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## Like Branches on a Tree

Meiloni C. Erickson  
*University of New Orleans*, merickson0227@gmail.com

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Like Branches on a Tree

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements of the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing  
Fiction

by

Meiloni C. Erickson

B.A. Alaska Pacific University, 2012  
A.A. Berkeley City College, 2010

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## Through the Lines

Two weeks after leaving, Verónica stood in a phone booth in the parking lot of a gas station off the highway. The night before, she had sat up all night drinking coffee in a 24-hour diner to keep warm.

“Hello?” a young voice whispered.

“Gracie?” Verónica said.

“Mom?”

Verónica heard the surprise in her daughter’s voice. “Yeah, baby, it’s me.”

“I’m so happy you called!” The whisper got louder. “When are you coming home?”

“Soon, soon. Is everything OK?” Verónica squeezed her eyes tight.

“Just wish you were here.” Gracie was quiet a second before adding, “How long are you going to be gone this time?”

“As long as it takes,” Verónica said, her voice sharper than she intended. She took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, sweetie. I miss you, too. I just can’t be there right now, you know that. But I’ll be home soon.”

“Ohh-kaay. I just want you to be in charge again.”

“Is Abuelita being mean?” The sharp tone returned to Verónica’s voice.

“Not really. She made pancakes yesterday for breakfast, and she’s been letting us watch cartoons on Saturday mornings.”

“That’s good. Have you and Frankie been helping with chores?”

“Yeah, of course. Abuelita says to clean every day is to keep control.”

“Yeah, being messy is what makes me have to leave.”

“I don’t think she meant you. She just wants us to do our chores.”

“Yeah, but she always says shit like that. Making it seem like I go away for fun.”

The line went quiet again; then Gracie said, “We don’t know what you’re doing, Mom.”

“So you agree with her? Think I’m off having the time of my life? Your grandmother doesn’t know what it’s like, feeling like you can’t breathe all the time, and she never cared to find out.”

“I know, I know,” Gracie answered quickly. “But you’re OK, right?”

The anger left Verónica as quickly as it came. “I’m fine, baby,” she said. “I’ll be home soon.”

\*\*\*

Verónica walked along the dusty highway trying to shake the phone call as the sun moved overhead. She wanted to go home, but she wasn’t ready yet. Once she got home, there would be all the usual questions and unspoken accusations. The girls would be happy to see her at first, and everything would be like a party, but before Verónica could blink, it all would be back to normal: school, work, dinners, laundry. Routine. Automatic responses. Suffocation.

It started small last time. It always started small. A night out with friends. The girls spending the weekend with their grandmother. All healthy. All acceptable. Until she took a little bump here or there. A line off the toilet tank in the bathroom of a bar. Until it was two weeks since she’d been home, and Verónica barely remembered leaving in the first place.

The desert was cool this time of year, but the sun was bright, and it warmed Verónica as she moved forward. She held her thumb out intermittently and without much conviction, not

even turning around to make eye contact with the drivers. She liked walking. A town was blooming slowly up ahead. Verónica figured she'd be there in the next few hours, near dark, but before the stars.

\*\*\*

The bar seemed busy for a weeknight. A sign hung outside advertising "Taco Night Tuesday," and Verónica was happy to see a crowd; it increased her chances of finding a place to sleep. She glanced around the open room. At a center table a bunch of college-aged kids ate dollar tacos and drank pitchers of beer. Some wore sweatshirts with ASU printed on the front. There was a pool tournament going on in the back near the restrooms, and mostly older men, but a few women, stood around the table, leaning on pool cues. Verónica figured she could cozy up to one of them, but she hated big groups. Always felt like she was in the spotlight and had to perform.

She signaled for a drink. The bartender was a pretty woman, dark hair long and curly, flannel shirt tucked into tight, faded, black jeans. She'd only left the top button open, and Verónica respected her for that. Tipped her two dollars for the layered ginger ale and dark rum. Verónica slurped from the glass when the bartender placed it in front of her. She liked to sip some of the rum before mixing it, letting the bold flavor fill her mouth before the relief of carbonated ginger.

She had just arrived in Phoenix, but she was already tired. She had been on the road thumbing all day. Probably only made two hundred miles or so, but she liked how she never knew where all the small little decisions would take her. The first time she'd left home was right after Gracie was born. She ended up in Houston that time, in jail, after getting caught breaking

into a rail yard. Train hopping had held a certain appeal. Pills were waiting when she got home. And her girls.

Verónica sucked the last of her drink through a straw with a bendy neck and tried to catch the bartender's attention, but she was working the other end of the counter. Verónica turned on her stool and saw a man with long hair to his shoulders in a booth by himself. He looked younger than Verónica, with a worn jean jacket covering an off-white thermal. His gaze was down, focused on an open book, while his fingers worked the label off his beer bottle.

"What can I get you?" the bartender said.

Verónica spun back to face her. "Another Dark and Stormy, plus one of whatever he's having." Verónica pointed to the man in the corner.

The woman glanced over at the man then gave Verónica a look.

Verónica laid a twenty on the bar.

"All right," the bartender said, taking the cash.

Verónica took a big sip before grabbing her glass and the bottle and walking over to the man. "Hey," she said, placing the beer in front him and sliding into the booth.

The man looked up from his reading. "Hi," he said, marking the page and closing the book.

"You from around here?" she asked.

"Nope. Just in town for a while." He tilted his bottle all the way up, finishing his drink.

Verónica took a sip from her own. "You like it here?"

He picked up the beer she brought him and took a sip. "Like it better now."

\*\*\*

He had a room at the hotel across from the bar. “Been on the road since August. Here in Phoenix for a week, then on to Flagstaff,” he said as he flicked on the lights. The sleeping area was neat, nothing cluttering the night stand, sheets and blankets tucked in tight. The desk by the window was a different story. Papers littered the desktop and the floor surrounding, while maps hung from the walls with routes drawn in red marker. In the corner was a large backpack set on top of thin, brightly colored ropes, all coiled in organized loops.

“Homey,” Verónica said, leaning against a small dresser.

The man sat on the edge of the bed and let out an embarrassed laugh. “It’s research. I’m mapping climbing routes in the Southwest.”

“Climbing how?”

“You know, ropes and harnesses.” He crossed the room and picked up one of the coils and tossed it to Verónica. “I was in the Marines. Learned how to rappel and tie knots there and got addicted.”

Verónica held the coil in one hand and twirled a rope end between the fingers of the other. “Did you like the service?”

He shrugged and pulled two beers from his mini fridge and gave one to Verónica before sitting on the edge of the bed. “I didn’t get deployed to anything crazy.” He took a long pull from his beer. “Some of my friends did, but not me.”

Verónica put her unopened beer on the dresser and crossed the room to him. “We don’t have to talk about that.” She pushed him lightly until he leaned back on his elbows then placed a knee on either side of his hips. The way he looked up at her felt warm in her stomach, like the



rum from earlier. She leaned down and kissed him, her mouth stealing his breath as she lowered her body onto his.

\*\*\*

When Verónica woke up a few hours later, the dark hotel room was silent except for the man's even snoring next to her. His silhouette became defined as her eyes adjusted, like a valley being revealed by the sun. He smelled like laundry detergent and earth, and the light falling through the window made him look soft. She trailed her fingertips lightly along his shoulder and down his arm to his warm fingers. They grasped at her, but she slipped through.

Verónica collected her clothes from the floor and grabbed her backpack. She turned the shower on hot and stood under the water until it ran cold. This was the part she hated. Sneaking out in the morning before whoever put her up for the night woke up. This guy seemed pretty nice, but at least he wouldn't feel bad when he woke up and she was gone.

Sex somehow made it easier.

She dried off, dressed quickly, and packed her bag back up before she opened the bathroom door. The sun was just beginning to rise, a blue-grey light making everything a shadow in the room. Through the window above the messy desk, Verónica could see the moon still up, glowing in the lightening sky. Had to be almost six. She walked over and looked at the maps and books scattered all over the table top. He had passion. She turned and looked at the man. Maybe she could stay for the day, have breakfast at least. They hadn't talked much the night before, but she had a good feeling about him. She slipped her shoes off and slid back into bed, snuggling into the man's chest when his arm moved around her to pull her close.

“Have you ever been climbing?” he whispered into her neck.

\*\*\*

His name was Diego. He taught Verónica the basics of climbing and the ropes and harnesses that first day, but it wasn't until the next day that she tied in and really climbed.

The red rock face was only around fifteen feet; a fairly simple route for an experienced climber, but for a novice the climb up was tough. Diego's steady voice guided her from below, instructing her to reach her left hand for a hold, or to take a big step up on a tiny ledge the size of a finger. Halfway up her hands began to sweat, and the jagged rock pressed painfully into her fingertips, but she kept moving, kept reaching to move higher.

She reached the top almost without realizing it. Her heart racing, Verónica leaned back and sat into the rope a bit to take in the scene around her. After a few moments, Diego explained how to kick off the wall to descend, and when she rappelled down, the feeling of falling mingled with the power of her body into a sensation that made Verónica cry out, adrenaline shooting through her in a near-orgasmic way.

Verónica was still flying high from her climb, so she agreed when Diego suggested they take a hike. They wandered down a path with no destination, and Verónica followed Diego, her thoughts drifting lightly along. Squirrels chattered in the leaves, and light fell through the trees in such a way that she felt at peace with the world. They came around a corner, and the path spilled onto a beachy strip of sand with wild growth ahead of it.

“Lakebed is dry from summer,” Diego said.

Verónica was overcome with the colors. Shrubs and succulents mixed with sagebrush and sunflowers. Blues, greens, reds, and yellows all together in the evening light. Verónica was filled with the beauty of it all. It was magic here. She let go of Diego's hand and started spinning, her head thrown back and arms spread wide. She spun faster and faster, the world around her blurring into flashes of color streaking by, until she lost her footing and stumbled. She fell to the earth, laughing.

On the walk back to the car, they came across a field of sunflowers

“Should I pick one?”

“Sure,” he said.

She hesitated. “But I don't want it to die.”

Diego smiled. “Then leave it, and let it grow.”

\*\*\*

Diego shared easily. He told Verónica that he was the oldest of four. Mom and Dad divorced months after he joined the Marines. He had a scar on his abdomen from an emergency appendectomy. He snored when he drank too much. Verónica learned all of this quickly, within the first few days of knowing him. She also learned that he liked to run a finger from her earlobe to the dimple behind her knee, and then back up again, making her skin break out in goosebumps.

At first she told herself she would just stay until he was done in Phoenix, but when he packed up to go to Flagstaff and put her bag in his truck next to his own, she didn't say a word. She also didn't talk about her life back home. Or her daughters. And Diego didn't ask.

Things in Flagstaff were good. The hotel they stayed in had a little kitchenette, and after spending their days hiking or climbing, they took turns making dinner each night. Life was simple.

After about a week into their stay, Diego came back from a trip to the grocery store full of excitement. “So while I was in town, I ran into an old friend from home. Gabriel.” Diego pulled the groceries from the bags and stacked them on the table. “He lives here with his wife. I told them we’d meet for dinner and a few drinks tonight.”

Verónica’s stomach turned. “Uh, OK. You sure you want me to go?”

“Of course,” Diego said, “I can’t wait to show off my girl.” He dropped a kiss on her cheek and went into the bathroom.

When Verónica heard the shower running, she stepped out of their room and walked over to the payphone near the ice machine. His girl. The way he said it sounded so sure. It made Verónica both pleased and uncomfortable at the same time. She dropped a few coins into the phone and dialed the number.

“Benavente residence,” Gracie said after the second ring.

“Hey, baby!” Verónica said with forced enthusiasm.

“Mom?”

“Of course, hon, it’s me.”

“Is everything OK?”

Verónica winced at the worry in her younger daughter’s voice. “Yeah, everything’s fine,” she said gently.

“When are you coming home?”

“Soon, baby.” Verónica hesitated. “I met someone. And I like him. He’s nice.”

“Nice how? Like he buys you things?”

“No,” Verónica said. “Better than that. He likes to be outside, and he likes to talk about things. He even knows how to cook. Sort of.” She let out a little laugh.

“Abuelita is making fried chicken Sunday. Maybe you should bring him.”

The idea surprised Verónica. She never brought anyone home. She tried to imagine Diego at her mom’s house, him with her girls. If they drove straight, they could be in Highland by morning. She shook the idea from her head. “I don’t think I’ll be able to make it, *mija*. I’m still pretty far away.”

Gracie was quiet, but Verónica could hear her heavy breathing. “Come home, Mom. We need you.”

Guilt washed over Verónica. “Just hold on a little longer,” she said. “I’ll be home soon.”

\*\*\*

When Diego and Verónica arrived Gabriel and his wife were waiting for them in a corner booth. Everyone was all smiles and laughter, reminiscing about their childhood and high school years—pick up football games and spring breaks spent at the beach.

“So, how long have you two been together?” Gabriel’s wife asked. She was newly pregnant and kept a hand on her stomach throughout the conversation.

“Long enough,” Diego said. He reached for Verónica’s hand, but she slid from the booth.

“I’m going to run to the ladies room,” she said.

In the bathroom, Verónica stood in a stall for a few minutes then flushed the toilet and washed her hands. She splashed cool water on her face and dried it with stiff, brown paper towels. How could she tell him about Frankie and Gracie? He would realize what a terrible

person she was if he found out that she left her kids behind. Would know that something was wrong with her.

As Verónica rounded the corner back to the table, she heard Diego speaking. “Yeah, well, I know it’s crazy, but there’s just something about her.”

“You really think she’s the one?” Gabriel said.

“Yeah,” Diego responded. “She is. I’m going to ask her in a few days.”

Gabriel’s wife cooed. “This is so romantic!”

Glasses clinked, and Verónica took a step when Diego continued, “Hopefully she says yes, and we’ll have a little bun in our own oven soon. Verónica will be a great mother.”

\*\*\*

For the rest of the meal, Verónica kept a smile on her face. She made small talk and grinned at future plans for the four of them. It wasn’t until the plates were cleared that she slipped away. At the bar she ordered a double shot of whiskey and took it quick, before ordering another. Diego made eye contact from the booth, and she waved and forced another smile but didn’t go back and join the group.

An hour later, Diego found her in the back of the bar smoking a joint with a biker. “This is Gerald,” Verónica said to Diego, her arm thrown around Gerald’s shoulders.

They left the bar in a hurry. Verónica waited outside by the truck while Diego said goodbye to his friends. During the drive he didn’t say much, kept his eyes on the road. Verónica could feel he was mad but didn’t know how to fix it. She never knew how to fix things. Was better at breaking them. She slid across the bench seat toward him, close enough that her thigh

pressed against his. She reached her hand out and pressed it to his crotch. “Wanna pull over somewhere and have some fun?” she asked, then playfully bit at his flannel shirt.

He shifted away from her and lifted her hand from his lap. “Not now, Verónica.”

She pushed away from him and back on her side of the truck cab. “What, you don’t want me anymore? I thought I was your girl.” she asked in a quiet voice. She ripped her jacket off and pulled her shirt off over her head. “You don’t want this?” Her hands groped her own. “You don’t want me?”

Diego shook his head. “Please stop. You’re drunk. You’re not acting like yourself.”

“Like you’d know,” Verónica responded as they pulled up to a stop light. “You don’t know what I’m like. The things I’m capable of. You barely know me at all.” She grabbed her coat, got out of the truck and slammed the door before she began walking in the opposite direction that they’d come from.

“Verónica!” Diego yelled from inside the car, his voice muffled through the glass. But Verónica didn’t look back. She threw the coat over her bare shoulders and kept walking into the night.

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Her anger kept her warm at first. Then the alcohol. But hours later, as the sun began to rise, it was only her movement that kept Verónica from giving into the cold. Fortunately the hotel was up ahead. Diego had the only key to the room, so she tapped lightly on the window until she heard his movement within.

He opened the door wrapped in a blanket. Without hesitation, he pulled her into his arms. “You’re freezing,” he whispered. He moved his hands up and down her arms, sliding his warm palms over her back and shoulders as well. “I’m so glad you’re home, baby.” His lips roamed over her neck and mouth. “I love you.”

Verónica didn’t respond. Instead she pushed him toward the bed, silencing his words with her mouth and her hands.

\*\*\*

Later, after Diego began snoring, Verónica eased herself out of bed, careful not to wake him. She badly wanted a cigarette even though she hadn’t smoked in years. She took a quick shower and then gathered T-shirts, bras, and the like, stuffing them into her bag as she went. When she was all packed, she looked at Diego, who had turned in his sleep to his stomach. The light creeping through the curtains was bright, making it easy to make out the details of him. She could see the puckered scar on his shoulder from a fishing accident, the patch of short curly hairs in between his shoulder blades that she knew was soft as baby’s hair.

