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## Wandering Sagebrush

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Wandering Sagebrush

A Thesis

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

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing

by

Andrea Cyrus

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## Dedication

Carolina and Lukas, you are *mi vida, mi mundo, mi todo*.

Grandpa Jerry, thanks for encouraging me to write.

Grandma Priscilla, *gracias* for teaching me the definition of *procurar*.

## Prelude

The Colorado mountains showcase glimmering aspen trees during the month of September. Colorful, bountiful leaves create natural kaleidoscopes. The wind, disguised as quaking whispers, escapes through clusters of leaves, sometimes pushing them to their brief moment of flight, followed by a gentle glide upon terrain. A jumble of brilliant red, cider orange, and golden leaves populate the base of the melodious aspen grove. They keep the earth warm and protect vulnerable life from a sudden, threatening, nighttime frost. The temporal cover evolves into a nurturing and protective blanket for seedlings to survive the harsh, debilitating winter.

## Table of Contents

|                               |     |
|-------------------------------|-----|
| Abstract.....                 | vi  |
| Introduction .....            | 1   |
| Leaving Talpa.....            | 2   |
| Fixed Instability .....       | 14  |
| Second Family .....           | 27  |
| Chiconky Ramblings.....       | 44  |
| Most Unwanted.....            | 54  |
| Jerry .....                   | 67  |
| Journey Between Gurnies ..... | 81  |
| The Baby Whisperer .....      | 93  |
| Vita.....                     | 104 |

## Abstract

*Wandering Sagebrush* is a collection of eight unified essays. The main themes of the thesis include the struggle for identity and how one finds the people and places to call family and home. The essays focus on the family we make, the family we lose, the family we choose, and the decisions one makes in the name of family.

Keywords: Southwest; family; friends; identity; bicultural; chronic pain

## Introduction

*Wandering Sagebrush* speaks to resilient life travelers who persevere when faced with adversity. Those are my people, as are the realists of the world. They will understand the instability of my personal journey through the first three decades of my life.

The journey includes illness, heartbreak, racism, abandonment, and death. I'm a product of divorce, a child of a bi-racial couple, and a chronically unwell mother of two young children. I will not make things sound okay because I'm a genuine and earthy kind of woman, truthful, and yes, sometimes a bit emotional. I feel deeply, not just for myself but for everyone I encounter.

After all the down swings, I continue to look for the good in life. That's how I continue on this journey. Maybe you'll see what I'm talking about as you follow me. Don't expect chronological essays because the collection is unorthodox and perhaps a little complicated. I jump around in time as well as from place to place because sometimes it's the only way I can make any sense of my experiences. You will experience my flashbacks in the essays. I hope you experience your own as well.

Maybe you'll identify with Great-Grandpa Juan's tenacity and hard work. Perhaps, you'll understand what life is like when you just can't find your place in the world. I wonder if you've experienced the heartbreak of losing someone so close to you that you feel as though your DNA has changed forever. No matter where you go with me on my journey, I hope you'll find the strength to get to your destination.



## Leaving Talpa

I imagine how the unfurling of one's life can align the *destino*<sup>1</sup> for someone else. Through the tradition of storytelling, I hear my ancestors' determination to remain connected to each other and our communities. When life makes me tumble into unknown territory, I recall Great-Grandpa Juan's journey, and I embrace solitude and uncertainty. I remember that in leaving, we learn how to find our way back.

Great-Grandpa Juan was a child when he rose from a solid dirt floor and stared into the darkness, aware of his last morning at home before leaving to become a man. Grabbing his kerosene lamp, he stood up quietly, assuring that his family, inhabiting the single bedroom, would remain in deep slumber. Slipping his short, lean frame through the door to the bitter exterior, he bravely prepared for his premature departure from home. The year was 1906, and at just 12 years of age, Juan stood with the resolve of an older, more mature man. Soon, dawn broke the dark sky, illuminating the massive Sangre de Cristo<sup>2</sup> mountain range to the east of Talpa, New Mexico.

The blood-colored mountains run parallel to a robust lifeline: the Rio Grande. The clear water would quench Juan's thirst throughout the journey and keep him headed north. Southern Colorado's land of cool sunshine and mountain water tributaries offered prospects of farming and sheep herding. Juan would sacrifice many comforts in search of hard work.

In the outdoor kiva fireplace, a pile of starter twigs created an echo of crackling music. The corralled mustang had been captured in preparation for Juan's departure and

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<sup>1</sup> destiny

<sup>2</sup> blood of Christ

woke up the family with her high-pitched neighs, signaling Juan's impending migration. The mustang sensed the mixture of nerves and excitement in the air. Emerging reluctantly, Juan's little brother tried to be strong, but his quivering *pucheros*<sup>3</sup> relayed the family's apprehension from seeing their eldest child embark on a journey far from all that stood for home.

Juan finished his outdoor chores, allowing his family to relax for a few hours before their day, their life in Talpa, carried on without him. His mother had been preparing masa dough since dawn. The morning ritual of making tortillas required little light. The *masa*,<sup>4</sup> shaped into a grapefruit, was always the consistency of a woman's natural breast. Flour snowed from her palm above the table. With caressing sweeps of her other hand along the table, the flour evenly coated the workspace and the rolling pin.

Making tortillas proved a meditative practice, relying on touch. Juan's mother pinched off a lime-sized ball to flatten out evenly from the woman's upper body weight, shaping circular perfection. A dollop of *manteca*<sup>5</sup> dropped directly onto the sizzling cast iron skillet before welcoming the soft, thin circle onto the heat. Once the bubbling *manchitas*,<sup>6</sup> arose, she pinched part of the edge and used her callused fingers and thumb to flip it over. While cooking the second side, his mother had flattened the next ball to drop onto the cast iron skillet. That morning, all the tortillas went with Juan, as the rest of the family forewent part of their breakfast to sustain him on his journey. He also relied on line-dried *carne seca*<sup>7</sup> seasoned with *chile molido*,<sup>8</sup> and salted *piñon*.<sup>9</sup> Harvested from the local

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<sup>3</sup> pouts

<sup>4</sup> dough

<sup>5</sup> lard

<sup>6</sup> little dark spots

<sup>7</sup> jerky

trees, the nuts were cleaned, salted, and roasted. Ample in protein, they would nourish him along the way.

As the bitter air turned to a mid-morning crispness, Juan walked over to his mother and lowered his knees to the Earth, keeping his head down. With her hand on top of his head, she prayed, "*Qué Dios te bediga, te proteja, y te cuide ahora y siempre.*"<sup>10</sup>

She made the sign of the cross over him. He rose, and she embraced him wholeheartedly. He lingered in the warmth of her maternal embrace. *De todo corazón*,<sup>11</sup> he kissed her on the cheek. Her son, *el hombre de la casa*,<sup>12</sup> could not have understood the impact of his bravery. He knew his family depended on him, and with his mother's blessing, he knew he would succeed. Colorado promised work, and Juan was just right for the job – much stronger than his diminutive height insinuated.

The filly's dark eyes revealed an adventurous spirit as she pounced from her hind legs to her front legs before breaking off from the ranch. Juan's light frame enabled her to fly through northern New Mexico. The 50 miles to Colorado was further than the boy had ever ventured from this family.

The mustang trotted along the *Tó Ba'áadi*<sup>13</sup> north to Colorado's *Valle de San Luis*.<sup>14</sup> Juan knew that neighboring Indian tribes could surprise him at any moment. He relied on his faith to keep him calm and on his ancestors to protect him. The *piñon* and *romero*<sup>15</sup> trees were replaced with cottonwood, spruce, and aspen along the Rio Grande, leading him

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<sup>8</sup> ground up chile powder

<sup>9</sup> pine nuts

<sup>10</sup> May God bless you, protect you, and care for you, now and always.

<sup>11</sup> with all his heart

<sup>12</sup> the man of the house

<sup>13</sup> Navajo phrase meaning feminine waters, today's Rio Grande.

<sup>14</sup> Valley of Saint Louis

<sup>15</sup> rosemary

through the southernmost *pueblitos*<sup>16</sup> of Colorado. As he made his journey, Juan heard that a wealthy man from Nambé, New Mexico, had recently transplanted and now desperately needed workers in Capulín. The man's enterprises solicited strong workers. One of his ambitions was to build a Catholic church along the foothills of the San Juan Mountains. Continuing for another twenty miles to the northwest, Juan arrived in the pueblo of Capulín, Colorado.

Juan found the man, J. Luís Rivera, hard at work with a handful of other men, assisting in the repetitive duty of removing rocks from the dust-like soil some fifty yards from a pristine mountain river. Juan worked fastidiously, earning enough money to save for him and his family back in Talpa.

Juan considered working for and mentoring from Mr. Rivera as blessings. This man would ensure that Juan, so far from his family, became *un hombre de palabra*.<sup>17</sup> The gentleman's vision for the land was endless: preparing a thousand acres across the rocky terrain for future harvests, traveling around the state in search of livestock so as to ensure the livelihood of the growing community, and transporting rock from the quarry to the heart of the village in order to construct the Catholic church.

Juan worked his way from ranch hand to right-hand man of Mr. Rivera. After years of backbreaking work and sending money home to his family in Talpa, his priorities shifted. With his younger brother now supporting the others in Talpa, Juan readied to propose to Celina Romero.

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<sup>16</sup> small towns

<sup>17</sup> a man of his word

He approached his boss, "*Jefe*,<sup>18</sup> you've blessed me with the work provided." Until the beginning of the twenty-first century, regional Spanish maintained extreme formality in conversations, consistent with the origin of the local dialect from Spain.

"Thank you, señor,<sup>19</sup> for all you have done for me and my family."

"Yes, Juan. What's your concern?" Mr. Rivera asked.

"It's that, well, would you consider paying me in land, señor? You see, I'm of age to start my own family, but I have nothing to provide at the moment, no place of my own."

*"Claro, Juan. Te entiendo."*<sup>20</sup>

"From now on, you will be paid with land. But please understand the value of land and how long it may take to earn your keep. Of course, you and your bride are welcome to live on the rancho after you are married."

In 1912, the province of New Mexico achieved statehood. The new Catholic church was built for the small community of five hundred residents, most of whom moved from New Mexico, like Juan. The dedication of the church to Saint Joseph, patron saint of families, called for a jubilant celebration. Music, dancing, and a feast with chokecherry wine, took place at the Rivera ranch. At the end of the celebration, Mr. Rivera returned to the ranch with Juan. As they rode along the Alamosa River, they took in the shade from the tall cottonwood trees. August heat required that the bridles and saddles were removed to allow the horses to rest and hydrate after a long day.

"Juan, look at all this land before you. God has blessed my family. In turn, I must share this with you. Because of your loyalty and trust, we have succeeded at accomplishing

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<sup>18</sup> boss

<sup>19</sup> sir

<sup>20</sup> Of course, Juan. I understand.

many goals. I'm grateful, Juan. You and Celina will take ownership of the land from here to the southernmost cottonwood tree before the trail to town and over to the east, where the *acequia*<sup>21</sup> bends and returns back north to the river."

The Medina family's home was small and made of adobe. The family grew and devoted their service to the church that Juan helped build. One summer, Juan's brother, Eugenio, helped him herd sheep up above the foothills leading to the San Juan Mountains. The young man simply vanished and was never discovered. The news felt unbearable to Juan and his family. They believed the Utes were to blame for Eugenio's disappearance.

After the passing of better years, Juan and Celina celebrated twenty years of marriage with their large family of thirteen children, dozens of godchildren, and their community. The year was 1937 when Celina, the family's matriarch died. Celina's interment on that August day was the saddest event the community had ever witnessed: thirteen children lined up alongside their beloved mother's coffin. They took turns holding the youngest toddler while the others said their goodbyes. The family's loss deeply affected the entire community.

Juan left his second eldest son, seventeen-year-old José, in charge of the large brood. He left for Antonito to distance himself from the pain and memories. The siblings under Jose's care ranged in age from eighteen months to fourteen years old. Not only did the children lose their mother, they had lost their father, too. José devoted himself to providing for his brothers and sisters by taking over the responsibilities on the farm.

The children's new normal began as their tears waxed and waned in intensity. The children forgave their father but depended on God and each other for comfort. Juan

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<sup>21</sup> a watercourse used in Spanish colonies

remarried a woman from Antonito. Her name was Aguida, a granddaughter of Kit Carson. They spent five years living in the neighboring town, twenty miles to the south. When Aguida died, Juan chose to finally return to his remaining children at home. Somehow, the Colorado state government named him Father of the Year. The community lauded his motion to make amends. They attributed the miracle to the work of Saint Joseph, the patron saint of families.

Seven of Juan's nine daughters became nuns, focusing on the betterment of their communities. They believed that in their commitment to service and God, they would never be abandoned again. One daughter, named after her mother, Celina, married, as did all the sons. For the next couple of decades, their dad remained committed to his elected role of county commissioner of Conejos County. When his mobility became limited in the early 1990s, Maria, the eldest daughter, left her work as a nurse to care for her father full-time.

The day came when Juan's eldest son, Grandpa José, died at the age of seventy-one. Juan never wanted to outlive his children. José spent his life as a hard worker, provider, and confidante to his brothers and sisters. The family grieved deeply for the man who held their world together when they had no one but each other. Juan heard the news as he sat in his small recliner. His head weighed heavily with grief as his arms supported him on both sides, allowing the tears to trickle down his crinkled face and pool into his lap. His profound pain was not measured in tears but in his freedom to mourn. José, like his father, had lost part of his childhood for the sake of his family. His brothers and sisters mourned the man who was not only a doting older brother but also a father figure who had stayed home as a young man to care for them. In his death, the family relived their abandonment.

Juan passed his days listening to the radio, which broadcasted the rosary every day

in Spanish. At mealtime, he relished the fresh vegetables and meat from the farm. Lamb, a staple in Southern Colorado, was usually made into a stew or savory *chicharrones*.<sup>22</sup> He cherished visits from his extensive family and always had the great-grandchildren over for Halloween. I never wore a costume because the weather would inevitably drop below zero on Halloween night. That didn't stop Great-Grandpa from teasing me about my scary costume. Then he gifted each of us great-grandchildren four quarters and laughed as we squealed in delight over the treasure.

In 1994, Juan bought a raffle ticket from his granddaughter. The raised funds would help restore the roof of the church Juan had built eighty-two years prior. When his family asked him why he had bought just one ticket for a dollar when he could have had six tickets for five dollars, he laughed and said, "Well, why do I need to buy more when I already have the winning ticket?" He made his visitors chuckle that day, as he always did. They dismissed his foresight.

Two weeks later, the winning raffle number was picked for the grand prize of \$10,000. The community stood outside in the sunshine and hollered and cheered for Juan Medina – the man who had worked tirelessly to build a community place of worship, whose family had maintained its important role in the upkeep of the church and the livelihood of the community. How had he predicted his win?

"I just knew," he said, before grinning his trademark grin, then breaking into hearty laughter with his loved ones.

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<sup>22</sup> a deep-fried, fatty, diced-meat delicacy



"What are you going to do with all the money?" his family asked. "I'm a hundred years old. I don't need that much money. I guess it would be as good a time as any to make plans for my funeral."

"Yeah, right, Grandpa," a granddaughter teased. "You aren't going anywhere when you're this healthy!"

Later that evening, his granddaughters discussed the unusual day.

"He's just saying that he's going to die to make us forget about all his money!" one of them said.

His dedicated daughter, Maria, called us two weeks to the day after he turned 100 and said, "Well, he made good on his promise," as she sniffled softly. He had remained un *hombre de palabra*<sup>23</sup> through his death.

Twenty-nine grandchildren, forty-four great-grandchildren, countless great-great-grandchildren, and a handful of great-great-great-grandchildren have arrived from Juan and Celina's union. The family likes to imagine how many more relatives they would have if the other seven daughters had chosen to marry instead of taking vows to serve their church. Juan's children live far apart from each other, and many have since passed.

Opportunities for work ceased in twenty-first century Capulín. Leaving home was necessary to pursue higher education. Fifteen years have passed since I chose education over family and culture. I miss daily life on the farm, picking wild asparagus, watching the lambs prance, and meditating on a daily walk up and down the long lane. I miss the way five generations resided close by and visited every day.

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<sup>23</sup> man of his word

The livelihood of the community barely hangs on; domestic violence, drug use, suicide, and murder are now rampant. The good days, full of celebration and joy are countered with hard work and sacrifice. I wonder what keeps so many of my relatives there when the adversity continues to wear them out. Water wells dry out, requiring expensive labor to drill deeper to find more. Pipes freeze during the winter and ruin plumbing. The obstacles mount higher and higher but somehow my family find the resilience to perservere.

