoreline and was now tethering his end of the rope to the trunk of a nearby tree. He began pulling the rest of us in. First, the two women, then Juan quickly follows behind and helps Coyote pull me Estella and the second man in. The second man climbed to shore but was too exhausted to help Juan and Coyote, he decides to lay on his back, panting and coughing up water.

10 feet! That's it! We're almost there!

"Ya mero Estell..." I was frozen mid-sentence when I saw Estella's head go under. Her hand suddenly disappearing from my view.

"Estella!" I yelled.

At that moment, something latched onto my leg and pulled me into the tire. Still holding the rope, my entire body is pulled below the water and I could make out Estella frantically clawing her way up my body. Her left hand holding onto my ankle as the right one attempts to reach out for something. Water began to fill my lungs as I gasped for air. I couldn't even reach out to her, I was too busy holding onto both the tire and the rope. As my vision began to fade, I could feel Estella's grip on my leg loosen. Darkness began to encircle my vision; all I remember was watching Estella be pulled away by the river, her hand still reaching out for help.

I felt myself become weightless, suspended in that one short moment. I felt a force pulling me from the water's grasp, hoisting me up and dragging me onto the shoreline. I turn myself over and begin coughing violently, my throat closing every time I attempted to take a breath. It was as if there was a jackhammer in my chest and coals being burned in my lungs. For

about five minutes, I stayed there on all fours just allowing my body to compose itself. Juan stayed by my side while Coyote hopelessly scanned for any signs of Estella's body. We all knew the truth.

When I finally regained some strength, Coyote led the rest of us through thickets and brush. We were told to stay low and not make a single sound, stay under the cover of the trees and look out for any monitors and sensors. It was almost impossible to stay silent when your wet clothes continuously splash and swish with every step you take but we carried on. After nearly 30 hours of traveling, trekking, and river crossing, we were met in a clearing with the sight of an eggshell white, unmarked van. The two front windows were so heavily tinted that you couldn't make out who the driver was; instead you were met with your own reflection. The back of the van was windowless and had no sort of indication or markings that would make it easily identifiable.

Coyote pulled the black handle and opened the two back doors for us. We were told to sit quiet and relax for the next four hours. The drivers would take us to Odessa and leave us at a home within an undisclosed neighborhood. Once there, we'd be given a meal and a place to stay for the night while they forge our new documents and passports. Then we would be left to fend for ourselves.

As Coyote continued to tell us the plan, the image of Estella continued to haunt me. I could only imagine what her son may think when she never arrives, the worry that will fall over him. The look on her face is etched into my memory. There was a small cut from where her nails were digging into my skin around the ankle, and there was even some bruising already forming.

“Suerte, y que se cuidan.” said Coyote as he closed the double doors.

He slapped the back of the van twice and there was a small stutter when the van began to take off. I looked around at everyone else; the woman who had fallen was looking at her surroundings confused at where we were. Juan was talking to the other man already talking about heading towards California to work in the fields. I rubbed my belly bump as tears began to well up in my eyes; I made it. I began to close my eyes and think of a new place to call home. Maybe out West? California?

Just as fast as I was able to relax my body was thrown forward as the van made an abrupt stop. We couldn't have traveled for more than 15 minutes. Everyone sat back down while Juan put his index fingers over his lips telling us to SHHH. There was the sudden sound of the front door slamming and what we assumed to be was our driver running away. Sirens began to whistle and wail through the van walls. I grab the woman sitting next to me and beg God not to do this to me. I beg him to have mercy; I just wanted a future.

There was a knock at the doors. I could hear the clicks of the locks opening up. The doors swung open and the only thing I saw was a bright flash of sunlight and a green man holding a rifle.

“Don't fucking move!”

## CHAPTER THREE

### Route 66-6

Listen, I tried telling your abuelo this story once, he didn't believe me either. I pleaded with him, even swore on my mami, but ese mendigo viejo never believed me. No one did. I told your momma too; your tios, tias, and cousins. To this day no one believes me. I know I'm a drunk, but at that time I was a young buck just struttin' my legs.

Ask anyone.

Anyways, that's not the reason I called you here, mijo, I wanted someone else to hear my story. My one hundred percent true story. And I ain't lyin' either! Screw whatever that viejito tells you.

This is what really happened.

It was the middle of an Idaho fall. Your abuelo and the rest of us were migrant workers, and we would travel the 2,000 miles every summer to work in the potato fields. Those Idaho potatoes are something else, y era una chinga. Your grandpa and grandma would work the fields everyday while the rest of us went to school in the morning. Then, in the afternoons we'd go and help in the fields along with them.

I was fast; you should've seen me the way I'd fly up and down the fields. I'd be the first one done picking and packing my row. But apa hated the way I did my job, he said I would miss

a lot of the potatoes or that I wouldn't take them out right or that I was just trying to be done so I can head home. He was just jealous.

Anyways, I'm getting off track. When we would go up there we would actually take a longer trip. Mom wanted to visit her family in Phoenix and we had a lot of primos over there. So, dad would take an extra week to make sure we got to visit them and then we'd cut up through Arizona, straight through Utah, and finish our trip just outside of Boise. This was a trip we had been making for 19 years, even longer for mom and dad since they had met when they were young in the fields up there.

Your grandpa was a drunk! And I mean a raging alcoholic! He would spend all night out in the cantinas, just washin' down the whiskies and tequilas all night. Worst of all, he would beat us and I mean damn good whoopin', the kind that would get CPS called on you nowadays! He could beat the brown off my skin with one arm while shootin' tequila in the other. We would get into fist fights with one another. Then again, it was the 80's. I'm pretty sure we weren't the only Mexican house dealing with that crap.

Well, let me tell you, one time it got really bad! I was 19 and grandpa ended up buying me my first truck so I could help out the family. You know, extra space for those long drives back down home to the valley. Now this was back in Idaho, dad went down to the car lot and paid for it in cash! It was a little on the older side but it was niiiiice! 1974 Ford F-100 Ranger with a short bed. That 360 CID FE V8 engine made that baby run purty! I remember the all-white body with a nice red trim running on both sides of the truck. I even named her "La Bonnie" porque esta bien BONITA! I would spend a lot of time washing her after working in the fields, making sure the I could see my face in the rims, and even touching up any dirt stains that

would fall on her while I was out. I picked up all the hot babes in Boise with that truck! I was the talk of the town! Well, at least I was... until your grandpa fue y lo cago gacho!

We bought that truck back in August of '82, and by October of that year me lo quito! He just took it away for no reason! And we got into it. Oh, we got into it real good. El vato, he went out drinking one night. Your grandma waited up for him like she always did and I waited up too because I wanted to talk him into giving me Bonnie back. We waited for a bit, usually the cantinas closed around 2 but sometimes it would take Dad a while to find his way back home. So I waited up with Mom for a while. I remember that night so well because the neighbor's dog didn't bark. He always barked, for any little reason. If a mouse farted, he'd bark. If the moon moved too slow, he'd bark. If the clouds were moving too loudly, guess what? That mutt would bark! He never shut up, never. I spent more nights trying to fall asleep because of him than actually sleeping. But that night, mira, not a peep.

I thought it was weird, and I took it as a sign from God that maybe Dad wouldn't come home drunk tonight. Maybe he'd come home and hug me and Mom, bring her flowers and tell me "Here you go, mijo. I'm sorry I took your truck away. I was wrong."

Shit, was I wrong. Dad was so pissed off drunk when he got home. He stumbled through the door, red faced drunk, still holding the empty beer bottle in his left hand. Mom had asked him, like she always did, "Ay Jose, where have you been this whole time?" and he would reply just like always. "Pos en la cantina! Where else do you want me to be! I work! I sweat! I get estressed too! The least I deserve is a little drink in the night. Mendiga vieja."

I tried to stay out of it, I was always told as a kid to let the adults handle their business. Thing was, I wasn't a kid anymore. I thought since I was 19 I can get involved in this too. Dad

kept yelling at Mom for a whole ten minutes about how worthless she was and how he was the only one who really worked in the house. All I did was stand next to your grandma while all this was happening. I never said a word. I should have, but I never did.

“And you,” he said staring straight at me, “you lazy, good for nothing, selfish little boy! You think you deserve the truck that’s outside? That’s my truck! I bought it with MY money! With all the time I spend working! I deserve that truck, pero noooo. Your mami said to buy you a truck so you can “help” but what good are you to me!? You don’t give me money! You don’t buy food! What do you waste your money on then!? Those little perras you take out on dates!? Chingao, ni que fueras tan guapo!”

Oh, dad tore into me that night. He tried ripping me a new one, but this time, this time I didn’t take that crap. I didn’t mean for it to start the way it did, but I ended up squaring up to your grandpa. I puffed out my chest as big as I could, really sizing up to him, and I told him “You think I’m worthless?! You’re the one that comes home drunk every single night! Estas mas en la peda que en tu casa! Mom stays up worried sick about your drunk ass when in reality she doesn’t need you. You’re pathetic. Eres inutil. Waste of space and a piece of crap dad on top of that!”

That’s when he swung.

I didn’t even see it comin’. His left hand swung so fast I barely had enough time to flinch before the butt of the bottle hit me right on the side of my head. It’s not like the movies, when they swing those bottles, they don’t always break. And man, did it hurt like Hell. I reached for my temple and I already had a lump the size of one of those little Cutie oranges. So I did the only thing I could do, I tackled his drunk ass to the ground.

We struggled on the ground, wrestling, I thought I could take him but your grandpa was a strong man. He was an even stronger drunk. I tried pinning him down by putting my knees on his body but he was able to push me off with his legs and the next thing I knew I was on my back and he was back up walking straight towards me. He picked me up by my shirt collar and started slapping me across the face. Each word in rhythm with his next hit.

“Don’t – you – dare – talk – to – me – like – that – again – you – ungrateful – worm!”

By the time he was done with me, my cheeks were glossy red and swollen. I could feel the heat race through my face and there was this high-pitched ringing in my ears. I couldn’t even make out what my mom was trying to say. I just remember seeing her plead with her hands clasped together and the tears falling from my face. Your mom and your tio and tias were awake by this time too.

“Get your crap and go home. Since you’re such a man here,” your grandpa said while tossing me the keys to Bonnie. “Take the damn truck and find your way back to the Valley, we don’t need you here anymore. Largate!”

So I did.