She was tempted to get back in bed next to him. To snuggle into his warmth and pretend she was just Verónica and nothing else. That she was the kind of person who could make things work. She moved closer to the bed, to Diego’s side, and let her fingers trail over his skin for just a moment. Just long enough for her to remember the feeling hours later when she was standing on a roadside, thumb out, waiting for the next ride.



## *Ajos and Hojas*

Abuelita sat at the head of her kitchen table, where three generations of Benaventé women worked in silence. The only sounds were made by their busy fingers as they each undertook one of the numerous tasks to make tamales. Abuelita's grand-daughter, Frances, slouched down low in her seat, breaking down bulb after bulb of garlic and adding each peeled clove to the pile growing in front of her. As the pile grew, Frances slouched lower, trying to use the garlic pyramid as a barrier between herself and her mother, Verónica, who sat directly across from her. Verónica worked unfolding dried corn husks, stacking them into her own piles, like the walls of a fort, barricading herself from both her mother and daughter. Abuelita stood over a wide-mouthed, shallow pan that held corn meal batter, saying a silent prayer that her daughter and grand-daughter would make it through the day in peace.

Abuelita worked the batter, one hand wielding an ancient beater that looked to be the same age as her daughter, while her other hand alternately added lard, salt, and garlic-infused chicken broth. All the while, she tasted a fingerful here and a fingerful there, adjusting the flavor, texture, or consistency of the mixture accordingly.

"Finished," Verónica said, pushing away from the table.

"OK," Abuelita said, "plug the sink and run hot, hot water over them."

Verónica tossed a stack of husks in the sink. "You know, I *have* made tamales before."

"*Pues*, I know, *mija*. I was just reminding. It's been a few years since you've been home when we made them."

Verónica rolled her eyes at Abuelita and turned the water on. After a few seconds, steam began to rise from the water gathering in the sink. When Frances and her little sister were younger, they would save the corn hair from the husks where it had dried to a deep garnet color.

They would make silky red piles while they worked; then they would gather the hairs in bunches, combing them, and smoothing them straight. The last time Verónica was home to help with tamales, five years ago, she and the girls sat out back in the warm winter sun near the orange tree, mother and daughters in a row. Abuelita had watched as Verónica braided the jewel-toned hairs into Frances' hair, while Frances braided them into Graciela's. The sun made the red glow against their own auburn hues, and the glorious beauty of all of her girls made Abuelita feel so full and whole. And in that moment she was certain that Verónica would finally stay for good.

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“Do you want some coffee, Abuelita?” Frances said. “I made some earlier.”

“No, *mija*, I'm fine. But maybe your mother?”

Frances' eyes went back to the garlic she peeled.

“Don't worry about it, Frankie. I'll pour my own.” Verónica shut off the water and grabbed a mug.

“I think Frances may want some,” Abuelita said to her daughter, not looking up from the pan where she roasted flour in hot oil. The first day Verónica was back was always the worst for everyone. So many minefields for Verónica to cross. So many questions the girls wanted to ask. And Verónica had been gone almost a year this time. The man she had gone off with last had ridden a loud motorcycle and had long, greasy hair that he held down with a dirty bandana. Abuelita spit when she met him. But Verónica didn't seem to care. From the moment she came home from the bar talking about him, Abuelita suspected that he would be the new fascination.

“Oh yeah?” Verónica turned and spoke to her daughter. “You finally joining the caffeine team with the rest of us?”

Frances shrugged. “Sometimes.”

“All right, then,” Verónica said with a smile. “How do you like it? Cream and sugar like me and your little sister?”

“Black.”

Verónica cleared her throat and poured a second cup.

“Speaking of Graciela,” Abuelita said, “she should be back just as the tamales are ready.”

“Lucky girl.” Verónica placed the coffee in front of Frances. “I’d love to be sledding in the mountains instead of working in the kitchen all day.”

“Someone has to do the work,” Frances muttered loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Is that why you didn’t go along?” Verónica said. “Or are thirteen-year-olds too immature for you now that you’re in High School?”

Frances snorted. “Sure.”

“No, don’t lie,” Abuelita said. “Frances wanted to go, but Graciela told her no.”

“Wow. Gracie said no?” Verónica raised her eyebrows. “That’s a first.”

“Lots of firsts happen while you’re gone,” Frances said. She peeled the last clove of garlic in a bulb, then turned to Abuelita. “Is this enough garlic?”

Abuelita nodded. “*Si*,”

Verónica grabbed her purse from where it hung on the chair back and said, “I’ll be out back having a smoke while the *hojas* soak, Mom. Call me if you need me.”

Frances stood at the counter working the blender making more of the garlic-infused broth. She added three to four cloves of garlic to the pitcher at a time, along with chicken stock

left over from the day before. Frances started the pulse low, as her grandmother had taught her, slowly increasing speed so that the garlic and stock blended together in an almost creamy texture.

Abuelita laid a hand on her granddaughter's shoulder.

Frances stopped the machine, and turned to face Abuelita. "She makes me crazy."

"She hasn't been home a whole day; how can she drive you crazy already?"

"It makes me crazy when she's in the same room as me," Frances said quietly, her hands arranging the garlic cloves on the counter into little piles.

"She's your mother," Abuelita said.

"But you're my mom," Frances replied.

\*\*\*

A short time later, Abuelita stood next to the table taking the batter-covered corn husks and placing a spoonful of meat and chilé sauce mixture in the center of the husk. After adding the perfect amount, she folded one side in at a time, the sides of the leaf hugging the filled center. Squeezing from the bottom she pushed the mass up an inch, then folded the bottom up, making the tamale into a neatly wrapped package.

Verónica returned from her cigarette with renewed energy and worked non-stop, covering husk after husk with batter and lining them up on the table for Abuelita to fill. The table became crowded as Abuelita had to smooth each one out before she could fill it because the batter was spread unevenly, sometimes thick and sometimes thin. When there was no more space left on the table for more husks, Verónica grabbed a clean spoon from the drawer and plopped a spoonful of

the chicken and *chilé verde* mixture into the center of a batter-covered husk. Abuelita watched as her daughter folded the edges of the husk over the chilé mixture and placed it in the pan, then grabbed another spoonful and husk.

“That’s Abuelita’s job,” Frances said, the spoon she was using to spread the batter clenched in her fist.

“Well, now I’m doing it, too,” Verónica said, placing another tamale into the pan. “Besides, we need to pick it up on this side. Mom is getting backed up.”

“Well, *mija*,” Abuelita said, “I’m having to smooth the ones that you’ve done so they are even.”

Verónica cocked her head to one side. “Does it really matter? They’ll all steam up fine.”

Abuelita shook her head but held her tongue. It wouldn’t help to argue with Verónica today. Instead Abuelita just kept working her own way, smoothing the batter and making sure the tamales were stacked neatly in the pan, only occasionally repositioning one that Verónica had put inside. While they worked, Abuelita couldn’t help but search her daughter’s eyes to see if her pupils were dilated.

\*\*\*

Three hours later, the first pan of tamales was bubbling on the stove, and Abuelita listened as Verónica spoke to Frances.

“...And after I get a job, we’ll get a cute place, Frankie, maybe by your school so you won’t have to ride the bus anymore.”

“I don't mind the bus,” Frances said, grabbing a spoonful of batter and spreading it in a thin layer over the cornhusk she had laid open on the table.

“Well, even if you don't mind, I mind. No daughter of mine should have to schlepp on the bus. You can even get your license soon. And if I get a great job,” Verónica said, sing-songing, “maybe a car is in your sweet sixteen future.”

Abuelita's brow furrowed. Verónica was at it again. “Wow, a car would be something,” Abuelita said. “I could never have imagined that when I was a girl. Where are you thinking of working?”

“Oh, I don't know. Something will come up I'm sure.”

Abuelita reached into the pan, scraping the last of the meat and chilé mixture. “OK, my *mijas*, break time. Then we'll need the other pan of *carne* from the garage to do the second half.”

“I'll get it,” Verónica said. “I want another smoke anyway,”

“Ay. Don't you think it's time to cut back, maybe stop smoking altogether?”

Verónica laughed. “I have no intention of quitting!” she called as she went out the front door.

“Don't ever start smoking,” Abuelita said to her granddaughter “It's a nasty habit. Your momma should never have started.”

“Don't worry, I have no intention of being like her,” Frances said and pushed up from the table, heading down the hall towards the bathroom.

Abuelita sat down in her daughter's chair and sighed. It was worse than usual this time. Since Frances and Graciela were little girls, their mother was in and out. Frances took it harder, but she normally came around after a few days. This time, though, Frances seemed different. Less mad. More cold. Abuelita hoped things would fix themselves when Graciela was back. A

small smile appeared on Abuelita's face. Her youngest granddaughter was a firecracker. Once, when Abuelita went to put away some clothes, she found Graciela dancing on Abuelita's bed wearing one of her slips. Graciela had turned on the record player, and it blared "the lady in red, the lady in red" while Graciela's little feet moved fast, her body twisting and turning to the rhythm.

Frances snapped Abuelita back to the present. "I'm not moving back with her this time," she said.

Abuelita took her granddaughter in her arms. It shouldn't be like this between a mother and child. "No, *mija*, no. Your mother, she'll settle this time. She's already talking about a job and a place to live. Maybe a new car for you. She needs to be here to show you how to be a young lady."

"Ha! What does she know about being a lady?" Frances said. "She runs off, then comes home and tries to play normal life. Besides, you know what will happen. She'll be here a month or a few months. And maybe she'll even get a job. But we both know one day she'll be gone, and there'll be a note, or a message on the machine, or nothing at all. And we'll move back here. And Gracie will cry for a week."

Abuelita was quiet. When had Frances figured everything out?

"She isn't a mom," Frances said softly. "She's a bad big sister who comes to town and ruins everything. Even Gracie."

Abuelita wanted to cry. It was true. But Verónica was their mom. She carried them in her stomach. She *had* to love them. "No more. That's enough. She is your mother. And if she wants you with her, you go. If she tells you to do something, you listen."

"But—"

“Enough! I mean it. Your mother is coming, and I want you to be a good girl. Show her what good girls she has.”

Frances closed her mouth, but her eyes pleaded.

Abuelita knew what she had to answer. A daughter needs her mother. She shook her head.

“This smells delicious!” Verónica said as she walked in the door carrying a large pot full of tamale filling.

Frances broke eye contact with Abuelita and turned to her mother. “Hey, Mom!” she said with a false-sounding enthusiasm, “Guess you're here for a first after all.”

Verónica pushed the door shut with her foot. “I'm sorry?” she said.

“Yeah, you know firsts, like we were talking about.” Frances slapped a corn husk on the table and grabbed a heaping spoon of batter. “Gracie's off having a first right now.”

“We've been to the snow before,” Abuelita said.

“You know what she said?” Frances continued, her eyes on Verónica and a mean smile on her face. “She said it doesn't matter anyway, because you'll end up sleeping with hundreds of people, so why is the first one important.” In a swift downward motion Frances flicked the glob of batter on the spoon to the corn husk

A look of horror dawned in Verónica's eyes.

“She said, ‘Whatever, Franks, you should get it over with, too.’” Frances’ voice broke a little. She looked down at the corn husk and roughly spread the batter. “So great, Mom, back just in time to see Gracie becoming a slut, just like you. Aren't you proud?”



Abuelita closed her eyes. She didn't want to believe what Frances was saying. Gracie having sex? The sound of Frances slamming her spoon down made Abuelita open her eyes just in time to see Frances pick up the batter-covered corn husk and fling it into her mother's face.

Verónica let go of the pan and brought her hands up to protect herself from the soft flying object. The pan full of pork and chilé crashed to the floor, splattering chilé in a deep red slash along the length of the kitchen.

"Great. Now you ruined the tamales, too." Frances looked at her mother. "Why don't you go back to where ever you run away to and leave us alone?" She stepped past her mother, through the mess, and out the front door, leaving chilé tracks in her wake.

Abuelita looked at her daughter, who stood covered in batter and chilé. She didn't know what to say. Nothing could fix the pain her daughter must be feeling in this moment. So Abuelita handed her daughter a kitchen towel and began to sweep the chilé and meat into a pile.

It was Verónica who broke the silence a moment later. "Is she right?"

Abuelita exhaled and shook her head. "No, *mija*, your place is here, with your family." She set the broom against the wall and went to her daughter. "We will just keep working here, and then Graciela will be home, and we can sit and have dinner, and everything will be all right."

Verónica leaned against Abuelita. "You think so?"

"Good food always makes things better." Abuelita gave Verónica a little squeeze, then went to the stove. "These should be done, now. I can smell them," she said, and she took the lid off of the pan and set it aside, waiting for the steam to clear. When it did, she peered inside and saw chilé and meat on the pan walls, in the water, and covering all the other tamales that hadn't leaked. She closed her eyes and exhaled hard, in a huff. Most were probably ruined. They could clean the mixture off some of the ones that were sealed properly, but it was all a big mess now.

“Everything look OK?” Verónica asked.

“*Si*,” Abuelita said as she put the lid back on the pan.

## Unpacking

I fold a sheet from the last load and place it on top of the stack, smooth edges to the right. It's taken the majority of the day, but it finally feels like I'm close to finishing. I carry the stack of sheets down the hall to the linen closet. Abuelita's funeral was at eleven; I've been unpacking for nine hours. I stand on my toes to place the sheets on the highest shelf, smoothing a bubble out of the striped contact paper I'd put in just a few hours before. Back in the kitchen, I stretch my back, trying to ease the discomfort that arrived during my fourth month and seems here to stay.

Dammit. I forgot to eat again. Gracie is going to kill me. After she went with me to my last appointment and heard that I had lost three pounds, she has been hounding me with text reminders to have a snack. But that was before Abuelita died. Since then she hasn't sent any texts about eating, and I haven't been hungry at all.

When I open the refrigerator door, the bottles I unpacked earlier and put on top of the fridge rattle. I'll relocate them in the morning. I tear lettuce, quarter a tomato, grate a carrot, and slice an avocado for a basic salad. If I have to eat, it might as well be something that's good for the baby. And not everyone gains a lot of weight. I wrote a report in junior high about Abuelita's life, and when I interviewed her, she said that she only gained fifteen pounds when she was pregnant with Mom.

I should've gone to the gathering after the funeral. There would have been good food there. Tamales and mole, chile rellenos. Something that might have been able to tempt me. But I just haven't felt comfortable at Abuelita's since she died.

I shake my head. Not Abuelita's. Gracie's. It's hers now.

When we were little, Gracie and I used to play house in this toy kitchen Abuelita got us. The cupboards were full of fake cans of vegetables and plastic plates and pots and pans. When I was the mom, I would pour a fake can of veggies into a pan and put it back into the cabinet before stirring with a tiny spatula. When Gracie was the mom, she would toss the can over her shoulder. I can only imagine what the house will look like in five years.

I finish my salad and wash the dishes, dry them with a towel and put them away. I should probably shower, but I'm so exhausted it'll have to wait until morning. As a compromise, I make myself wash my face and brush my teeth before going to lie down.

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The crisp sheets smell of the lavender sachets I use in the dryer. A wedding present from a co-worker. At least Abuelita got to see the wedding. I lie on my left side, like all the books and websites say I should, even though my belly hasn't grown much. That doesn't mean there isn't a tiny person in there needing me to make sure the placenta has good blood flow. I take a few deep breaths and close my eyes.

I wonder if Alvaro will like how I've set the house up. He'll be back in three days. I roll to my other side, snuggling into the pillow. I still don't understand why he couldn't have come back early for the funeral, but the long truck runs will end well before Michaela is born. My hand drifts to my abdomen and feels for my daughter. Alvaro promised to be here for her.

What if the baby comes early? I roll to my back and look at the ceiling. She won't.

But what if?

Then I'll handle it. I focus on my breathing. The Lamaze video I watched on YouTube said controlled breathing is good to calm the nerves. I roll back to my left side and begin counting my breaths.

In and out. One... But then I'll be alone. Alvaro will be gone like he is gone today...In...He won't, everything will be fine, and out. Two. In...He'll be gone and I'll be alone. Three... Out. Four... Abuelo wasn't there when Uncle Nathan was born....In. But Abuelita had her mom. Out...Where's yours? seveneighnine.

Ten. I sit up and snap on my bedside light, my hand on my chest as I try to catch my breath. It slows somewhat, and I kick the sheets off and head to the bathroom. I should have showered before I lay down. Lazy.