One hundred and ten years ago, my great-grandfather boldly ventured to improve his family's livelihood. As his descendant, I focus on carrying his spirit with me. The distance separating my ancestors' *terreno*<sup>24</sup> in Talpa, from the dirt of my garden in Washington State, is 1189 miles. By car, driving nonstop in perfect conditions, it would take nineteen hours. On a resilient mustang—well, I guess I will never know about that journey.

I will never know what it is like to hang on for dear life—my own and that of my family, by the nape of a mustang, nor will I recite thousands of prayers, as my bleeding hands excavate innumerable stones as a means to an end. The hard work of my grandparents and great-grandparents appears in mysterious ways, like my instinct to never give up on anything, whether it's something worth my time and effort or not. Sometimes, it shows up mentally or physically and, every once in a great while, spiritually. When I climb mountains only to realize I can go no higher, that is when I feel closest to my ancestors, who grew up imitating the rams on the mountainside. I feel free when I climb the eighty-five-degree slopes, with my hands and legs, counter-balancing my weight on the instability of the crumbling terrain.

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<sup>24</sup> land

I look down at my soft fingertips. They are void of trademark calluses which display the dedication to the craft of making flour tortillas, New Mexican style. I look at pictures of my Spanish ancestors, who, with the Native Americans, had created the New Mexican lineage. When an occasional stranger approaches me and asks if I have indigenous ancestry, I want to know what they see, because I so rarely see it in my reflection, but, instead, I feel it in my heart and honor it in my intentions. Ancestry remains not just in physical characteristics but also in traditions. When we align *luminarias*<sup>25</sup> along the country streets at Christmastime, I gaze upon the warmth of their glow, and I think of how the sun rises and sets over the Taos Valley, illuminating the mountains on both sides.

I rely on the mountains and on the faith that guided Great-Grandpa to Colorado. When I am unsure where to go or how to resume on track, I close my eyes and breathe, imagining that I'm back in New Mexico. The aromas of rosemary, sage, and lilac all transport me to Great-Grandpa's humble home. I burn sage to keep my home safe. During Christmastime, we purchase a small rosemary tree to remind us of our relatives who are far away from us but have become part of our spirit. In spring, lilac blossoms occupy the exterior corner of my bedroom, just like they do along Great-Grandpa's fence. These *costumbres*<sup>26</sup> make me the person that I am. However, the loss of several traditions that I held close makes me yearn for my family and community. It makes me question who I am now. Far away from it all, I am so different from the person I used to be. I am a person who remains closely connected to the earth and my family and who is solid in my faith.

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<sup>25</sup> sand-filled paper sacks with illuminated votive candles

<sup>26</sup> traditions

Mealtimes have changed from enjoyment to eating out of necessity. My stomach growls for soul food of fresh tortillas to scoop out, *chile rojo con carne*.<sup>27</sup> Such food leaves me with a satisfaction that penetrates my spirit's core. My body aches for the medicinal waters flowing throughout Colorado and New Mexico, but especially Ojo Caliente.<sup>28</sup> This was Great-Grandpa Juan's favorite healing hot springs, located just outside Taos. Laden with lithia, iron, soda, and arsenic, the waters are revered for keeping bathers healthy. Each evening, my eyes yearn to absorb the blood-bathed range, the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, in the east as the sun surrenders behind the opposite mountain range, the San Juan Mountains, in the west. My ears strain for the northern New Mexico Spanish dialect, a singsong rhythm, that calls to my heart like a love song.

I am bound to the Talpa community, so far away that *una vuelta*<sup>29</sup> to the area, is like going back in time, back to where there are limited electricity and water, where word travels faster in person than by smartphone, but also where silence speaks more than a thousand words and intuition is respected as an integral part of communication. The high desert of Talpa is a place I can stand and feel more alive by remembering Great-Grandpa Juan's departure from New Mexican soil. It's a place where I relish my insignificance in relation to the universe and all the glorious beauty around me. That's all it takes for me to return to Talpa.

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<sup>27</sup> red chili and meat

<sup>28</sup> referred locally as 'Ojo,' meaning hot eye

<sup>29</sup> a return

## Fixed Instability

I don't remember what game we were playing upstairs, if any. I only remember how Dad summoned Marina and me.

"Girls, come downstairs. We need to talk to you."

Just one month before, our family of four moved from the Pacific Northwest to Mama's birthplace in Southern Colorado. As a trained Jungian dream analyst, Mama always interpreted whatever she remembered from the night's subconscious thoughts. Once, a dream alerted her to her father's failing health. She woke up with an unexpected demand: Dad must retire and move our family to Colorado. Dad, a young forty, loved being CEO of his business. Mama gave Dad a choice to sell his successful computer graphics company and relocate the family, or she would leave him and take Marina and me. Her motive seemed clear. She presumed her ill father wouldn't be around much longer, so it was worth selling the business and moving back to Colorado. Her tight-knit family would be awaiting us.

By moving to a high desert climate in Colorado, we learned that Seattle's magical drizzle and dances in the rain were tethered to our happiness. The rain had a way of cementing one's growing roots to the Pacific Northwest. In Colorado, without abundant saturation and fertilizer, transplanted roots withered quickly. Fierce winds pulled out vegetation, both young and old. Sagebrush, indigenous to the area, were bounced along by the relentless wind, across the country terrain. I identified with the dead plant rolling around aimlessly, giving an impression of an attempted frantic exodus from hostile territory.

Our family laughed when my sister and I missed dancing in the rain. Before the move, we'd meet outside with our friends to jump in the infinite dark puddles. The differences between the southwestern and northwestern cultures seemed endless. "Don't worry," an uncle said, "We have those rain dances here, too. But nobody ever wants to need them." The indigenous rain dances performed on the nearby Native American reservations were a plea to Mother Nature for the gift of precipitation. Contradictions both big and small between the two regions, made Colorado feel increasingly foreign. The same words meant different things, like dances bringing rain instead of rain bringing dances.

While still enjoying a lackadaisical sense of vacation instead of a permanent move, we awoke to Dad's strict instruction for us to join him. We obediently scrambled from the second story of the house to the downstairs in our favorite cartoon pajamas. Seven-year-old Marina in Jem and the Holograms and five-year-old me in Rainbow Brite. We climbed into the formal dining room chairs and sat on our heels. We anticipated the day when everything new, like our unknown family, community, and students at school, all felt familiar. We looked at our parents while Mama appeared altogether too serious and removed from our setting. She gazed out the window at the clear view of Mt. Blanca, snow-capped and glistening. Dad faced us and then looked down. No one spoke for a while. Then he said, "Girls, your mother and I have decided to get a divorce."

Time paused. I anticipated more news while my sister burst into tears. Looking up at Dad and then over at Mama, I asked, "What's a divorce?" Mama refused to acknowledge me. My reality, my identity, would be shaped by what happened next. Mama's sobs pierced the silence. Dad recognized my naiveté and answered, "Sweetheart, it's when two people don't want to live in the same house anymore."

"Oh," I nodded, suddenly understanding. Dad looked like he was about to jump in a swimming pool, with his chest lifted and lungs expanded. If there had been a pool to swim in, he would have lasted underwater a long time. I watched and wondered about my family's strange behavior: the crying, the breathing, and the odd sense of being alone although we were all together at the table. What was the problem? I thought. If my parents did not want to live together there, we'd just have to move to yet another house where we would all be happy. I didn't know that in Colorado, not wanting to live in the same house meant each parent moved to his or her own.

Mama had promised fun and family when she persuaded us to move from fun and friends in Washington. She said things would improve in Colorado. I couldn't imagine a better life than what we had before the move. Once in Colorado, on the night before she left us, she told us we could run over to where she would be staying if we needed her. The next day, from the upstairs window, I watched her carry suitcases and walk across the dirt lane to Russell and Beverly's house; I knew in my heart that I'd have to wait patiently for the better life she promised. She left without saying goodbye, and that's how we knew we'd be seeing her soon.

The unfinished interior of the house seemed irrelevant before Mama left. Suddenly, looking at the swatches like I had done with Mama made me sick, like I couldn't breathe. Marina and I sprinted over to Beverly's house, where Mama would be waiting for us. Breathless, we smiled at our uncle who was chopping wood outside months in advance of Colorado's cold winter. He led us to the door, where we yelled, "Mama!" She sat on the sofa, in deep conversation with her sister. As Russell held the door open for us, Mama shook her head and sat back. The disappointment on Russell's face told us everything we needed to

know and how it pained him to say, "Girls, your Mama is busy. Go on home." The house was not our home. Mama was our home. Without options, we slowly stood back from the house as the screen door shuttered.

Days later, I saw Mama from the upstairs window, heading north, away from the rental house, and towards the river at the bottom of our property. Her image slowly diminished until, even squinting, I could not distinguish what she was doing in the middle of the pasture. My heart raced, wondering what she needed to do out there, all alone. She must be lost, I thought and zipped downstairs, pausing to throw on some dirty socks and dusty tennis shoes. I ran past the barn and corrals and turned right to follow her route. I would help Mama, who was lost, and get her back safely. She was probably calling me to join her, two hundred yards away, but I couldn't hear her.

"Mama!" I yelled. "Mama, I'm coming."

I pounded the dirt, running faster than ever before. "Mama, I'm here," I shouted when I could see her walking away from me. I stopped behind her.

She turned around and asked, "What are you doing here?" Her inquisitive dark brown eyes stared as I happily said, "Mama, I came to be with you." I smiled at her and hugged her curvy bottom as hard as I could. "Are you lost, Mama?"

"Leave."

"What, Mama?"

"Leave."

"Why? I want to stay with you, please."

"Andrea, leave! Go. Get away from me."



I stumbled backward, trying to understand the immediacy of her words. As I fell and got back up, her screams echoed along the river. Tripping over my feet, I ran back home to escape her unfamiliar, enraged voice. Although she didn't say why she was angry, I knew it couldn't be at me.

Dad noticed our dwindling spirit as we waited for Mama to do what she needed to do before coming back to us. He gave us back something we had missed: swimming. Dad drove us in his new pickup truck and gave our babysitter a twenty-dollar bill to take care of our entry and food at the outdoor hot springs. He'd say, "I'll be back by closing," and always returned on time and exhausted. His toothy smile warmly welcomed us into his arms. The return was sweeter and more rewarding every day, but it didn't help the part of us that ached for Mama.

Swimming seemed to be all we did that summer. Racing into the locker room, we changed and jumped into the soft mist zone that dampened our suits before heading under the sun's strong rays. Starting at the lap lanes, Marina and I raced to pass the swim test in order to jump off the diving boards. She rarely beat me. I was a natural in the water. Mama had announced the conclusion of my competitive training before we moved to Colorado. Returning to the water gave us back some confidence from our family's instability.

One day, back at the house, I answered the phone while Dad napped extra long. A cousin asked, "Hey, do you wanna go to the sand dunes with us?" I said, "Sure!" Mountain runoff created a river along the bottom of the dunes, which became the closest thing to a beach with all the sand and water. In the background, my cousin's mom asked, "Who are you talking to?" When my cousin answered, she was told, "Hang up the phone. We can't

invite them." My cousin said, "I'm sorry." I remained listening to the line buzz after she hung up.

One day, Mama showed up on Dad's property, driving furiously down the long lane to the roundabout where we were playing in the dirt. She dashed around to the other side of the car, opening the back door saying, "Hurry girls, get in. We have to leave now!" We followed her, not knowing why we had to rush. As soon as we closed the car door, I turned around to see Dad running after us, in nothing but athletic shorts. Mama sped away. Dad stopped running after fifty yards and stood in the middle of the lane. The kicked-up dirt swallowed him from my view out the back window.

Mama drove us over to Abuela's house and left. Meanwhile, Auntie stirred pots of *chile verde*<sup>30</sup> and *chile rojo*.<sup>31</sup> The two unique scents mixed above the stove, and curiously, my mouth watered in anticipation of the spices that I was learning to appreciate. Suddenly, our stomachs woke up, but we weren't allowed to eat as the chile needed to thicken over low heat. While Abuela started rolling out the dough for the flour tortillas, we were given our instructions.

"Girls, when we tell you to hide, you need to go to Grandpa's closet and stay there," *Abuela* said. "How long do we hide?" I asked. "Until we tell you to come out," Auntie said. Two hours later, we heard a vehicle roar past the living room towards the front of the house.

"*Ya*,<sup>32</sup> Andreita, Marina, it's time to hide! Go and don't come out until we say so," *Abuela* said. Thinking we were playing games, we hurried to the other bedroom, and as I

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<sup>30</sup> green chili

<sup>31</sup> red chili

<sup>32</sup> right now

did, I heard Dad rush through the kitchen, looking for us. "Where are they? I know they're here."

Grandpa stopped him before going any farther past the dining room on the way to the bedrooms.

"Mike, you need to go now," Grandpa told him, motioning him to step back outside.

"Why are you hiding the girls from me? Why are you doing this to me? I didn't do anything!"

It was the first time my chest and stomach hurt simultaneously.

Something about Abuela's game wasn't right. Too scared to ask questions, I felt my fingers dance uncontrollably. As the front door slammed, so did my heart. I stayed closeted, barely breathing, heart racing. Unsure of whom to trust, of whom to follow, I stared into the darkness. No one came for us. Marina decided to exit, but I was too scared. Finally, a pile of blankets toppled over and created a fluffy haven both peaceful and comforting. I fell onto it and closed my eyes.

Later that year, Grandma and Grandpa celebrated their forty-fifth wedding anniversary in an extravaganza at Mama's house. After the priest blessed the marriage, the daughters brought out entrée after entrée to the dining room where the large group of over forty people laughed and celebrated the couple's fortune.

"Mike's here," someone whispered. Dad rushed into the house, grabbed Marina and me around the waist, and hauled us to his truck.

The guests called out, "Mike, don't."

"Let them stay."

"Please, don't ruin the party."

Dad returned to the stained glass door and slammed it closed. Before we had time to buckle up our seatbelts, Dad took off with a roar from his engine. His violent driving made us tremble. As soon as Dad reached the main highway and slammed his foot down on the gas pedal, we shouted and grabbed each other. Dad said, "Girls, don't cry, it's me. What have they said to you? I'm your Dad. You're supposed to be with me."

"Please Daddy, take us back. Please," Marina cried. I huddled on the floor praying for some relief from my heart as it fought to break free from my chest. "Is that what you want? Do you want to go back?"

"Yes," Marina said. She was so brave at that moment. Dad quickly turned the truck around, slamming me into Marina against the opposite door. The ride ended back at the bottom of the lane where the priest, Russell, and another uncle had a human blockade. Someone grabbed me from behind while Russell grabbed Marina. They carried us inside, where I heard people comment on Dad's erratic behavior.

Fragments of embedded glass shone under the light, as family attended to Beverly's injuries. She had been at the door when Dad slammed it, destroying the custom stained glass artwork. I crunched larger pieces on the tile floor as I stepped into another aunt's arms. Between the blood, crying, and a million shining shards, everyone knew the party was over. Friends silently picked up their jackets and kissed Mama's parents goodbye. Family tended to each other, carefully avoiding the glass. Once the majority of guests were gone, Mama told her sister to take us back to Dad.

Walking out the door, I watched as Mama and the priest embraced each other for a long time. I don't remember anything else from that night.

The pool closed when school commenced. I proudly packed Dad's hiking backpack with a chunk of printer paper and ten pens, because I couldn't find any pencils. The backpack sat at the front door all night, while I anticipated the first day of school in the morning. Feeling like an outcast, I sat with three other girls, each with a cute and trendy backpack from the Lisa Frank collection. Unicorns, kittens, and stars in vibrant colors matched the stylish girls' outgoing and confident personality. Someone made breakfast for them, helped them pick out their outfit, and styled their hair. They stared at me as I brought out limited school supplies. From the look on their faces, I knew that I didn't fit in with them. I kept a certain look at all times, not a smile, not a frown, just a straight line across my mouth.

School equaled misery. Stomach ailments resulted in vomiting or constipation, but I didn't know then what was wrong with me. Dad's meals of pizza, popcorn, and root beer floats were not helping my digestive system. The teacher noticed how much time I spent in the bathroom stall and talked to Dad. He bought Tums anti-acid chewable tablets and told me to eat them if the discomfort returned. My stomach felt better when I took them as soon as I woke up, before going to school.

Christmas break gave way to free time with Marina at home. I couldn't wait for Christmas day because Mama had mentioned to her sisters who told my cousin who then told us that she would be spending Christmas morning with us. We would open gifts together, just like we had the previous year, in Seattle. When the big day arrived, I ran in the dark to Marina's room and smacked into the closed door.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"It's Christmas. Mama is coming! We have to go downstairs and get Dad," I said.

The excitement and anticipation of seeing Mama ignited new hope in Marina. She jumped out of bed, and we ran downstairs together. Hopping on Dad's humongous bed, we squealed with delight and tickled him awake.

"Daddy, wake up! Mama's coming," we said.

He looked up at us staring down at him and hesitated. "Okay, girls. Let's get ready."