I packed what little I took for the few months of work, a few old t shirts, my jeans and the two pairs of shorts I owned and I made my way outside. I kissed your grandma on the head and drove off. Grandpa couldn’t care less. He was already asleep. So I drove off and by the time I was on the road it was about 3:30 a.m. I knew I wasn’t going to be able to make that 28-hour trip on a few hours of sleep so I decided to pull into a gas station about 50 miles outside of our campamento and slept in the truck like the other trailers. Only difference is I barely had enough



money to get me back home and I didn't even know where to start the trip. I decided that would be a morning problem and I dozed off.

I woke up that same morning around 10:45, and went into the gas station to wash up. I just rinsed my face in the dirty sink with some soap and used a stick of Wrigley's and some water as my mouthwash. I wasn't much of a coffee drinker, still ain't to this day, but I bought me the biggest damn cup they had because I was damn sure gonna make that whole drive in one night. Now that was ambitious of me to try and take on, especially since I had no idea where to go, but my mind was made up and I had to take a chance. I started by looking at some of the license plates the trailers had on their rigs. I was hoping to find one from Texas that could hopefully lead me back at least across state lines. The closest I found was a man from New Mexico.

He had a long white beard, at least long enough to tickle the top of his belly button. He was a gringo and that bald head of his carried years of knowledge navigating across US interstates. He wore blue jean pull overs on top of his yellow pinned stripe flannel and he wore some army combat boots laced all the way up to his shins. I decided he would be my best bet for directions so I waved him down as he made his way into the store. I asked him if he knew about getting back to Texas, at least there I can find my way back down south.

"Now what's a boy like you doin' tryna drive all the way down to Texas for?" he asked me.

I was too ashamed to tell him the truth with my dad, so I lied and said I had a job waiting for me back in Texas and I needed to get there in the next two days. He eyed me up and down, knowing damn well I was lying, but he helped me anyways.

“I tell ya what,” he said, “I’m taking this here load down to Salt Lake City, if ya follow me down there for the next few hours, I can tell ya which exit to take.”

I was excited to just get at least some directions to get my ass back down south! I shook his wrinkled, callused hands and got ready to jump into my truck when he suddenly tightened his grip. I looked back at the old man to see his sharp baby blue eyes piercing through my sunglasses.

“Listen boy, when we enter Salt Lake you’re gonna have to exit off the highway and head South towards Monticello, Utah. When you get to Monticello, you’re going to merge onto US Route 666 and that should take you all the way to New Mexico. From there you’re on your own kid, I’ve heard from a lot of truckers about some weird shit that goes on down there. They call it the “Devil’s Highway” for a reason. Just promise you’re gonna drive real careful like headed down that way.” he told me coldly.

I just nodded my head and agreed with whatever the old man said. Ghost, aliens, devils, I didn’t believe in any of that crap. I just wanted to get home and enjoy my time away from the family. To this day I wish I would’ve listened to him just a little more.

Fast forward to about five hours later, I followed that trucker down to Salt Lake City and headed down to Monticello. I still had half the coffee I bought back outside of Boise and a few sticks of beef jerky that I thought would hold me over until dinner. Nearing the exit south, the old man honked his truck horn a few times, I waved him off and we went our separate ways. To this day I’m still grateful for that man’s help. He’s the only reason I didn’t end up dead halfway in the middle of nowhere. At least, I’m grateful that I didn’t die halfway in the middle of nowhere.

Down the drive to Monticello, I had to make sure I drove at least a little slower than usual. See, headed south you start making your way down the side of the Wasatch Mountains. It's the most beautiful view you can ever see. The sunlight kisses over the mountain top in this nice orange flare color and the mountains look like a deep gray with their deep rocky sides. Man, driving downhill sucks. You're stuck on the outer lane and every time you look to your right all you see is your thousand foot drop just calling out to you. One quick twitch, one bad gear, a tire bust, or even a hard sneeze would send you right over the rails. I could feel my hands getting more and more moist with sweat, I felt my stomach in my throat and I even thought about just stopping at the next town and just head back up. But I was too stubborn to do that mijo. I was too stubborn for my own good. What really got me was when this huge semi took over most of the road. I was so close to the edge; I could feel the paint on my truck stripping near the rail. Now that pissed me off, so I floored it and got the Hell down as fast as I possibly could. The worst part is I still had one more mountain side to go after Monticello. By that time, it was going to be pitch black.

Nightfall came around 8:45, and the shadows were dancing in the distance, just outside my high beams. This part of the drive started getting to me. I was tired, but I wanted to at least get Route 666 out of the way and then stop in Gallup to get some shut eye. Then the plan was to steam roll my way straight down to the valley. That would take me about 16 hours of solid driving.

Little did I know, I'd be home a lot sooner than I thought.

I pulled into Monticello a little later than I was hoping, around 11:45 p.m., only because I stopped for a burger and a shake halfway through my drive. That shake was so good that I went ahead and ordered me a second one for the road! Man, it really hit the spot. Anyways, I gassed

up in Monticello and made sure my truck was as full as it could be. This was back when the price of oil kept going up, not like today though. I paid about a buck twenty a gallon and filled up with about 20 dollars. Route 666 was about 200 miles long and my tank should be able to take me across no problem, if I didn't drive too fast and stayed steady on the gas. Between Utah and Colorado, I'd have a few stops to make if I needed gas but most smaller stations would be closed. So I made sure I was good to go. Once I got into the last stretch between Colorado and New Mexico, I wouldn't see another gas station until Gallup. Let's say about 145 miles of empty land between me and the road.

Luck had me driving down Route 666 at exactly midnight. The full moon just happened to be out and from the top of the Utah mountains it looked like a giant white cotton ball in the sky. It was so bright and not a single cloud in the sky was there to ruin the view. I could even turn off my high beams and still have enough light to drive in peace. I didn't do that though. I remember rolling down my windows and shutting off my AC while blasting Bohemian Rhapsody as I made my way down The Devil's Highway. I was flying at a cool 75 miles an hour and the thick smell of gasoline, mixed in with the dew of the mountain breeze made for a natural air freshener. If I could bottle that smell up and make a candle, I guarantee I'd be a millionaire right now!

The first thirty minutes on the Route were pretty uneventful. I saw a few goats running across the mountain side, kinda like the ones you're raising right now. Just these huge horned goats, chasing tail all night. The highway was pretty lonely, and I had only seen one car for those first thirty some minutes I was driving, and man were they hauling ass. I passed a few small cities. Their dim lights were just bright enough to make out the building outlines but nothing major. I was honestly starting to get some confidence in my driving until I started thinking about

that old trailer and how he had warned me about driving down that stretch of road. I started thinking he was just full of it and just wanted to scare me out of the drive. Man, sometimes I wish it was just that.

Not too long after I had that thought, I saw a bright white light creep up behind me through my rear view mirror. It started small, just a few dots in the distance but then they started growing and growing and growing until the beams of this double wide eighteen wheeler damn near blinded me. I could barely see with the glare and I could feel my suspension starting to rumble. The shaking was so bad that my steering wheel was trying to lock up on my so, out of blind judgement, I kept right and slowed down to a crawl. That semi drove by so fast he picked up all the dust from the ground and blew it straight into my truck. I could barely see or breathe through the thick cloud and I could feel little pricks from where the pebbles were being launched back at me. I could tell by the sound of the rocks banging against my truck that I was going to have to repaint in some areas.

“Hijo de tu mama!” I yelled out.

When everything settled and my eyes were finally able to focus I was about fifteen feet off the curb of the road and about 50 feet away from a small cliff top that lead about fifteen feet down into a flowing river. Jesus Christ that was a close one. I got off to check out to see if there were any damages to my truck. I was right about the paint being chipped off, other than that nothing major. My steering wheel did shift though, now the Ford logo on the wheel sloped down at an angle, so now my steering wheel looked like it was turning right even though my tires were straight. Just a slight misalignment, I thought I could deal with it later. I hopped back in and turned back onto the main road.

Now I had my eyes glued on the road, and I was starting to get a little antsy with the possibility of another crazy mother trucker coming down the highway trying to rear end me or worse, kill me. Whatever thoughts of sleep I might have had were now gone.

Don't think I was scared... yet.

At that point my blood was just boiling because that idiota ruined my paint job and he hurt my Bonnie! I was starting to get over it once I crossed into the Colorado mountains. There was just something about seeing the world at night, the peace and calm that you feel while the warm wind blows through the vehicle while you're driving down an empty highway. The feeling was pure bliss, not a single worry dragging me down. No dad to tell me what to do and nobody making me act right. Bliss.

My bladder wasn't agreeing with me though, so I went ahead and pulled off to the side of the road. I was still heading down the mountains at this point, and there just so happened to be a scenic ledge just around one of the road bends. By this time, I had already been driving down 666 for about an hour and fifteen minutes. The ledge was overlooking a small break in the mountain range that settle in a small valley. With the moon you could see the water rolling down stream and you could hear the leaves whistling in the wind. I got as close to the edge as the guard rail would let me. I hadn't seen a car since Utah and definitely didn't see any lights coming from any direction so I did what any mature, 19-year-old, testosterone-fueled man would do and I peed over the guard rail. I had been holding it for so long I felt like my guts were gonna blow. I just watched the stream flow down the cliff edge. I stood there for a second, just enough time to zip up my jeans and admire my work when I heard the hum of a small engine roll by. A small car, never did see the model, rolled by downhill but that wasn't what bugged me. When the lights flashed, just for a quick second, I saw death staring back at me.

She was hanging over the edge of the cliff with an effortless grip on the rocky edge. Dressed all in black and the only thing I saw was her face. She was pale, big dark sunken eyes, with her hair winding like a wig made of snakes. Her hands gripped the cliff rocks and her nails were like needles. She reached out for me, she wanted to scratch my face, take my eyes out. I fell backwards with my pants around my knees, I rolled on my stomach and tried to pick them back up. I jumped to my feet and slid across my hood like Bo Duke from “The Dukes of Hazard” and got in Bonnie and drove away. My tires threw up a cloud of dust and debris when I peeled out. I even cut off a van that was heading down the same road.

I felt my heart pounding in my chest and my hands were shaking so hard I could barely stay between the lanes. Slowly, I made my way down the winding road. Every few seconds or so I would look over my shoulder, trying to make sure she wasn’t following me. I could feel my blood pounding against my veins and I could feel my stomach in my throat. Even trying to convince myself that she wasn’t even there didn’t work. I know what I saw and I know she saw me too.

Your grandma always taught us growing up that if we ever felt the Devil was trying to consume us, to pray to the Lord in order to keep him away. I never believed in God, but that night made me a Christian in an instant!