I step in the steamy water, and it warms my skin, but I still feel cold. Turning it up, I stand under the stream face forward, letting myself become hypnotized by the feel of water running down my face and body. I stay that way for a few minutes, my breathing finally normal. I don't know what I was getting upset about. Maybe Abuelita wouldn't be there, or my mom for that matter, but Alvaro would. And Gracie. Even though she is taking Abuelita's death really hard, she wouldn't miss her niece's birth. Memo is excited to have a little cousin. They could spend Easters together at the house, the kids hunting eggs in the same backyard Gracie and I hunted in.

I turn halfway around, letting the water run through my hair and down my back. The shower is just what I needed. I could spend hours in here, becoming lined and wrinkled like an old woman, but I read that too much heat might not be good for the baby, so I lower the temperature and rinse off.

Back in bed, I read a chapter in my newest baby book, this one about attachment parenting. Mom practiced un-attachment parenting. I close the book and turn off the lamp. I take a deep breath and wait for my body to relax into sleep. No over-thinking. Just deep breaths and sleep will come.

When I found out I was pregnant, I'd been really scared of telling Alvaro. We had only been together a little over a year, but he was wonderful. I remember the way his eyes softened, the way he held my hands and told me how much he loved me. When Abuelita asked him if he was going to make an honest woman out of me, he proposed on the spot. And he understood my desire to have the wedding before the baby, even if that meant getting married two months after he asked me. Our small wedding was different than what I had imagined as a girl, but I worked hard to make it the best it could be. Abuelita made mole, the same her mom made on her wedding day years and years before.

I turn to my other side and frown. Things changed so quickly after the wedding. It seemed like all we did lately was argue about the smallest things. Insignificant things like buying new socks or the proper way to wash dishes. But now that we are in the new place, I hope things will calm down. Deep breaths, deep breaths. I begin to drift off, thinking about a garden I can plant in the spring near the back fence. And maybe we can plant a fruit tree when Michaela is born. I heard of a man who planted a whole orchard to celebrate his daughter's birth. A legacy in her name...

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My eyes pop open, and an eerie blue light is coming from the nightstand. I sit up and stumble over to the dresser, where I left my phone hours ago. The display shows three missed calls and four new texts, the most recent from Alvaro.

*Just parked and turned in for the night. Really wish I had been there for you today. 2 days till I'm back, amor. How was it at Gracie's after?*

The other texts and missed calls are from Gracie herself.

*Where did you disappear to? Everyone is here, driving me crazy. SOS, Frankie. SOS.*

That had been at noon, an hour after the service. Then, a little after one, she sent:

*Are you still coming? I need you to get through this...*

Her last text arrived at eight.

*Dammit, Frances. You suck. Everyone's gone now. I get it, but you could have told me you weren't coming. I had to deal with them all by myself. Whatever. It's done. I still love you. Come over tomorrow and help me clean up and eat this food. Memo is already passed out, and I'm gonna do the same. Night.*

I groan and sit on the edge of the bed. I would have to go over tomorrow. I'd only been once since Abuelita died, to help Gracie pick out some clothes for the funeral home. Her room still smelled like antibacterial cream and garlic. Medicine and spice. Doctor and Chef. Healer and Feeder. I couldn't stand it in there, so I grabbed the green suit Abuelita often wore on holidays, threw it on the bed, and headed straight outside, wishing I could have a smoke.

I throw myself back on the bed, stretching my arms above me, reaching. It might have been different if I had been living there with Abuelita before she died, like we had planned. I know when Gracie and her man split up, it seemed natural that she and the baby would move into the house. They didn't have anywhere else to go. And Abuelita had needed someone living

with her full time. It worked out for everyone. Even me. If I had moved in and gotten pregnant and Alvaro and I were married, what would have happened?

I take my old robe and slippers out of the closet. Then the house would be mine and not Gracie's. The house was the safe place when I was a kid. If Mom was dropping us off there, it meant we would be with Abuelita, and everything would be all right. Even if Mom didn't come back for months, Abuelita was always there. She would hug Gracie close when she cried and would answer all my questions when I asked. Even little Memo got special meals prepared by his great-grandmother when he was feeling out of sorts.

I leave a trail of turned on lights in each room I pass. Now Gracie gets the house, and all of Abuelita's things. And I get an empty home.

I'm panting a little as I enter the garage and make my way over to the shelves unpacked only a few hours before. On the shelf behind Alvaro's tools is the bag of baby-proofing doodads from the hardware store. Alvaro promised he would install them before the baby is born, but if I do it now it'll be one less thing we'll have to worry about. I move the packages to the worktable and take one out to read the instructions on the back. My hands are shaking so badly I have to rest them on the table, but after a few moments my breathing is back to normal, and I'm ready to baby-proof my house.

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Two hours later and my body is exhausted, so I lie down again. But sometimes when I'm extra tired, it's even harder to sleep. I close my eyes tight and since I can't take a sleeping pill, I try another sleep technique I've read about. This one says to start at your toes and physically relax



them, letting the tension drain from that area before moving to your foot, then ankle and so on until you reach your head or you are asleep.

I close my eyes and imagine my toes have a red light glowing out of them, and then I imagine it slowly floating away, until the red has disappeared and my toes look normal. It feels like maybe it's working, so I focus on both of my feet, imagining the same red glow slowly dissipating. This could work. I need to rest, need to take better care of my baby. I curl my arms around my belly. I am going to be a great mom. My baby is going to live in the same house until she moves out. She will go to the all the same schools, have neighborhood friends she will know her whole life. All her things will be saved for her, so when she gets her own house, she can fill it with memories of her childhood. I won't ever throw her things in the trash, no matter how mad I am.

I roll over, my breath coming quick. I can't change what Mom did; I can only raise my daughter better. That bar isn't set too high. Even Gracie is above it.

I refocus on my toes, envisioning the red light. Mom should have come to the funeral, at least. If nothing else, she owed her mom an appearance at the cemetery. But who am I kidding? I roll back to my other side; she didn't show at my wedding. Why would she at her mom's funeral? At least my wedding had booze. Which I helped pay for but couldn't drink. Not even a sip of champagne.

Gracie had said I deserved one freebie drink during my pregnancy, but I didn't take it at the wedding. It was a good thing because Gracie had enough for both of us. I couldn't blame her, what with her recent break up, but even Memo looked embarrassed for his mom. And he's only three. Not that his age matters. I know better than anyone that kids somehow understand when their parents are making a fool of themselves.

I lie on my back, completely giving up on the relaxing-my-body-parts-thing. My legs feel heavy, and they get tangled in the sheets as I twist and turn in search of the right spot. I'm going to be a bad mother. I don't eat right. I'm not getting enough sleep. The baby hasn't kicked, yet, even though all the books say it should happen around week sixteen.

What if she's a preemie? And no one is home. Alvaro will be in Virginia or somewhere, and I'll be on the bathroom floor trying to get up and call for help. There'll probably be an earthquake then, too, so even when I get to the phone, all the lines will be tied up, and I'll have to lie on the floor for hours in pain, like Abuelita did when she fell and broke her hip. Then I'll try to have the baby here on the floor, and no one will be here to help. I cringe and curl up into a ball at the thought, my breathing becoming tight. The only person who would have been able to help anyway would be Abuelita. She delivered four babies in her lifetime. Or was it five? I can't remember, but I have the details in that report.

Or what if Alvaro is here when I have the baby, but something is wrong? All the articles lately are talking about poisons in the food source. What if the stuff I've been eating somehow poisons the baby, and she's born with some freaky mutation? Like a tail. Or a third eye.

My breath is coming fast now, like I've been jogging.

Or maybe it could even be some normal mutation, like that statistic that says one in two thousand babies is born with atypical genitalia.

I try to silence those thoughts, but it feels like I'm choking. I get up and go to the kitchen for a glass of water. I take a few swallows, but I'm panting so hard, I spill most of it down my front. I put the glass down, make my way to the dining room table, and sit in a chair with my head between my legs.

In. Out. In. Out.

It's not working! I raise my head, and on top of the refrigerator I see Alvaro's cognac.

Maybe just one. To soothe my nerves.

I pull the chair over to the fridge and stand on it to reach the bottle.

The amber liquid is only a finger tall in my water glass, and I drink it quickly.

Oh. The warmth spreads in my belly and calms the nausea I didn't realize was there. So nice. I pour another quick. It's made of grapes, same as wine, and European women drink wine during their pregnancies. Right? Besides Gracie said I had a freebie. But she would never have to know I was taking it.

I pour a little more into my glass. Gracie drank while she was pregnant. She didn't even know she's was pregnant until she was almost five months, and she spent all that time drinking and smoking weed. She ate sushi and drank coffee. Never gave it a second thought. And Memo is fine. So it isn't like these few drinks will make my baby sick like the neighbor's baby. Abuelita told me about it when I did that report. I got an A on that assignment. Got As almost always. Not Gracie, though. Barely graduated, never had a real job. Just popped out a baby with her boyfriend and gave Abuelita a great-grand baby and got the house.

I bring a hand to my belly. Abuelita will never know Michaela.

What am I going to do? I need her to answer all my questions and tell me how things were when she was raising babies. I need her help. I cross my arms on the table and rest my head for a minute.

The report.

I have Abuelita's words. I have her life story.

I stand up, swaying a little. Where was it? I'm halfway down the hall, heading to the office where I think it might be, when I realize it's not here at all. I gave it to Abuelita after I got

the graded copy back. I wanted her to read it. To see that I'd gotten an A. It was sitting on her bookshelf, where it had been for years.

Did she ever read it? I shake the thought from my head and grab my keys.

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The drive over to Abuelita's seems to take only seconds, and before I know it I'm there. I park my car in front of the house, parallel to the Christmas tree planted in the center of the front lawn. It's been there since before I was born. Planted by my grandpa when my mom was a girl. Abuelita didn't like killing a tree every year. Another story I have in the report. My teacher really liked that part. I lean over and grab my flashlight out of the glove box. The sun is almost up, the sky lightened to that early translucent blue, but it will be dark in the house. Gracie has never been an early riser.

I unlock the front door and step inside. I wait for my eyesight to adjust a little before making my way to the hallway and down it towards Abuelita's room. I open the door quickly, knowing if I go slowly it will creak like an old haunted house in the wind. I close the door behind me without a sound, and then I click on my flashlight. I angle the flashlight to Abuelita's bookshelf, catching the image of Abuelita's wedding day in the framed photograph on the dresser. I grab the frame and put it under my arm, then sweep the light around the room, thinking I should grab something else, when I see Gracie asleep in Abuelita's bed.

What is she doing here? She has her own bedroom! I take two steps to the bed before I realize what I'm doing and back up, covering the flashlight beam. Get the report and get out.

I step quietly over to the bookshelf and look for the report using the reddish glow made by my hand over the flashlight. There it is, in the corner of the bottom shelf, exactly where I thought it would be!

I grab the report and put it with the frame under my arm, quickly making my way out of the room. As I ease the door shut, the picture frame slips out from under my arm and crashes to the floor. I slam the door without thinking and start running. She can't see me! I make it to the front door, slamming that behind me as well, and am almost in my car when Gracie is yelling from the doorway, "I'm calling the police, so you better get out of here!"

Shit. Shit. Shit.

"Frankie?" Gracie steps into the yard and lowers the phone from her ear. "What are you doing here?"

"Nothing." That isn't going to work, so I hold up my report. "Just picking this up, you know me, have to have everything organized."

Gracie is at the front gate and has a very confused look on her face. Big surprise. This is Gracie I'm dealing with. I might be able to pull it off.

I unlock my doors, and throw the report on the passenger seat. "I'll see you later, Sis." I am about to slide into the car, almost home free when I drop my keys. As I go to pick them up, I hit my head on the car door.

"Son of a bitch!" I yell, holding my head where I whacked it.

Gracie is there suddenly, touching my hand gingerly. "Frankie," she sniffs the air, "have you been drinking?"

My face flushes, and I begin to tremble. "Of course not! Do you think I would drink while I'm pregnant? Are you crazy?"

I try to push her away, but Gracie pulls back at the same time, and I lose my balance for a moment. Gracie reaches out to catch me, but I wave her hands away as I find my footing.

“I don't need your help,” I say. “I'm strong. I don't need anyone's help. I didn't cry when Abuelita died like you, wailing for everyone to hear.” I grimace. “God, Gracie, it's not all about you.”

Gracie is watching me, a horrified, hurt look on her face.

“Oh, are you gonna cry now, too? Gonna cry and run into Abuelita's house and jump into Abuelita's bed? Gonna take over here and become the head of the family? Please.” I'm on a roll now, taking slow steps toward my sister as she cringes backward, like she always does, retreating to the house that should have been mine. “I'm the oldest sister. I'm the one who should have been here. If I was here maybe I could've helped her. Maybe I could've saved her!”

“Hey, wait a minute!” Gracie stops and stands up straight. “She was sick. There was nothing I could have done.”

“You could have taken better care of her, instead of having her wait on you hand and foot.”

“What are you talking about? That's what Abuelita loved. She loved spoiling Memo, and cooking for us, and taking care of us. But I took care of her, too. I drove her to the doctor, and to get her hair done. I even bathed her when her arthritis was bothering her.”

“I would've done everything!” I say savagely, my hands clawing the air. “I would have done everything, but I couldn't because you were here. And now it's all yours. You get it all. You have all the memories that are left from my childhood. And everything from Abuelita. You get to be the one.”

I'm suddenly exhausted, and my legs feel so shaky and weak, I know I have to sit before I fall over. I make it the few steps to my car and get in.

Gracie comes over to my window. "Wait, you shouldn't be driving," she says, concern in her voice. "Think about the baby."

I slam my car into gear and accelerate away. Doesn't she realize that I am thinking about my baby? My baby is the most important thing in the world. I pat the folder on the passenger seat. Even if Abuelita's gone, I still have her words. Once I read them I'll be able to get some rest.

When I get home, I heat some milk on the stove as I skim the pages, stirring with one hand, reading with the other. The first few pages talk about Abuelita's childhood and all the hard work she had to do, traveling with her father during the harvest seasons to pick grapes or strawberries, avocados or almonds. I stir the milk absently as I skip over the parts where I report about her father dying, or the family being so poor her mother would gather food from dumpsters behind grocery stores just to feed the family.

Finally about halfway through, I find the part with the stories about childbirth and raising children. About figuring out how to be a mother to her nephew when she was only eleven. About the joy Abuelita felt the first time she held Uncle Nathan in her arms. I read the three pages that focus on these moments over and over, trying to hear Abuelita's voice telling me what to do, telling me that everything will be OK. But I don't hear anything.

The sound of the milk bubbling over brings me back. I turn off the stove and move the pan to the sink, burning my hand a little on the handle. I turn the cold water on and let it run for a moment, cooling, before I place my hand under the stream. The burn isn't bad, just a little raised skin.

I dry my hand and feel the weight of the day finally catching up with me. Sleep. I fish my phone out of my purse to charge it while I sleep and see that I have a new message from Gracie.

*Hey, I don't know what that was all about, but I love you, sister. Call me tomorrow.*

*Everything is going to be OK.*

I blow out a hard breath and close my eyes. I should respond. I should apologize. I open my eyes and my thumb wavers over the reply button. Moving back and forth a little, like the answer is waiting in my motion. I should say something. Anything. Let her know I got home safe, at least. But my thumb wavers still, refusing to push reply.

Instead it pushes delete.



## Down for the Count

“...And that was when I hit rock bottom.” I took a breath. “I knew I couldn't continue that way. I was hurting everyone around me. Well, I was hurting the ones who were still talking to me, anyway.” I ran a hand through my hair, remembering the disappointment in my son's eyes the night I hit bottom. My knuckles cut and swollen from fighting with his aunt. But all that was over. I was an alcoholic, and I was ready to admit it.

“I got myself into a program. And it wasn't easy. I didn't have insurance, so I found a clinic online that accepted Medi-Cal. I don't know what changed in me, but something did. I knew that without help, I was gonna go too far down the hole. So far that I couldn't come back.”

I took a drink of coffee and let the memories of all the almost-too-far things I'd done flash through my mind: the night I'd tried to send Memo to live with his father; the time I'd woken up in a parking lot, asleep at the wheel of my still-running car; the night I beat the shit out of my sister.

“But here I am today, day 736, a little over two years sober.” I held up my chip like an award, triumphant. “It was a hard road, but I'm glad I walked it. I have my son back living with me now. I'm redeveloping relationships with my family members. And I have a job that I kinda like, even if it is hectic. Things are looking good. And I don't think they would be without everyone here, taking it one day at a time with me.” I looked around. “My name is Graciela, and I'm an alcoholic. Thank you.”