Marina and I sprung into action, running upstairs to change our clothes and wash up. A fight ensued over the sink as we each wanted to rinse and spit out our toothpaste as fast as we could. Skipping over a couple of stairs at a time, we almost flew back to the dining room, where the artificial tree glowed brightly with all the lighted strings thrown haphazardly.

A month before, we had begged Dad to put up a Christmas tree. He relented and purchased the artificial one from Walmart. Before the divorce, we used to decorate a beautiful, fragrant fir. The large box of ornaments had followed us in the move, but they had shattered and posed a hazard as we reached in to retrieve them. Just a few had stayed intact. We salvaged those to decorate the tree and save Christmas! Dad nodded and smiled at our efforts to force Christmas onto a family that ached to celebrate.

Christmas was our most anticipated day ever, well at least for Marina and me and, I liked to imagine, for Dad too. Mama would come back to us, just across the street. She would be our rock again. She'd ask how school was going. Marina would tell her all about her freckled-face crush. Dad would ask her to reconsider and come back home. We'd forget about her being away because she would be back! Waffle batter would be heard sizzling in the morning before school, and we'd receive a tender hug from Mama's always slightly

sweaty, soft skin. All that mattered was that we'd be spending a day together, inside our warm home, watching the snow fall and steadily deepen throughout the magical day.

At nine o'clock, we had been up for three hours and couldn't hide our hunger any longer. With our stomachs grumbling audibly, Dad opened a can of peaches and gave us each a fork. After we had eaten the peaches, he told us we needed to drink the leftover juice. As we drank the sweet syrup, I started to feel sick. But since Mama would arrive soon, we sat in front of the tree and guessed what was in each box. They were all from Santa. We'd soon open them in a mad dash, after the count to three, and unleash a flurry of shredded paper. Mama and Dad would be laughing at us and holding each other.

At eleven thirty, Dad let us open one present. Matching sweaters, except Marina's was pink, and mine was blue. "You'll have to wait for your mother to come before opening another present."

At one, Dad retreated upstairs to watch his Sci-Fi program, *The Twilight Zone*. Marina and I looked around for something to do. I grabbed the sleeping bag from the top of the bed and dragged it to the staircase. Feet in and leaning back, I bumped down each step to the first floor.

"My turn!" Marina said. Yelling down all eighteen steps, she said, "Mama will love this."

At two o'clock, Dad came downstairs and when we asked for Mama, he looked down at the carpet and then raised his eyes to meet ours. "I don't know, girls."

"She said she was coming," Marina said. Dad's eyes suddenly looked tired. "I'm going to take a nap now," he said, and returned to his bedroom, closing the door behind him.

Without Dad to keep us occupied, I realized something still didn't feel right. Putting my head down on the carpet and looking over at the tree, I stared at the starry lights, imagining they were little bits of magic, just waiting for a child's wish.

Four hours later, the garlicky scent of Domino's pizza woke me up and I rolled over to face the kitchen. Remembering it was still Christmas, I got up and yelled, "Mama!" As I entered the kitchen, Dad sat at the table holding Marina, who was crying. She sniffled and wiped her nose on her arm when she saw me. I understood. I put my thick socks on and crammed my feet into shoes before opening the front door to the freezing elements. Without saying what I was doing, I embarked on a necessary task: finding out what had happened to Mama. I trudged through the heavy snow across the lane, to the rental house. Snow saturated my clothing. Mama must be there, I thought, noticing that Russell and Beverly's truck hadn't moved during the snowfall.

"Mama, Mama, open up. Mama, Mama, open up. Mama, Mama, open up!" I banged harder and faster on the door. I stood in the minus ten degrees, snow falling silently around me. Moisture evaporated from each breath into the cold air. I begged for someone to let me in and see Mama.

Russell opened the door and said to me, "*Mi'ja*,<sup>33</sup> she's not here. I'm sorry." He grabbed me and carried me in his strong arms through the deep snow. I fought all the way back, kicking and screaming, tears freezing onto Russell's jacket. When we arrived back at the house, Dad opened the door and led us to the entertainment room, where the fireplace was roaring. The crackles of the firewood sounded more like a witch's cackle, and I felt tricked and betrayed. Russell put me down on the floor in front of the fireplace and left

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<sup>33</sup> my little one



when Dad told me to change out of my wet clothes. Covered with a thick, soft blanket, I stared into the flames. Too many questions remained unanswered. One of them had to be answered by Mama. What would she say when she interpreted this real-life nightmare?

## Second Family

We called our clique from the tiny town of Capulín, Colorado, the *Vatos Locos*.<sup>34</sup> The movie *Blood In, Blood Out* had just been released and we identified with the characters who created a tight-knit family called the *Vatos Locos*. We were in fifth grade, still a bunch of innocent kids, who referred to each other as *ese*.<sup>35</sup> To Josinés, Angelo, Little John, and Panchito, I was Andreita. The nickname blessed me with brotherly comfort and protection previously unknown to me. Sometime during our remaining eight years together in the school system, we became family.

My first family was privy to the town gossip and always excluded sharing something alarming or disgraceful with me and the rest of my cousins. "*Ya lo escucharon?*"<sup>36</sup>

Grandma Priscilla would ask the adults to get their attention before continuing in a hushed voice so the younger generation would not hear. Most of the time, we were kept outside, allowing the grown-ups to gossip freely. I was always amazed at how our family communicated through hand squeezes, glares, bows, subtle nods of the head, taps on the kitchen table, or peripheral glances. Each movement said something. At the same time, a silent response equaled a problem, a recognition of something that shouldn't be said aloud.

Silence felt unnatural among my family. We were only quiet at church. From the moment we exited our car and began walking up the church stairs, we began to tiptoe. We aimed to repress any noise. After dipping a finger or two into the baptismal font, we quietly shuffled into the packed pews. The ultimate test was the lowering of the knee rest. Just

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<sup>34</sup> crazy dudes

<sup>35</sup> homeboy or dude

<sup>36</sup> Did you already hear about it?

when we made it to our spot without a noise, the knee rest would slip from someone's hand and shake the entire pew as it dropped to the floor. Greeting others in church required a nod, smile, or handshake, but we all avoided speaking for fear of being reprimanded.

In a large family of one grandmother, six aunts, and dozens of first and second female cousins, I frequently escaped in search of a hiding spot to read a book, while all the others talked over, under, and through each other. A quiet demeanor equated to a genetic anomaly. Different, in a family of strong, cunning women who relied on themselves to survive, I failed to express myself. Outside of school, I took daily refuge in the haven of Grandma and Grandpa's farm.

Once, at the age of seven, I sat on the woodbox in Grandma's kitchen and half-listened to the others, as usual, when one aunt whispered that the black sheep of a certain family was back in town. I identified with the term; my quieter, pensive personality didn't blend well with my family. My physical characteristics differed dramatically too; I was tall, gangly, and without curves. It didn't take much teasing for me to feel picked on. The family gave me every year humorous birthday cards that said things like, "Thank goodness your brains aren't measured by the size of your chest." And that was in fifth grade, back when I still had hope that the curves would come, and when they didn't, the insults intensified by the year.

The estrogen-dominant family members suffocated me with expectations, "What's wrong with you that you don't look like us?"

"Start saving your money, *hita*!<sup>37</sup> You'll need to get implants soon."

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<sup>37</sup> little daughter or little one; term of endearment to a younger female

I found myself mingling less and less with female cousins and spending more time embracing my newfound brothers from the *Vatos Locos*. Our independent, physical, and ornery distinctions kept us unified. In school, we suffered in the best way possible – together.

We played our own version of catch outside on the baseball field. Boys and girls started on opposite sides of the field, with the girls' one goal of running past the boys to reach the safety of the fence. The game didn't scare me, but the punishment did. I refused to be caught and kissed by a boy. My adrenaline shot up every time we played. Precision was integral to my success. As a wannabe dancer, I leaped across the grass in every direction and spun out from their grasp. Josinés came closest to catching me, as his fingers swatted my long ponytail. Every game, he came closer and closer to catching me, but I remained undefeated champion through fifth grade. My greatest accomplishment that year was knowing that I was the only girl who could outrun each boy at La Jara Elementary.

On Saturdays, catechism class at St. Joseph's Church was an excuse to get away for a couple of hours from *la familia*. We'd lounge together outside the church, before and after class, and again the next day for mass. Many times we complained about having to spend our free time there. Josinés would say, "Mass on Sunday lets us get straight with *Papito Dios*<sup>38</sup> and the *padres*.<sup>39</sup> We smooth things out a bit, by just sitting and talking to God for an hour. *Pero después, whátchale que me voy*."<sup>40</sup> He was always the first to silently escape from the small bench at the back of the church.

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<sup>38</sup> God the Father

<sup>39</sup> parents

<sup>40</sup> "But later, watch out, because I'll be gone."

I grew to depend on Josines' sage advice and cool confidence. He had a large family at home. His brother spoke with a deep and ultra masculine voice, just like Gerardo, the singer of the 1991 hit, "*Rico, Suave*." In fact, girls across Southern Colorado would make their way to our tiny town just to lay eyes on him while he worked outside on his low-rider, a bandana capturing the sweat off his chiseled body. Meanwhile, Josines' sisters, besides being some of the smartest students in their classes, were stunningly beautiful with jet-black hair, flawless complexion, wide smiles, and intense eyes. However, their admirers dared not approach. Dating was considered a serious matter. Few men were granted permission to talk to one of the lovely women in his family. Having doting, older sisters, Josinés learned how to charm a woman just as he was becoming a man. As his family's bond thrived, I watched, admiring their world. Luckily for me, Josines drew me into his personal circle.

Spring each year tested our patience and left us aching for fun. We had long grown tired of playing hide and seek in the same tires at recess. Besides, everyone knew that boys took whizzes in them. Our heads spun from the constant motion of the swings and monkey bars. One day, we entered an off-limits area to the northwest side of the school. We just wanted to provoke someone and see if they would reprimand us. Josinés sensed our hesitation and rationalized our moves, saying, "Don't be scared. Let them yell at us for venturing over. If the teacher yells at us, he might even get a day off that he probably wanted anyway, and we'll get to go home." It sounded like a good chance to take.

"Andreita, Ang, Little John, Panch – *ándale*."<sup>41</sup> Josinés' compact and muscular frame hid in the shadow of the building.

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<sup>41</sup> hurry it up

"Where are you?" we yelled.

"*Cállense vatos.*<sup>42</sup> Follow me." he said.

We had missed his sleek posture, as he stood ready to pounce from the darkness, and quickly scuttled over to join him. Only twenty yards separated us from six six-packs of pop, cooling off in the chilly mountain air. It was a rare treat for any of us.

"Did someone forget 'em?" Little John asked.

"Howda we know someone's not watching us? I bet they set a trap to get us in trouble," Panchito said.

"Nah, dudes," Josinés said. "It's been there all day. Who's stupid enough to leave it outside? Now, grab everything you can hide in your backpack. Go!"

We lurched forward in a mad dash, before grabbing our favorite flavors, and oh, there were several to choose from: Mountain Dew, Pepsi, Diet Pepsi, even Hawaiian Punch! I grabbed two cans, feeling a surge of excitement from the thrill of our discovery and then from the fear of getting caught. We hid the pop in our clothing until the bell rang moments later for us to return to class from lunch break.

Once upstairs in our classroom, I hid one can in my saxophone case, but couldn't find room for the other. I panicked and imagined other accomplices yelling at me, *Quick, you're going to get caught! You're going to blow it for everyone.* Josinés saw my frightened face and breezed alongside me, grabbing the second can and sliding it in his Dickies before the teacher resumed class. She saw him at the front of the class instead of at his seat. He scooped up a pencil off the floor that he had thrown as a diversion and twirled it in the air before catching it in his other hand. He offered it to her, saying, "I've got your back,

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<sup>42</sup> Shut up, dudes.

teacher." She narrowed her eyes as though incriminating him as he strutted back to his desk.

That night, our parents received a call about the incident. They talked to us, each giving a similar message. "You better have not stolen the pop. If you did, you're going to make it right." Back in those days, there were party lines that allowed multiple homes to share one phone number. Everyone would take the call, and if it wasn't for them, they'd stay on the line to learn more gossip about their neighbors. Soon, everyone wanted to call out the elementary *ratas*.<sup>43</sup> We all felt the pressure to safeguard our first and second families' reputations.

As coincidence had it, each of us returned the next day with the pop in our bags, wanting to make amends. The Capulín bus had pulled up to the front of the school, where the eagle-eyed administrators stood to catch us before heading to class. Josinés, the first to notice, ordered out instructions. After all, we couldn't just hand the pop over. No, he wanted us to return them discreetly, to be found by the kindergarten teacher, whom we had unknowingly robbed.

"Andreita, you go first, through the front. John, go to the south playground. Ang, tell them you have to get something to your mom upstairs. Oh, and nobody knows shit," he emphasized. I glided through the front door. Meanwhile, Little John couldn't slide around the building to escape reprimanding.

"Little John, we know you were involved. What'll your grandpa say when we tell him you're a thief?" Little John, a scroungy and light-hearted fella, raised by his grandpa, pulled back from the principal when she tried to take his backpack away.

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<sup>43</sup> thieves

"You wanna box, Mrs. Lopez? I've been working on my stance. Just try me. Come on."

He expertly maneuvered around the feisty principal, like a Chihuahua yipping at her heels and darting away. He ducked at her attempts to grab onto his bag but, finally, was brought airborne by the fit woman.

Meanwhile, the entire school was swept through as the staff desperately tried to recover the kindergarteners' pop, given as a treat for having achieved perfect attendance. A pop party was a huge event for our low-income school.

After discovering the pop had been left outside to chill in the shade before the students' party, we felt lower than the slime that lined the bottom of the playground equipment. We acted without regard for the young students and were punished. The grandmother of every vato instilled in him a timeless *dicho*.<sup>44</sup> When someone did something that they knew was wrong, the community would say, "*No tiene vergüenza*."<sup>45</sup> We became shameless, spoilsports to our elders. We wore our guilt internally but visible to each other. We just wanted to have fun, even if we, the *Vatos Locos*, were the only ones to remember.

The school district announced the completion of a new middle school in La Jara, further distancing us from the old middle school in Capulín, where we lived. The nuns of St. Joseph had educated many of our family members there from the 1940s until the mid-1980s when the school was purchased for public education. The school closure ended an era of three generations of my family attending the same school. The administration changed the mascot from the Flickers to the Mighty Falcons. We hardly identified.

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<sup>44</sup> saying or phrase

<sup>45</sup> He or she has no shame.



The Flickers were known state wide for being tough: small, quiet, and calm, but also instantly crazy *vatos* who feared no one. The mascot's wings contained countless red hearts that symbolized how fierce our students competed, full of unrivaled spirit and determination. Training at 8,000 feet in altitude also gave our athletes the competitive advantage of better endurance.

The schools' consolidation meant the Capulín Flickers were the first to be picked up in the morning and the last to be dropped off by the activity bus in the evening. The white kids were picked up from school first and arrived home first. I was picked up at 7 a.m. and dropped off back at home at 6:30 p.m.

In sixth grade, we received two feet of snowfall in one night, which seemed to happen a handful of times throughout winter and spring. Most kids stayed home, but those of us from Capulín couldn't stay home. Our parents worked and needed someone to watch us. We arrived at school and found out that most students and staff had stayed home. Fortunately, we had a scheduled field trip to ski at Wolf Creek, just an hour and a half up the steep mountain pass.

During the bus's slow progress up the mountain, Josinés kept us entertained with all the *chisme*<sup>46</sup> from town. After all, his apartment was at the intersection of Main Street and the state highway that runs through town. He saw everything happen from his bedroom window. It felt good and even gave me a bit of a sense of power to know the happenings, especially when Mama had little energy for conversation or gossip with me at the end of a long day. During the trip, the bus driver had to turn off the hot air, so the engine wouldn't overheat on the icy road. Whenever the bus slid around, we became quieter. No one

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<sup>46</sup> gossip

admitted being scared, but I'm sure the *vatos* could see fear all over my face. The guys kept teasing our driver that he needed to stop skating. In the cold bus, we could see our breath, but we couldn't even see the steep mountainside off the side of the road. Blinding snow kept our attention inside the bus.

"Come here," Josinés said, opening up his jacket and pulling me in closer to keep warm. I snuggled next to him. He was warmer than mes and felt inviting.

"Kiss me," he said. "It'll warm you up."

I was too damn cold to argue, but I didn't kiss him. "Andrea, haven't you ever kissed someone before?"

I shook my head no. I never had to pay the punishment of kissing a boy, like other girls who couldn't run away from them at recess.