“God that if I got home safely I’ll call that viejo, estúpido and make up with him. I’ll tell my mom how much I love her. I’ll even hang out with my sisters more. I just want to get home!” I said to myself.

Never in my life had I felt the urge to pray, Mom was a God fearing, church-going woman who prayed over us and also prayed every morning and every night. She would pray

before every meal and prayed when we were sick, hurt, or in a tough bind. Prayer was her go to for everything, hell, prayer seemed to work for her better than Tylenol for a headache. I never had the urge to pray, never had the drive to go to church. I did believe in God; I just didn't think he would pay attention to a man like me. If God was really watching over me, I wouldn't be under the same roof as that man. If God really cared, I wouldn't be on route 666 alone at 1:30 a.m., I wouldn't be getting chased down off the road by a damned troquero, and I definitely would not have had an encounter with Death if God ever cared about me. My prayers were falling on deaf ears, at least up until that point. Sometimes looking back, I think someone was listening... maybe... just maybe...

I found myself at a 24 hour 7/11. We didn't have energy drinks like you all do now days. Back then, you were at the mercy of whoever was making the coffee and whether or not they had that magic touch. I bought myself two of the biggest cups they had, no lids so I made sure to sip both just below the rim. Whoever that old lady behind the counter was did not have that magic touch, and it was like drinking hot water that got filtered through top soil. The bitterness stayed on my tongue after every sip, but it was strong enough to keep me going. This 7/11 would be the last stop before I hit Gallup in about an hour and a half. No need to fill up at that point, I was still pretty good on gas.

This last stretch of road to me was definitely the part that separated the boys from the men and to be honest after that drive, I wasn't even ashamed to call myself a boy. I got back onto the main road and continued my way South. The funny thing about New Mexico and the desert in general is that there's nothing to see yet everything to see at the same time. You're talking miles and miles of the same rock formations in the distance, giant boulders just sitting out in the middle of nowhere, the cloudless sky giving off the light of the moon, and even the stars looked



like they were marking a path for me. I would see the occasional tumbleweed fly across the road. I would jump out of my seat any time they would run through the road. I couldn't get the thought of what I saw back on the cliff out of my head. It also didn't help that those damn tumbleweeds looked like little kids running across the desert road! There shouldn't be anyone out here!

I thought I was losing my mind. By that point I swore there was someone, something, after me. Something was following me and didn't stop, I could feel this uneasy presence like if someone wrapped me in a frozen towel. I could feel chills running down my back and at one point I even started shivering. But the crisp night air of the desert couldn't do that to me, there's just no way it was the breeze. Even though my truck was a two seater, it felt like I had someone staring right at the back of my head. I could feel their eyes burning holes into my scalp, their cold breath just barely touching the back of my neck, their long boney fingers making their way around my throat.

I didn't dare look back. In this lonely desert road, I was now truly terrified.

Going against my better judgment I turned my head up, just high enough to look into my rearview mirror. There she was! This time right behind me! Her eyes met mine and in the few seconds it took I looked out the road and saw her again now standing right in the middle of the road! I pulled hard on the steering wheel, and felt my truck skid out of control! I tried to level the wheels but it was too late and I was forced to ride the skid all the way to the edge of the road. Again, my truck was surrounded by dust flying everywhere and I started panicking, I couldn't catch my breath and my second cup of coffee was now all over Bonnie's passenger side. When the dust settled my high beams focused on... on her. She was still there mocking me! I could see those thin lips twisted in a crooked smile while she raised one hand and pointed straight at me!

My lights flickered, then she was closer. And again. Closer. And again. CLOSER. AND AGAIN. CLOSER!!! Right as she made her way to the hood of my truck, she slammed her hands down on Bonnie's hood, the lights flashed once more and she was gone. In a panic, I put her in gear and high tailed it down the road. I didn't even stop in Gallup.

I drove straight 'till my tank was a hairline to E. I fueled up and just drove straight down back to The Valley. I didn't care about speed limits, trooper, none of that crap. Even the tall green palm trees that told me I was home did nothing for me. Your grandpa's high fenced one-acre lot still didn't comfort me. The closed and bolted doors of our two-bedroom house did nothing for me. I wasn't safe anymore. That first night home, I slept with all the lights in the house on...

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So that was it mijo, I called your grandma that night just to let her know I got home safe. I told your mom and tias this story too but they never believed me, they all thought I was just faking it to get dad's attention but I really wasn't. I know what I saw that night and honestly I pray to God every night I never have to see her again. Please mijo, even if you don't believe me, do me a favor and just never turn around.

## PART TWO: DEVIATION

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Drip

When I first met her I always felt something in my back of my head, something didn't quite feel right about her; my ten-year-old mind knew something was amiss. The way she spoke to me was computational, a set of 0's and 1's already programmed into her mind. My dad is still in pieces after the divorce and I was still not comfortable with this woman. Within a year without any warning she snaked her way into my home. They started a family together, with that came the hellish years of my childhood.

Drip, drip, drip. I could slowly feel my right hand go numb as my blood gushed down my hand. Drip, drip, drip. I cry, a cry for help. A cry that falls on deaf ears as my step-mom, who clearly sees the severity of my wound, says "Clean up this mess, you're staining my floor!" Drip, drip, drip. I place a dish rag on my hand to cover the slit in my palm and begin mopping. My emotions are clearly reflected in my face, white hot anger builds inside of me. But before I could utter a single word, I hear the sweet angelic laugh of my little sister and bite my tongue. Drip, drip, drip.

Cough, cough, cough. I lay in my bed with my lungs in my throat, knowing well when the next fit will be coming in. cough, cough, cough. I must lay completely still in order to keep my composure. The room is spinning like a tilt-a-whirl and my head is pounding worse than an

alcoholics hangover. Cough, cough, cough. My sister brings me a bowl of steaming hot soup and a cold glass of orange juice. Sip, sip, sip. Nothing stays down but I continue to eat because I know she just wants to help me, with her toothless grin staring right to my face I gulp the last bit of soup only to be rewarded with another coughing fit and a gag. I run to the bathroom. Cough, cough, cough. Everything is our, the toilet is a mess. My step-mom walks in, bucket and cleaning products in hand, “Oh good you’re up, clean this mess.” Again biting my tongue, I began cleaning, the fumes begin to drown me in their stench and my face quickly meets the toilet bowl. I rise again, a hot red river flows from my nostril. Drip, drip, drip. I look down, compose myself, and continue cleaning.

Wah, wah, wah. Crying, the only sound that can shake me down to my very core. Sometimes my dad, sometimes her, most of the times it was my little sisters. I couldn’t stand it, not because it annoyed me, more because it hurt me. Sadness is something I could never overcome growing up. In the end it’s what fueled the flames of the six years I spent in Hell. Wah, wah, wah. What was it this time? “Money is too short this month. We can’t afford this. You’re so lazy! Do something around the house!” I can’t take it anymore! Why did my dad have to remarry so quick! She wasn’t right for him! I hate her! Wah! Wah! Wah! This is the one cry I can never forget, the one that turned me from a big brother into a big protector. Barging into their room, I never make eye contact with them only my sister. Through glassy eyes she begged for help. I made a grab for her giving her to my dad and turning my attention to the “witch”. Every thought, every emotion, every time I had to bite my tongue, it’s all coming out.

I erupted with anger, hatred six years in the making that was never released; bottled and shaken like Mentos in a Coke bottle and oh did it burst. Words no man should ever have to utter exited my mouth. I could see her face it turned from anger to fear, fear not of me, but the truth.

They say the truth will set you free. Oh was I free. Wah, wah, wah. She acted like the victim. My father took her side. He was blind but he made his choice and so did I. Freed but defeated I packed my belongings called my mother and left my home. I turn one last time to see what I was leaving behind. She stood at the door with him, triumphed smile spread across her face.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Three Teachers

Home.

Home is the one place where family and friends mean pretty much the same thing. A place where you can hang your hat and kick up your feet after a long day out on the field or getting a good workout in. Being away from home, about 1,600 miles to be exact, has made me realize how much I really need my family in order to keep my sanity.

But I'm getting ahead of myself right now. This self-revelation came from the help of three teachers, whose names I do not even know, but taught me three important aspects of life.

\*St. Louis, MO. Destination: Oklahoma City, OK. \*

Sitting at the station I look up at the monitor displaying arrival and departure times for buses. I kept my eyes focused on the 8:45 time slot to make sure it didn't go anywhere. This would be my first trip back home since I departed for college and the first time seeing my family in almost six months. To my left there's a couple of frat boys in their white Alpha Sigma Gamma shirts boarding a bus to Chicago. Not from my school but they shouted loud enough for everyone to know they were from Mizzou.

On my left lay a bench of empty seats. A man, who wore a torn brown-beige faded jacket on top of a shirt that may at one point in its time been white and torn jeans, takes the seat next to me and uttered something unintelligent.

Druggy maybe?

I keep my thoughts to myself as he keeps his eyes fixated on his broken wrist watch. He carries a small brown duffel bag that's almost bulging at the seams.

"Got the time?" he asks.

"Ten 'till eight." I respond.

He gives me a slight smile, grabs his bag and walks away.

I continue to wait my time out by watching some YouTube videos. Smosh is my go to comedy channel since most of their videos take about 20-30 minutes a piece anyways. In the blink of an eye I was boarding my bus.

I take my seat right in the middle of the bus. 15 people, at most, board the bus but I just brush them off. I forgot my portable charger in my bag and stand up to reach the baggage compartment when someone bumps into me.

"Hey watch out," I say.

I look up to see the same badly dressed man from before.

"Sorry man!" he responded.

I paid very little attention to him when he took the seat right across from me. Peering out from my window the sun began beaming from behind the St. Louis skyline. As the bus hummed and lurched forward our departure from the city began. I make use of the empty seat next to me and lay down as comfortably as I could, given the circumstances. The rattling of my seat cooed me in a metallic lullaby and I fell for it. My eyelids feel heavy as my melatonin levels begin to rise. Aware and unaware at the same time. Bliss.

Right in the limbo of consciousness and unconsciousness I feel a slight tapping on my foot.



“Excuse me, are you a college student?” he asks.

I nod and roll my eyes as I attempt to hold on to what little notion of sleep I have left in me. He taps me again.

“You mind my askin’ what’re you studying?” he pries.

“English,” I reply.

“Oh, I see, a writer or a teacher?”

“Don’t know, haven’t given it much thought, writing is just something I do for fun and I thought it’d be easy just to get my degree in that.”