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“Thank you for calling GE Capital, how can I help you?”

Three hours in to work the next day, I thought maybe I should reevaluate what I'd said about liking my job. The mortgage crisis made my job as a customer service representative kind of depressing. The majority of people were calling to try to figure out how to save their homes from foreclosure, but all I could do was transfer them to another department that I knew had an hour hold time. They would probably lose their patience and hang up before even speaking to anyone. I felt a twisting in my gut each time I transferred a call. Which was approximately every three minutes.

“Hi, I’m calling to talk to someone about getting a modification on my grandma's house,” the woman on the other end of the line said after she provided me with all of the information on the account. She sounded my age.

“I'm sorry, but unless you are authorized to speak on your grandmother's behalf I can't provide you with details about her account.” I doubted the woman was trying to commit fraud, but the calls *were* being recorded.

“My grandma is right here, can she just tell you it's OK?”

“That's fine; put her on the phone.”

I heard the woman speaking faintly, explaining to her grandmother what needed to be done.

“Oh, of course,” the older woman said after confirming her account information. “My *mija* takes care of everything for me.”

*Mija.*

“Thank you very much, Ms. Aguirre,” I said, a smile playing on my lips. “Pass the phone to your granddaughter, and we’ll see how we can help you.”

They had a common story. Grandma’s home value had skyrocketed, and she was convinced to refinance by a young mortgage broker. It was an opportunity to do some much-needed improvements on the house. But now that the mortgage bubble had popped, their home was upside down, and they owed more money than the home was worth. Even worse, their interest rate was adjustable, and the adjustment date was looming. Same as half the country. It made me sick to hear her describe what was going to happen, but what could I do?

“OK, well I’ve noted your authorization in the system. Let me transfer you to the modifications department, and they’ll get you started in the process.” I heard the falseness in my voice. “Thank you for calling GE Capital, and have a nice day.” I punched the transfer button.

Sighing, I removed my headset and closed my eyes for a minute. She was going to get the run around. And they would probably lose their home.

“Kathy?” I called out opening my eyes and seeing a picture on my cubicle wall of my son, Memo. It was from Easter a few years before. He was three, wearing a little gray suit, with a yellow bowtie that had blue polka dots all over. So young and formal. The last Easter at Abuelita’s house.

“What’s up?” Kathy said as she popped her head over the four-foot wall separating us. She was probably the closest thing to a friend I’d made since getting sober. Most people had faded away when I cut out the alcohol.

“What are the chances of someone getting a mod done before New Year’s?” I asked.

“With our turnaround time right now?” Kathy said. “Slim to none.” She had worked at GE for eight years, well before the boom. She knew people in every department, probably

could've been a supervisor, but she said she liked working the phones. "Less stress when you're just the operator," she said once while we smoked cigarettes after lunch.

I put my headset back on and was about to take another call when Kathy popped back up, "Are you busy tomorrow night?"

"Not really. What's up?"

"Well there's this book club I'm in, and we need some new blood. It only meets once a month, and the books we read aren't really long or anything. Only like two hundred pages most of the time. This month we read *Tortilla Flat* by Steinbeck."

"Haven't read it," I said, wishing I had. I knew I should probably go to a meeting if I had some free time, but socializing with grown people and talking about books sounded like just what I needed.

"Oh, no problem! Mostly we just drink wine and gossip anyway. You'll love it!"

My heart sank. Kathy didn't know I was a recovering alcoholic. She didn't know this was day 737. It wasn't like I was hiding it, there had just never been a good time to bring it up.

"Oh wait, tomorrow's the fourteenth right? Sorry, Memo has an after school thing. Basketball, I think," I said vaguely. "I have to pick him up late. No drinking for this designated driver." I finished by rolling my eyes, as if a night of wine and gossip is what I'd rather be doing. And maybe, if I had been a normal person, that could have been my life.

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"Hey," I called as I walked up the drive of my sister Frances' house.

“Hey.”

She was sitting on the porch, drinking a beer. Through the open window, I could hear Memo and my niece, Michaela, playing.

“How was he today?”

“Same,” Frances answered. “They got wet in the sprinklers, but he still has some things in the dresser, so he's in dry clothes now.”

It was always like this with her. She never said anything directly about taking care of Memo while I was in rehab and for a while after I was out and still getting my feet under me. But it was always on the edge of conversation.

I sat down and lit a cigarette. “So, I was thinking we should try making tamales this year for Christmas.”

“Really?” She snorted. “Seems impossible without Abuelita.”

“Well, we gotta try some time. It's been four years. The recipe can't die with her.”

Frances didn't say anything; instead she took a pull of her beer. This is something else we don't talk about, the fact that she drinks in front of me and my son. Or the fact that she was just as drunk the night I bottomed out and we got physical.

“Remember all those Christmas Eve mornings? Getting up at 5 a.m. to go buy the *masa*. Abuelita in the kitchen heating, stirring, blending.”

I laugh at the memory. “Yeah, and then hours of spreading the *masa* afterwards.”

She groaned. “Not something I'm looking forward to, but at least we can have the kids help a little now.” Taking a deep breath she stood, crushing the empty can of beer in her hand as she did. “Let's do it over here, I have most of Abuelita's pans.”

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The old block still looked the same, and I slouched a little in my seat in hopes the neighbors wouldn't recognize me. Memo was telling me about the dodgeball game at recess that day. I half-listened while peering over the steering wheel.

I hadn't done a drive-by in a while. Months probably. But talking with Frances had made me nostalgic. I wanted to see the Christmas tree.

"Mommy, where are we?"

"Just passing Abuelita's old house, honey. We used to live here when you were very little."

He had only been three when his great-grandmother died. The house probably wasn't something he remembered. He hadn't picked tangerines and figs in the backyard, or ridden his bike on this block, or decorated the Christmas tree that stood in the center of the front yard where Abuelo had planted it. "Saves me money this way," she would answer whenever anyone mentioned it. "I don't have to buy one every year."

Some new people lived there. I hadn't been able to keep up with the payments, and Frances had her own mortgage to worry about. Not that we made any money from the sale. Barely broke even after taxes and fees and everything

I thought that the new owners might be Jewish. I wasn't sure. Maybe Jehovah's Witnesses or something. But either way, they hadn't decorated the tree the year before.

I slowed down as I got closer to the house, taking in the tree and the rose bushes I had seen all my life. The new people had kids; toys and bikes littered the driveway and yard. That would have made Abuelita crazy. She hated it when we didn't put our toys away. She even tried to yell at Memo about it right after we had moved in, when Abuelita had needed someone with her full-time, and I needed somewhere to go after Memo's father and I called it quits.

I was almost at a stop when the porch light flickered on. My heart jumped, and without thinking I stomped on the gas, racing away down the street. I glanced in my rearview mirror as I turned the corner, and all I saw was the Christmas tree, illuminated in the yellow glow from the porch light.

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“Thank you for calling GE Capital; how can I help you?”

“Hi, I'm calling for my grandma. I'm authorized to speak for her. We filled out some paperwork for a modification and sent it back like three weeks ago, and I just wanted to check on our request.”

“OK, what is the name and account number?”

The woman on the line gave me the information, and I pulled up the account. I saw that I was the person who had notated the authorization.

“OK, so I see you sent the papers in on November fifteenth, and they have been reviewed. You should be getting a letter in the mail any day now with a request for some follow-up information.”

“Is there any way you can tell me what's needed so I can get it back right away? My grandma's payments are adjusting in two weeks, and I can't let the bank take her house. She's lived here for seventy years, bought the house brand new.” She was quiet a moment. “And she's always taken care of everyone, you know?”

And I did know. Or at least I knew the kind of grandmother she was talking about. The kind who took anyone in, who always had a forgiving word, who loved unconditionally. Abuelita.

I opened the PDF copy of the letter. “It says you need to send two months of bank statements and proof of income.”

“I'm pretty sure I included that in the original package. Was something wrong with what I sent?”

“I'm not sure. I can only see what the letter says.”

“*What are they saying, mija?*” I heard the woman's grandmother faintly asking in the background.

*Mija.*

What were the odds of this woman being routed to me again through the customer service number? Maybe this was fate. Maybe I could do something. “Listen,” I told her, “just fax the papers directly to me, and I'll make sure they get to the department.”

“Oh, thank you!”



“No problem, just hold on a sec, and I'll give you my fax number and my extension so you can check back with me directly.”

When I received it, I put the fax in a folder and wrote the grandmother's account information on the outside. “I need a favor,” I said to Kathy as I dropped the folder on her desk. “Family friend trying to get a mod. She faxed the missing paperwork directly to me. Think you can get it to the right person for me?”

“Yeah, but what's in it for me?”

I laughed. “Undying gratitude?”

She rolled her eyes, but took the folder.

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“Thank you for calling GE Capital. How may I help you today?”

“Hi, Graciela? This is Maria, Alicia Aguirre's granddaughter? I faxed you some paperwork a little over a week ago?”

“Yes, of course. Let me pull up your file.” Once I was in, I saw that a new letter had been generated. This time requesting copies of the last five years of income taxes, which I knew should have been sent in the original file and should have been requested the last time if it was missing. “Can you please hold a moment, Maria? I'm going to consult a supervisor.”

“Kathy!” I said, getting out of my chair.

“Yeah?” She swiveled to face me, while covering the speaker from her headset.

“Can you tell me why the mod department is screwing with my family friend?”

“What do you mean?” she asked. I explained to her what was happening, but she just shook her head. “My friend said he'd pull the file and fast track it. I'm not sure what happened.” She looked around before adding in a lower tone, “Sometimes I think they do it on purpose, so people just give up and either pay more or lose their home.”

“You better find me that number you call when you're about to go postal, 'cause this is fucking bullshit,” I said with a grunt as I picked up my phone, trying to think what I could tell Maria.

She chuckled and shook her head as she uncovered the mouthpiece on her headset.

Sighing, I sat down and reconnected the call. I explained to Maria that she needed to send me the information again, and after some complaining, which I couldn't blame her for, she agreed to fax it.

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I found my running shoes under my bed, with crusty socks jammed inside from my last run. I left my headphones on the dresser and headed out, tying my key to my shoelace after locking up. I needed to clear my head. I probably should have used that time for a meeting but running was a luxury I didn't get to enjoy much those days. Not like before Memo had moved back home. Sometimes we would go to the high school track, or the park, but I couldn't get in the zone when I was trying to watch Memo at the same time.

I turned left on the corner without thinking; my feet remembering our favorite route. Frances had been bitchy about watching Memo for an extra hour. It was the tone more than her words. The tone said, “Wow, Gracie, it's not enough I take your son in for nineteen months, then

continue to pick him up from school, and watch him for two hours every weekday? Now you need an hour to run?”

Fuck her.

I picked up my pace as I crossed the last big intersection of my route. Frances always acted so high and mighty. Like she was perfect? She drank at least one beer every god damned day of her life. And I was supposed to act like it was fine; no big deal. Not like our Dad didn't die from cirrhosis of the liver at thirty-eight or anything. Or our Uncle. Not like I had to go into clinical rehab or anything because I'd fucked my life up so bad, drinking and drinking and drinking, even more so after Abuelita died. Not like there isn't a genetic predisposition and the less exposure to alcohol the kids had the better.

And then there was fucking Maria—*Mija*. What was I supposed to do about that? How could I help that situation when I couldn't even talk to my sister about our fucked-up family?

I was at the park before I knew it. I swallowed, trying to re-wet my mouth that had gone dry from breathing so hard. It was still too early for the path to be lit, but dusk was settling, and shadows were creeping in. I started down the path that led to the lake, feeling my breathing slow and my heart rate steady as I wound through the switchbacks of the concrete trail.

The smell hit me before I knew where it was coming from. Cigarettes. Cheap hops. Beer sweats.

A smell I knew well.

He was sitting with his back against a tree, facing the sidewalk where the path spilled out, not the sunset on the water behind him. A paper bag was clutched in his hand, while empty tall cans were standing in a ring around him. He was passed out cold, a snore erupting from his drawn mouth.

A sadness filled me while I examined the shell of a man. He was used up. Even in the dim light, I could see the crud accumulated in the wrinkles on his face, smell the sour, sick stench of him. His clothes were filthy; he probably had been in them for weeks, months even.

It happened slowly, before I noticed really, but suddenly we were making eye contact. He just stared at me, like I was staring at him, and neither of us said a word. The moment seemed to go on forever, like we both know the same secret. The same awful secret.

He looked away first, rolling on his side as if to get up.

The spell broken, I turned on my heel and was gone before he ever made it up.

Day 755. Day 755. I chanted as I ran back to my house.

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A few days later, a voicemail was waiting for me when I got to work.

“Well, thanks for nothing. I thought you were going to help us.” It was the granddaughter, Maria. “The mortgage adjusted, now the payments are over two thousand a month, and my grandmother will lose the house.” The line went quiet, and for a moment, I thought maybe that was the end of the message, but then I heard a long, ragged breath. “I grew up playing in this yard. My grandfather died in this kitchen. And now it’s all gone.” She was quiet again, then cleared her throat loudly. “I hope you all are happy over there,” her voice was low and steady, “making us jump through hoops for nothing. Making us think there is hope, when there wasn’t any.”

I kept listening after I heard the click, until the voicemail system prompted me to save, repeat, or delete the message. I let the receiver drop back to the cradle and sat back in my chair. It was happening again. Couldn't I save anything?

I drew my knees up to my chest threw my head back and howled, loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Graciela?" Kathy said, standing to look at me.

"Is it all fucking bullshit?" I was on my feet, now, looking around at my co-workers' surprised faces. Some of them at a half-crouch, peered over cubicle walls. "Are we monsters? Preying on the needy? Taking what people have worked their whole lives for?" I spun around, looking for someone who understood. "These are people's homes. Their lives!"

No one said a word. Kathy had a sad smile on her face, but even she stood quiet.

My boss came out of her office, and she made her way to me. "Graciela," she said, her arm stretched out like she was meeting a dog for the first time. "It's OK, whatever it is. Why don't you come with me?"

I looked at Kathy, and she nodded encouragingly, so I took my boss's hand and followed her to her office.

After I calmed down and explained to my boss what had happened, she sent me home for the day, and gave me the next day off as well. "Come back Monday, and we'll have a meeting and talk through all this after you've rested."

I was in the parking lot about to get into my car when I heard Kathy calling my name.

"I'm gonna get fired Monday," I mumbled when she caught up to me.

"C'mon," she said. "I asked to leave early to get you home safe. No one is going to get fired. I'll talk to them." Kathy led me away from my car and towards hers. "I mean, everyone

loses it every now and then.” She opened the passenger door and buckled me up, like I was a child again. “You did it with style, I’ll give you that, but you’re a good employee. They won’t want to lose you.”

I’d gone numb and didn’t pay attention while Kathy drove. I looked up when she parked and saw that we were at a bar I’d never been to before. “Let’s get some drinks, and we’ll figure something out. I know some people in H.R. who will listen if I make a fuss.”

She doesn’t know. “Kathy,” I said. “I can’t—”

“Oh, c’mon,” she said impatiently. “After the day you’ve had, you deserve this!”

My legs felt loose, like all the power had left me and they were on auto, taking me to familiar places. Before I knew it, I was sliding onto a stool, my mouth watering.

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My alarm clock read 6:03 a.m. when I opened my blurry eyes. My mental alarm didn’t remember I was basically fired and could sleep in. I stumbled to the bathroom and peed for what felt like a minute straight, all the while tasting the ashtray that was my mouth. In the kitchen, I started the coffee and rummaged through my purse for a smoke.

I poured myself a cup before the whole pot was brewed and took a sip. Lighting my cigarette, I turned on my phone and saw that I had five new voice messages. I put my phone on speaker and played them.

“Graciela?” It was Frankie. “Where are you? You’re over an hour late now; were you going running again today?” I pushed delete and the next message began, “Really, Gracie? Not even a phone call? Memo is worried si—” I pushed delete before that one could continue.

“Graciela I am so tired of your shit. I thought we were past this crap, but obviously—” I clicked the call off, ending the tirade of accusations spewing from my machine. This would be another thing Frances could add to her list, yet another way I fucked everything up.

My cigarette was finished, so I reached into my bag for another and felt my keys.

I took them out and removed the chips from my key chain one by one. Thirty days, three months, one year; green, orange, purple... they all go in the trash. Only the white one left. I had to get through the day to earn it, but it was all I could do.

Day one.