I was only thirteen years old, but clearly, Josinés figured he'd keep me from being ridiculed and labeled as a prude by my peers, some of whom would become parents in the next two to four years. "Keep your lips soft and press 'em to mine." Our lips met. I felt nothing special. Was that a kiss? "Okay, this time, use your lips to pull on mine a bit." It was awkward but surprisingly safe. My friends surrounded us so Eddie the driver couldn't see. I knew there was nothing to prove, but I was determined to learn. With Josinés, I had a patient, dedicated, and determined teacher. The kissing helped keep me warm, so we didn't stop. Suddenly Eddie shouted, "Hey, I don't wanna see that going on back there! Do I need to turn this bus around?"

"*Chale*,<sup>47</sup> Eddie. I'm just educating *la señorita*<sup>48</sup>, and she's trying to get warm. Turn on the damn heater if you don't want to see it again," Josinés said, and I learned two lessons: it isn't what you say, but how you say it, and Josinés could talk his way out of anything.

During senior year, we asserted ourselves, walking through the older, brick high school. Centauri High's insufficient electives of basic art, weightlifting, applied science, trade class, and Spanish left us day-dreaming of elaborate plans to get back at the principal and vice-principal. They held lofty titles for being lazy educators. La Jara, Colorado, had no other place to work. There was one pharmacist, one lawyer, one market, one restaurant, a senior citizens' center, a post office, a gas station, and a liquor store. If someone wanted to work in town, they had to teach.

Two years prior, at the end of fall term, we were slowly cruising the halls during a fifteen-minute break between classes when Principal Espinoza stopped me and said, "Marina, we are really going to miss you next year. Good luck in Arizona." I smiled politely at the bastard who must have gotten his story wrong. Dad lived in Arizona. I lived with Mama. Maybe my older sister, Marina, who had nothing to do with me, had said something about visiting him there. But it turned out that Principal Espinoza had just blabbered the news before it had been shared with me: Mama was kicking me out to live with Dad in Arizona.

I stared at Mr. Espinoza while I thought things over. I'm not sure what pissed me off greater: a principal who confused his students or the fact that Mama was tired of parenting me years before any mother should give up. I exhaled all hope. Dad had moved to Arizona

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<sup>47</sup> calm down

<sup>48</sup> the young woman

for work when I started high school. Mama was upset about me dating someone at the age of fifteen, but the punishment of being sent away felt unfounded. Self-doubt and hatred flooded my soul as I blamed myself for being unlovable. I stood still, barely breathing. Before I could dwell on my future circumstance, the *Vatos Locos* were howling with laughter, making Mr. Espinoza the brunt of the unfortunate truth. I had no idea then, but my brothers would remember what his comments did to me. Even though I disregarded Mr. Espinoza for the *pendejo*<sup>49</sup> he was, his words became reality, and I packed up to live with Dad and his new wife.

Arizona gave me better educational opportunities and plenty of hobbies to try. I thrived in my speech and debate, and dance classes. I made friends with some loner kids who rode the bus with me from the poor side of Apache Junction, where I lived in a fifth wheel trailer in a senior citizen mobile park. Every afternoon, I visited with my elderly neighbors, Rose and Bill. Upon my arrival, they would pick a ripe orange from their solitary citrus tree and cut it up for us to share. I felt close enough to them to ask about sensitive, pertinent subjects. One day, Dad's wife eavesdropped on our conversation, and suddenly, I was being sent back to Colorado for senior year.

Even with my sister gone, Mama and I couldn't get along. We easily irritated each other and when things got particularly bad, I lived with my boyfriend's family. Mama would call over and tell me to come home, only to see the cycle repeat throughout the year. Reuniting with the *Vatos Locos* became essential to my mental health. We watched our

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<sup>49</sup> idiot

classmates succumb to the pressures of drugs and alcohol, abuse, pregnancy, or the stress of early adulthood. Even our *cuate*,<sup>50</sup> Panchito, left for the big city.

During the last week before graduation, we remembered that one childhood dare had not been fulfilled. For years, we had dreamed of an epic food fight. Our go-to retaliatory joke evolved into a real plan when we sat down and watched the rest of the school file through the lunch line. It was the time and place. There would be nothing better than spaghetti and meatballs for a food fight. Like all the times before, Josinés took control. We sat in the back row of the cafeteria, and soon, everyone was seated.

Josinés whispered at first, "One, two, three – FOOD FIGHT!" As he threw the first fist of spaghetti and meatballs, no one had yet realized the launch of excitement. Our lunches quickly decorated the other students' clothes and the ceiling tiles. The faculty and staff became frantic. Our shouts served as one of the best soundtracks to life. Food flew from one side and splattered along the way to the other side, leaving just the five of us clean and free of fault. Jose grabbed my dirty hands and expertly rubbed them on his shirt before heading to the water fountain to wash our hands, freeing me of evidence and him of accountability. His street smarts could clear him of anything.

We all felt high on life. Graduation was three days away and our inner world was just how we wanted it. Each of us had survived the odds of growing up in an impoverished land where people watched for others to fail. Something would eventually define us for the rest of our lives, but we knew that by making it that far, we'd already succeeded. We were still one unit, *mejores amigos para siempre*.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> buddy

<sup>51</sup> best friends forever

The *vatos* had my back, and I had theirs. The administration called us to the principal's office individually. As each of us exited the interrogation, we avoided looking at the others. We were *Vatos Locos* forever! Our blood felt shared, and if one of us was called out, we'd all be called out, but we would never rat out each other.

"You're a good student, Andrea. Do you want this on your record? Tell us who's the mastermind behind the food fight and you won't be expelled. But if we find out you were involved, there will be big consequences," Mr. Espinoza said.

I knew they had nothing on me. The intimidation didn't work.

"Sorry, Mr. Espinoza. I have no idea," I said.

The administration had us sweating, while rumors whirled like tumbleweeds. The word in the halls was that Mr. Espinoza was waiting until the last day to expel the instigators, keeping them from graduating. The boys had their concerns.

"Man, that's straight-out disrespectful. If they're gonna play hardball, they'd better tell us before the last day of class. They just wanna torture us, *qué no?*<sup>52</sup>" one said. "We'll show them not to mess with us. The day's not over," José said. I trusted the boys would figure it all out. After all, we had finished what we'd set out to achieve – becoming unforgettable at Centauri High. The last day was saved for a presentation of the senior projects. Months of work had gone into preparing a digital collage of memories from childhood through senior year. At nine o'clock that morning, an announcement canceled the slide show after our involvement in the food fight. Our long, entangled history of discord with the administration would continue through the last day. They went too far.

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<sup>52</sup> right

We refused to get too caught up in something we couldn't change. The outdoor event was scheduled to take place at the end of the day. Our class came together to play in the dirt, and what fun we had. We dug out a 14' x 8' x 6' hole and filled it with water; the pit created a perfect excuse for a game of tug of war. Each grade chose six students and a tournament ensued. Our class was hardly the brightest or the most athletic, but, instead, we thought of ourselves as life-smart.

It came as no surprise when the junior class won its two rounds, which resulted in a final fight against the senior class. The junior class had earned all the accolades at the most recent track and field state championships. The juniors believed themselves to be hot shit, but we knew how much they stank.

We grabbed the rope to the north, and the sophomores grabbed the rope to the south. Our side consisted of three *Vatos Locos*, one basketball player, and two track athletes; the junior side consisted of pure athletes. The initial tug launched us forward two feet, but we caught ourselves on the precipice of the muddy pool. The school cheered loudly from the sidelines. "Harder! Don't let 'em get you!" they cried. "*Ándale*. Get it done!" I could hear Josinés yelling at me to pull harder. The skin on my hands burned, and my forearms ached. It was graduation week and no *tontos*<sup>53</sup> were going to put us down on our way out. "Dig deeper. Put your weight in your heels," Josinés yelled.

Our stamina beat out the younger class, pulling them into the water. Before I could turn around to celebrate, Josinés, the *chavo*<sup>54</sup> who taught me how to grab an opportunity, how to be resourceful, how to kiss, and how to fight, picked me up and threw me into the muddy water. It was a wonderful feeling of bliss.

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<sup>53</sup> idiots

<sup>54</sup> young dude

We had made our own fun. Josinés jumped in after me, and we laughed endlessly. So good, so pure was our joy; we embraced before helping each other out. As I stood to the side, squeezing the water from my clothes, Josinés and Jacob, a kid from a different clique, ran a quick thirty yards to the east, where our nemesis principal, Mr. Espinoza, stood from afar. They swiftly threw him up in the air and jogged over carrying the poor, resisting *pendejo*,<sup>55</sup> and tossed him into the water. We howled with laughter as the principal struggled like a dying *pinacate*.<sup>56</sup>

Oh, we were so done.

After a couple of minutes, the younger kids helped the man out. We were told the school was locked, and we'd lose everything in our lockers. Swift to punish, never to communicate, the administration left us to deal. Few students had their car keys on them. But the *Vatos Locos* knew Ol' Man Dominguez, the janitor. He made us wait until six p.m., when everyone had left, and then opened up a back door where we snuck in and grabbed our things. "You *muchachos*<sup>57</sup> think you're so smart and funny. Just wait until this comes to bite you in the ass," Ol' Man Dominguez said.

With a quick glance, I saw a small smirk on the janitor's face. We must have reminded him of his own good times at that same school, decades before. We helped him clean up the muddy evidence from sneaking in. Peace felt restored, but there was the possibility of Jacob and Josinés being expelled before graduation. Mysteriously, the situation absolved. Maybe the boys kept some sleaze on the administrators. I also imagined the administrators saying "Hell to it all," choosing not to engage in that battle. Before we

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<sup>55</sup> jerk

<sup>56</sup> a New Mexican beetle, or a stinkbug

<sup>57</sup> trouble makers



left home that night on the activity bus, Josinés returned and said, "It's all good." I never heard how they did it. What did they know? Somehow, we always knew that everything would be all good.

Families showed up early to find good seats in the auditorium on graduation morning, even though we were the smallest graduating class on record. As we waited to proceed, the popular "Graduation Song" began, with oohs and aahs echoing our way. We peeked out from the waiting area and saw the senior class slideshow up on the wall. There were pictures from our infancy through twelfth grade. We smiled and felt the freedom we had long desired. Nowhere else, at that moment in time, could there have been a happier administration nor a happier group of kids. As each remaining member of the *Vatos Locos* walked across the stage, I realized that we could never have made it through without each other, our second family.

## Chiconky Ramblings

During school vacations, I always visited Grandpa and Grandma in the Pacific Northwest, where they lived close to McChord Air Force base. On our way out of their house to attend church service one Sunday morning, I peered up at Grandma Lois, a woman whose assurance reflected in her dominant posture and matter-of-fact tone of voice. "Don't worry sweetheart. I've never thought of you as Hispanic."

The implication hit me hard because Grandma knew my Hispanic mother and her family were raising me. Up until her comment on my identity, I felt that she had acknowledged all of me – not just one side of my lineage. As my father's step-mother, she was the only Grandma I ever had on my paternal side. Dad's mother died decades before I was born.

With a Hispanic mother and a German father, I assumed people saw me as both. My sister and I incorporated a new word into our identity so people might understand our heritage. We became Chiconkys, a mixture of Chicana, because of our Hispanic family, and Honky, because we heard Hispanics refer to whites using that term. We thought the word sounded funny and it made our classmates laugh.

People wanted a quick answer and not a five-minute explanation of the complexities of ancestry. Looking back, I wish I had been confident enough to say something, anything, to defend my heritage. The problem was that, still in my preteen years, I didn't know myself yet. Silently, I ached to correct Grandma. She, a gorgeous, intimidating Swede with crystal blue eyes, fished for a response as she looked down into my deep brown eyes.

"Thanks, Grandma," I said, ashamed. Speaking out against her prejudices would produce hard feelings and maybe even revoke my visiting privileges with Grandpa. Such a punishment frightened me more than anything.

Grandma Lois stood with ambition and purpose for an extra moment. Sophisticated, with the perfect diamonds on her long fingers and pearls around her neck, she stood out at church for being a classy woman with strong morals. Every day, dressed in her Sunday best, she finished numerous crossword puzzles, keeping her mind sharp and her tongue sharper. Grandma demanded respect and attention from all her acquaintances, even those who barely tolerated her. This time, she had made what was surely a statement of inclusion and support, but I still felt she looked down on me.

I was pretty sure she saw me as a quiet young woman, with a shy smile, because that was me. She commented to her friends that I was the granddaughter who gave her the warmest hugs. Attending Methodist church and politely conversing with her church friends and pastor always put me in her good graces. I loved how Grandma made me feel special so I behaved perfectly, almost robotically. I made sure that I'd never miss out on receiving the love and attention from the person who mattered most to me: Grandpa Jerry. I had reason to worry about losing the most loving and caring person in my family.

When Grandma Lois and Grandpa married, they each had three children. Grandpa was her third, her best, and her last husband. She had a way of keeping Jerry's family at a distance. After finally marrying the man she lived to love, she was thrilled to have a committed partner with whom to raise her three children. Unfortunately, they didn't have the means to bring Grandpa's three boys back from his parents' home to live with them. Once they married, most women still pawed at him and acted out for his attention. It must

have been hard for Grandma, as she hated having to share him with anyone, even his family. I visited them every chance I had during school breaks and vacations. Grandma became more at ease with my visits once I turned twelve and I could admire her ability to vocalize her thoughts and stand up for her beliefs.

Grandpa knew that when I visited, he still had to pay great attention to his wife. A few days into most visits, he would remark cautiously that it was time for a quick hot tub, out in the separate garage. He'd motion for me to join him, and that was the only sign I needed to jump up off the floor and follow him to the formal dining room. Once out of hearing range, he'd ask me what I'd wanted to drink. Large bottles of Crown Royal, some broken into and others preserved, lined his custom bar. Mixers, soda, and wine looked popular as well.

When we exited the house and felt the fresh air, we'd breathe in a surge of freedom. We tiptoed across the wet patio and through a small trellis leading us through the thick evening fog, Grandpa always entered through the garage to use the hidden key to open the attached spa room. Old furniture he brought from Japan littered the room but lent to the exotic ambience: the cedar scent from the dry sauna and the chlorinated steam rising about the Jacuzzi. The atmosphere felt wet and sticky from the dust mixing with the moisture, fogging up the windows. I likened it to walking through a tropical forest and being overwhelmed by different senses. Grandpa would help me into the Jacuzzi first and slowly submerge himself in the deepest corner. We often sat without talking for a while, just relaxing and enjoying the moment. Grandpa had a way of making any moment with him feel special and rewarding.

The hot tub became our spot to talk about life. We both opened up and learned about each other. I loved Grandpa's stories as they were the best. His military career took him all over the world, including his favorite country – Japan. When our drinks disappeared, he'd sneak back to the bar for another round of either poor man's champagne or Crown and soda, and we'd sit outside by the tranquil pond to cool off. With the moon shining on the still water, he reminisced about his first wife, Jacqueline, the Grandma I never knew.

Jacqueline successfully passed down something to her descendants: her glorious, reddish-brown hair. Grandpa would tear up at the sight of me in the sun with radiant, red highlights. Just like Jacqueline, I had a good aim at the firing range. I'm pretty sure that Jacqueline loved everything about being with Jerry, like the rest of the family did. One thing Grandpa missed about being with Jacqueline was how they broke the rules together. Jacqueline was an up-for-anything kind of woman.

Grandpa was at his happiest when we reenacted the good ol' days. We even relaxed at the Elks Club and shot pool for several days. Although few people ever got in Grandpa's way, a sheepish-looking older man finally told him that the members were tired of holding back their cursing in my presence. During these visits, I knew who I was: Jerry's granddaughter and Jacqueline's mini-me. I had never felt so lucky, assured, and peaceful as I did with him during time up in the Pacific Northwest. I never had to explain my identity to him.

Sometimes, I found myself walking a delicate path around Grandma Lois. I feared being displaced from Grandpa and Grandma's home if I didn't act perfectly enough. I grew up with an impeccable sense of balancing things. After my parent's divorce, I balanced the

responsibilities of making Dad happy and giving Mama the space she needed. I could leave my sister alone, too, to daydream about a better life with a unified family. Walking such a path left me wondering why I chose to follow everyone's expectations when I should have focused on setting my own.

In the seventies, when my parents entered into a marriage with intensely differing religious, political, and cultural views, they lacked mentors. Three more decades would pass before mixed marriages became more common. My parents' expectations did them no favors either. Mama anticipated her new family to be as welcoming and loving as her own. She refused to interact with Dad's stepmom, who made racist comments in front of her. Mama's family came together for all meals in her parents' home, regardless of how large the family grew. Dad's parents ate out at the Non-Commissioned Officers' Club on base. These all seemed like small differences, but they became divisive. Eventually, the cultures proved too oppressive to the other, culminating in a case study for future brides and grooms considering a bi-cultural marriage.