At this point I give him my full attention having nothing better to do on this long haul anyways. He seems genuinely interested in my life so it’s only fair to do the same for him.

“What’s your story sir, where are you comin’ from?” I ask.

“New York, had some family I was visitin’ out there, need to get back to Oklahoma.” He says.

Our small talk turns into a full blown 4-hour conversation.

All I can say is whatever rollercoaster ride of a life I thought I had, I was just kidding myself. The man suffered from drug abuse when he was in his late teens and early twenties. His hands shake as he speaks, side effects from the drugs he used to take. He lost his money to that life and was homeless for a while, he had no one to turn to due to the fact that he could not face his family for his wrong doings.

Alone.

The whimper and sorrow in his voice as he spoke rang true. This was the voice of a man who has taken his fair share of loses in life. He was near the brink of suicide until he saw a help wanted sign in a small corner store outside of New York. Slowly he worked his way back to a

decent living and was able to come back to his family. Made some form of steady income, he even got himself rehabilitated for his addiction.

That man, who I first believed to be a homeless junkie, is on his final year to earning his teaching degree at Oklahoma State University. When we arrived we said our final goodbye's and he left me with these final words.

“Mistakes come and go in life, but no matter how bad things may seem you need to keep looking forward. Set your goals, keep them in mind, and always strive for success in everything you do.” He takes his bag and gets off the bus. I watch through my window as he hails a taxi from down the road, waving goodbye as he enters and drives away.

With those words I move on.

\*Oklahoma City, OK. Destination: Dallas, TX. \*

Back in my bus I find comfort in the words left by the man, I always believed anything was possible but this acted as reassurance in a way. I could feel a warm and inviting sensation bubbling up inside of me, it was nearing six that afternoon and it was barely the first leg of my trip. Thinking I could finally get some rest I lay back in my chair only to be awoken by the loud laughter of a pudgy, pale faced woman who took the place of the man who sat next to me. She was on the phone snorting away with her laughter. As odd as it may seem it was actually quite infectious and I found myself slightly chuckling at the thought of the conversation she must be having.

Just as the bus pulls out of the station the woman hung up her phone and looks straight at me. I flinch and try to continue acting as if I was dozing off once more. It's a bit uncomfortable

being looked at in your “sleep”, especially because her deep blue eyes are piercing through my very soul.

Her hard, stern face loosens up and her wrinkles are more apparent now.

“You look so much like my Joey!” she exclaims.

Off put by this I only muster up a “huh?”

“My grandson, Joseph, you look so much like him I just can’t help but want to pinch your chubby little cheeks just like his!”

Please don’t, I think to myself.

Again I found myself caught up a small conversation in which her life story was told. She was in her late forties but years of working in a factory that manufactured airplane parts left her looking sixty.

“A woman’s job is anything a man can do but just a little better!” she exclaims with a wink.

She grew up in a low income family and had to work from a young age to support her mother and later on in life her children. She was heading to California in order to meet up with her kids who were off enjoying college and their new jobs.

She says that “The biggest thing in life, besides the All Mighty Himself, is family because family is there for you especially when bad times go to worse.”

She goes on to tell me how her mother raised her single handedly while maintaining two jobs. She said that her mother was always there for her in times of need, as well as the occasional visits from her grandmother. With the same will of fire that her mother had she took it upon herself to raise her three children without the need of their father.

“Do not ever take advantage of the love of a family member,” she tells me. “embrace them every day and never let them go. Make sure you tell them how much you love them every chance you get because you never know how much longer they will be on this Earth.”

The small talk continues through the rest of the trip, until we reached Dallas. She gave me a hug and said a small prayer then went of her way to her next bus.

I pick up my phone and call my family.

\*Dallas, TX. Destination: San Antonio, TX. \*

Second leg done, just two more to go. I fix myself into a nice and comfy position. Finally, I think I can get some sleep.

I hear the muffled sounds of someone attempting to cover up their crying. It was coming from the seats directly in front of me. A young woman. She couldn't have been much older than me, 25-28 years could be a good guesstimate. Her hair is short, shorter than mine, and she's crying into a rather large stuffed Pikachu plush doll that she seems to be very fond of.

At this point sleep is non-existent.

I lean over and tap her on the shoulder. Her head swings faster than a screen door during a tornado and doesn't miss a beat when she exclaims “All you men are pigs!”

A bit harsh but I just offer her a tissue and one of my waters from my backpack. She accepts and apologizes for what she said.

“You're not a pig, I'm really sorry for lashing out earlier.”

“No worries, I'm Mexican so my family has a lot worse insults than pig.” I reply.

She laughs and shrugs off my comment.

She began by telling me about her boyfriend, she was devoted to this man, and held him high on a pedestal. She spoke of the amazing times they had from her freshman year of high school up to her junior year in college.

“Things used to be simple,” she states “we could just go out on cute little dates and have spur in the moment adventures.”

They seemed to be the most imperfect couple, the polar opposite of one another. She was clean and he was dirty, he was responsible and she was irresponsible, and they both couldn't stand each other's parents. It sounds like they're two perfectly fitted puzzle pieces from two different boards.

“It's the differences that make the fun in a relationship, if I wanted to date someone just like me then I'd just stay single forever. He accepted me for who I was and I was always accepting of who he was.”

She explains to me that the reason she's heading to San Antonio is because she thinks her boyfriend is cheating on her. His mood towards her had been changing drastically, he didn't make his visits like he would in the past. He never called and was always out. She couldn't take it anymore and had to go see what was happening for herself.

We both took our seats once more and each fell asleep. It was about eight in the morning when we got into the station. To both of our surprises her boyfriend was there holding a card asking

“Will you marry me?”

It turns out it was all a ploy to get her out here so he could propose. Before I could get on my bus to my final destination she pulls me aside and told me, “If you ever find your significant other, just that one girl that you know holds the key to your heart, do not ever let her go. Just

hold on to her, yes there will be tough times but it will all be worth it in the end. Promise me you'll keep her happy." With that the newly engaged couple took off and I board my final bus.

But first I call my girlfriend just to tell her I love her.

\*San Antonio, TX. Destination: McAllen, TX/ Home. \*

My grandma would always tell me that the people you meet in life are never a coincidence. That God will always put someone in your path for one reason or another. You take from the experiences that come from these individuals and apply them to your own life. Without any further distractions I put my head down.

I catch a glimpse of a white dress, a ranch house, my family. Flashes that go by in mere seconds yet it actually marks the passing of hours. The lurch of the bus brings me to. McAllen Texas. My city but not my home.

\*McAllen, TX. Destination: Home \*

I grab my bags off the bus and walk to the entrance of the bus station. I am met by my girlfriend who embraces me immediately. I tell her how much I love and missed her. My family stands behind her waiting for their turn. Before I got to them I hold my girlfriend a little tighter, pull her in close, and with a tear rolling down my face I say, "I'm home."

## CHAPTER SIX

### How to Lose It All.

Step 1: Find a girl. When beginning your fitness journey, it is important to always find a partner willing to be your “gym buddy”. Preferably, she should be around 5’4, have sleek black hair with auburn highlights, dark skinned but not too dark, her eyes should be two light brown pools of joy that just drown you in them every moment you decide to look into them. She should be a little on the chubbier side, you always want someone that aspires to have the same goal as you. Finally, hit the weights and cardio hard.

Step 2: Fall in love. Your gym partner will be there with you every step of the way. Shared prep-meals turn into shared cheat meals, gym sessions turn into gym dates, and every day you pick her up for another round you find your sweaty, shaky, pre-workout buzzed hands inching ever so slightly next to hers. Your talks stop being solely on what the routine is for the day and your personal lives begin to intertwine. You learn about her boss Michael who always chooses Jessica to man the registers while your (well platonic friend at this point in time) is forced to mop the Zarape floors stained with goopy potato puree that fell off of the side of a three year olds munching mouth, the green salsa bottle table 7 never decided to pick up, and all of the wasted fajita and bistek that somehow tumbled itself out of the flimsy soft tortillas. As you listen to every word, you notice her strong Spanish accent often takes over and she says words that to the untrained ear could sound borderline gibberish but to you it becomes the sweet melody, matching Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata. Her slow moving lips become the orchestra, every word a new chord being struck, just like the ones she is tugging at your heart. Kiss her. Take the

chance. She will say yes. Lean in. When she accepts, she'll take your hand. It's just as sweaty as yours was. That day you'll run a little faster and lift a little heavier.

Step 3: Get your heart broken. You weren't enough for her in the first place. Where love should've presided only lived envy, greed, and anger. At first the relationship will seem great, but the bad will always outweigh the good. There'll be arguments here and there, you'll start some, she'll start some. The gym dates have stopped. You put on an extra 25 pounds. This is ok, it's all part of the plan. She'll check your phone for every beep, every ring, and every buzz, but don't you dare ask for her phone. She will never let you touch it, that is her crystal skull and just touching it could trigger every trap in her arsenal. She'll always be online but she'll never message you. When you ask her what she's doing she'll say "hanging at my house" but when you ask to go over she already has plan made. Messages are read and read and read but never responded to. Every deep conversation turns into a ping-pong battle between "cool" and "yeah". You'll find out about Ramon. Ramon is a coworker of hers. He likes her too. With a cold goodbye she leaves you for the arms of another. No reasoning, no response, and no remorse. She'll walk away leaving you to mend the pieces of your broken heart. You don't go to the gym for two weeks.

Step 4: Self-realization. You must overcome the emotional rollercoaster that nearly took you out of the game for good. Treat yourself to something nice. Buy a new pair of flat bottom Jordan's to start your new workouts with. Buy some Underarmour cut offs that cling a little. Make that your motivation. Read more. Sleep more. Dream more. Pray more. Find God in all of this mayhem and ask Him "What is YOUR plan?". Read the Bible. Read the Bible. READ THE BIBLE. Further your faith, your knowledge. Catch up with old friends you never saw because they were "bad influences". Buy a dog. Man's best friend never fails to stand by you when times



are tough. Name her Lulu. Learn from the mistakes you made and find your worth. Trust me, it's not at the bottom of that bottle of Jack Daniels. Search YouTube for workout videos. Follow bodybuilders on social media. Learn the muscle groups. Don't answer her calls. NO MATTER WHAT. Learn your body type. Ectomorph, Endomorph, Mesomorph. Fill in the blanks. Pair the muscle groups. Triceps go with back, biceps go with chest, shoulders get their own day, burn the hell out of your abs and legs on the same day. Start your routine again.