## The New Recruit

I met this guy at the park where I smoked weed sometimes after school. It was in November, but it was hot, so I was in the shade under a big tree with two of my boys when this Casper-looking dude walked up, his back straight like a fence. He looked me right in the eye, like he had something to say, and then in a real official voice he said, "Hey, can I have your doobie after you're done?" I laughed at first, 'cause it was the last thing I was expecting from him, but then I was like, "Naw, we barely lit the motherfucker." And he nodded and looked around at all three of us, then said, "All right" and started walking away, saying, "Thanks anyway," over his shoulder as he went.

And then I felt bad for some reason, maybe 'cause how he looked me in the eye, and how he was older, but not old, and all skinny and shit, like he didn't eat right. And how he wasn't dirty, not like a bum or anything. Just real casual, even proud like. So I shouted, "Hey, Casper, come back. You can hit it one time."

He turned around and smiled, his smile real small-like, just pulling at the corners of his mouth, and when he walked up he said, "Thanks, man. I just moved here, and I'm crashing with a friend. Barely got a job and haven't got my first check yet." He took a hard hit off the joint and coughed a little before passing it. "So I just come to the park and look for doobies 'til I get some cash flowing."

It made sense. Gotta respect someone trying to get their shit together. So I told him, "That's what's up. You can smoke with me whenever."

I told my tía about him when I got home. "He had a big bushy beard like all the white boys up here," I said.



“Oh yeah?” She laughed. “White boys don't have beards in SoCal?”

“Not like they do in Stockton,” I said.

She laughed. Tía Rosa was a lot younger than my mom and dad. She's my dad's baby sister. They're like seven years apart or something, so she was only thirty or so when I came to live with her. But she was older than my mom and dad in some ways, too. Like she had the same job for eight years, working for the state at the water company. They gave her benefits and everything, so now that she's my guardian, I get them, too. She was really excited about that, but all it meant was I got braces.

“How old was this guy?” she asked.

“I don't know, like thirty maybe?”

“And he was smoking weed with a bunch of high school kids?” She raised her eyebrows and looked at me like something was up and she wanted answers.

That was different, too.

“I don't know; he seemed cool. He was skinny but not like on drugs. He was quiet, too. Didn't talk that much.”

“Hmmm, still seems sorta strange,” she said. “And besides you shouldn't be smoking at the park anyway. I told you after school and weekends and only in the backyard. No burning at the park. You don't want to get caught smoking, Memo. The cops will haul you in.”

“Trust me, Tía, I was being careful,” I said. “I don't want to mess up the Army.”

“Uhh, the Army.” She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. “Never mind, smoke in public,” she said, and she laughed.

“Hey!” I wrinkled my nose and shook my head at her.

She threw a pillow from the couch at me, playfully, but I ducked and it hit the wall with a soft thud.

She hated my plan to enlist. Tried to convince me to stay with her and go to community college, but I couldn't stay around here making her take care of me after I graduated. I'd been here a little over a year, with eight months to go. That was already more than she had to do. Besides, I wanted to start something new after I graduated. Something that was all me.

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I first met Sergeant Thompson at school a few months earlier. He was walking around during lunch at the beginning of the school year, talking to anyone who would give him the time of day. I wasn't one of them. But he walked up to where I was sitting and asked us if anyone was interested in talking about opportunities for their future. No one even blinked. Just kept talking about the fine-ass Filipino cheerleader. He waited a minute, then laid some cards down on the table saying he was available if anyone wanted to start a conversation. When the bell rang to go to class, I swiped them all and put them in my pocket, 'cause business cards make good joint crutches.

I didn't think I'd call him or anything, but a few weeks later I went to roll one up and used one of his cards for the crutch. I had just gotten off the phone with my mom. She said she was doing better, but that's what she always said. I was about to spark the joint, right there in my room, not even giving a fuck, when I saw the card had a quote on the bottom in real small print. The quote said "Chance favors the prepared mind." And below it a name, Louis Pasteur. I didn't know who that guy was, but what he said made sense. Can't be sitting around and expecting shit

to just happen. That's when people start drinking and fucking everything off. That's when everything falls apart. So I called Sergeant Thompson, and we made an appointment to meet up.

I took the bus to his office, at a strip mall between a Mexican food spot and a discount T-shirts store. I walked past the office at first, even though I was supposed to be there already, and went inside the restaurant. It smelled good, like corn tortillas and beans and carnitas. The place was clean, but beat-up, with booths this ugly orange color, and all ripped and cracked. The guy behind the counter looked young, younger than me, with dark hair and dark skin. He gave me that half nod, where you lift your head up and push out your chin, and said, “*Que quieres?*”

My stomach felt all twisted, so I said, “Medium horchata.”

He looked at me funny when I ordered, probably 'cause it was in English, but my Spanish sucked, and I hated speaking the little bit I did know to anyone, even my family. The words just felt wrong on my tongue, like they didn't fit.

“Three dollars,” he said and handed me the drink. His accent was so thick, that dollars sounded like dole-ares.

I passed him the money. “*Gracias.*” That one was easy.

He gave me the change but didn't say anything else.

I walked into the office, chewing on my straw. A guy was sitting at the desk in front.

“Guillermo?” he said.

I nodded and took a pull from my drink.

“Sergeant Thompson is waiting for you.” He escorted me past some desks separated by little half-walls, to an office door in the back. He knocked before opening it.

“Guillermo Gonzalez for you, Sergeant.”

Thompson was sitting at a big desk working on a computer. He didn't answer at first, just kept typing for a few seconds, then he clicked something and looked at me.

“Guillermo, that's right.” He stood up and came around the desk to shake my hand. “I'll take it from here,” he said to the guy from the front and then to me, “Have a seat.”

I sat down and put my drink on the floor next to my chair.

Thompson settled back behind his desk, then folded his hands in front of him and stared at me. When I didn't say anything, he raised his eyebrows and ducked his head a little. “Well, how can we help you?”

I wasn't expecting that. Wasn't he going to pitch me? “Uh, I came to find out about the Army.”

“What do you want to know?”

He wasn't doing this right. “You know, uh, how it can prepare me or whatever.”

“What do you want to be prepared for?”

I blew out a breath and took a drink of my horchata. What did this guy want? Me to beg or something? I didn't say anything for a while, just looked down at my shoes, chewing on my straw.

Thompson sat quiet.

“Aren't you supposed to pitch me or something?”

“That's not really what I'm here for. I'm here to find out how you can help the Army and how the Army can help train you for your future in or outside the service.”

I gave him a little nod, hoping he'd keep talking.

“So, tell me a little about yourself, Guillermo.”

“Like what?”

“You know the basics. Where you're from. Parents. Siblings. Activities you enjoy.”

The questions were easy enough, for most people. “Well, I live here with my aunt, but I'm from Southern California, like an hour from L.A.”

“OK,” Thompson said. “And your parents?”

“They, uh.” I took a deep breath. “Well, my dad hasn't ever really been around. He pops in and out, but nothing permanent.” I looked up at Thompson real quick. “Drugs, you know?”

He didn't seem surprised. And why should he? Plenty of my friends had the same story. Dad not around because—fill in the blank. “And my mom is an alcoholic. She loves to drink but it makes her sick. Messes up her pancreas.” I could never remember what she called it. “Anyway, it makes her sick, and then she can't work, so she lost our place, and we didn't have anywhere to stay, so she sent me up here to live with my aunt.” I picked up my horchata again and took a sip.

“And you're going to go back...”

“No. Tía Rosa got custody of me. Made Mom sign a paper so I could stay until I finish high school.” I brought the drink to my mouth again but didn't drink any, just chewed the straw.

“But you don't want to go back after?” he asked.

“I just really want to take care of myself,” I mumbled, the straw still in my mouth.

“What's that, son?”

I let the straw fall and looked up at him. “I don't want to weigh anyone down anymore. I just want to take care of myself and keep things tight.”

He nodded. “I've heard stories like yours before. And it sounds like you need some stability, son. Something you can count on. The Army can help with that. It can help you get something going for yourself. Help you take control.”

“How long would I have to be in?” I said.

“Depends. There are a lot of options for someone like you, Guillermo.” Thompson glanced at a paper on his desk. “I looked up your test scores after you called. Do you remember taking a test for military placement?”

I had a flash in my mind of my government class in an auditorium taking a test for extra credit. Our teacher was a vet. I nodded.

“Well, you scored fourth highest in your school. Do you know what that means?”

I shook my head.

“That means the sky is the limit for you. Plenty of options for your future.”

I blew out a breath long like a whistle with no sound. That sounded good to me. Then he was doing it right, showing me the pamphlets and outlining programs.

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The next time I ran into Casper was down on the block, close to my Tía's house.

“Yo, Casper! What you been up to?” I said to him, bumping his fist. He was smooth with the movements, for a white boy. “Haven't seen you around,” I said.

“Yeah, I was up in Portland for a wedding last weekend,” Casper said. “And I stayed around for a bit to do some hiking.”

“Cool, cool,” I said. “You down to burn one?”

“Sure.”

We walked back to the house. My tía wasn't home, but she wouldn't mind. She was always saying I could have friends over, but I didn't really like to bring people by. Not 'cause I

was embarrassed; the house was nice. Tía Rosa did it right. I just don't want anyone messing with her stuff. She had all these nice pictures on the walls in frames and little cool things like bongos and big chunks of colored crystal on tables and counters and bookshelves. Everything had a place. My room used to be her study, but she moved her desk to the garage before I even got there.

"My aunt doesn't mind me smoking," I told Casper. "As long as I'm not drinking, she's cool."

Casper was standing at the bookshelf, his head bent to the side so he could read the book titles. He glanced at me, "Seems more than fair."

"Only thing is, we gotta smoke on the back porch. But it's chill. My aunt has all these plants and a table and chairs. Even a little waterfall fountain, so it's kinda nice and relaxing."

"Nice," Casper said. "If you like that kind of stuff, maybe we could hike around sometime."

I opened the back door and laughed. "No offense but hiking is some white people shit." I shook my head. "Not exactly my scene, ya feel?"

"Not true." He followed me into the backyard and looked around. "Hiking is just walking."

We sat at the table, and I lit the joint.

"So what's your big plan after high school, Memo? You gonna go to college and all that?"

"Naw, man. I'm gonna join up. It's the Army for me."

"Really? You don't seem the type." Casper said. "What made you want to do that?"

“I don't know,” I said. “My grandpa on my mom's side was a Marine. And one of my uncles was in the Air Force.” Truth was sometimes I wasn't sure. It had been two months since my first meeting with Thompson, and he had a whole plan for me, but when I thought about it, it didn't feel real. It was like a movie in my mind, and I was there, wearing an old-fashioned helmet. But it was a plan. I had to do something after graduation; I couldn't just stay with my tía. And I couldn't go back home. There wasn't anything happening there. Last time I talked to my mom she was so drunk I could barely understand her. If I went back, I'd probably just end up in jail or dead.

I shook those thoughts out of my head and put a smile on my face. “Besides you get a gun and shit,” I told Casper.

“You ever shoot one?” he asked.

“Yeah, back in SoCal when I lived with my mom, I would go to my grandma's house to hang with my uncles. On New Year's they would shoot guns into the air at midnight, standing around a fire in an old metal barrel. When I was little, I would get scared, 'cause I remembered hearing that when the bullets fall back down they could hit someone, but the New Year's when I was fourteen, right before I moved up here, my uncle was all over my back to come out from the under the patio and shoot.

“Everyone was saying, ‘Yeah, do it, Memo! *Ándale pues!*’ Hurry up! So I took the gun from Uncle Teto, walked out to the fire, lifted my arm and the gun straight in the air, and fired three times, real quick, at the Big Dipper. Bop-Bop-Bop!” I mimicked the motion for Casper, my hand miming the recoil. And I remembered how as soon as that gun fired, I wasn't scared of the bullet falling back down then. I wasn't thinking about gravity. It had felt like the three shots I put into the air were flying still, all the way into space.



“So that was it? You never shot again?” Casper said.

“Naw, I moved with my aunt that summer, and she hates guns.”

Casper got quiet after that, just smoking the joint. He took another deep hit and held it, passing it to me before releasing his breath. “You think it'll be like that when you shoot guns for the Army?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Something like that.”

Casper nodded, quiet again, like he went inside himself. I was quiet too, just smoking, wondering what Casper was thinking. Hitting it over and over, 'cause it felt like he wanted to say something or wanted me to say something, and I didn't know what it was.

“I was in the Marines,” Casper said finally, leaning over and grabbing the joint from my fingers. “My dad was in the Marines, his dad, my two uncles on my mom's side.” He smiled quick, kinda sad. “Hoo-rah! Through and through.” He took a big drag. “And it's not like that.”

I was surprised but not surprised. Something about him was official. “How long you been out?”

“Couple years?” He shrugged. “I just drank for a while in North Carolina. Then I went to Colorado, where my sister lives, 'cause I needed the cold and the mountains after all that desert and heat during my deployment.”

“And now you're here?”

“Yeah, it was time to leave Colorado. I wanted to see the ocean again, so I flew to Washington and started hiking south on the Pacific Crest Trail. Ended up near Sacramento then took a bus out here to meet up with a guy from my unit. He's letting me sleep on his couch for a while.”

“Damn, Casp! You walked all that way?”

He let out a chuckle. “Yeah. I walked all that way.”

“By yourself?”

“Mmmhmm.”

“Damn.” It would be crazy to walk that far. And boring. It would probably take forever, too. What did you do all that time by yourself? Just think? “I don't think I could do it.”

“You'd be surprised.”

“Well, yeah, I could do it, whatever, but I don't think I'd want to, ya feel? What's the point?”

“I don't know. For me, it was a lot of things. I wanted to get back to basics. Get back to just me.” The joint had gone out, but instead of relighting it, Casper put it down on the table between us. “There's something about getting back to the simple things that helps. Traveling only as far as your feet can take you. Eating only what you can carry on your back.” He caught my eye. “You know what I mean?”

“Can't say I do. Like I said, I've never really gotten into hiking or whatever. It's a white boy thing.”

Casper settled back in his chair as he spoke. “Ah, you gotta try it. It's the only place where you can hear yourself.” He re-lit the joint and took a hit. “We'll go sometime. It's something you should feel. Could help you see things a little more clearly.”

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Casper was true to his word. He called me like a week later. The guy he was staying with lent him a car, and Casper asked if I wanted to go to hiking.

“It's an easy one, only five miles round-trip.”

“Only five?!” This guy was a joker.

He laughed. “I'll pick you up in twenty minutes.”

He was there in fifteen. We drove on the highway for about thirty minutes, until we got to Caswell Memorial State Park. Casper parked the car in a gravel parking lot near a path that was completely surrounded by trees and bushes and branches. It looked like someone had come along and bent the trees just enough for people to walk through. He got out and grabbed a small backpack from the trunk.

“Let's get going,” he said.

I got out and looked at him. “Five miles?”

“Yup,” he said, grinning, “But don't worry. It's all downhill on the way back.”

I figured out pretty quick that downhill on the way back really just meant that the beginning sucked. It was like walking up a handicap ramp that went on forever, and after a while, I got so hot, I had to take off my hoodie and tie it around my waist. Casper was just wearing a T-shirt and shorts and these sandals with big ass rubber bottoms like boots. I kept up with him OK, even though he walked pretty fast the whole time, without really stopping. Whenever we got close to the river, you could tell before it even came into view. First from the sound of the water, but then you could feel it, 'cause the air got cooler and sort of sweeter. The ground evened out some, too, and then there was water, clear and with a green tint, like in a movie or something. I slowed down then and looked at the water moving, sometimes fast, sometimes slow. And sometimes I dipped my fingers, letting the water pull at me a little. I'd do that then look up, and Casper would be down the trail or even out of sight.

We rounded a corner, and the path got steeper than before, almost like stairs. I was right behind Casper then, putting my foot exactly where his had been, staying close. I could hear something rumbling up ahead, deep.

“Almost there,” Casper said.

We took three more big steps, and the path leveled out. Through the trees I saw a big waterfall on the left, the water fast and white dropping into a dark blue pool below it.

Casper dropped his bag, took off his shirt and sandals, looked at me over his shoulder and said, “Ready for this?” Then he took off running to the clearing and jumped out into the air, arms and legs wide like he was reaching, before he pulled himself in and splashed into the water below.

I ran to the edge and looked down. He exploded out of the water and threw his head back, his yell echoing around us.

“C'mon, Memo! Water's fine!”

I couldn't believe it. This man was crazy! People just don't go jumping off cliffs. That's some sick shit. Some wild I don't care if I die shit. I stepped back from the edge and looked around. We had climbed up pretty high; green trees stretched out in all directions, with no spaces between them. There wasn't anyone around, but it wasn't quiet at all. Birds were flying in and out of the trees singing and chirping, probably fighting over worms or trying to get laid. I wondered if they were this loud in the city and I just couldn't hear them.