Dad's brother told me, "Well, I always wanted to marry a Latina, but after seeing what your mother put your father through, I'll never do that." Mama's sisters would tell me that Dad was married to his job and didn't show any affection towards her. Someone told me at school that Mama broke into Dad's home after the divorce. When the Anglo community got word, their children tormented me about the shadiness of the Hispanic culture. The struggle went back and forth, Anglos to Hispanics, Mormons to Catholics, promoting never-ending name-calling. My elementary school was roughly fifty percent Hispanic and fifty percent Anglo. There was one Black student and three Chiconkeys: me,

my sister, and another girl my age, but luckily for her, she looked just like her Latina mother and was warmly embraced by Hispanics.

Although racial tensions were hardly new in the 1980s, the move to Mama's birthplace in Colorado sent us back decades in time. There, the Hispanic settlers took pride in their mixed Native American, Spanish, and Mexican ancestry. Our ancestors settled in New Mexico, sixteen generations ago, in the early 1600s. By the year 1930, a large Mormon population settled in Southern Colorado during one of the toughest winters on record. The Hispanic community taught them how to survive through the construction of adobe homes to keep warm, medicinal herbs to heal, as well as slow-burning firewood: pine to start, before switching over to oak. Once the community began to flourish, the Mormons refused service to those who had helped their homestead. They posted signs around town saying, "No Dogs, No Mexicans allowed." The resentment scorched the land between the two mountain ranges. The smoke still simmers, quick to spark and create more destruction.

It had seemed that a summer away from the tense environment in Southern Colorado would help me stabilize my identity and purpose. I was stuck between both sides, and Grandma Lois's comment threw me into a whirlwind of opposing forces. Sometimes, I felt white. Sometimes, I felt Hispanic. Most of the time, I remained undefined and misunderstood by both sides, forced to pick a side, and feeling like I never fully fit in either culture. This problem didn't exist when I lived in the Seattle suburbs as a young child in the 1980s and had never met an Hispanic. The trouble started when we relocated to Colorado and heard Spanish spoken and noticed that people already had a problem with our biracial family.

In sixth grade, four girls sat with Jess, a chica from Capulín who tried initiating me to the Hispanic side of the classroom where kids from both towns, all Hispanic, sat waiting to determine my fate, six years until graduation. She said, "*Eh, tú. Ven aquí.*"

I walked over slowly and nodded the flicker nod, something that only people from Capulín did to each other. It signals, "What's up?" We had grown up attending the same Catholic church for the last five years but hadn't established a friendship.

*"Como te llamas?"*<sup>58</sup>

"Andrea."

*"De dónde eres?"*<sup>59</sup>

"Cap." Only the locals said 'Cap,' leaving the outsiders to say "Capulín."

Growing frustrated at me, she asked, "Don't you speak Spanish?"

I shook my head. I only understood the language. My grandparents, aunts, and uncles all spoke Spanish, but Mama had given up her culture when she left home for higher education at Colorado State University, in the northern part of the state. North of Pueblo marked the old U.S.-Mexico border back in 1848 before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The Hispanic community thrived in New Mexico and Southern Colorado, but once past that landmark, only English was spoken and laws were strictly enforced. In the southern part of the state, we could ride without seatbelts, sit on the tailgate, and pile upwards of twenty kids in the back of a pickup truck.

*"Pues, vete."*<sup>60</sup> How can you call yourself Hispanic if you don't speak our language?"

Jess asked.

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<sup>58</sup> What's your name?

<sup>59</sup> Where are you from?

<sup>60</sup> Well, go away then.



It wasn't a question but a statement, sending me to the middle of the room, feeling empty and worthless. I sat, paying attention to the school work on the board, and trying to ignore the warring students on each side. If the teacher ignored them, so would I.

"Andrea, come over here."

I walked over to the Mormon's side and stood in front of three desks.

"Do you want to come to a dance this weekend?" Ginger asked.

"Sure, I love to dance," I said.

"Okay, but first you have to come with us to seminary," she said.

"What's seminary?" I asked.

"It's where we meet up and learn about John Smith and our ancestors," she said.

"Oh, well, I can't do that. I'm Catholic, and my family won't let me go to your church."

"Suit yourself," Ginger said and laughed with her friends. It was only the first week of middle school, but I had failed at fitting in.

I tried to win over one side. While eating pizza and watching a movie during the last day of fall term, I whispered in my cousin's ear, "Can I have some gum?" Her father, my uncle, was the town pharmacist. She grabbed the wad out of her mouth and stuck it on my forehead, saying, "Here you go!"

Perhaps she knew that by being nice to a Chiconky, she'd be treated badly, too. Clearly, school cliques were much more important to her than family.

Back at home, my sister and I tried explaining the bi-cultural issues that kept us from fitting in. I gave up trying to be friends with everyone. Meanwhile, Mama refused to confront anyone in the Hispanic community about the harassment we, but especially my sister, endured. Marina received the worst of it and suffered greatly in her education,

having ulcers that kept her in pain. Some days we'd have gum put in our long, dark hair while trying to ignore the older loudmouths on the bus. Only when we walked down the long lane to Mama's house would we realize the damage that had been done that day.

One weekend, while we were staying at Dad's house, Marina invited two Hispanic girls over for a slumber party. I kept away for the most part but couldn't help checking on them upstairs when I heard a crash.

One girl grabbed a Coke and said, "Check this out." She shook it and opened it slightly, so the pressure caused the pop to spray two feet up and cover the walls in brown, sticky syrup. They laughed as they ruined the walls upstairs. In the morning, the girls had their parents pick them up at 6 a.m., an hour before Marina woke up to say goodbye. They never came over to visit again. At the time, I couldn't understand why Marina took part in the supposed fun. Looking back, I understand the deep desperation she had of needing to fit in.

I felt the rejection a few years later when a first-generation Mexican-American with jet-black hair, a bashful smile, and bright, white teeth, asked me to the prom. I told a girl, who had moved from Mexico, that I might be going to the prom with him. By the next day, I was on bad terms with the Hispanics in my class. They didn't hold back any opinions.

"You know you can't go with him, right? You need to go with someone of your own race," a girl said.

"What's the problem?" I asked.

"Andrea, you're not Mexican enough for his family. You're too white."

"It's just prom. It's not like it's serious. Come on now," I said.

In the movie "Selena," a Mexican-American singer successfully crosses over from Tejano<sup>61</sup> to American Pop music. In one scene, Selena's dad talks to his family about the frustrations of Mexican-Americans and the pressure of pleasing two different cultures at once. When I first watched the movie back in 1997, I couldn't stop laughing that even the successful Quintanilla family felt the same stress of pleasing separate cultures.

I learned that I can't be twice as perfect and that others, throughout my life, may not see me for who I am, but that it doesn't matter. Racism hurts. Even though I grew up in two separate cultures, I'm not free from racist thoughts. I've seen my mother discriminated against by white people working in stores and by law enforcement. My father has been discriminated against by Hispanics who refuse him service at their restaurants.

Diversity matters. Even though I'm sensitive to racial misunderstandings, I choose to deal with them at work. I'm always available to hear anyone out when he or she feels mistreated. Sometimes, the issue is related to other types of imposed inequality. Somehow, I feel my heart repair when I'm able to give an attentive ear and empathize with someone's mistreatment.

After President Obama's inauguration in January 2009, I walked the streets of D.C. almost floating on the city's vibrant energy. I pulled my gloved hands out of my pockets to breathe warmth into them. Mama and I heard someone calling after us in a demanding voice, "Ma'am. Ma'am!" Mama shook her head at me to keep moving, and neither of us turned around. We were alone, lost, and scared. Finally, the relentless attention made me turn around. A group of inner city youth caught up to us, and one of them handed me two

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<sup>61</sup> Tex-Mex

twenty dollar bills that had dropped from my pocket during the walk. I thanked them and smiled. They smiled back and said, "No problem."

I loved the feeling I got from sharing smiles with the youth. That Inauguration Day, I learned to stop and listen. Even though Mama and I attempted to dismiss someone's voice, they forced us to pay attention. Resiliency allows voices to be recognized. It allows others to experience equality. I'm grateful for having received that lesson.

## Most Unwanted

The sunshine shone through the passenger window and posed a sleepy threat as we passed a sign that read, "*Bienvenidos*. You are entering the Land of Enchantment." We continued south to our destination – the historic city of Santa Fe, New Mexico. With my head reclined I could taste the metallic tinge of blood on my tongue. Groggily, I watched the sun saturate the Sangre de Cristo mountains with intense shades of red. The desert heat blurred the road, making the desert environment even more dire. Direct sunrays from the west collided with my cheek as the burning oral incisions placed me in a mirage of hell.

The narcotic and lingering anesthesia mixed with the heat and enveloped me; weightless, I floated. Mystical and visual auras of the southwest heightened all my senses as I coasted on painkillers. Never before had such an awe-inspiring sunset vanish so quickly, leaving me aching for more magical bliss.

Several hours earlier, I underwent wisdom teeth extraction in Colorado. For my recovery, Mama was heading three hours out of the way to my sister Marina's apartment in Santa Fe. The dizzying desert heat made me question Mama's decision to have me on the road all day after surgery. My recovery would have been even easier back at home with the help of my large extended family. However, I was just fifteen years old and accustomed to Mama and Marina making all the decisions. I could argue with them, but the silent punishment wasn't worth the fight. Instead, I focused on the blaze of the sun coming through the window, making my hair feel too hot to touch. Without the AC on, we ascended more easily over the mountain pass to the Española Valley and avoided the engine overheating. The combination of the drugs, the heat, and the stop-and-go action of the car left me seeking reprieve.

Holy hell, I could feel the surgical effects. With darkness approaching, my mind cleared of casual daydreaming. I unconsciously resorted to our family's native Spanish tongue. *Ay, ay, ay, ay*, I sang out the rhythmic pain in my mind. With each heartbeat, the incisions throbbed to capacity. There seemed to be too much blood pooling in my mouth. I motioned to Mama for a beverage when we came close to a gas station. "Not yet. You have to wait longer," she said.

Mama took a sharp exit off the highway and entered the sleepy, dusty part of Santa Fe. We passed *peluqueras*, *taquerias*, and *panaderias*. They appeared closed up for the night or possibly defunct. In fact, it was hard to read any sign of life. Nothing but dried up sagebrush and tumbleweeds populated the street. After a long stretch of old buildings and shops, out popped new apartment complexes. Mama parked and told me to wait until she found Marina's apartment. I stood up and stretched outside the car, where the asphalt quickly heated up the thin soles of my *chanklas*.<sup>62</sup> I was desperate to escape and find air conditioning. The scorching temperature sucked up my remaining strength after the long day in the surgical center and traveling. Marina stepped outside and motioned Mama to go inside with her. I looked forward to a cool oasis inside and found the energy to climb the stairs.

"Mommy! I'm so glad you're here. Come look at this scarf I just picked up from that cool store on *Agua Fria*.<sup>63</sup> Oh, and before I forget, I got one for you, too!" Marina said.

I admired Marina's artistic style – colorful banners, self-made artwork, and unusual décor – and entered the small kitchen, eyeing an empty glass and looking for bottled water. To avoid infection, the doctor required consumption of purified water. Dizzy and parched, I

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<sup>62</sup> leather sandals

<sup>63</sup> name of a popular street for shopping in Santa Fe, meaning 'cold water'

glanced toward the two for help. The bloody gauze needed to be thrown away to make room for fresh packing on the four incisions. *It's not worth risking another fainting spell*, I decided, and returned slowly to the living room, taking a spot on the floor.

"You look great hita," Mama said, sitting next to Marina on the small couch. "Who dyed your hair?"

"Don't you love it? There's a new salon on the corner of Prado and Rodeo – super expensive but I didn't think you'd mind, right? I need to take you there. She did such a good job. I mean, don't I look like a true Snow White?"

Marina never left room for others to talk. Instead of fighting for attention, I stood up against the doorframe and quickly felt my body spinning again. Coughing softly into the conversation, I said, "Mama, I'm thirsty."

"Well, why don't you rest here while your sister and I head out to pick up some groceries." It wasn't a question but I always felt the need to comply so I nodded. My next pain dosage was due, but I wasn't desperate enough to drink from my sister's alcohol storage just to take the medicine. Marina partied frequently and ignored her health, which was evident by the junk food and alcohol stashed in her cabinets. I resigned myself to waiting. After the arduous trip and ensuing dehydration, I'd probably just puke the peach Schnapps anyway.

Drifting off to sleep made the pain tolerable and allowed me to dream up a different reality. Three hours later, my family came back, and I watched them bring bag after bag from Whole Foods. *Wow*, I thought. *Since when does Marina eat healthily?* Weighing more than 200 pounds, my sister hadn't been a healthy size since she was five. I wondered why

she shopped there when she couldn't afford it. Standing up slowly, I looked for water.

"Mama, where's the water?"

"It's in one of the bags. Look for it," she said.

"I did, Mama. I don't see it."

"Marina, did we buy water?"

"No, but we have some Blue Sky soda," she said.

The thought of syrupy, bubbly soda made my stomach turn.

"Mama, I just need water."

"Just have some soda. You're so difficult, Andrea." I lacked the strength to argue.

Whether I'd recover well from the surgery remained to be seen, but I debated whether to live with either of them, any longer. Over the next few days, Mama and Marina distracted themselves from their roles of caregivers. They dined together in the Plaza, enjoying the city's unique cuisine. In discomfort, I recovered alone.

Earlier that year, I had undergone a lower abdominal exploratory laparoscopy to diagnose endometriosis. With the help of my aunt, who worked at the Mayo Clinic, I was referred to Dr. Magtibay. I may someday forget his name, but not his peaceful energy. His intense eyes portrayed an intriguing sincerity and were framed by a baby face. I had never experienced such a raw, open connection with anyone. The embarrassment stretched beyond him asking intimate questions and giving me a thorough exam. It included the way he carefully unveiled my most intimate sexual health history while respecting my privacy. His comforting and confident voice made me trust him at once. He scheduled surgery for Friday, the third of July.



The surgery went well, a success! In fact, Dr. Magtibay said that he had removed endometriosis, and I might even be temporarily freed from the severe pain I had endured since I was eleven. The pain would return someday, and more surgery would be needed, which would threaten my fertility.

"Just get a hysterectomy, Andrea. How do you expect to live in this kind of pain?" Mama had frequently asked. But even then, I knew I was meant to be a mama. Motherhood meant little to her, but it meant everything to me.

Once put in the recovery room, I waited for my glasses to be returned to me to provide some sense of location as well as my condition displayed on the beeping monitor. Nurses passed back and forth until one heard me calling out, "My sister." The nurse returned with not only Marina but also my immediate family. I imagine I called her because we didn't always have our parents around. The only certainty I held to was Marina being close by. We were always together. I closed my eyes and fell back asleep for a moment before I awoke to a medley of agitated voices soliciting my attention.

"Why did we even bother to be here for you at five in the morning when all you can do is ask for your sister? We've waited patiently and the nurse says you don't want to see us! You're so ungrateful. We're out of here." Dad grabbed his new wife's hand and left.

"I can't believe you, Andrea," Mama said. "We are not waiting out there any longer when we've been sick and worried about you all morning. Do you understand the stress you've caused us?"

"Well, not really," I said.

My sister, the only one summoned, turned around to leave, saying, "Look at all you've created here."

I felt betrayed by my family. Their anger and hysterics took away my carefree, drug-induced high. The nurse returned to take me to a private recovery area. I needed to pee before she would dismiss me from the hospital. Dehydration left me with nothing to expel. The nurse gave me ten more minutes, and if I did not pee, I would be hospitalized overnight.

Mama's nerves overtook her patience. "Do you know how much we will be paying for this surgery, Andrea? You are so stubborn! It's going to cost us thousands of dollars for you to stay the night. God damn it, just do it!"

"Mama, I can't," I said.

"Just say you can and you will," Mama said.

The nurse returned and let out a long sigh.

Mama was used to getting her way. Once she got out of a speeding ticket by telling the officer she was unaware of her speed because she had been too busy talking about her ex-husband with her sister. Now she stood ready to save money by using her well-honed persuasive skills. "Nurse Lacey, my daughter says she is dehydrated and has absolutely nothing inside. I promise you, I will get her to the hotel and get her back on the toilet. If we have any problems, I'll call you right away."

"Well, all right," Lacey said. "If you promise." She walked around to the nurses' station and returned a moment later with a folder for us. "Here are her discharge papers. She needs to take her next dose of Vicodin in half an hour. Don't wait too long."

As the nurse rattled on, I slowly drifted off to a dreamland where pain ceased to exist. In my dream, the peaceful rippling of aspen trees in the wind drowned out all other sounds. The fresh mountain air penetrated my lungs. The heavenly experience came from

my most freeing moments in the outdoors of Colorado. All too soon, I awoke alone in a sweltering car, feeling like my insides had been stabbed. Ninety minutes had passed since I was to take the next dose of Vicodin. Mama and Marina had left me asleep in the car while they dined out. But now we needed to return quickly to the hotel an hour away and pick up the narcotics for my recovery.