Step 5: Hit the gym HARD. I'm not talking about some light jogging and a few exercises, I mean go in there and tear every muscle fiber as if they were the last remnants of your toxic relationship. Break down the muscle fibers. Let them build on top of one another. A new muscle, a new you. Stretching is key, never start without stretching. Protein helps too. The supplement store has an abundance of flavors: chocolate, vanilla, banana, French toast..., we had French toast once... shake it off. The memories mean nothing now. Pump the iron until your own body gives up on you. Wait... just hold on. Take a break. You're good now. Your body shouldn't be able to move at this point. Your mind should be so numb from the focus that you can barely drive home. Shower, please shower. Even though you might not want to, do it anyways. Call your family, ask them about their day, go over. Eat dinner with them, laugh up a storm when your grandpa turns red after trying some of your grandma's homemade habanero salsa. Go home. Relax. Return to the gym in a week.

Step 6: Steady grind. After recovery keep a consistent routine. 45 minutes of cardio, 15 minutes of abs, and 1 hour and 15 minutes of weights. Go to the sauna. You'll meet an old man. He'll tell you about his ex-wife. He'll tell you about his current wife. He'll tell you about how toxicity killed his first marriage and he'll tell you how the Lord saved his second. Listen to him.

Hold on to every word as if it were the last thing you'd ever hear. Go home. Think about it.  
Drink your BCAA's, your muscles need the recovery.

Step 7: You lose it all. After about a year of consistent training you're finally at your goal weight. You look amazing. Not too cut, not too bulky, just a lean green lifting machine. Look at yourself in the mirror. You can't even remember her name anymore. Looking back, it all may seem like a nightmare. Learn from it. Go upstairs. Find an elliptical to run on. There's a water bottle in the only available one. You meet a 5'3, brunette-haired woman. She'll be wearing a T that's way too big for her and some tights torn at the ankles. Her rosy cheeks will let you know she just finished her own run. Hand her the cleaner bottle. Ask for her name. She'll say its Mal. Ask for her number. You'll get it for sure. Get on the elliptical. Look at yourself one last time as you run. You lost it all. The weight, the heartbreak, the memories. You lost it all. From here on out it's nothing but GAINS.

## PART 3: ACCEPTANCE

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Trial Run

Since the day I was born, I was expected to take my first breath. Expected, but not required. Easily my newly developed brain could have blocked the signals to my body and not allowed my fragile lungs to intake the life-giving oxygen all beings desperately need to thrive in the world. However, this was not the case and I let out the wail that announced I was teeming with life, my white skin flushed with red pigmentation and I was quickly cleaned, bundled up, and given to my mother to be held for the first time. Of course, I wouldn't know how exactly this all played out in the hospital, but I do know this is a somewhat accurate story of my birth. Such a frail and young baby, 18 inches, 7.2 pounds, and a large load to carry on my shoulders from there on out.

As the first born, all eyes were on my every movement. Every micro-movement or spark of interest gathered a great deal of attention from both my parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles alike. When learning how to stand, it was as if the world was holding its breath as I teetered back and forth searching for my center of gravity. My first toy that I can vividly remember playing with was a plastic screwdriver that came with a plastic wooden board that you could use to screw in plastic screws. I carried that screwdriver along with me so much that I can vaguely remember the words "carpenter" and "mechanic" getting repeated around me. I then remember getting an entire toy toolbox with multiple tools and gadgets I assume were to stimulate my interests. Despite their best efforts, these toys quickly lost my interest as I began

playing with a toy stethoscope that I picked up from my local daycare that I never bothered to return. The same pattern ensued with the phrases being replaced with the words “medicine” and “doctor”. Soon I found myself buried under a mountain of white lab coats, the game of Operation, and multiple fake syringes and needles to give my stuffed animal patients their shots.

As a young boy I would never be able to see what it was that my family was doing, but reflecting as an adult I see they were attempting to groom me to fit my apparent interests at the time in hope it would flourish into a full blown career goal. Now this grooming didn't stop as a child, I was constantly told “You need to go to school to get a good paying job in order to succeed in life, so you can have all the money you could need and have a beautiful home and...” yada, yada, yada, all that basic crap parents tell you to motivate you to go to college and not drop out. When a family friend or member of my family would ask me what I wanted to do when I grow up I would always say the basic “superhero, policeman, astronaut” but my parents were quick to correct me and respond with “He's very interested in medicine and has been playing doctor for months now.” Pretty soon I was changing my answer to doctor, not because it interested me but more to not upset my parents and their plans for my future.

Now, I was an only child/grandchild for about five years, so this behavior was quite constant throughout that timeframe. However, when my cousin was born, I noticed things began taking a turn for the worst.

Now, I do not blame my cousin's birth for my treatment and expectations being raised, I just took notice that this was around the time my actions started reflecting much harsher consequences. The correlation between the behavioral change of my family was all too convenient for that of even a five-year-old to understand that something was amiss. It's strange

how one event can turn the tides of time and alter the perception you held for the longest time. It's as if all the dominoes fell at once but the pattern is altered, even if just the slightest.

When elementary school began, my parents' expectations grew in gradual increments. When I received my first "Outstanding", which in Kindergarten language is the equivalent of an A, "Outstanding" was the only mark acceptable to my parents. Anything less of that brought forth comments such as "Did you even try? Why go to school if you're just messing around? Do you want to be successful or not?" In their defense my parents only wanted the best for me but I strongly believe the way they went about raising me was often tough love raised to the next level. Survival of the fittest couldn't hold a candle to my mother's parenting techniques.

The unfairness of my situation became apparent when my great grandmother would care for me, and my first run in with true punishment took form. For me this came in the shape of tropical parakeets she kept in a white metal cage, one where the rust had leopard printed itself around the thin bars. I remember the caroling chirps from each songbird as their sweet voices carried themselves up into the air and the smell of the fresh earthy bird seed my grandmother would sprinkle in every morning and afternoon. I took it upon myself, and the innocence of my childhood curiosity, to examine one of these birds up close. Reaching in I grasped my favorite parakeet, a blue backed, black winged specimen with a bright green neck that slowly transitioned to yellow and white on the head.

My great grandmother witnessed my curiosity and startled me by yelling "What are you doing?!" and with a shudder and a flinch I unwillingly released the bird into the daytime sky, never to be seen again. Accidents happen, I understand, but the physical discipline that followed would pale in comparison to the leniency that would fall upon my cousins after me. I had been spanked before but this one particular one felt like a piranha feeding frenzy. I received hits from

my great grandmother, grandfather, mother, and father for a simple mistake any child could've made. It was a simple accidental release, but my younger self wished it could've been me that flew away from it all instead of the bird. To switch places, even if just for a moment, and feel the cool rush of wind encircle me as I take to the sky. Sadly, I could not fly and running was completely out of the question. I was cornered, much like that of a caged parakeet.

This would not have bothered me as much if it hadn't been for the fact that my younger cousin decided to follow in my footsteps and recreate my bird escape. He had been watching me from his highchair and thought me touching the bird was the funniest thing he had ever seen. He began multiple attempts to free the birds to no avail. My great grandmother blamed me for his new fascination with the birds and had to permanently move them to a hanging cage outside her trailer to avoid any commotion with my cousin.

History would soon repeat itself and the punishments that came after were not reciprocated when my younger cousin released ALL of the songbirds at once! I was eight when my cousin decided to take a pole to the parakeet cage and attempt to knock it down into his hands. Instead of simply reaching for a chair that would've put him at the proper height to reach the cage and carefully pull it off of its latch, he continuously pushed at it until the hook undid itself and the cage came crashing down to the hard ground below. Luckily no animals were harmed in his little charade but he still managed to mess that up by opening the gate and yelling out "Fly birdies fly" releasing every last one of the parakeets leaving my great grandmother bird-less. I sat in anticipation, wincing at the thought of what he was about to go through as well.

However, my wincing was in vane and my prayers for my cousins well-being were answered all too quickly to be considered a miracle. When the cage was discovered on the ground by my great-grandmother she did nothing more than shrug her shoulders, let out a

defeated sigh, and carried my cousin away hung over her shoulders like a wet pillow and walked back into the trailer as if nothing had happened. There was no anger, there was no striking and you can imagine the shock on my face as I watched the mischievous child laugh while on his merry way in my great-grandmothers arms. The unfairness of it all loomed over my thoughts for hours.

Though this may sound rude, I was hoping that with the arrival of the other adults later that afternoon would cement my cousins fate as he took his place next in the gauntlet of the unjust children. I would stay waiting for that day 16 years later. It just never came. My cousin was not put through any kind of disciplinary action and instead was treated as an unfortunate event that only an unknowing child could commit. Hypocrisy.

Even as my age advanced, our differentiated treatment and disciplinary actions did not. I was scolded for minor actions; below average test grades, striking out at a baseball game, missing a homework assignment, basic child-like circumstances. However, my cousin could bring back failing grades, missing work, and act out of line and talk back to adults all because “he didn’t know any better” and I was often told I needed to be a better role model for him.

This trend followed soon with my next born cousin when I was 10 and again when I turned 15.

Going into my teenage years I found myself stressed at the thought of not living up to my family’s absurd expectations of me. I wanted to be a lawyer, I wanted to be a doctor, I wanted to be a professional athlete. At least that was the mantra I would repeat to myself in order to keep myself aligned with my family’s expectations pertaining to my future.



Given the family history of success in baseball, and the constant reminders with the accolades and trophies that garnished the walls and cases in my grandparent's home; I found myself wanting to carve out my own path with football. The sport I truly loved with a passion. My size, strength, technique and speed garnered the attention of multiple colleges and even landed me a full ride to continue playing the sport I loved as well as gaining a quality education at an accredited university. A feat only accomplished by my uncle back in the 90's with baseball. For once, I felt like I was in charge of writing my destiny and as if I finally had control of the narrative of my life. That control was almost stripped from me when my family pushed me to study pre-med or pre-law.

Their constant persuasion and nagging almost pushed me over the edge. Even when I planned on leaving 1,000 miles away from them, they still wanted the ability to control my life. Against their advice I ended up pursuing English as my major and since then, my narrative has been written by me and me alone. Figuratively and literally.