“Me-mo! Are you coming?”

I walked back to edge. It was pretty far down, but Casper was down there in the water swimming around. Fuck it. I took a step back and took off my shoes, shirt, and pants. The twigs

poked my feet as I took a few steps back, but I ignored them. I took a deep breath, ran a few steps, closed my eyes and jumped.

\*\*\*

We started hiking a couple times a month after that. Mostly nearby, but we did an overnight thing in Yosemite in March when it started getting lightweight warmer in the mountains. My friends thought I was crazy, missing parties so I could get some sleep before an early hike. But Tía Rosa got me hiking boots for Christmas, and by the time I set foot on Half Dome, they were pretty worn in.

Casper started talking more after that first hike. He told me funny stories from when he was younger, or stories about the different places he had hiked. Since his father was in the Marines, they moved around a lot, but wherever they went, Casper said his mom would take them on weekend hikes and summer camping trips.

He never talked about the Marines really, or what he did or where he went. And I never asked, 'cause I get it; we all got shit we don't want to think about. But whenever I talked about the Army, or how Thompson was telling me that a unit was kind of like a family, he would shake his head and say I shouldn't do it.

"Don't get caught," he said. "Once you're in, it's almost like you're never out. You just don't know how to be."

I shrugged it off and tried to change the subject, but every now and then he would drill me about it. "It's like, I'm staying with my old platoon buddy, and all he wants to do is drink beer and talk about when we were in. When we were there."

“Isn’t that where you met?”

“Yeah, but it’s more than that.” He stopped in the trail and turned to look at me. “He said he didn’t feel alive anymore. Like he died back there, but his body was here, going through all the motions of what it means to be a person.”

“But that’s not like you,” I told him. “You’re out here in all this.” I gestured to the scene around us. “You’re out here with me.”

He tilted his head and looked at me, like he was going to say something, but then he just turned and started down the trail. I followed a few steps behind, giving him some space. A few minutes later thought, I heard him say, real quiet, “Am I?”

\*\*\*

Things were moving forward with my enlistment. My eighteenth birthday wasn’t until June, so I couldn’t start processing yet, but Thompson was getting me set up to become an airplane mechanic, and boot camp wasn’t seeming as scary since I’d been getting in shape with all the hiking. But as summer started getting close, Casper kept talking about my enlisting more and more.

“You know, it’s like you don’t even know how to be funny anymore after you get out,” he said one day in April when he was driving us home from a hike. “Like your humor is too crude, too rough for civilian ears. So you just start being quiet.

“They send you to war, and you somehow make it through Hell, and then you just...go home. But home isn’t home anymore, and you aren’t you.” He looked at me.

I didn’t know what to say.

“You get sucked in, and you do things, and you become kind of cold,” he said. “Then the offers to re-enlist start showing up. With bonuses and the promises of light duty.” Casper put his window down and stuck his arm out into the air racing by. “Money that you can always use.”

I laughed. “Yeah, those signing bonuses are no joke.”

Casper shook his head. “But they are, if you don’t know who you are anymore. When they already got you, it’s like why the hell not?” He was quiet a minute then, real focused on the road, like it was a mountain and we might drive off. “So you meet with the people, because your buddy gets you to go with him to the info session, and before you know it, you sign on the line for two more years.”

It didn’t seem like we were talking about me anymore. “Two more years?” I asked.

“Yeah. It won’t be bad. Just two years.” He looked over at me with a sick smile. “And I get another bonus if I decide to double up after that.”

I looked out the window. He’d spent all this time telling me not to do it ‘cause it changed you, and I’d been shining him on, not really listening. But now that it was him, it didn’t seem right. He shouldn’t go back. He wasn’t all the way cold. I wanted to tell him that, to say he could do something else, too, like me. But instead I said, “When do you report?”

“Six weeks,” he said. We pulled up to my tía’s house, and he put the car in park. “I’m going to head to my sister’s in a month or so, to spend some time with her before I fly back to North Carolina.” He tilted his head and reached out and sort of punched me on my shoulder, but real soft like. “But maybe we can get another big trip in before I go. Another overnighter or something.”

I didn’t answer. Just grabbed my bag and got out of the car.

“Memo,” Casper called.

I turned around.

“This doesn’t have to be you.”

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I didn’t talk to Casper for a while after that. He called a few times, but I just told my tía to tell him I wasn’t home. It wasn’t like I was mad or anything, I just didn’t know what to say to the guy. I started hanging with the guys from school on the weekends, going to parties, having a few drinks here and there. And Thompson had me going to these group exercise sessions to get me ready for boot camp. After all that hiking, the shit was a breeze for the most part. I wasn’t sure I still wanted to even join up anymore. Not after all that with Casper. But it was still the plan for now, so I kept going, just to have something to do. I was walking home from one of those sessions, smoking one while I walked. I was gonna have to quit soon to pass the drug test, but I had a few more weeks. I turned the corner to my tía’s place when I saw Casper sitting on the steps by the door.

I offered him the J and he took it from my fingers without a word.

I sat next to him on the steps, and we smoked in silence for a few minutes before the joint went out.

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” he said. “Got an early flight out.” He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to me. “My number and address at my sister’s place in Fort Collins. If you want to write or whatever, she’ll forward things along until we get connected.”

I unfolded the paper and looked it over, then cracked a smile. “Your name is William?” I said.



“Yeah.”

“Memo is short for Guillermo.” I raised my eyebrows at him, but he still didn’t get it.

“William. Guillermo. Same thing.”

“Oh...” he said. “You know, it’s funny. I always thought we were sort of the same in some ways.” He tilted his head in that way he did, and looked at me close, like he was reading the title of a book on my face. “But different, you know?”

And I did.

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“Are you sure you want to do this?” Tía Rosa said, looking at me from the driver's seat. It was late June, Casper had been gone for over a month.

“I’m sure,” I opened the door, got out and walked around to the back of the car. She had tried to talk me out of it. We sat around the kitchen table for hours, first just talking, but then studying the maps and books I had gotten from the library. Eventually, my research won her over. And it didn’t hurt that she teared up when I told her I wanted to strike out on my own, like her.

I pulled out my new backpack from the trunk and settled the stiff straps onto my shoulders. “Don’t worry, Tía, it’s going to be fine.”

“I know,” she said and got out of the car to wait for me on the curb. “Well, I love you,” she said, pulling me into a hug. “And I’m worried, but I’ll try to stay positive. Please promise me that you’ll be careful,” she whispered into my ear.

“I will.”

“And that you'll send a postcard when you can.”

“Promise.”

“OK, then.” She let me go and stepped back. “I love you, Memo. Good luck.”

I kissed her on the cheek. “Love you, too, Tía,” I said. “See you in two weeks.”

I felt a little sick when I got on the bus, like that time I drank a bunch of beers and then smoked a fat blunt and the world went spinning. I passed the other people, making my way toward the back, toward an empty row. I sat down next to the window, and looked around. The bus ride was going to take four hours, then I had to walk three miles to get to the trailhead, so I'd probably sleep most of the ride. A view from the window wasn't what I wanted. I wanted to see it all for myself. To go where my feet could take me. To pick a path and walk on it, however far it led.

## Shade

The first thing Michaela purchased in college was a phone cord that stretched twenty-five feet. It only cost six dollars. Her dorm room was on the fifth floor next to an emergency exit that led to a fire escape stairwell on the outside of the building. When she wanted to use the phone, Michaela would remove a shoe and place it in the door jamb, blocking the door from closing completely and locking her out.

Michaela's roommate, Amanda, had a cell phone that she was constantly on, either talking or texting. "Everyone in my high school had one by tenth grade," Amanda said when Michaela brought the cord home from the pharmacy. "I got mine in junior high."

Most of Michaela's friends from back home had cell phones as well, but Michaela never even considered asking her mom for one. She knew her mom couldn't afford it. It was the same thing with money for books. Her mom wasn't like other college kids' moms, helping set up their dorm rooms and sending care packages after two days of school. Michaela's mom had to drop Michaela off at the bus station over three hours before departure because her mom worked the night shift.

Amanda wasn't in their room that afternoon, likely off at a club activity of some kind. They'd only been on campus two weeks, but Michaela felt like Amanda knew everyone already. The message board Amanda had put on their shared room door said "In the main quad!" in pink dry erase marker with a heart and smiley face drawn below the words. Michaela grabbed the phone from its mount on the wall and left the room, dialing as she walked the few steps to the exit.

The floor and stairs of the fire escape were made of thick concrete, but the landing was open on two sides, allowing for a view over the city on one side and the courtyard on the other.

Unfortunately, metal bars ran vertically across the open space, like a prison, obscuring the picture with rusty red stripes. This was a safety precaution, Michaela figured, against the idea of jumping.

She pinched the phone between her shoulder and ear and grabbed a metal bar in each hand while she waited.

“Hey, babe,” Isaac said. “Didn’t think you’d call again today.”

“Am I bothering you?” Michaela said. She had chosen to face the city this time, the lights marking the grid of the streets.

“Did I say that? Just thought you’d be getting ready for the week or whatever. Don’t you have homework?”

“Sorry,” Michaela said. “Yeah, I mean there’s not much to do. I only have work tomorrow at ten, and it’s finally payday.”

“Nice! And at least you get to sleep in. They got me back on mornings this week.” Isaac drove a forklift in a warehouse distribution center.

“At least you get out early, then,” Michaela said.

“Yeah, whatever. Just work, you know?” Isaac said. “Anyway, after I talked to you earlier, Bobbo called and told me about a party in L.A. this weekend. Supposed to be in an abandoned warehouse with a couple of DJs.”

Michaela rolled her eyes but kept her tone even. “Probably going to be a lot of people there,” she said.

“I’m sure. You know it’s still warm down here, so everyone is still in summer mode.”

“Right,” Michaela said, “all the hoochies will probably be wearing nothing.”

“Probably!” Isaac laughed. “But you know that don’t faze me, ma. I only like college girls now.”

Michaela smiled despite herself. “Well, lucky me.”

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Michaela went to work the next morning with a little bounce in her step. Payday! She knew that the check wouldn’t be much, but it should be enough to get most of her books and a maybe a graphing calculator. As a part of the financial aid packet she had gotten in the mail, and signed without much understanding, she was assigned a job in the dining hall as a dish washer. She’d been doing it for two weeks and liked it so far. The hours weren’t bad; Michaela either worked the lunch shift from ten to two, or the night shift from four to eight, depending on when she had classes. She worked alone in a back section of the kitchen, dirty trays coming in on a conveyor belt and clean ones stacked in racks for the next meal service.

The person she saw most often was Sophie, a second-year Asian girl who worked the serving line. A few days after school started, Sophie came back to Michaela’s area and hopped up on one of the stainless steel tables used for prep. “It’s dead today. Rush week means free pizza in the quad.” She looked at Michaela. “You thinking of going Greek?”

Michaela shook her head no. She hadn’t even considered it. Those girls in their matching shirts looked so put together and normal. Michaela barely looked them in the eyes when they handed out fliers.

“Yeah, I didn’t either. I mean I thought about it, but who needs all those people all up in your business, right?”

Michaela nodded and kept focused on the dishes.

“And to be honest, most of those girls are phony as fuck,” Sophie said. “If one more of them asks me if something is gluten free, I’m going to lose it.” She made her hand into a gun and placed her barrel fingertips to her temple.

Michaela laughed, even though she wasn’t entirely sure what gluten meant. Something to do with bread.

Sophie grinned. “So what’s your story?”

“No story, really.”

“Well, where are you from, what’s your major, where do you live? You know, first day bullshit.”

“I’m from Highland, a little city outside of L.A.,” Michaela said. “But not by the beach,” she added quickly. “I live in Alder Hall now, and I’m not sure what my major is yet. Undeclared.”

“I just declared for History. Forever broke!” Sophie laughed. “OK, now for the good stuff. Sibling rivalries? Boyfriend? Girlfriend?” Sophie grinned again. “Do we hate our roommate?”

Michaela sprayed the last of her dishes and loaded them on the rack, then she jumped up on the table opposite Sophie. “No siblings. I have a boyfriend, Isaac. And yes. We most definitely hate her.”

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Sophie wasn't working that day, but the lunch shift went by quickly for Michaela anyway. Before she knew it, all the dishes were clean and stacked, ready for the dinner service. She hung her apron and punched out, then headed to the manager's office.

She knocked on his door, then poked her head in the doorway when he acknowledged her. "Hey," she said. "Where do we pick up checks?"

Bill's eyebrows drew together. "Checks? Payday isn't until next week."

Michaela swallowed so loudly she was sure Bill heard. "Next week? I thought you said we get paid every two weeks."

"Yeah, we do," Bill said. "It just takes payroll a week to process. So next week you'll get the check from these two weeks." Bill leaned back in his chair and folded his hands over his belly. His voice softened a bit as he said, "I know it's annoying at first, but after this it's automatic every other Friday."

Michaela didn't trust herself to speak, so she just nodded and left the office.

"Michaela," Bill called after her, "if you need help you can always..."

But Michaela didn't hear the rest. She was out of the cafeteria and walking through the quad before she calmed down enough to take a breath. After walking aimlessly for a few minutes, she saw an empty bench under an awning, protected from the coming drizzle, and she sat. One more week, Michaela thought. It wasn't that long, but college felt so thin to Michaela already. Maybe she wasn't supposed to be here. She felt dumb in all of her classes. Amanda thought she was weird. Isaac was back home, slipping away. Michaela sighed and let her head fall back, eyes searching the gray sky. If she could only get her damn books. That was the only thing stopping her from really making a go of this.

Fifteen minutes later, Michaela was in the student bookstore. She walked to the back of the store, rifling through an American history textbook, looking for the magnetic strip nestled between the pages. Of the four books she needed, the history book was the only one not wrapped in plastic. She found the security strip toward the middle and let it fall to the floor, looking over her shoulder to make sure the register guy wasn't watching. He wasn't. With one hand, Michaela lifted her sweater and shirt from the small of her back, and with the other she slid the book down her pants. She let the clothes drop and resettle over the book, then, while walking to another section, she zipped her hoodie up to her chin. Rain pattered against the glass and windows, making a sound like fingernails tapping impatiently. Michaela had thought going to college was going to get her away from doing this kind of stuff. Seemed like she had been wrong.

She wandered around the store near the register, letting the clerk see her looking at all of the pens and keychains and snacks, the book sticking to her clammy skin. She hated stealing. But this was different. Before arriving at UC Davis, she had known that college students had to buy their books, but she hadn't known they would cost so much. The sixty dollars in her bank account wouldn't even cover the cost of one book. But a history exam was scheduled for next week, and Michaela knew she couldn't afford to fail.

After much phony deliberation she grabbed a pack of gum and went to the register.

"That all for you today?" the clerk said.

"Mmm-hmm," Michaela said.

"You sure I can't help you find anything else?" he smiled at Michaela, his teeth showing.

Michaela began to breathe a little faster. Did he know? A slick sweat covered her skin almost instantly. "No, I'm good, thanks."



The clerk nodded. "OK, but I'm here if you need me," he said, smiling again. "That'll be eighty-seven cents."

Michaela handed the crumpled dollar over, hoping the clerk didn't see the way her hand was shaking.

"Thirteen cents is your change, beautiful," the clerk said, placing the coins in her hand and lingering there a moment. "Don't forget to come back and see me sometime."

Michaela felt the tension drain from her body. He was hitting on her. She laughed as she took the change. "Will do."

The rain was still falling when she left, so Michaela put her hood on. She should have asked that guy for a bigger bag, she thought as she walked through a twisting path that led through some trees. The path was filled with students now, but once she was alone she would take the book out and carry it the rest of the way. When she was almost out of the trees, Michaela rounded a curve that was empty. She looked over her shoulder, and not seeing anyone, she reached around and lifted her coat, the other hand grabbing the book.

"Michaela?" someone said behind her. It was Sophie.

Silently praying Sophie hadn't seen the book, Michaela quickly turned around letting her coat fall back into place. "Hey!" she said with too much enthusiasm.

"What are you up to on this wet day?" Sophie gestured Michaela under her umbrella and they fell into step.

"Not much, just trying to stay dry."

"I don't mind the rain myself. I just like to get out in it sometimes and walk around campus. Makes me feel like I'm in a movie."

They continued down the path, Michaela staying a half-step behind Sophie. The history book was slowly riding up Michaela's back, inching its way to exposure.

"Are you going out this weekend?" Sophie asked. "Always lots of parties for the first football game."