"Ah! Maaaaama! Ooooh Mama!" I yelled. Pain seared through my belly and crippled my body.

Suddenly, I could not stop screaming from the pain's quick return. Mama and Marina returned, and we left back to Mesa. Mama began begging for help from strangers on the sidewalk in front of our hotel. I remained immobile, in a living hell.

"God help me. Please, someone help!" Mama said. I stared straight out the car window and watched as people looked coldly at my diminutive Hispanic mother and walked on by. No one wanted trouble with two screaming women.

A man, medium in build, swept in and gathered me in his strong arms. I tossed in them as he cradled me and ran to the hotel room, alongside my mother. Each bounce shook the pain and dispersed it to every cell in my body. He lowered me down on the double bed. My screams mixed with sobs, but I hoped, when my eyes finally met his, that he could sense my gratitude. I wondered how the pain could be so horrific and remembered my father calling to ask my mother if he needed to pick up any medicine for us. She said no. Now, at close to eight, she dialed my father and told him to hurry over to the pharmacy before it closed. Within a half hour, I heard my father's voice and felt a pill slip into my mouth. In Mama's bossiest tone, she said, "That's all Michael. Get out."

My recovery in New Mexico, the Land of Enchantment, left me dreaming of a different family. Almost a year had passed since the surgery in Arizona, but I was back with my family and needed their help. My imposed solitude was nothing new. Recovery requires patience and accepting others' care. I succeeded in being a good patient, but as Mama and Marina shopped at the Plaza and ate out at the best restaurants, I couldn't help but feel misplaced. Their fun came to an end when Mama announced her departure. I would spend the next few days with Marina. Mama needed a break from me before school started. Mama wasn't shy about her true feelings toward me. Ever since the day I was born, she told everyone that she couldn't bond with me. She failed to tell them that she never tried.

When nine months pregnant, Mama had suffered from Bell's Palsy. The doctors couldn't give her anti-viral medication to improve her paralysis because she would deliver me any day. Her jagged smile reminds me of what I took from her. I know that on this matter, we see things the same way.

Like Mama, Marina resented the necessity of putting up with me. Mama continued financing my sister's life in Santa Fe, so I became an obligation. On my seventeenth birthday, Marina headed to the outskirts of town to meet up with some guys she had just met. I was excited. It would be my seventeenth birthday and my older sister was finally taking me to a party, just like a friend. I played it cool, but I sweated and fidgeted nervously.

"We're here," she announced as her car rolled into the driveway. "Don't be stupid in there."

We went inside the dark house where people sat on a shag carpet, passing along what looked like something from my high school science lab. Black, slithering smoke in a tube being passed from one person to the next. My sister sat down between two guys and I

squeezed in to sit next to her. As the bong made its way around, I shook my head, not knowing what to do with it.

"Here, give it to me," Marina said. I leaned back, and she grabbed it from the man. She inhaled quickly and began to cough. Her voice sounded weak and broken. We didn't stay long and soon found ourselves driving home. The voice I grew up listening to had become strained. For so many years, I had relied on Marina's calming voice for reassurance. I wondered if her voice would be damaged forever.

We arrived back at her apartment, and before she had a chance to flip the light switch, she squeaked out a barely distinguishable threat, "Tell Mama and I'll kill you."

Days later, I returned to Colorado for the start of my senior year and spent much of my time thinking about Marina's life after high school. She had grown artistically in terms of her hobbies but could barely hold her job down as a Sam's Club cashier. Continuing to rely on Mama financially, she was waiting for her prince charming to sweep through the desert and rescue her.

Marina's threats were nothing new. Back in Seattle in the mid 1980s, she had threatened me for the first time when I was four, and she was six, and I had watched as our babysitter, Daniela, gave her cash. What would Marina do with thirty-six dollars? Why didn't I get any? Why did they leave me in the house alone every time Daniela came over?

One evening, the truth flowed from my mouth, as it does from every child who hasn't lost their childhood. We were seated at the kitchen table when Mama asked Marina what was bothering her. When she didn't answer, I said, "Daniela gave Marina thirty-six dollars to be quiet."

Mama's penetrating, dark eyes accentuated her concern. She asked, "Marina, is that true? What happened?"

Marina's eyes displayed the ill she felt toward me. She knew my statement meant that nothing could ever be the same. As she was forced to open up and tell our parents the truth, her evolution had already begun. With downturned eyes and fragile voice, she cowered. Soon after, my parents' audible fights added to the negative shift in the home's ambience.

I changed too, not that anyone else noticed. Occupying their thoughts were things I had no concept of until we suddenly had lawyers, a court trial, and psychotherapy. We were pulled out of the Montessori school to meet with the lawyer and therapist to answer questions. Rewards came from Toys "R" Us. Marina always got a big toy, and I, a much smaller knickknack with the explanation, "Because nothing happened to you."

Our parents spent more time with us but eventually called on the help of a high-school student and neighbor named Steve. Sitting in the family room on our couch, he seemed a bit scared of us or maybe of his new job. Our family's record player sat on the table behind him with five boxes of vinyl records. "Please, please Steve? Put on some music. We want to dance." He'd respond, "Oh, I'm not so sure about that. Why don't we just play with your ponies," referring to our collection of My Little Ponies. After numerous evenings, he warmed up and played the vinyl records from the 50s, 60s, and 70s. He was a real nice guy to be around. We were free again to be kids—laughing, dancing, and singing.

Sometime later, while we waited outside the courtroom, Daniela pled guilty to the charges, and we were told it was all over. It was exactly what my parents wanted, but Mama became depressed. She demanded that Dad sell the computer graphics business he

created. The business was valued at several million dollars. The sale would give us enough money to move from Bellevue, Washington, to Southern Colorado, and let Dad retire. That's what Mama said, at least. Dad, a young forty, had worked hard to achieve success and was still in his prime. Although he showed no signs of bitterness, I can't help but wonder how he felt about Mama's making him sell his thriving company at the beginning of the digital graphics era. He loved Mama more than anything and did whatever it took to make her happy.

As our home was being packed up, I played around the boxes, watching *The Price is Right*, and Mama labeled each box.

"Mama, I don't want to move to Colorado. I want to stay here with my friends."

"You'll make other friends, Andrea. You have lots of cousins you can play with."

"What about swimming? Can I still swim in Colorado?"

"If I answer all your questions, nothing will be a surprise. We'll be there soon enough."

Mama dropped me off at the airport, and I flew as an unaccompanied minor from Seattle to Denver. From Denver, I flew to Alamosa, a small town in the San Luis Valley. All I could see were mountains as the small propeller plane cruised placidly at 17,000 feet. My nerves grew into a heavy, anxious ball as the plane landed and parked in front of a small building. The front door opened, creating stairs. I didn't know what to do, but a woman at the door told me to wait until someone came for me. Then a handful of people came onto the tarmac and dispersed to their friends and family. After shared hugs and laughs, they turned back toward the parking lot and walked off the tarmac.

An old man stood alone, showcasing his million-dollar smile, a sherpa lined denim jacket, and well-worn Levi's, which gave him a veritable cowboy air. He tipped his cowboy hat slightly and walked towards me, oozing confidence and charm. I just couldn't figure out why a wooden stick stuck out from the curve of his lips as he smiled and greeted me. "*Hola, mi'jita*."<sup>64</sup> His greeting warmed my hesitation. I knew he was family, although I couldn't recall his exact role. But that laugh, yes, something about his laugh made me trust him, at a time when I wasn't sure I could trust family who left me at the airport alone.

The man held my small bag and picked up my suitcase. I followed him hand in hand to a well-used Chevy truck. He opened the heavy door and helped me climb in. The seat was covered with hay straw, farm tools, and dirt. Sitting on top of the hay made my legs itch. I looked out the window as we headed somewhere below the endless, open sky, punctured with high mountain peaks in every direction. Field after field filled in the space between the pointed peaks.

We passed cows and sheep with their offspring. The lambs pranced back and forth from one *acequia*<sup>65</sup> to the next, sometimes falling short and landing in the water, but always jumping out to continue on their adventure. At the end of the hour-long drive, we walked into a small white house hidden at the end of a half-mile-long lane. We got out of the truck, and the man closed the door with a heavy thud. He told me to go inside and see Grandma. That's how I learned he was Grandpa. We walked up three steps and opened the front door, entering a small kitchen with unfamiliar aromas invading my nose. The conversation

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<sup>64</sup> Hello my little one.

<sup>65</sup> ditch



became lively when I walked in, and I heard female voices saying, "*Andreita*,<sup>66</sup> we're so happy you're here! Come meet your cousins! Are you hungry, *hita*?<sup>67</sup>"

Overwhelmed by all the attention after such intense isolation, I was lost in a sea of unfamiliarity. Their darker skin, Spanish conversations, and loud interjections of laughter felt peculiar and odd. I wondered who they were and how they knew me.

Tears took over like the unsuspected arrival of a flash flood, instantly ripping through the arroyos. I felt threatened, as though I was in the middle of a sagebrush-filled canyon with the howls of approaching coyotes bouncing off the walls, echoing louder and louder. I sensed the beauty of the night's stars shining down on me, but it felt far away; I wanted someone to guide me. "Come on hita! We aren't going to bite," a woman said and laughed. That night, I imagined snakes hiding behind rocks and striking me as I walked through new and unfamiliar territory. Their piercing fangs clung to my ankles, and their poison seared my flesh.

The unknowns grew as the year went on. A custody battle ensued, and each of my parents would embark on escapades to hide us from the other parent. Their duties would eventually subside, as each broken parent coped with a new reality called divorce. I never forgot about the snakes which threatened me in my dreams, and I wondered what I would do if one struck me. I decided to move forward through life with the utmost caution. Maybe I could escape from its path before it could kill me.

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<sup>66</sup> little Andrea

<sup>67</sup> little one (feminine)

## Jerry

As a child, I loved to turn on the red lava lamp and jump onto the plush velvet chaise while waiting for Grandpa Jerry to get up in the morning. Sometimes I'd snuggle with him and Grandma, close my eyes, and listen to the waterbed splash as they stirred in their dreams.

The room I had enjoyed looked distorted and dark. Gone was the chaise of a hipper, more youthful era. Without it, I no longer felt beckoned to sit and relax. I looked toward the orchid and fern-filled bathroom, only to notice the night lights had been turned off. The empty, king-sized waterbed, where my grandparents had slept for the last thirty or so years, remained covered with a homemade quilt but appeared stiff and uninviting. I looked at the fireplace and realized that although fall had begun, the usual roaring fire consisted of mere embers. The oddly angled hospital bed took up the room's remaining space and seemed too small for Grandpa Jerry, who remained motionless with his jaws wide open. His breathing, entirely too labored, gave me a clue as to why the ambience had drastically changed.

In the city of Guanajuato, Mexico, I had been dreaming about my grandparents' home in the states. I listened to the growing sound of a megaphone far down the street. Morning businesses woke up any remaining dreamers and stuck them in reality. I was no stranger to this dream. The first time I woke up from it, I departed for Seattle the next day and spent five days with my visibly ailing best friend: Grandpa Jerry. His muscle mass had thinned, leaving his long legs slender. Congestive heart failure had changed his entire body. Underneath his stretched skin, the boxed pacemaker poked out for all to notice.

Grandpa's strength returned the day I arrived. He announced we would visit his favorite Japanese restaurant in Tacoma. Japanese culture held an important role in

Grandpa's military history, and he maintained numerous friendships in the local Japanese community when he moved home to the United States. The hostess led us to the *tatami* room. Grandpa Jerry's stepdaughter kneeled at his feet and took off his shoes. That's when I noticed his swollen feet and discolored legs. Grandma spoke loudly—she was nervous that spending the day outside the house would take away his remaining energy. But, Grandpa had vivid, humorous stories to share and fully intended to spend a special meal with everyone he loved.

Grandpa ordered sake and plum wine for the two of us. Years prior, he had introduced me to the drinks at that same restaurant although I was underage. I had a fondness for the sweetness of the wine. He and his wife shared the sake. He watched as I drank some of the wine. I peeked into the ceramic cup each time, not wanting to see the bottom; it would be the last time we'd share a drink. I took everything in: the company, laughter, savory tempura, and warm miso soup. Holding on to every detail, I secured the memory for later use.

Grandma made a point of telling the restaurant owners and staff that it would be her husband's final visit. The entire staff had become family to my grandparents. As they made their way over to greet them, they bowed to honor each other and then hugged as tears fell. I couldn't watch Grandpa say all his goodbyes.

In his prime, Grandpa was a true lady's man, and equally, a man's man. He was tall like his German ancestors and tan from spending his days outside fixing jets around the world. Handsome, with wavy, black hair and stunning blue eyes, he attracted countless people – single or married. There was rarely a man who didn't want to be associated with Jerry as his friend. Most believed him to have been a Hollywood actor. He was more

handsome than Clark Gable and kept the warmest company. I often felt awkward and shy as a teenager, but around Grandpa, I felt important, cherished, listened to, and loved. I lived for his humor, his supportive nature, and all his life lessons.

The repetition of the dream made sense to me. Either Grandpa had died, or he would die very soon. I had been renting a room in a large house in Guanajuato. As I sat up in bed, the maid came with the cordless phone and said someone needed to speak with me.

"Andrea, I hate to tell you this but--" the family member began. "Grandpa's dying," we said simultaneously.

"How did you know?" he asked me.

I packed up, left my studies in Central Mexico and returned home for good.

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Born in 1929, Grandpa was a teenager when the United States fought in World War II. While most of the men in Bend, Oregon, were drafted, Grandpa found his temporary calling to stay home, where he served the women whose husbands were away at war. When he told me the story, I couldn't help but ask for more details. I was just 13 at the time and learning more about the war from him than in social studies class. How exactly was he of service? "In every which way," he said, giving me a mischievous smile as I naively acknowledged his contribution, which I erroneously assumed was running errands. "Duty called, over and over for years," he said.

According to Grandpa, women became depressed when he met and fell in love with a fearless, ultra-feminine, and sporty woman named Jacqueline. It didn't take long for either to realize they wanted to spend their lives together. Both Jerry and Jacky, as he liked to call her, had no siblings. Jacqueline's family worried that Jerry didn't have good

intentions. Jerry's family attended Presbyterian church and were regarded highly in their community, but Jerry had a free spirit. Jacqueline's father left her mother before she was born. Jerry vowed to take the best care of his love, and his family welcomed the young woman enthusiastically into their family. Pictures of the two show the genuine adoration they had for each other. Their relationship was enviable as they fulfilled the role of best friend, lover, and spouse for each other.

Jacqueline remains a vision in my mind. If I knew more about her, I'm certain her story would be a masterpiece. She was the one who moments after losing their first child, a little girl named Ann, sat up determined in the hospital bed, saying, "Jerrold Marston Cyrus, I will make you a father again." Jacqueline possessed otherworldly beauty because of her ability to love and laugh. Her sincerity and spunky sense of humor captured Jerrold's heart. On a whim, she'd jump in a truck and head for impromptu trips to the mountains with nothing but fishing rods and a shovel to dig up bait. She'd follow Grandpa on his hunting excursions. He couldn't imagine himself with another.

Jacqueline and Jerry spent summers at the family cabin in Oregon, with their three boys: Michael, Kerry, and Erik. Michael had a knack for taming squirrels and putting together radios for the family to dance to music every evening. Kerry became the outdoorsman, bringing home fish for the family's dinner. The youngest, Erik, spent time running after everyone and was doted on by all. It was 1964, the summer when the song "In the Misty Moonlight," played over and over on the radio. It was also the last summer they would spend together as a family.

At the age of 33, Jacqueline died unexpectedly from what would be diagnosed as lung cancer. She had been hospitalized for three days due to a nagging cough that had

plagued her for months. Although her children, ages six, eight, and twelve, couldn't visit her during her last few days, they went to the exterior of the hospital and raised their hands up to meet hers. They missed her so. On the day she died, all three boys became ill. One by one, they were taken from their classroom to the nurse's desk, asking to see their mom.

Jacqueline's family never forgave Jerry for failing on his promise to care for her. With Jerry's military commitment, he was unfit to raise his young children alone. One option existed, so he sent the boys a half day's drive away to his parents' home in central Oregon. Guilt made Jerry drink into a depression that came close to killing him. His military career came into jeopardy when Jerry arrived at work still recovering from the latest hangover. One day, he was sent from work to the closest diner, the Spanaway Cafe, where he stayed drinking coffee for the rest of the morning.

Jerry returned to the diner often. He liked the cheap meals, and the coffee was decent. Two lovely waitresses worked the same shift and became acquainted with the newest regular. "Noreen, what do think about going with me to the NCO Club tonight when you get off? Wear your dancing shoes," Jerry said. It appeared he maintained his confidence. Noreen said, "Tonight? No, Jerry. My feet hurt. I'm not going with you, I'm going home." Jerry sat pensive for a brief moment and tried for some better luck. He said, "Hey Lois, what about you? Are you up for dancing tonight?" Lois took a moment to chat up another customer before saying, "Jerry, I'll be damned if I'm going to be someone's second best." She exited the area as Jerry said, "Well, can I at least get some more coffee?"