To those of you who suffer from an overbearing family, hear me out. Their best of intentions are there and they do wish to see you prosper. However, they should not define the kind of person you wish to become someday. Your life is just that, yours, and allowing others to control your every being and making decisions for you only diminishes the unique qualities that make you who you are. Take their words and hear out their advice but do not let that define you as a person because when you give other people the opportunity to plan the future for you, you are trapped in a never ending maze of misery that you desperately try to pry your way out of. Life shouldn't have to be an illusionary montage of events written by others, instead it should be shaped by the decisions you go on to make with your own free will. Don't allow yourself to

become a puppet. Learn from your mistakes and if possible I hope you learned from mine as well.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Cowboy Identity Crisis

As the midsummer sun beamed down on the grassy valley plains, I sit back and acknowledge the fact that I should've worn my light blue Magellan long sleeve work shirt over this black plaid Wrangler. The beads of sweat drip from the top of my neck down the crevice of my back forming a discolored round patten on the back of my shirt. It sticks to my bare skin and with every motion of my shoulders reapplies itself to a new part of my back. My straw hat does little to shield my eyes from the UV rays. I can do nothing more than sit on the ruffled squared hay bale twenty feet away from Old Lexi.

Old Lexi was young once, we all were at one point, but she's seen better days in her last 20 years on this ranch. This is what I believe to be the end of the road for Old Lexi. On my fifth birthday, my Great Grandpa Cows bought me Old Lexi as a gift.

She was just Lexi at the time.

Her white silken fur held a stark contrast to the rest of my grandfather's own cattle herd, which was mostly comprised of black and red Santa Gertrudis. You could pick her out of the herd from a quarter of a mile away. She stood out, just like me.

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"No one likes country Sam," Hector said "you're such a white boy. How can a white boy have a Mexican last name?"

Hector was my school yard bully but I never understood where he got around to calling me white. If anything, my tan complexion was already an off-putting sight to his own misconception to the word white.

“That’s old white people music, white boy!” Hector screamed as he shoved me to the ground.

Second grade school yard antics. I didn’t push back, just put my head between my knees and hoped he’d just walk away.

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I was born into a hardworking family from a different era than most of the other people my age. While other kids were listening to late 90’s rap and hip-hop, I was being raised on Merle Haggard, Frank Sinatra and Led Zeppelin. I was handed down the morals of an older generation and often felt like it placed me in a different mind frame from those around me. I was too much of an old soul to be considered part of my generation but at the same time, I couldn’t fit in with an older crowd either due to my “millennial privileges” such as the internet and easy access to all sorts of information. I was automatically ostracized just for being born at a certain time or place.

The world has its ways of singling out certain people and placing them in a bubble that slowly suffocates them until their blue in the face, then loosening its grip just slight enough to get a small breath of air before pulling them back in for another go.

Balance.

A word I struggled with when it pertained to my everyday duties as a child. Go to school, go to practice, do your homework, be in every club, get straight A’s, excel in all sports,

find a college you want to go to, pay your bills, buy a car, buy a house, pay back school; the list is ever growing and never truly ends. Instead, it continuously adds on to itself and the workload increases ever so slightly. Sometimes its gradual, other times it's like one day you're carrying 100 pounds on your back then someone comes and slaps on an extra 500 on top of that.

Compare that to the simple life of Old Lexi, she never had to worry a day in her life for any of these things. She grew up in a green ocean of flowing coastal grass where she could graze till her hearts content. All four of her stomachs were always full and not once did I ever see her try to jump the fence line for greener pastures. There was nothing better than what she had with us at the time. I got to see her grow from that young lost heifer to carrying her first calf and subsequently delivering said calf into this world. She would go on to have seven more beautiful breeding seasons bringing new life with every passing year. Her only job, eat and get pregnant so we can sell the calves off at auction and make some extra money to maintain the land. She has it made.

But even a simple life can wear someone or something out. Time holds no bars when breaking down the body regardless of species and genetics. As we progress forward our bodies will always regress, never being quite the same as the day before. Old Lexi once had a beautiful coat that's now blanched to the point where she seems almost albino in nature. Her once young and hopeful eyes now droop with the sad truth of her existence. Her belly that was once full now only shows signs of pasture bloat. Hell, even her ribcage is shown through her pasty skin like pizza dough being pulled over the side of a bread hook. Her beautiful set of horns have long lost their fine point and are now dull to the touch, grinded away by years of scratching against fence posts, fighting other cows for dominance, and getting stuck between a tractor or two every now and then. As she sits under the makeshift awning my grandpa had built over 50 years ago, I try to

nudge her to move but all I'm met with is a snort and some green mucus seeping from her nostril. Of course she goes on to stick her tongue up in there to clean it out.

Gross.

Just move already. Get back out to pasture. Go meet with the herd. Do anything except for just laying around.

Even as I think those words to Old Lexi, it's obvious that they can also be used on me. I'm reminded of the constant nagging from everyone to "get up and do something with your life" which is impossible when all I've ever wanted to do was relax and look up at the sky. It's always been non-stopped school work since day 1, even being pushed as far to receive my 2-year associates from college all before the age of 18. People continuously add to my workload without even asking for my consent pushing me further and further down into a rabbit hole that I didn't even dig for myself. It's as if I'm in a glass coffin of others creation, lowered down into a grave dug by others, and slowly shovel by shovel dirt is being poured in. At first, it was only a few handfuls but I realized those handfuls soon turned into scoops, then buckets, then by the truckload. I'm screaming for help but no one can hear me behind the three-inch-thick glass. It feels more like a one-way mirror; no one can see the damage they are causing but I can see who it is damaging me. My body was almost completely consumed. My face is the only thing left. A few more shovel scoops. I'm holding on to the last glint of sunlight shown through a small opening, a spot missed by one of my grave keepers. Until that too is filled and I'm plunged into claustrophobic darkness. I hold my breath. I need to conserve oxygen. Conserve my sanity. I can feel the pressure of the dirt slowly cracking the glass on my coffin.

Just breathe.

Old Lexi lets out a low bellow. She's standing again. But something about her is different. Her stomach muscles are contracting and by the veins expanding in her neck, she's straining. Her tail flies up to the air and a thick discharge spews from her backside. Old Lexi was giving birth.

While there was still time to spare, I ran down to my steel shed and took out all the essentials; lubricant, a rope, elbow high gloves, and disinfectant. I made my way to our outdoor cooler and grabbed a small dose of epinephrine, the last vial. By the time I got back to Old Lexi, one of the calf's front hooves is already showing.

That's a good sign.

I use the rope to lead Old Lexi to the head gate to minimize any unnecessary movement. I give her some space and let her do her thing for a while. A stressed cow is one of the most dangerous things on the ranch especially when birthing. Sometimes it's better to leave them be.

I watched her push and contract for about three hours, but no signs of the calf. That one hoof is still the only thing there. I go ahead and decide to intervene. Rolling up my sleeves, I plunge both arms into my long gloves and begin prepping for an assisted birth. I use a glop of lubricant to help ease the birthing canal and end up elbow deep searching for the second leg. After finding it, I slowly lead it out of the birthing canal and tie the rope around the two legs.

Positioning the head properly is the next step, too far up and I risk snapping the vertebrae. Once positioned, I time my pulls with Old Lexi's pushes. Breathe, push, pull, rest. Breath, push, pull, rest. Breath, push, pull, rest. I could see the little blonde head making its way out eyes still closed. Unaware of its own surroundings or its existence. Blissful ignorance.

With one tug and a huge push by Old Lexi, the calf is out. Slinking with its mucus-like membrane down to the hay strewn floor. No more than 80 pounds, blonde just like its momma. I wipe the sweat off my brow and let Old Lexi out. All seemed right with the world.

Old Lexi collapses and convulses on the ground, her calf isn't breathing either. I hastily move towards the calf and put my ear to its chest. No heartbeat. Epinephrine should only be used during shock to help regulate an animal's heartrate or get it jump started. CPR was my first option, and I begin by pushing hard on the calf's exposed chest, covering its mouth and one nostril I take a huge breath of air and blow inwards. I repeated this for two minutes. My artificial heartbeat wasn't helping. My epinephrine was only enough for one dose. I go ahead and slam the needle through the calf's leg. For a moment, I thought I chose wrong. Old Lexi let out one last bellow. I could tell she was gone.

I held my breath too, slumping back into the darkness. I couldn't even do this right. A short breeze runs through my hair. The calf's eyes flutter open. There's a light in the darkness after all.

We each take a breath.



## CHAPTER NINE

### Chasing the Wind

\*Pfft\*

The air sputtered out of my Daisy pump action replica rifle. Everything slowed down for just a moment. I could feel the weight of the plastic rifle stiffen as I had raised it and sighted in my target.

“There,” my step dad said “right corner. There’s a small squared sticker there. Try and hit it.”

Slowly, slowly, I squeezed the trigger with the lightest of touches. I made sure to hold my breath so the rise and fall of my chest wouldn’t offset my trajectory. I saw the hammer of the gun fall back a few notches before swinging forward and coming down hard on the faux igniter. No smoke, no flame, just a small lead ball followed by a puff of compressed air. I’m not going to lie about how I knowingly looked across the yard where my struck target lay, or about how I gave my step dad the finger gun salute in acknowledgement. No. For that brief moment, I was in utter disbelief. At about twenty yards, I managed to hit a sticker the size of an average postal stamp with a 2-centimeter-wide BB.

“I see you, sharpshooter!”

I think that’s where my love of shooting first flourished. I remember holding my head a little higher that day, taking pictures of my prized shot, and showing off to all of my friends the

next day. I told them how, with the help of my trusty “sniper” rifle, I was able to hit the smallest target imaginable. Quickly my love for shooting became an obsession of mine. Not in a cynical or maniacal manner, more like a realization that this is a hobby I could enjoy doing for a lifetime. It was recommended to me, by a friend of mine at the time, to give a go at a little book series known as “The Hunger Games”. The protagonist’s expert marksmanship with a bow appealed to my new found love for shooting. Suddenly, I wanted to be an archer and a marksman all at the same time.

I would find myself creating my own bows and arrows from paracord and live branches torn from the mesquite branches at our family ranch. (I later come to find out in my teenage years that willow and other soft woods make much better bows.) I became obsessed with TV shows like “Sons of Guns” and “Top Shot”; dreaming about one-day competing amongst the greats. When “American Sniper” came to theatres, my step dad encouraged me to enlist and join the Navy SEALs and become a Navy sniper. I pondered and played with the idea in my mind for about a week, but I loved food too much and I loved football even more. But, I’m getting off track.