"Um, not sure." Michaela reached under her jacket and tried to ease the book back down, but it was sticking to her sweat-dampened skin.

"I'm going with my old roommate. You should come with us!"

"Yeah, maybe." She almost had it—

"What's that?" Sophie said.

Michaela's heart began pounding triple time. "Oh," she said with a little laugh. "Nothing, it's just my history book." Knowing she was caught, Michaela pulled the book out as if it wasn't strange to have had it crammed down her pants.

Sophie took it from her. "Looks brand new." She cracked the pages and took a deep breath then passed the book back to Michaela.

"Yeah, just got it."

"Kinda late to be getting books, no?"

Michaela didn't know what to say. She didn't want to admit she couldn't afford them, even though Sophie was cool. Michaela didn't want to admit how unprepared she was for all this. "Yeah, I know. I'm gonna get the others this weekend. I was just at the bookstore and I, um, left my schedule in my room and couldn't remember which ones I needed besides this."

"They have a way you can look it up there," Sophie said. "C'mon, let's go back to the bookstore now, and I'll help."

"No, it's OK, really. I'll just get them tomorrow."

“It’s no big deal.” Sophie started moving in the direction of the bookstore.

“Like I said, I was just wandering around. We’ll be done in like ten minutes.”

Michaela didn’t know what to do. She wanted to run down the path and leave Sophie standing there, but Sophie was just being nice and sweet and helpful, and making Michaela crazy in the process.

“I can’t go back to the freaking bookstore, OK?” Michaela blurted out. “I just stole the freaking book and the guy was flirting with me and he’ll remember that all I bought was some freaking gum.”

Sophie’s eyes softened. “Oh, Michaela. Why? You know—”

“Duh, because I don’t have the money,” Michaela said. “It’s not like it’s for fun. Now thanks for your offer, but I’m just going to go back to my room now and do the homework for history because,” Michaela held up the newly acquired textbook, “now that I have my book I can.” She turned around and hurried away, ignoring Sophie’s calls after her.

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The message board had Amanda’s whereabouts (“In class!”) like always, and in the corner, “Isaac called.” Michaela relaxed a fraction. Isaac would understand. She tossed the stolen book on her desk, grabbed the phone, and went into the hall. Even though Amanda was gone, Michaela wanted the stairs. She wanted the cold of the concrete and metal to cool her down.

Isaac answered on the first ring, and they talked for a while. Michaela didn’t tell him about the book or Sophie. Instead they talked about home. Isaac’s little brother was just starting high school. A couple they went to school with was having a baby and getting married.

“You think you can come back for the wedding in March?” Isaac asked.

“Maybe,” Michaela said. “I might not even make it to December.”

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The next afternoon Michaela sat in the stairwell again, slouched on the concrete steps.

“I didn’t go to my work today,” she said into the phone receiver.

“Oooh, bad girl,” Isaac responded. “Why didn’t you go?”

“I don’t know,” Michaela said. “This girl I work with was giving me shit about not having all my books, and I just didn’t want to deal with her.”

“Ah, that sucks. Why haven’t you got them yet?”

“Don’t have the money,” Michaela said, wrapping the cord of the phone around her finger until her skin disappeared.

“Damn. How much are they? I could put like fifty in your account to try and help out so you can get your smart on.”

Michaela didn’t want to tell him that the fifty wouldn’t be enough. “Don’t worry about it,” she said. “I’ll figure something out.” Michaela wrapped the cord tighter and tighter around her finger, feeling it grow colder as the blood flow was cut off. “I wish I was there,” she whispered, the words come out garbled because her voice had grown thick.

“What?”

Michaela cleared her throat. “I said I really miss you.”

“Miss you, too, girl,” Isaac said.

After that they were both pretty quiet, the silence hanging between them making the distance even seem farther.

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Two days later Michaela got ready for the morning shift and dragged out the process as long as she could. She even put on make-up. When she couldn't delay any longer, and was on the verge of being late, she began the short walk to the dining hall knowing a confrontation with Sophie was unavoidable.

A couple of hours into her shift, however, Michaela began to relax. There had been no sign of Sophie by the time clock, and when someone came around the corner to grab more trays it was the tall red-headed boy who always wore headphones. Two o'clock came and Michaela let out a sigh of relief. She'd been silly to call in sick. Even when she saw Sophie, she didn't have to talk to her. Michaela could tell Sophie to mind her own business. Michaela turned the corner, feeling lighter than she had in days, and stopped short. Sophie was sitting on a bench near the path to the dorms.

"How was work?" Sophie said.

Michaela took a few steps toward the bench. "Cool."

Sophie nodded and didn't say anything.

Michaela stood in the path not knowing what to say. She knew she should just say something general, like have a good day and keep moving, but the way Sophie was looking at her made Michaela feel like she couldn't. Like she owed Sophie more than that. Michaela took a deep breath. "So about the other day—"

“Don’t worry about it,” Sophie said with a smile. “I get it, really I do. I’m the first one in my family to go to college. When I first got here I didn’t know shit.” Sophie stood up and placed her hand on Michaela’s arm. “But someone broke it all down for me, so now it’s my turn.”

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First thing Sophie did was take Michaela to a computer lab to look at her student account summary. “See, this number here,” Sophie said pointing to a number with a negative in front. “This is your refund amount, which you will get in like two weeks.”

“Refund from what?” Michaela said.

“From your grants and loans and stuff.”

Michaela’s stomach fluttered, and she felt a little sick. It was over a thousand dollars.

“What’s even better is that you can use some of it even before the refund is processed.”

Sophie went on to explain about book vouchers and how to put some refund money onto Michaela’s student ID to use in the laundry room and for printing in the computer labs. “There’s all sorts of stuff like that set up to help out. I didn’t know any of this stuff, but then I went to a first generation support meeting, and they told me all the info. Plus they gave out free backpacks with notebooks and pens and stuff.”

Twenty minutes later they were in the bookstore, voucher in hand. Sophie moved through the store quickly, explaining to Michaela how her family had emigrated from Vietnam when she was four.

“My mom likes to say an old proverb,” Sophie said. ““One generation plants the seed so the next can enjoy the shade.””

Michaela liked how that sounded. It made it seem as if everything had a purpose.

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The next week went by quickly. Now that Michaela had all of her books, she spent most of her time studying and catching up on class assignments. She was especially proud of a paper she wrote for English class about her favorite book, *The Giver*. For the first time in her life, she wrote two pages more than the requirement, without even trying. She also went to her first college party with Sophie. They got ready together in Sophie's dorm and stayed out until campus was almost silent on their walk home, except for the clock tower sounding three a.m. That night Michaela began to feel like she understood what Sophie said about feeling like she was in a movie. This was what all the college movies looked like.

The night before her refund check came, Michaela sat in the stairwell talking to Isaac. "I think I'm going to take Spanish next semester."

"Oh yeah, babe? Going for that easy A?"

Michaela laughed. "Yeah, right, the only words I know are food ones."

"Speaking of food," Isaac said. "I'm gonna have a BBQ for my birthday this weekend. Carne Asada and my mom's avocado salsa."

"Mmmm, I miss that salsa. The food here is all plain, no flavor."

"Too bad you're so far away. You would be the best present."

"Only two and a half months until winter break. Then I'm all yours for a month."

"Yeah." Isaac sighed. "Just feels like forever." He was quiet a moment. "Starting to forget what you look like."

“Isaac...” Michaela said. “It’s hard for me, too.”

“I know. It’s just so shitty. Everyone is paired up with a girl at the parties, and I’m the only one standing there by myself like an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot. You’re the best.”

Isaac let out a single laugh. “Yeah, the best at hanging solo while my girl is up at college staying out all night, going to frat parties.”

“Hey!” Michaela said. “That was only one time!”

“Right. And you’re never going to go again?”

“Of course I will. But it’s not like it’s all I do. Most of the time I’m studying.”

“Yeah,” Isaac muttered, “probably studying anatomy with Mr. College Frat Boy.”

Michaela couldn’t believe what he was saying. “Are you for real? This is ridiculous.”

“What’s ridiculous is you expecting me to wait four years for you to come back home.”

Isaac’s voice was harder than Michaela had ever heard it before.

“Four years? I thought you were moving up with me after summer, like we talked about?”

“Yeah, right,” Isaac said. “I’m really gonna move to the middle of nowhere with you. I have a life here, Michaela.”

“I did, too. But I left to try something new. I thought you supported that.”

“I did. I mean, I do. But it’s pretty crazy to think we could go on like this for years. Like I’ll just be a monk while my girlfriend is off doing whatever.”

Michaela took a deep breath. “What are you saying?”

Isaac was silent a moment. “I don’t know. Nothing.” His breath was heavy through phone. “Maybe we need to think about seeing other people.”



Michaela grasped the bars on the stairwell. “If that’s what you want.” Her voice sounded small.

“It’s not what I want. It’s just what it is.”

Hours later she still sat in the stairwell, the phone receiver now silent after never being replaced in its cradle. She felt numb, like everything that had happened in the last few weeks had happened to someone else. She had been with Isaac since junior year of high school. He was the first and only person she’d slept with. If it was really over, she didn’t know what she’d do. She was pissed at him, obviously, but the thing was, she couldn’t exactly blame him. She *was* asking a lot. And it had to be harder for him than her. She had a whole new world to distract her from missing him. He just had something missing.

Michaela couldn’t sleep that night. She tossed and turned so much that Amanda offered her some Nyquil in an irritated tone after Michaela’s second trip to the bathroom. Finally, Michaela slipped from her bed and got dressed in the early gray of morning. The financial aid office opened at eight, and Michaela planned on being there first thing. She had English class at nine; then she would head to the bank and cash her refund check. She pushed Isaac from her mind as she waited in line for her check, thinking deliberately instead about her class and how their papers would be returned today. If she got an A, she would buy herself something small, maybe a new shirt or a bag from the student store.

Distracted with plans for her refund check, English class went by in a blur. Michaela figured she could find a decent laptop for around four hundred and with what was left in the refund, and her paychecks from the dining hall, she would have enough left to keep her comfortable through the semester. At the same time, she could always use the computer lab for free, so maybe she could use some money and do a big trip to the super store to stock up on

essentials like shampoo, toothpaste, and snacks and then buy her ticket home for the holidays. When she thought of home, she thought of Isaac, but, fortunately, by the time she reached those thoughts, class was over and her professor was handing out papers by the door as students left. Michaela was one of the last to leave.

“Feel free to stop by my office hours to talk about this when you have some time,” her professor said as she handed Michaela her essay.

Michaela nodded and glanced down at the paper as she stepped into the hall. Her stomach dropped. D+.

Purple handwriting seemed to cover the pages, but Michaela didn’t read any of it. She crumpled the essay into a ball and stuffed it into her jacket pocket. This was bullshit. She worked so hard on that paper. It was even over the required pages!

Michaela waited in line at the bank in a fog. Why had she come to college? She hadn’t even thought about it until it her English Honors teacher had offered extra credit for applying to the UCs. With the fee waiver provided by the counseling department, and the essay she’d written for her term paper, it had only taken twenty minutes or so. The hardest part had been asking for letters of recommendation, but both the teachers she asked were happy to help. They’d both been excited that Michaela was making plans for the future. They told her that college was a great choice. But clearly they were wrong. D+.

On the walk back to the dorm, Michaela found herself near tears. She was going to fail college, everyone who mattered was over seven hours away, and then everything with Isaac—it was all becoming too much. She bit the inside of her cheek while she waited at an intersection, the flashing red hand taunting her. The city noise was loud around her. People talking and laughing, cars honking, birds cawing. Michaela looked both ways, and the coast was clear, so

she hurried across the street. She began at a slow jog at first, but before she knew it, she was running, running as fast as she could, zipping around people and crossing intersections without stopping. She ran until her face was numb, and her side hurt, and she didn't think she could breathe.

When she reached her room, Michaela's breathing was still fast, and she felt hot all over. She walked in, and Amanda was there with another girl whom Michaela didn't know. They were sitting at Amanda's desk, Amanda's friend sitting in Michaela's desk chair, which had been pulled over to Amanda's side of the room.

"Hope you don't mind," Amanda started.

"No, you're fine," Michaela said. "I was just on my way out." She quickly packed her backpack, then left without saying goodbye.

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It was weird to be taking this bus again, or at least the reverse one. Even though it had only been a month since she rode up to Davis, it felt like a lifetime ago. She remembered how she kept worrying the whole time on the way up that the bus was going to get into an accident. She couldn't imagine what college was going to be like, couldn't imagine herself in the pictures of brick buildings and trees in the brochure. So she was certain she was going to die before she got there, every turn of the bus on a windy section of the highway the turn that would inevitably be taken too tight, causing the bus to flip and roll, killing Michaela before she had the chance to see what Davis had to offer.

But that hadn't happened, and the bus had dropped Michaela off, and college life began without any major event signifying its start. She was surprised to find that Davis was all modern school buildings and old stone benches. There were hills in the distance, with lines of green trees marching along them. People were everywhere: walking, driving, biking. Michaela smelled pizza and exhaust and beneath it all, a refreshing earthy smell that had made her want to sigh.

Now, Michaela put her history book back into her backpack and stared out the bus window at the passing rows of orchards. The trees were younger, limbs tentative with few leaves. She looked at them from an angle as the bus sped past, so she could see the strip of bare earth made from the spacing of the planting. If she let her eyes lose focus it would all whip past her: color, blank, tree, air, something, nothing.

She was nervous. What if Isaac didn't want to see her? When she bought the ticket it seemed romantic. Plus, she could see her mom and her auntie. But as the bus barreled down the highway, Michaela couldn't help but wonder if she'd made a mistake. College was the first thing she had done that she was really proud of. And no one in her family had ever gone before. She knew they were counting on her to be the one. Too bad she was dumb.

A while later the bus pulled into a small town, the name of which Michaela missed when the driver announced a fifteen minute stop. She grabbed her bag and lined up in the aisle to exit. When she stepped off the bus, she looked up automatically and was blinded by the sun. It had been dim on the bus, the sunlight filtered through tinted windows. Even after Michaela's vision cleared, everything had a glowing haze around it for a while, like a memory in movies. Michaela headed into the bus depot to use the restroom. On the way out, she saw the bus schedule printed on the wall. Buses came every two hours, either heading south toward Highland or north, back to Davis.

Outside, Michaela waited with a few other passengers near the bus for the driver to reload. He was smoking a cigarette a few yards away, his back to the passengers. Michaela figured she had some time, so she unzipped her backpack and looked inside for her wallet to buy a soda from the vending machine. Her paper lay crumpled at the bottom of the bag. She dropped her wallet back into her bag and took out the essay instead. After she smoothed the pages, Michaela forced herself to ignore the grade and finally read the comments. A lot of them were about sentence structure and wandering off topic, but some of them were compliments, like “Great idea!” or “This is interesting! One more sentence to drive it home.” On the last page her professor had written a long paragraph praising her ideas and offering her a chance to revise. “With a little hard work this paper could easily become an A!”

Michaela raised her face to the bright sun and closed her eyes, listening: birds singing, calling to each other; a muffled conversation between a man and a woman; the particular rhythm of someone walking in heavy boots. The sun spread over her skin like a warm blanket, soothing.

The driver mounted the steps of the bus and fired the engine. Its rumble pulled Michaela from her thoughts, and she watched as the other passengers began to board. She looked down at the essay.

With a little hard work.

## Sheared

Back when Abuelita was young, before she quit school, before her big sister died in childbirth, making Abuelita a mother to her nephew, before she met and married her first husband, before having three sons and, years later, a daughter with her second husband, before her first grandchild ever drew a breath, Abuelita was called Lina.

“Lina, please spell ‘audacious,’” Miss Jenkins said.

It was 1942, and Lina stood at the front of her classmates. There were three students still competing for spelling bee class champion, and Lina was the only student from the Mexican school still in the running.

“A-u-d-a-c-i-o-u-s. Audacious,” Lina said, eyes squinched as she waited for the result.

“Correct.”

Lina let out a breath and got in the back of the short line at Miss Jenkins’ desk. She had never been in an official spelling bee before. At her old four-room Mexican school, it closed and Lina and all her friends had to switch to the white school they had studied American history, vocabulary, arithmetic, and spelling. Their old teacher would announce after each test who had performed best, and Lina’s name was almost always called.

But this was different. This was out loud and on the spot. No time to think it over, or see it on the page to check if it looked right. Just Lina and the words.

She loved it.