Jerry and Lois did make time to dance together, and when they did, they made magic. Neither had so thoroughly enjoyed an evening in recent months. Dancing dates filled their evenings. Jerry started changing soon after dating Lois. He put the bottle down and

focused on his new sweetheart. Lois learned decades later that if it had not been for her role in Jerry's life, he would have lost his military career. Jerry's high-caliber work as a flight mechanic in the U.S. Air Force called him into the role of a leader. The respect from his co-workers and higher-ups quickly elevated his rank to Chief Master Sergeant of the United States Air Force. His duty never wavered, not even when the attractive female general at McChord Air Force base visited the new widow at work. The woman was unaccustomed to hearing the word no. One day, after clearly stating his intentions to abide by the Uniform Code of Military Justice, he stated, "Ma'am, I'm from the West where the men are men and the women are damn grateful."

~

It was time for me to leave Mexico and return to the Pacific Northwest. Grandpa needed me. He had always been there for me, especially at the age of fifteen when each of my parents took a turn kicking me out of their homes. As empty as my heart felt from my parents' inability to show love, I always had Grandpa's steadfast support and respect.

In 2004, I had just finished finals a few days before college graduation. I headed north to celebrate with Grandpa and Grandma who couldn't make the long drive to Oregon for the ceremony. On the way, I received a call from my estranged father. "Andrea, we're on our way to your graduation. We're in Oregon now and should be at your place in a few hours," Dad said.

I hung up the phone and began to cry as I headed to visit Grandpa. I felt torn between seeing my biological father who was accompanied by his second wife, and Grandpa Jerry, whom I missed. I dialed Grandpa's number and listened to Grandpa and

Grandma answer on separate phones. They had been present and supportive throughout my life, especially during college. Through tears, I tried to explain the conundrum.

"Honey, why are you crying? Did someone do something to you?" Grandpa asked.

"D-D-D-Dad!" I said. "He-he wants to-to see me tonight, bu-but I want to visit you," I said.

"How dare he make you cry like this. You get on up here, and I'll deal with him."

I continued on. Grandpa had my deepest respect, and I trusted his every choice. After spending a few days with him, I returned to Oregon for my graduation as family showed up from Colorado. Dad felt I had disrespected him by not allocating enough time for us to visit. Before the new week started and everyone was on their way back home, Dad decided to keep me out of his life for good. When I told Grandpa about the way things ended with Dad, he called his son and told him to never visit, to never call, and to never expect anything from him or Grandma ever again.

I remained in shock over being disowned by Dad. Before that moment, I couldn't fathom life without my father. Although I didn't think about it at the time, by pledging his loyalty to me, Grandpa would never again speak to his son.

~

Grandpa couldn't be dying, because our family would be lost without him. Just the thought of his pending absence overwhelmed me. Salty tears fell into my mouth—a reminder that my heart had begun to break. Watching death's arrival, no matter how many times I had seen it before, would never again feel so raw.



I spotted the ticket counter, realizing how late I had arrived for the eight a.m. departure to Los Angeles, where I'd connect to the Northwest. As I spoke to the agent, she reminded me, "*Llegaste tarde.*"

I knew I was late, but something in me held fast to the only acceptable outcome: being with Grandpa. Whether I'd get there in time seemed out of my control, but I kept believing. In my heart, I knew Grandpa needed me, too. The agent continued talking under her breath, working hard to change my original ticket and get me on the departing flight. An agent escorted me through security and out to the bus for transportation to the plane. The plane's boarding door had been closed, but the agent yelled at another co-worker to have it re-opened for me. My escort hugged me and wished me good luck. He sensed my fear. I sat down in row one and caught my breath.

We ascended as dawn broke. While enjoying breakfast onboard, I noticed a prayer card on the tray, with a sunrise of peach and raspberry sherbet-colored mountain peaks. I felt summoned to meditate. I gazed out the window, stunned by such intense beauty above the city of Guadalajara, and I spoke to Grandpa silently. Everything was in order to see him by nighttime. *Now, the rest is up to you, Grandpa.* I acknowledged an invisible force, guiding me to reach Grandpa in time.

Grandpa was deeply patriotic and believed in treating others well. The outdoors had long been his sanctuary. As an environmental activist, he wrote letters to his congressmen, senators, and council people. When a waste management company lobbied to open a new dump at the base of Mt. Rainier, close to salmon waterways, he sent letters about the ramifications. He refused to witness the poisoning of the local ecosystem, including the wild habitat. The waste management company eventually won their bid. Grandpa sat in his

office—defeated—and cried. When he finished, he stood up and left to seek peace in the land that he had fought hard to protect.

When I turned 5, Grandpa taught me how to fish in the open waters. I was hooked on the thrill of a fish, pulling the line. Grandpa practiced catching and releasing, which was the only illogical thing that I had ever witnessed him do. At the age of eight, I practiced fly-fishing in the wild grass on his property. During my downtime with him, he taught me about Japanese culture and how to speak the language.

When I turned 11, he took me down to the mall to shop. What he didn't know was how I didn't enjoy shopping. I returned outside to his truck less than ten minutes later to see him smoking while he waited for me. "Listen, kid. Grandma won't be too keen on the idea of what you saw," he said. He repeated that phrase over and over. He didn't ask me to lie, but that was the closest he ever came to asking me to protect him.

When I was 12, he taught me how to gauge my alcohol limit by sipping wine until I got buzzed. He didn't want alcohol to be something I couldn't control. I'd have a sip of it, and then he'd make me wait five minutes. After close to half a glass of wine, I began feeling funny. "I think my tongue is starting to tickle," I said. He grabbed my glass and finished it, saying, "Okay, sweetie, you're done."

He found it his responsibility to teach me about men too. Without my father around, and without any brothers, I knew nothing about sex. I listened as Grandpa taught me about safe sex without a clue as to what he was saying. I remember nodding when he asked me if I understood. All I determined was that I was not ready to make any decisions about sex.

One day, I peeked into Grandpa's office and saw him looking at family pictures. He held me close and said, "Listen, Sweetheart, I'm not always going to be here with you. It may not seem like it now, but it's true. And, someday, you are going to find a man who makes you very, very happy. Now, you know I want nothing more for you than your happiness. So, promise me—promise me that when the time comes for you to decide whether or not to marry this person, you will do what's necessary to find out everything about him. You can't do that alone. So, promise me that you'll hire a private investigator, and if something comes up that smells of trouble, anything that shocks you and makes you question whether or not you really know this man, you'll run. Run hard, and get away, kid. He's not worth your trouble, and you will always find another man to make you happy."

I stared into his eyes, shocked at the urgency of his words. Without having had a boyfriend, I imagined that the day was years away before I would consider getting to know someone that intimately. "Oh, and Sweetheart, don't forget that it's just as easy to love a rich man as it is a poor man, but life is a lot harder without enough money," he said, making it clear that he wanted my happiness but wasn't sure he'd be around long enough to ensure it.

The plane landed smoothly at Los Angeles International airport. The customs and immigration hall were rumored to be chaotic, but I blew through the lines and made the tight connection to Portland, where I would pick up my car from a friend and drive to Seattle. I desperately needed some sleep first and planned on staying the night in Portland. I made a call to my mother, informing her that I had returned to the states to see Grandpa but needed to wait until the next morning. She, too, had had a dream and urged me to head

straight to his home. After a quick meal in the city, I continued north on the five-hour drive to Seattle.

While exiting Portland, dark clouds invaded the clear sky and unleashed a fury of rain. Neither traffic nor signs were visible. Without seeing lines to keep me on the road, I desperately asked Grandpa to help me. Half-expecting an accident from any direction, I continued on with my memory of the road as a guide. Ten minutes later, the rain thinned, and I gradually resumed some speed, making my way across the Washington border. I fought exhaustion with pure adrenaline.

"Sweetheart, you're here," Aunt Lorrie said as she gently guided me to where Grandpa lay, motionless with raspy breathing. The morphine kept him comfortable but unable to speak. The rest of the family had left for home and would resume vigil the next day. I had the night shift and was fully prepared to be at Grandpa's side until family returned.

"Grandpa, I'm so sorry you aren't feeling well," I said, my fingers sweeping his naturally dark black hair off his forehead. "I'm so lucky to be here with you." My stomach ached from anxiety, but the more I spoke, the better it felt.

"How do you still look so handsome going through all of this, Grandpa?" I laughed. Only he could look handsome, strong, and confident in death. "I love you," I said.

I stared at his profile as I shared the words, never letting go of his hand. His head rolled over to the side of the bed I sat on and distinctly squeezed mine: once, twice, thrice, telling me "I love you" the only way he could. His response delighted and reassured me that he had waited for me. I moved to the other side of the bed, needing to know if I had imagined his response, his love. "Grandpa, are you playing with me? I love you!" He rolled

his head over to the right to face mine again and squeezed three more times. Tears rolled down my face. "Grandpa, I love you so much. I'm going to miss you forever. Will you come back to visit me?"

Grandpa squeezed my hand and held it tightly, until I gave him permission to relax.

"I understand, Grandpa. Thank you. Thank you so much for your love. You've been everything to me. Please give my love to Grandma Jacqueline. Please give my love to Grandpa and Grandma Medina, too." Suddenly desperate, I kept my face next to his, feeling the death rattle emerge and shake my cheek. The smell of his lingering death saturated the air, and I forced myself to take it all in. I wanted to feel exactly what Grandpa was going through. I would suffer with him. My hot tears washed his face. We stayed hand-in-hand, cheek-to-cheek, while I struggled to keep breathing; I so badly wanted to leave with him.

Grandma Lois came in at one o' clock and told me to go sleep in the guest bedroom. I obliged and said, "Grandma, please come get me if you need anything," I said.

"I promise, Andrea," she said. I whispered in Grandpa's ear, "You can go whenever you're ready. I love you, and I'll always miss you."

I retreated to the other side of the house and slipped into bed. The heavy blankets weighed me down, inhibiting my freedom to toss and turn, and my eyes refused to stay closed. Adrenaline pulsed through me, impeding any sleep. Though idle in bed, my heart stood at attention, refusing to sleep as Grandpa succumbed to the last stage of dying.

Suddenly, Grandma's Border Collie became agitated and barked.

"Andrea!" Grandma yelled, beckoning me.

I sprinted past Grandma in the living room and into the bedroom. Grandpa's breath labored and paused. Bending down to his ear, I told him, "You are so strong, Grandpa.

You're an amazing person. I'm so proud of you. I'll love you forever. Please, go now; it's okay. Your family is waiting for you. I love you. I love you. I love you."

Suddenly, Grandpa's hand loosened its grip. The dog began to bark again. Brown, foamy liquid oozed from Grandpa's mouth and spilled onto his white undershirt. The odor was rancid, but I refused to let the smell scare me. Grandpa was gone. I stayed with him for ten more minutes as his body released. I kissed Grandpa and thanked him for letting me be a part of his life and death. Walking out to the living room, I saw Grandma at the counter with one hand on the phone.

"Is he?" she said, unable to ask the question, let alone go in to say goodbye.

"Yes."

"Well," she said, "I guess I better get to calling the family."

Standing at her side, I held my arm across her shoulders as she called the children one by one. After all the calls, she sat pensively and tried to find something else to do. I turned her in the chair and said, "I'm so, so sorry Grandma. I love you."

"Oh, Andrea, what would I do without you?" she asked.

Grandma clung to me, and her heartbreak heaved in my embrace.

Soon, family pulled into the gravel driveway. There was no communal consoling: each person needed to sit and be with Jerry. At times, the energy seemed frantic. Aunt Lorrie grabbed scissors and slipped next to him in the hospital bed. She cut some of his thick and wavy black hair off. Jerry's stepson removed Grandpa's military tags. I stood back, becoming upset, as I witnessed Grandpa's things being taken by his step-children.

On Grandpa's side of the bed, I looked out and saw the rare treat of soft sunshine during fall, which made the grass gleam. I looked out over the acreage with Mt. Rainier to

the left. Exhaling deeply, I unearthed heavy pain. Staring off in the distance, I imagined what Grandpa noticed every day from that view, when suddenly, I saw the blind's wand swing from left to right, back and forth in front of me. It continued swinging as I laughed out loud.

By taking in Grandpa's morning view of Mount Rainier, and connecting with nature, I found him again, and that's likely where I'll always find him. Countless times in his life, he'd get up at five a.m. and head north to South Hill in Puyallup. Once he reached the top of the hill, he parked his shiny black Lincoln Town Car on the side of the highway and leaned back against the trunk. The slow rise of melted oranges, pinks, and purples against the snow-covered ridges caught his breath every time and took him elsewhere, where he could focus on peaceful thoughts and warm memories. His death in the early morning hours reminds me that he had one more place to visit after dying at home and before leaving this realm. I imagine he took his spot on the hill just one more time as the combustion of colors lit up Mt. Rainier and that he made his final peace with his life.

## Journey Between Gurnies

Although the doctor never told me how long I had been gone, I can say, with confidence, that it didn't feel long enough. A thick warmth encapsulated my body, sending me floating along a sunshine-drenched path of peaceful happiness. For me, the moment confirmed that dying was the least worrisome aspect of life. I felt assured by my flat-line experience. In contrast, it took two decades and seven surgeries to understand why it was important to survive my journey with chronic inflammation.

When I was a kid, Mama took me to countless doctors throughout the Southwest. I existed as a doubled-over, bedridden youth, sometimes vomiting or passing out from pain. Other times, I woke up screaming for help, unable to walk and retrieve medication in the kitchen. By the time I turned fifteen, I was desperate for an answer to my distress.

"There is no way the man coming down the hall is your surgeon. He should still be in college. Forget medical school. No way," Mama said.

I silently read his name from the admissions paperwork: Dr. Magtibay. He was the man who would help me return to a typical teenage life, filled with school, dance team, and maybe even a date or two. Dr. Magtibay entered the room and reached for my hands, holding them in his. He looked me in the eyes and said, "Andrea, I'm Doctor Magtibay. I'm so very sorry for all the suffering you've experienced lately. I'll do my best to take your pain away."

Dr. Magtibay was tall with coffee-colored skin and an easy smile. His mysterious presence was a force all alone. I breathed slower and nodded as he spoke. I felt as though he guarded the mystery to life, and staring into his eyes unveiled a wise, old soul. His positivity shone like gold. He might as well have given me a one-percent chance of recovery



from my pain, and I would have smiled and thanked him, because, despite the odds, he would somehow take the pain away. His gentle hands held onto mine throughout most of the pre-operative visit. He summarized that after surgery, I'd have a fifty-percent chance of going on to become a mother. Goals for the surgery were highlighted, and the risks were minimized. Being with the doctor made Mama and me take our anxiety down a few notches, while his spirit garnered our immense respect. His gentility even entranced my hard-to-impress mother.

Several days later, Dr. Magtibay successfully cauterized my endometriosis. After the surgery, he set realistic expectations: "You may experience up to five years of relief from your pain. Eventually, you will most likely need more surgeries." Although I feared the pain would return, I felt consoled and motivated to live well and enjoy that phase of my life.

At the age of twenty, I started to feel a return of the lower body inflammation as well as pain and nausea on my right side. Walking to campus during my junior year at Western Oregon University proved too difficult. I experienced radiating pain from the front of my chest to my back, like swift kicks attempting to break my ribs and inhibit my breathing. As the pain persisted, I lost the desire to eat. My family insisted that nerves were getting the best of me, as I had just enrolled at a different school mid-way through college. *Ridiculous*, I thought. *I'm much tougher than that*. Doctors insisted that I was too young for any real health problem.

After several tests had come back normal, the doctor suggested one more to rule out any issues with my gall bladder. I couldn't wait to prove that a reason existed for the pain and the inability to keep food down. The nurse had me drink a chalky substance within a short time frame. Mama watched as I rested on my back, and the technician positioned a

device above my gall bladder. Imaging allowed the technician to watch what happened as the substance worked through my digestive tract. In a matter of five minutes, I broke out sweating and vomited the majority of the mixture. The results showed my gall bladder worked at eleven percent.

On the way to the surgical center a few days later, Mama and I prayed the rosary. I preferred meditating over prayer, during the early morning, but I suppose Mama needed the companionship during the repetition of prayers. We shared a bit of uncertainty but no major concerns about the surgery. Mama and I arrived an hour early for the surgery. Mama kept busy by rearranging everything in her purse. After a long wait, the nurse called me back to the pre-operation room.

"Did you hear that, sweetie?" Mama asked me, as the nurse waited for me to follow, "I'll see you as soon as they finish prepping you."