The point of the matter is, I loved shooting and was pretty good at it. I enjoyed hunting in my teenage years (still do today) and often times would spend much of my weekends either helping my great grandfather raise his cattle or hunting for hogs and birds. I was too young to realize at the time, but those moments with my great grandfather were some of the best times I had growing up. I remember waking up at 5 am on Saturdays to take him down to the old produce lot just outside of the city limits. A quick hitch and a 15-minute drive later we were loading up 10 pallets worth of cabbage onto our flatbed trailer. We would make this trip a total of 5 times just that morning to carry 50 pallets down to the ranch. Now, these pallets of cabbage

were donated to us because they were considered inedible by FDA standards and I'm pretty sure the distribution companies get a tax write off if they donate them to working farmers. All I knew was now I had well over 10,000 pounds of cabbage I now needed to unload and feed to our cattle.

More often than not, these pallets were loaded to the brim with cabbage, with a catch, each head of cabbage was individually wrapped in a plastic sheet that we needed to unwrap before tossing the goods out to our fat girls running around the corral. This unceremonious circumstance lead to 10-hour work days in the middle of the dry Autumn day. Two hours in and my shirt would be drenched thoroughly with my salty sweat, and my cap could wring out at least a quart of that putrid liquid. My eyes would sting from the beads of sweat that would crawl their way into the corners of my eyes and dig their way under my contacts. We would continuously unload box after box of these green menaces and it seemed like the work never ended. I would look up from the lip of my cap and watch miserably as my uncle unapologetically refilled our trailer with another pallet. If I never saw another cabbage in my life time it would be too soon.

We would ritualistically drink a frosted Mexican Coke my great grandpa kept in the fridge just for us. We'd share it. He was a diabetic.

Now this time in my life was especially difficult because this is what started the familial college conversations. I had to begin thinking where I would pursue my higher education.

“Where are you going to college?”

“What's your major?”

“What're your plans after graduation?”

All questions I didn't have an answer to and all questions I wasn't prepared to answer. In all honesty, academics came to me as second nature. You know the old saying "the brain is a sponge that soaks up information"? Well, I can relate to that without reservation. My mind was in a constant flux of learning, I constantly searched for new ways to intrigue my senses and often would spend a lot of my class time trying to control my boredom. It was within this boredom that two common denominators would always remain true, marksmanship and ranching.

While in college, I settled on an English major with an emphasis in creative writing. It was something I was good at and I figured if I was going to spend my days studying, it might as well be in a subject I will enjoy. Given this time, I would find myself alone at night in my room reading under a nightlight as to not disturb my snoring teammates (I forgot to mention this earlier but I also ended up on an athletic scholarship to play football) and I would often ponder where this messy road of academics and life choices would take me. It was during this time in my life where I felt the most lost. I was carrying a load of expectations from my family, a gift that was once in a generation.

My great grandparents and grandparents alike carried no more than a high school diploma in their educational bags, my parents were college graduates no higher than a Bachelor's degree. Me? I was the intended next level genius. Bachelor's degree? No. Master's? No. Doctoral? Make it so. Without my permission, my parents made the conscious decision for me and decided I must decorate my walls with degrees and awards that reflected my academic prowess. Prowess that I knew I had, but had no intention of reaching. At least, that's the decision I made for myself. My stubbornness and independence never allowed other opinions to affect me and I did not enjoy others, regardless of relationship, to decide my own fate. I am a firm believer

in fall or flight, if I am to succeed it is under my own accords and my own will. Should I fall, then that too will depend upon my own drive.

I spent two years in undergrad, thanks to earning two years of college credit through my dual enrollment courses, and during those summer vacations I would retake my position as my great grandfather's ranch hand. Hauling bales, flinging cabbage, riding horses, and vaccinating cattle. Grandpa always made sure vaccination days landed around my visits home. He would tell and retell old stories on how he would ride the tractor with his father and bring the cows back into the corral with the help of Brownie, their Chocolate Labrador. He could vividly describe each detail of the story as if he was right there at that very moment, from the way his father's old leather jacket would squeak in the winter with any slight movement, and how Brownie's abnormally large tongue would hang out his mouth and leave a pool of drool in its wake while he road shotgun in their '87 Chevy. That same Chevy, whose white paint has been baked and chipped by the cruel south Texas sun. He would describe the way his cowboy hat made him look like Cool Hand Luke and that he was a better looking Mexican George Straight. He couldn't sing on a tune but I let him have his moments. It was hard to imagine this wrinkled old man, with his leathery brown skin and sunken earlobes was once a young buck such as myself. Yet, his sharp mind was one of the few things in his possession that time could not conquer. He was a man through and through. Even though he had little to nothing, it was always more than enough. Even up to the date of his death just two months after I came back home after graduation.

When I heard a question again, "What're your plans for the future?", this time I had an answer. I wanted what he had. A simple life, plenty of children, a great wife, some land, and a faithful furry companion. Simple. But simple doesn't always come simple. This lifestyle, though

enough for my grandfather, was not enough for my family. My decision was met with rebuttals in every direction.

“Why a rancher?”

“There’s no money to be made in ranching/”

“You seriously spent all your time in school just to become a dirty rancher?”

“How do you plan on supporting a family?”

Instead of being praised for wanting to continue a dying family tradition, I was humiliated and ostracized for wanting to follow in his footsteps. I could only do my best and hide my disappointment through a straddled crooked smile, my feeble attempts going pretty unnoticed by my family. I felt the blunt of it all unfold when my paternal grandfather called me the uncanniest name imaginable. Again, this name would become the sole personality I would encapsulate for the rest of my time as a full grown adult. It not only established who I was, but who I could be. All in a single name, etched into me like a burning cattle brand on the side of a prized steer. Minus the smell of burning fur and flesh.

My first encounter with this name came around the same time I made my first big purchase. Fresh out of college and with 500\$ burning a hole in my pocket I decided to set out and begin my ranching adventure by purchasing a Red Angus heifer. My uncle knew of a man, a county over, that sold these exquisite beasts at a remarkably low cost. The text read “Come get her today, and she’s all yours for 300\$.” Excitedly, I rushed to hitch up the old horse trailer to my uncle’s ’99 F-150 and the two of us were off to collect my heifer. I can clearly remember the first time I laid eyes on her, the way her fur hung in spiraled strands that curled around her eyes, the way her coat color shifted from amber to mahogany depending on how the sun radiated over

her, and the way her eyes widened in disbelief as we forced her into a heavy steel trap that would soon transport her to her new home. She was a young heifer, no older than four months and fresh off of suckling at her mamma's teat. I named her Bella.

As my first purchase, I wanted to ensure that calf was safe at all costs. I overspent on feed and hay and even went as far as corralling her in a separate pen so she wouldn't get mixed up with the five cattle that remained on the ranch. Each day as I clocked out from my teaching job, I would make the ten-minute drive to the ranch and tie her up to a fence post, slowly hand feeding her and getting her accustomed to her new surroundings. She would fight me of course, how would you feel if some stranger came into your home, took you from your mother, and then tried to hand feed you and tied you down to a post every single day? It was safe to say she was frightened. It was during one of these taming sessions in which she lashed out at me and kicked me right in the thigh. A sharp prickly sensation gradually spread throughout my leg and my toes began to spasm in my boots, rubbing against the steel toed sole. I hobbled over to where my grandpa and uncle were sitting, laughing at my pitiful attempt at taming Bella.

"Ya ves, (you see)" he snorted "tu nomas eres un **vaquero fracasado!**"

And... there it was. THAT word, that word that became synonymous with my ever increasing failure to ascertain to any level of dignity or pride. Now, my Spanish wasn't the best and I understood everything up until THAT word.

Fracasado.

What an interesting choice of words being used to describe me. I laughed along, not knowing the context or the implications of what that word carries. I went ahead and turned to Dr. Google for an answer. The results were far worse than the expectations.

**Fracasado, adjective: to fail or a failed attempt at something; to be unsuccessful or washed up.**

Vaquero fracasado. The failed cowboy. I was utterly crushed. With the understanding that names are just that, words being spoken by other individuals to describe either oneself or another person, but to me the implication brought upon me by calling me that name stemmed deeper than just name calling. To me, it felt like I was being labeled before I even had the opportunity to prove myself to those I love. It was as if I was sitting alone at a poker table with four aces' over the dealer, yet no one believed in my hand. Hell, it was like I was never even given cards to play with, forced to just twiddle with my chips until the next round is played.

That word continued to haunt me for about a year and a half. Within that time frame, I was able to purchase six more cows through auctions and even started a small herd of goats. I managed to grow a small but steady income through swapping, selling, and auctioning my cattle and goats. It was a simple cycle, feed the animals, sell the animals, buy feed to make the animals fat, rinse and repeat. My tiny herd soon became self-sustaining. I sold when times were tough and bought when the market was good. I was able to earn about 2,000 dollars in revenue within my first year. Yet, it seemed like no matter how often my family would see me leave for the auctions or go on delivery runs after a sale, there was a strong belief that I was still nothing more than a vaquero fracasado.

One of the tipping points for me came from a botched delivery. I had just recently purchased a year old, 700-pound Black Angus cow from a man who at the time just didn't have the time for her. I got her for 500\$. The one thing he did say was she had a bit of a short fuse on her but by this point, two years into the game, I figured I could handle her. I had already been charged at, rammed, kicked, and even viciously licked by these creatures. (Cows tongues are



notoriously soft as dry sandpaper.) So I carried out a mildly uneventful pickup, I heard a few bumps where the heifer was banging against the steel frame of the trailer but that was not out of the ordinary. I honked at my uncle to unlatch the 10-foot corral gate and drove in to our unloading area. Typically, when we unload it's just a matter of unlatching the two steel bolts at the back of the trailer and letting the cow work their way out; this one had other plans. As I parked my truck and prepared to get off and begin the unloading process I was met with a flurry of "Hey, hey, hey's!", only to have just enough time to open my door and witness this giant four legged monstrosity of a cow bust through the quarter inch, welded steel caged roof of our trailer and hang between the trailer and freedom. She managed to place one hoof on a hollowed out portion of the siding and forced the remaining half of her body through the trailer and began her quick and heavy descent down onto the bed of my truck, where she ever so gracefully landed but not without engraving her hoof prints on my tailgate and shattering a portion of my rear window. To add fuel to the flame, she then relieves herself (in both numbers) all over the bed of my truck before nonchalantly jumping down and running off to join her new herd.

Pictures were taken, jokes were made, and the rancho fracasado has now struck again. All thanks to one acrobatic cow and the impeccable timing of my grandpa's arrival. I decided from then on out I would no longer be the butt of everyone's jokes. Regardless of my actions, regardless of my attempts at success, regardless of my drive, the only thing I yearned for was the respect of my family members and I was going to earn it one way or another.