Activities like this made Lina laugh to think she hadn’t wanted to switch schools at first. She and a bunch of other kids went to their Mexican school on the first day of integration, but a long, yellow school bus was waiting, and it took everyone over to Washington Elementary. Lina

was glad now. The teachers at the new school talked about different stuff like the planets and Asia and Africa.

A short, brown-haired boy went next. Lina knew that he was a really fast runner, always beat everyone at relays. He tripped over the order of the vowels in ‘initials,’ leaving one other boy left.

Miss Jenkins waited for the next student to take the speller’s position in front of the podium, and after the curly-haired boy nodded, Miss Jenkins said, “Please spell knack.”

Lina’s heart leapt. She knew that word. She’d read it before in the newspaper and had needed to look it up in the school dictionary the next day. It was a tricky one, with one of those silent letters that didn’t make any sense.

“N-a-c-k. Knack?” Brian said slowly, eyebrows raised.

“I’m sorry, Brian, that is incorrect,” Miss Jenkins said with a gentle smile. “Please return to your seat.” Miss Jenkins turned to Lina and motioned her to the podium. “Please spell ‘knack’.”

Lina nodded and stood tall, facing the class. “K-n-a-c-k. Knack,” she said with a smile.

When she finished, she saw a look of surprise on Miss Jenkins face. Lina liked Miss Jenkins because she was always nice to everyone, and she read a chapter from a book to the class every afternoon, but Lina hated how Miss Jenkins acted like it was extra special when a student from the Mexican school got an answer right. She wanted to laugh and tell Miss Jenkins that spelling had been something they practiced a lot at her old school. They even copied pages from the dictionary. But Lina didn’t laugh. Instead she told Miss Jenkins thank you and went to take her seat near the back of the classroom.

When Lina sat down, her friend leaned over. “Ay, Lina,” she said. “You should have lost on purpose. Next week you’ll have to do that in front of the whole school. Aren’t you scared?”

Lina shrugged her shoulders, but inside she was quivering with excitement. She had a feeling she was going to win. And she couldn’t wait.

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After school, Lina raced to the home of her older sister, Rufina. Rufina was almost six years older than Lina, who was the second eldest with four little brothers and sisters after her. Now that Lina was ten, she was responsible for preparing breakfast, getting her siblings ready for school, and leaving the youngest two with the neighbor to watch while Lina was at school and Madre worked her morning job at a nearby bakery, *La Panadería*. Lina also handled the laundry and ironing, as well as taking care of the small garden and chickens that dominated the backyard. Rufina used to split these chores with Lina, but last summer she had started going walking with a boy who was just a few years older but already had a job with the train station. Now she was married and lived across the boulevard in a house with green grass and flower boxes. Madre sniffed and turned her head every time Rufina’s name came up.

“The flowers may be pretty, but they won’t feed her and her fancy husband,” Madre would say. Madre had been happy for the marriage at first. Most girls in the neighborhood married around sixteen. Those who waited until they were eighteen started to seem like old maids. But when Madre found out Rufina was moving out with Hector to a new house, instead of having Hector move in with the family, Madre basically stopped speaking to Rufina. “She should be here, helping the family,” Madre would say and shake her head.



That day, after winning the spelling bee, Lina couldn't wait to get to Rufina's house. Rufina had never liked school or reading, but Lina knew Rufina would be happy for her. Lina ran through the park, dodging young mothers with their babies in buggies, and older men sitting around tables playing cards.

"Guess what?" Rufina asked after she opened the door and let Lina inside. "Hector says he's going to take me on a vacation to the beach this summer, for our honeymoon."

"Ohhh," Lina said, all thoughts of the spelling bee gone with the memories of the ocean and sand. Just thinking of the ocean let Lina hear the birds and the waves, feel the sun on her skin. They used to go to the beach back when Papa was alive, but not at all in the three years since he died.

"Maybe if Madre will allow it, you could come with us?" Rufina said. "I know she's still mad at me." She laid a hand on her stomach. "But I'm hoping we can work things out soon."

Excitement raced through Lina. If she asked Madre just right, she would have no choice but to let Lina go. First she would clean the stove, then she would beat the rugs, and then she would have a warm cup of chocolate waiting for her mother. Madre was always nicer with something sweet inside of her. Lina would even promise to give the small kids baths and put them to bed every night up until the trip if that's what it took!

Still lost in her thoughts, Lina stood to hug and thank her sister when she noticed how her sister's hand was still resting on her stomach, thumb rubbing small circles. She remembered Madre doing that when she was pregnant with the youngest boy. Rufina also had that faraway look on her face, like she knew something no one else did. Lina recognized the signs.

"When we go to the beach, I'm going to save all the seashells I find and make us bracelets," Lina said. She would let Rufina keep her secret.

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Lina walked home slowly. She was happy for her sister, but Lina couldn't help but think about how Rufina had never talked about wanting to get married or have kids before Hector. Now it seemed like what was supposed to happen, and that was it; Rufina would be a mom, just like that.

Sometimes when Lina played chase with boys, her stomach would flip when one tagged her hand, but she didn't want to kiss them. And Lina couldn't imagine having kids of her own. Ever. She loved her little brothers and sisters, but sometimes she couldn't stand to be around them. She was supposed to come straight home after school to watch them, so Madre could go to her night job at the restaurant. But Madre didn't have to be at work until three, so that gave Lina a whole hour to do whatever she wanted to all by herself.

Back at the Mexican school, Lina had usually used the hour to play baseball with her friends, but now that the schools were mixed, most days she stayed after to sit in the library and read a chapter from one of the beautiful old books. Lina thought the library was the best part of going to the new school. It was cool and quiet in there. Lina would sit in the aisle between the shelves in the section by the windows, her back against the books, and the books' spines pressing into her own.

Twice since moving to the new school, Lina had lost track of time in the library and was so late getting home that Madre had sent Lina's brother after her. Each time Lina rushed home, imagining the ways Madre would punish her, but both times Madre just gave Lina a look and a kiss on the top of her head. And after the second time, Madre gave Lina an old book someone

had left at the restaurant. “For after your chores,” Madre had said, sliding the book across the kitchen table to Lina during the hour they overlapped at home.

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Lina was surprised to find that the school-wide spelling bee was easier than the one in her classroom. Most of the kids were younger, so that helped, but even the boy from the other fifth grade class didn’t last long. The last round was between Lina and Sarah, a third grader with blonde hair in two braids, who stumbled over the spelling of ‘gladiolus.’

Afterwards, Lina called into the quiet house, “Madre! I did it! I won!”

Lina’s mother came out of the bedroom, finger to her lips. “*Cálmate!* Your little brother is finally asleep.”

“Sorry, Madre,” Lina said in a loud whisper. “I was just going to say that I won the school spelling bee! I beat them. I beat them. I beat them. I beat all the *gringos* in my school, and now I get to go downtown to have another spelling bee with the winners from the other schools in town.”

Lina’s mother held her arms out for Lina. “Ay! How wonderful!”

Lina went to her mother’s side and embraced her, pressing into her Madre’s body, breathing in flour and garlic and spice. The smell of home.

“My *mija* is so smart.” Madre released Lina from the embrace and started straightening the kitchen. “When is the competition?”

“Next week.”

Madre stopped what she was doing and looked at Lina. “During the school day?” she asked, her eyebrow raised.

“Yes. In the morning.”

“Good.” She turned back to her cleaning. “You know I need you here after school to watch the *niños*.”

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That weekend Rufina came over without Hector for Sunday dinner. Madre knew she was coming, and cooked enchilada *verdes*, Rufina’s favorite. But when Rufina arrived wearing a dress with a laced hem and pearl buttons, Madre sniffed, and turned her face when Rufina greeted her with a hug and kiss, so that Rufina met Madre’s cold cheek.

“Have you been cooking dinner for your new husband?” Madre said to Rufina as they sat at the table to eat. “You look very skinny.”

“Si, Madre, of course,” Rufina said. “I just haven’t been feeling well lately.” As if to demonstrate, she picked at the beans and rice on her plate, moving the food around without taking a bite.

“Guess what, Rufina? I won the school spelling bee at Washington, and now I get to compete in a city competition this Thursday.”

Rufina put her fork down and took Lina’s hand. “I guess all that reading the newspaper paid off,” she said.

Lina smiled and took a big bite of enchilada.

“What time is the spelling bee?” Rufina asked. “Maybe I can come watch while Hector is at work.”

Madre grunted through her nose. “Won’t you be busy with your new house and garden?” she said. “Taking care of *una casa* is a lot for one person.”

“Yes, but I can make time to watch Lina. She is still my sister.”

“Is that so?” Madre said as she spooned rice onto a plate for the youngest boy.

“Family is more important to me than ever, Madre,” Rufina said. She took a deep breath. “Hector and I have some big news.”

Madre stopped moving, a spoonful of rice hovering in mid-air over her own plate. She looked sharply at Rufina, then to Lina, who averted her eyes.

“No,” Madre said. “Not already.” She let the serving spoon fall back in the pan, grains of rice scattering across the table cloth.

“Si, Madre. The doctor said the baby will be here around Christmas.”

“So foolish, *mija*,” Madre said quietly. Then she let out a moan and pounded her fist on the table. The motion caused the grains of rice to jump, leaving oily spots of tomato sauce on the table cloth everywhere they landed. “First you and that *pendejo* move to a new place, leaving me alone to do all the work, pay all the bills, feed everyone, and now you want to have a baby? Who is going to help you?” Madre looked back over each shoulder, as if someone was standing behind her. “Not me, Rufina, I’ll tell you that much.”

Rufina laughed scornfully. “I would never expect help from you, Madre.” She spat the word from her mouth. “You don’t think children are to love and care for; they are just another set of hands to work for you.”

“Is that what you think?” Madre said, her voice low and tired. Not looking at Rufina. “You think I like to spend my time slaving, to make sure the children I am left to raise alone have somewhere to sleep?” She picked at a grain of rice on the table cloth. “So tired, that I have nothing left to give.” She raised her eyes and looked at Rufina. “Don’t you think I want to give my babies the world? But all I can do, day after day after day, is work two jobs and keep us off the street and food on the table. And if that isn’t enough...”

Rufina began to speak, but Madre cut her off.

“No,” Madre said. “I am done talking. It is time for you to go.” She stood and began clearing the food from the table, not looking at Rufina or even Lina.

Rufina stood, and Lina thought she was going to say something, anything, to stop Madre from ignoring her, but Rufina just told Lina, “Good luck,” and left.

Whether Rufina meant good luck with the spelling bee, or good luck with Madre, Lina didn’t know.

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The house was cold the morning of the city spelling bee, so Lina turned on a burner for a while to warm the kitchen as she rushed through her chores. She moved quickly, her mind already on the next task, making her rougher than usual when she was braiding her little sister’s hair.

Reacting to an especially strong tug, her sister cried out and tried to pull away.

Lina pulled her back and pushed down on her shoulder, forcing her back in the chair. “Stop squirming, and it won’t hurt,” Lina said.

Lina dropped off the younger two at the neighbor's, and then hurried her brothers to school, taking the shortcut through the field, not caring that her socks were getting covered in burrs, and the boys' legs were getting scratched. She wasn't sure what time she was supposed to leave, but she wanted to be in class early. As soon as class started, the principal came in and told Miss Jenkins it was time for Lina to go. Miss Jenkins stopped the lesson and told the class to wish Lina luck, which they did in a sing-songy way.

Later, at the school district office, Lina peeked through the curtains of the auditorium stage to look for Rufina in the audience. They hadn't spoken since Rufina and Madre had argued, but Lina knew her sister would come.

All the other competitors were sitting behind her on brown, wooden chairs lined up into two rows with space in the middle for a walkway to the microphone. Lina didn't see Rufina anywhere, and as far as Lina could tell, she was the only Mexican in the group on the stage or in the audience.

"Miss," a woman in a red dress said as she approached Lina. "We'll need you back in your seat, Missy. We are about to begin."

Lina let the curtain fall and returned to her seat.

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The championship word was called, and Lina's heart felt about to beat out of her chest. Labyrinth. LABRYRINTH. Labyrinth.

She was city champion.

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After it was over, and the blue ribbon had been pinned to her chest, Lina had to pose for pictures for the newspaper with lots of different people, including her principal and the superintendent.

“Aren’t you just the cutest and smartest little thing? Where did you learn to read?” the superintendent asked Lina.

Lina shrugged. She didn’t like the man. Something about him seemed funny, but not in a way that made Lina want to laugh. He made Lina feel small.

“Did they teach you to read at that Metzican school,” the man continued, “or did you learn at home with your parents?”

“School, I guess,” Lina said.

The superintendent turned to the principal. “Not exactly a conversationalist is she?” He laughed. “Well, hopefully she turns it on again at state. She’ll be the first Metzican girl in the competition, ever. She’ll be the posterchild for the integration program.”

They weren’t paying attention to Lina anymore, so she took the couple of steps from the stage to look for Rufina again

Lina walked all the way to the back of the building, out double doors into the parking lot. It was quiet out there. The sun was shining. Spring would be upon them any day now. She was about to go back in when she saw Rufina waiting across the street for the bus.

“Rufina, where were you?” Lina said when she reached her sister. “I looked for you from the stage.”

“I had to sit over in back by the door.”

“Why? There were empty seats near the front.”



“The *gringos* told me where to sit.” Rufina rolled her eyes. “Anyway, great job!” She pinched Lina’s arm lightly. “I can’t believe you got all those words right. And honestly what does labyrinth even mean? ”

Lina flashed a smile. “It’s like a big puzzle that you have to find your way out of,” she said. “I saw it in a book once.”

“You and your books.” Rufina smoothed down Lina’s hair.

Lina blushed.

“You’re going to do something special, Lina,” Rufina said. “This is just the beginning”

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Lina went straight home after her class was released for the day, the blue ribbon still pinned to her dress. She walked into the house and was surprised to hear the radio on and her mother sitting at the kitchen table with a drink in her hand.

“Madre?” Lina said.

“*Mi hija!*” Madre said. She stood and went to Lina, wrapping her in an embrace. “There you are. How was school?”

“Fine,” Lina said into her mother’s chest. Madre smelled sweaty, like she’d been in the sun too long, and her breath smelled sour.

Madre released Lina and walked back over to her seat at the table. She took a swallow from her glass and smiled at Lina. “I have good news for you,” Madre said.

Lina’s hand went to the ribbon on her chest. “Me, too.”

“Madre first.” She paused to take a drink from her glass. “*Los jefes* want to open another *panadería*, and they asked that I help set up the new store and take care of the kitchen.”

“Really?” Lina said. “That is wonderful!”

“*Si, hija, si.*” She finished her drink then wiped her lip with her handkerchief. “But I’ll need you to come in the beginning to help me.”

Lina’s eyes went wide. “Me?”

“*Si*, if you help me, we won’t have to hire someone else right away. Then when things pick up, you can be the first hire, and then I will get paid enough to quit my job at the restaurant. And it will be good to have someone with schooling, someone so smart.” Madre refilled her glass. “You start Monday with me at four-thirty *en la mañana.*”

“But I have school,” Lina said. She thought she would have at least another three to four years before she would have to start working. Most girls dropped out in high school, but most of the time they went until they were at least fourteen. That was when Rufina quit.

“You’re smart already. You don’t need any more school. You need to start making money. That’s the only way to make it in this world.”

“But I’m only in the fifth grade.”

“That is more school than I ever had. You can read and do math; that’s plenty.” Madre’s eyes softened and she put her hand on the top of Lina’s head. “As much as you love books, they won’t feed you, or your family.”

“But Madre,” Lina said, “what about state?” She pulled on the ribbon, making it jut out so her mother would see it. “I won at city, and now I get to go to the state spelling bee.”

“And if you and I run the new *panadería*, maybe soon we can move into a better house, with a proper floor. And maybe one day, a yard with green grass.”

“But, Madre, the superintendent said I’ll be the first Mexican ever to compete at state.”

Lina hoped and prayed that her mother would understand what that meant for Lina, to be the one who showed everyone how she was just as smart.

Madre responded in a very soft voice, softer than Lina had ever heard her speak. “*Lo siento, hija*. I know this doesn’t seem fair. But it is for the best. You’ll see. And as for the spelling, there are *muchos Mexicanos*. Someone else will do it.” She cleared her throat. “For now, you need to be here, helping the family.”

## VITA

Meiloni C. Erickson was born in San Bernardino, CA in 1983. She attended Berkeley City College for her Associate of Arts degree in 2010 and Alaska Pacific University for her Bachelors in 2012. Both degrees in Liberal Arts with Creative Writing emphasis. She joined the Creative Writing Workshop at the University of New Orleans in 2013, where she served as *Bayou Magazine* Associate Fiction Editor from 2014-2016.