Now, returning to my sharpshooting activities, I would enjoy back to back weekends shooting doves in the Autumn afternoons. My first shotgun was a pump-action Mossberg Maverick 44 12 gauge, black plated with a shoulder strap for safe carrying, and a buttstock sleeve that carries 5 additional shells for easy access. No sights, no fancy choke tubes, just a

basic gun and a small bead sight to hold me on target. Either way it doesn't take a genius to operate; point, shoot, track, point, shoot, track. It had seen plenty a field day with me and had cycled over 3,000 rounds, no jams, and plenty of good eating being laid out in the field. This gun was as reliable as they get. I trusted it with my life, it was not only a hunting tool but an extension of my talent for marksmanship. It became a part of me and I knew the ins and outs of that weapon within just a few months of owning it. This was mine and I was damn good at it.

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Our ranch is located just a mile and a half away from the Rio Grande River, surrounded by sorghum fields and about 50 acres of untamed woods. The Santa Ana wildlife refuge nearby is home to an abundance of South Texas wildlife including armadillos, bobcats, a plethora of venomous and non-venomous snakes, and most importantly coyotes. Coyotes, the hunter scavengers of the south, are one of the few native species near our area that will and have attempted to attack out cattle. Traveling in packs, their distinctive yipping can be heard from miles away. When you hear the sound of a thousand Chihuahuas in the distance, the pack is drawing near and on the hunt. Even though they are pack animals, that doesn't necessarily mean they stay with their pack. I have had a few venture all alone onto the property and, out of hunger and disparity, have attempted to nip at the younger of the cattle and especially our goats. A quick meal for a sly carnivore, a young goat could suffice for a good two days' worth of meals. Even though we do have two Chocolate Labs, Choco and Chase, guarding the livestock; there is always the possibility of one breaking through the ranks and making their way with a quick bite.

I took any and all sightings of coyotes serious and often have to unload my twelve gauge into the woods just to scare off any would be predators. I took my job a little too serious, out of paranoia, and became overly protective of my livestock. My uncle and grandpa took notice.

“Coyote! Coyote! Hector, coyote!” yelled my grandpa.

Instinctively, I reached for my gun and ran outside. Making my way downfield where both my uncle and grandpa stood. There, they waved me down and began pointing into the direction of the woods.

“That way!” they said in tandem.

Quickly, I shouldered my shotgun, steadied my eyes down the barrel and pulled back the trigger. A blank. Just a loud BANG to deter any would be attacker. The next rounds wouldn't be used so sparingly.

“It ran in there; you need to go after it! I think it might've taken one of the baby goats!” my uncle exclaimed. I nodded in agreement and loaded five rounds of buck shot, just in case.

With my shotgun on my shoulder, knife in my belt loop, and pants tucked into my boots, I made my way into the woods ready to take out any coyote that crossed my path. I gave them a thumbs up and ran into the brush. The woods in our area aren't exactly tall trees and thick shrubs, it's a mix of mesquite trees and huisache shrubs, each carrying a range of thorns that can vary from a miniscule few centimeters long to others as long as 3 inches. If not wearing the proper attire when walking through them, you will get cut up through the thickets and be left with welts that itch and burn as they settle into your skin. Luckily, that day I was wearing a long sleeve flannel and some thick boot cut jeans that did more than enough to shield me from the initial pricks.

The woods are an unforgiving thicket of needles, ready to whip and lash whosoever chooses to enter the domain. Even though I was armed to the brim for the hunt, I neglected to bring along a machete to clear a path through the branches. Eventually the young, fresh shrubs at

the border of the woods began to merge into the thicker, tighter net of the more mature plants and in turn, the thorns began to increase in size. What began as a few snags and bulges on the outside of my clothing began to morph into rips and piercings narrowly snaking their way through the fibers and fabrics of my clothes just to make their way into the pin cushion known as my skin. I was but maybe 50 yards into the woods and already I knew this was going to be a pain in my ass. I could've easily let it go, be secured with the thought of it running off scared into the woods, and find that peace of mind to return back to the property and go on with my day. But something forced me forward, I wasn't allowing myself to turn back. For some reason, that was never an option.

When tracking animals, your surroundings need to be taken into account; broken branches and feces are two sure fire ways of determining the position of a would be target. But its more than just looking for the obvious signs, sometimes it's the things you can't see that is the most helpful in situations like this. The silence of the birds, the tranquility of the wind, the pungent scent of a fresh kill. Giveaways, takeaways, lessons learned from years of hunting and tracking and truly understanding what it means to be a part of nature. I had found a thick and sturdy fallen branch that, with the proper swing and force, could act as a make shift club and knock away at some of the branches that loomed over me. I had to make sure each swing was carefully calculated, for the tree line was also home to wasp and hornets' nests that would attack at any sign of disturbance. The club also allowed for me to swat at any large spider webs that would envelope my face at any given moment. Only seeing the size of the webs was enough to deter me from wanting to meet the creature responsible for weaving them.

I kept my head on a constant swivel, periodically moving sideways and downwards to inspect my surroundings. I was moving at a snail's pace, fast enough to make minimal progress

but slow enough to remain undetected. With the slightest twitch of the leaves, a snapping of a branch or the blur of a passing object. I would pause and listen, closing my eyes and focusing solely on what I could hear, then I would glance towards the area of suspicion. The low hanging branches did not make this task any easier. Thirty minutes into my approach and my back was already beginning to cramp from being hunched over for such a long period of time. No tracks, no scent, and no trail; it was as if I was tracking a ghost in broad daylight.

I knelt down and upon looking at the ground I noticed there lay a few bones, presumably that of a small bird, with a few specs of meat still on it. Just beneath that, in a neat and tight row, a colony of carpenter ants were having their way with the chunks they had collected. In a single filed line, they were making their way back towards what I presumed to be their colony. In the same direction they were heading was a clearing, just large enough to where I may be able to stretch out a bit.

The clearing was about fifteen feet in diameter and it actually allowed the perfect vantage point to peer into each direction. I took a seat on a fallen mesquite, after ensuring that there were no critters in or around it, and decided to take a quick break and develop a new plan of action. I opened my phone to see if my absence had worried anyone, only to find a single message flash across my screen.

*Text message.*

It was my cousin, Jr. Apparently, he had arrived shortly after I had begun the tracking fiasco and was wondering how I was managing.

Jr. – “What up?”

“Nothing much”, I replied.

Jr. – “Bro, imma just be straight up with you. Grandpa and tio are laughing right now because they sent you out to catch a “coyote” but there ain’t one man. They just sent you out there to chase your tail for a while. They’re betting to see how long you take. Head back. Also, you didn’t hear it from me. Vaquero fracasado.”

There it was. Again, the strong sense of disbelief and unwillingness to believe in my own capabilities now brought forth once more and this time with intention. How, how was I expected to meet the requirements to fulfill expectations when I was never even given the opportunity to prove myself? The self-fulfilling prophecy given to me by others. Again, I was nothing but a failure. Out of pure frustration, I threw my makeshift club back into the thicket, losing it in the process; along with my sense of dignity. I allowed myself to wallow in my sorrows and forced myself to my feet, mentally preparing for the trek back as well as facing my family’s onslaught of criticism. I took but one step when suddenly...

\*SNAP\*

I whipped my head around and noticed a small creature underneath the shadow of the brush. Though it was hidden in the brush, the beady yellow eyes and the quick flash of the sharp canines revealed to me everything I needed to know. Coyote. It yipped twice; I raised my gun and pointed it in multiple directions. I had no idea if this coyote was alone or was a part of a pack. What I did know was that no matter what, I had to take it home with me. As our gazes met, it stared deep into my eyes. The golden iris’s pierced through my soul, there was an uneasy look to them. It seemed as if they were... amused. The yip that escaped its snout mimicked more of a maniacal cackle. He was laughing at me. There we stood, frozen in our own standoff. For one, survival, the other integrity.

I fired my first shot but missed hard to the left. The coyote then hissed and lashed out from under the brush, rushing at my legs. With the stock of my gun, as it latched its claws into the side of my leg, I brought it down over the coyote's head but to no avail. It began to scratch at bite at my leg, tearing full pieces of fabric off in quick succession. I pulled my knife out and plunged it into the side of its back leg, narrowly missing the torso. It backed away slowly turning to inspect its own wound. I on the other hand did not wish to look down, knowing well that there were indeed a few cuts on my leg and the sloshing in my boot helped me determine there was some bleeding going on. I didn't have the stomach to look at it right now. My adrenaline was through the roof, my heart was now racing in the Fortune 500, and my senses seemed heightened. Before I could even think, my gun was raised again, pumped, and ready to go. The coyote lurched back before pouncing once more.

BLAM!

This time I didn't miss. There was no whimper, no more fighting, just a fresh Autumn breeze and the smoke off the barrel rising into the air. I chose to forgo treating my wound right away and instead opted to carry my prize on my back. I hobbled back, leaving a trail of blood in our wake. When I broke through the tree line once more, I felt a sudden surge of tranquility fall over me. The sun shone a little brighter and the breeze was much lighter. My fog in my head was cleared and the doubt in my mind subsided. I was a new man.

"AHHHHH!" I yelled before continuing my hobble back home.

I was greeted with a cacophony of shocked and appalled looks from my family, each with a ghastly expression more towards my leg than anything else. I still hadn't wanted to look down

at it. Full transparency, I thought I might pass out if I saw the shredded skin. I threw the lifeless corpse of the coyote in front of everyone, gasping at how small this creature really was.

“What the hell happened to you!?” asked my grandpa concerned.

“Just pour me a drink, viejo.”



## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Shawn Michael Gonzalez is a native of the Rio Grande Valley and a current educator. Shawn is a former South Texas College and Lindenwood University alum, where he earned his Associates Degree in Interdisciplinary Studies (2016) and Bachelor's Degree in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing (2018) respectively. He completed his MFA in Creative Writing from UTRGV in 2023. He was also a former member of the Lindenwood University Belleville Football team from 2016-2018.

Upon graduation, Shawn quickly found a love for education and athletics. He devoted the rest of his professional career to education and is a current teacher and coach, giving back to the same community that he grew up in. His ambition is to continue to uplift and encourage his students to pursue a higher education. He uses his knowledge of sports and his own experiences leaving home to help the students understand the benefits of pursuing education. He hopes to continue to build a reputation for himself, not just as an educator, but also as a pillar of motivation for his community and his students.

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