She was nervous. Maybe I should have been nervous, too. During the placement of the IV, the nurse hit a nerve, causing a sudden, sharp pain to shoot up my arm. I began to dry-heave as sweat rolled down my forehead, chest, and back. Adrenaline shot through my body, turning me into a samurai. I remember glaring at the nurse and then bursting into tears from the pain. While I defended my body, she must have gone to grab another nurse, to take over the IV insertion. Whatever happened next, I don't remember, but the nurse forgot to let Mama say goodbye.

Time ceased. There was no struggle from one life to the next. I felt my breath surrender. Clarity of thought and a sudden reassurance possessed my spirit. I knew I was outside my body. As I felt abundant warmth and radiance, I listened to the distant buzzing on the monitor. The doctors' anxiety was palpable.

The anesthesiologist gave my heart a shot of atropine.

An inaudible pulse vibrated my soul. I listened to the panic around me and sensed urgency over my physical body. Voices elevated and frustration set in. My experience juxtaposed theirs. For me, it was pure nirvana. I could have stayed forever. Eventually, I agreed with some unspoken notion to inhabit a body again. I came back, but my body had suffered.

Still dressed in scrubs, the surgeon had left the operating room to find my mother. He said, "Mrs. Medina, I don't have much time to speak with you. I need to let you know that Andrea is having difficulties with the surgery. We lost her for a while. It took some time for us to get her back."

"What do you mean get her back?" she asked. "You were supposed to take me to see her before she went in for surgery. What happened? What did you do to her?"

I woke up in what seemed to be a living room. Someone began to tug at me. My underwear was halfway up my legs, and my bra was left unattached. Mama wanted me out of the surgical center, but I wasn't responding to her. She yelled at any nurse who insisted on helping.

"Don't touch her," Mama said, ready to pounce on any nurse who defied her. Meanwhile, I felt heavy and unable to move.

"Andrea, I'm taking you out of here *right* now. I can't believe them. Stand up, stand up, right now. I need you to walk. I'm not letting you stay here. You almost died! You did die! It's time to go. Come on now. Get up!"

Mama pushed me in a wheelchair to the car. I listened to her tone because focusing on words took too much energy. During the drive back to my apartment, I wondered what

had caused Mama's anger. The one thing I knew for certain was how safe and comfortable I had felt before waking up from surgery.

As a college graduate at the age of twenty, I had moved to Central Mexico to study medical interpreting. I felt well enough to spend my leisure time walking and hiking in the mountain communities throughout the states of Zacatecas, Jalisco, Michoacán, and Guanajuato. Throughout the day, pop-up cafes and taco stands sprouted alongside streets. I ravished some of the best *tortas*,<sup>68</sup> *aguas frescas*,<sup>69</sup> and *elote*.<sup>70</sup> One evening, I felt a fever hit, and for the next several days, I couldn't get out of bed. The woman I lived with brought cut-up onions and potatoes, placing them on my forehead, chest, and feet. The vegetables turned hot from staying on my body. As the woman replaced them, along with my drenched clothing, she noticed I could no longer communicate and had begun to refuse water.

Early the next morning, I told myself I was dying. I could not move. Pain gripped me, and I had no energy. The woman's son had waited in line for three hours at the doctor's office and called to say it was time to take me in. The family carried me inside, and we waited with a dozen other patients while many others stood along the exterior of the office.

I remember reading the doctor's name on his desk and looking up into his eyes as he asked why I had waited so long before seeing him. His concern was apparent. When he touched my tonsils, my eyes poured out hot tears from the pain, but I could no longer talk. My body rustled non-stop like a tree in a winter storm. The infection had spread from my pus-filled tonsils. The doctor wanted to take out my tonsils but my family insisted on me

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<sup>68</sup> sandwiches

<sup>69</sup> freshly prepared fruit-flavored water

<sup>70</sup> corn on the cob

returning to the United States for medical care. It took ten days of prescription anti-biotic shots before I felt strong enough for the journey.

In the states, I underwent surgery the next day. In the crowded recovery room, I heard children crying on both sides of my hospital bed. My mouth had a peculiar sense of burning, itching, and throbbing, while my jaw felt unsettled, like I had been in a fistfight. In the presence of numerous, agitated children, all recuperating from the same surgery, I realized my exhaustion from the last decade of medical care and questioned the remaining value of my life.

As a thirty-two-year-old, I had the pleasure of meeting all the ER doctors at the local hospital during the dozen or so visits that year. After another inflammatory episode had left me immobile for two days, I received a call from my gynecologist with a proposal. He believed we could curb the inflammation during the difficult part of the month by taking muscle relaxants before the pain started and then relying on narcotics if the pain worsened. His plan would protect my fertility if I decided to have more children. The other option was the second laparoscopy to explore not only my lower pelvic region but also other organs that had become inflamed. I cheered at his words. I was tired of being bedridden with pain, which seemed hormonally driven. In late January, my calendar highlighted one day with a question mark – surgery day.

I had spent the last seventeen years fighting to keep my uterus when others were quick to query why I'd put myself through the pain. My surgeon had warned me of the laparoscopy turning into a hysterectomy because of the precarious placement of a uterine fibroid. I was ready for a second laparoscopy even though I already had two names picked

out in the event we chose to become pregnant again. I switched my focus on the quality of life for our small family instead of yearning for children who did not yet exist.

The week before the big day had been full of laughter. I was healthy enough to resume work as a flight attendant, flying to the Hawaiian tropics. Our services were interrupted by medical situations and turbulence-induced beverage spills. Not one soul complained after we sold out of our delightful Washington State Pinot Gris. The grumpiest fliers of all, the pilots, had been in a good mood, as well. A couple celebrating their ten-year wedding anniversary even tipped me after the flight. They said I had entertained them the entire way. Little did they know that we were keeping things light and silly as a distraction leading up to my surgery.

Life with chronic health issues can make a person more serious, more conscientious. I skipped over my twenties with the distraction of constant pain. I worked hard, when possible, to pay my health care bills. I appreciated the ability to be carefree before the second laparoscopy because I had not been living such a life.

Before surgery day, I checked into a Maui hotel on a layover, just a few blocks from a frequented snorkel site. The hotel gave me a comfortable suite instead of a standard room. I took the sign as an omen that I'd be okay after surgery. I had looked for signs my whole life to get me through periods of pain, doubt, or fear. In the luxurious room, I de-stressed from the fourteen-hour workday by collapsing in bed for a five-hour nap.

I returned home optimistic in anticipation of the surgery. Because of an emergency room visit earlier in the month, additional blood work was unnecessary. I celebrated one less needle poke. These mini-moments renewed my spirit. It didn't take much to make me smile; over the years, I couldn't help but live for a momentary break in the cycle of pain.

At the appointment, I still had several questions for Dr. Bob. Just like his name, he is a simple and familiar man. He entered the room most gracefully. I watched him sit lightly on the stool, with his long, lean legs at a ninety-degree angle. He analyzed my electronic medical record with a poker face and finally nodded that I passed the pre-op exam.

While Dr. Bob stared at the screen, I wanted to get a sense of just how well I could trust this man with my life. Now, he had been a family friend for five years, but this was an opportunity to see him as a talented surgeon. I stared at his precisely groomed facial hair. Certainly, his barber knew how to draw impeccable lines along his face. Would his incisions be small, straight, and almost beautiful, just like those from my first surgeon? I looked up at his aging blue eyes, with a few wrinkles in all the right places. He displayed maturity and experience. His glasses sleekly covered many of these lines, from most angles, as though he had been aware of the ability to look younger by purchasing attractive and perfectly framed glasses.

"Andrea, do you have any questions for me?" My partying mood ended when he looked straight into my eyes. The pending surgery became very real.

"Uh, how many questions do I get, and does this count in the grand total as one or two?" I asked.

"I have as much time as needed for your questions." He knew what to say. Did he need to know I feared how many people would see me naked? And what exactly would they see? Each question failed to humor my doctor, as he answered with the same poker face, petty question after petty question. I felt guilty for asking taking up so much of his time and decided the questions were unnecessary. Upon leaving the clinic, I called my husband and asked him the questions, too.

"Yes, everyone will see you naked," he said, inciting a gasp.

"Who do you mean by everyone? Do I know these people? I asked. My husband worked at the same hospital. Chances were they knew me even if I didn't know them.

"It's not a big deal, Babe." It took me a while to gather the courage to spill out such thoughts.

All that was left in preparation for surgery was a nice, warm bath and Milk of Magnesia. I dipped into the steamy tub while cradling my iPhone in my nervous hands. After a calming bath, I made my nightly rounds to the upstairs, putting together a puzzle with my son, then back downstairs, where I dried my firstborn's curly blond hair after bath time. We caught a glimpse of each other in the large mirror and smiled. As my children surrendered to the special place of dreams we call Sleepylandia, I prepared a bag for surgery day.

As I headed into the bathroom, my husband, who hadn't spoken to me all evening, gently touched my waist and waited as I either kept walking or returned to him. I turned back as he pulled me in until we were almost touching. He said, "Everything is going to be all right." I whispered back, "I love it when you can do that for me." I knew he wasn't worried about the surgery, because as a gynecologist, he operated several times a week, and I told him just that. But it meant more to me than he would ever realize that I found comfort in his embrace. He didn't hold me, but he said I was in the best hands. I smiled my appreciation.

The numerous scars from my surgeries have mostly faded, but all it took was scheduling another to put my mind right back on the gurney. In the morning I stayed free of



food and liquid, fed my family, and read to my children. When it was time, I said goodbye, leaving all my love with my kids, who would need it the most, just in case.

I decided to be more aggressive and share concerns with my operating room team. "I need extra time with the anesthesiologist," I told them. When he spoke with me before surgery, I said, "So, you know, my heart likes to stop sometimes. We're unsure why. If it decides to do that again, you'll be ready right? I've had a shot to the heart to get it started before. Haven't needed the paddles yet, but you'll be prepared, right Doc?"

And stop it did. When the medical team began to pump my belly up with carbon dioxide, the pressure on the heart became too much, dropping my vital statistics. The anesthesiologist manually deflated my belly until my blood pressure slowly came back, and my heart rate popped back on screen. They had to maintain a minimal level of gas in my belly, requiring the surgeon to work at a slower pace because my organs were closer to the skin's surface. During recovery, I was shocked to learn that my intuition had been right. I was glad the surgeon had prayed with me before the surgery – such a thoughtful guy! I didn't feel the residual pain, like when my heart had stopped during gall bladder surgery. I believe that once death finds someone, it stays close.

The surgery didn't have lasting effects. Inflammation returned soon after, unlike after the initial laparoscopy over sixteen years before. Growing up, I always dodged the thought that I was meant to be chronically unwell. If anyone in my family was sick, I'd always catch what they had. The family joked that my immune system was on vacation. Fainting had been a common problem for me, continuing through both of my pregnancies. Everyone jumped to a different conclusion as to what was wrong with me. During the pre-op appointment for a myringotomy, the anesthesiologist asked, "Have you had anyone, you

know, besides your husband, try to figure out why your heart stops so frequently? This, Andrea, is *not* normal." His warning echoed in the back of my mind.

With graduate school, two preschoolers, and a full-time job, I just didn't realize that I needed to take a step back and analyze my health. Besides, I enjoyed being frugal and a modern example of an independent woman. Spend money on another specialist? Nah, I'd save my money. I'd just cut back on caffeine and sugar, consume more kale and quinoa, meditate, and practice yoga.

Being a caretaker didn't leave time for self-improvement. Finally, I was forced to ask, *who was taking care of me?* My monthly paycheck and benefits were taking the best care of me. Good thing for employer-provided health insurance. Over the last twelve years, I have saved a couple hundred thousand dollars from having an excellent policy. Who knew that my job as a flight attendant would pay off so heavily every year?

Have I mentioned I believe in miracles? Sometimes, they occur in the efficacy of hospital cocktails. It always takes a good one to take care of me. Too often, after being released from the hospital and walking back to bed, the pain would return in full force. Without hesitation, we would go back to the hospital, where I'd look at the staff as if saying, *Remember me?*

I'm aware that my two young children bear a burden when I'm unwell. I didn't make the Mother's Day Muffins date with my daughter last year. My family started riding bikes without me because after a casual fifteen-minute ride, I would be bedridden again with joint pain and an immobilizing headache. My children come in to see me in the morning and softly hold my hand. They ask how I'm feeling and then ask if we can read books and play games in bed. I treasure each moment.

The children are my reason to keep going when the symptoms make me start questioning my quality of life. They are the reason why I canceled the last scheduled journey on a gurney. Saying goodbye on my daughter's sixth birthday unleashed a profound fear of not being here for my children. Any chance I get, I relish a reemergence of normalcy.

## The Baby Whisperer

The Hawaiian sunshine penetrated our flight crew uniforms as we waited for a van to arrive and transport us to the airport for our flight to Oakland. The purser flight attendant, Will, a Texan with delicate blue eyes softening his brawny build, fanned himself and said, "We get Sig tomorrow," looking at his work iPhone for flight information.

"Cool," I said, pretending I hadn't noticed. I had been wondering how the last two days of the trip would go with the well-known German transplant, whom I had never met. The van pulled up, and we loaded our weighted-down luggage, totes, and shopping bags into the back of the airport transportation.

"So what did you get?" I asked Will.

"Oh honey, I'm all about the food, you know."

Honolulu's Ala Moana Shopping Center stood adjacent to our hotel. Most of us purchased Kona coffee, macadamia nuts, or other treats to spoil our friends back on the mainland. I bought two honey Hawaiian cookies, one in the shape of a surfboard and the other, a hula dancer, both for my young children.

We settled into the spacious van, appreciating the panoramic view of Waikiki beach with its clear water and gentle surf. Leaving the Hawaiian Islands was never easy, even though most of us returned each week. Our crew had started the second day of flying together without even knowing each other, but we had become family. Just the day before, we spent half the day exploring the outdoor dining options along the beach. The neighborhood had experienced a sewage leak that infiltrated the hot and sticky environment. Will had promised us the best food in the city, but all we could smell was pungent waste that affected our tasting ability. We ended up at the military hotel on the

beach for one last happy hour. There, we breathed in relief as the live Hawaiian music began and the breeze swept away the offensive odor. With a drink in our hands, Will made a toast, "To all the crap we've dealt with all day." Debbie, a new flight attendant, said, "To flying in smooth skies and walking in cleaner air." We celebrated our new friendships that evening.

We were sad to leave Debbie behind on day three of four when her trip continued south to Los Angeles. Will and I headed north to Seattle before ending up in Chicago that night. Sitting next to the same person for four days and relying on each other to resolve crises can teach you a staggering amount of personal information. We're prone to hug problems out on the plane and relax together in every city. It's common for years to pass without seeing a co-worker but to finally cross paths and remember the minutia of the last trip together. The same goes for Sig, the crewmember I met later the next day.

Sig was known for his dominating attitude and superhero powers of lifting every single passenger bag into the overhead bin; his remarkable strength allowed a forty-five-minute boarding process to accelerate into a speed boarding of just ten minutes. It was impossible to imagine how he did it. Why would he want to exert himself unnecessarily, by storing over a hundred bags in the overhead bins when the passengers were required to do it? Maybe he was trying to prove something. Maybe he was a freak of nature with too much energy and no patience to stand back and watch. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to be working next to this man for our four-hour flights the next two days.

I created a vision of Sig that was in too many ways unfounded and stereotypical: a tall, broad-shouldered, stocky Bavarian, who lifted bags and spun them on his bald head before slamming them into the overhead bins. I imagined him putting unruly passengers in

the lockable bin, just for a thirty-minute warning, of course. His steely blue eyes would command everyone to sit when the fasten seatbelt sign dinged, and if they didn't, he'd let out a guttural, "*Es ist nicht gut!*"<sup>71</sup>

I had never heard anyone speak poorly of Sig. In fact, everyone adored him. Making his co-workers' day go smoother was just one of the many things I heard about Sig. Flying with Sig had many perks: the plane's timely departure, crew members refraining from assisting during boarding, and his passengers always behaving. Our flight might be uneventful, but would I be free to make silly travel jokes? Would he let me take a minute to refresh my oily face and chapped lips before heading into the cabin to serve more beverages? Would he be a stickler for service regulations? If someone approached me for extra drinks between the provided services, would he demand that they sit back down and wait for the next beverage service in two hours, just like many other senior flight attendants required?

Assumptions built and questions lingered until Will and I connected in Seattle to pick up Sig. When we arrived early at the gate to board, we learned that Sig had started work early. I thought, *Of course, he has.*

I decided to be entirely formal until Sig notified me otherwise. As I checked our equipment throughout the cabin, I glanced toward the aft galley and saw a busy, quick-moving man. He shuffled snack packs to bins, bins to carts, and racks of pre-cooked meals to the oven. I worked thoroughly from the front of the plane to the aft, stopping at each designated row to ensure proper placement and functionality of our emergency equipment. I was not in a rush to meet the man who could not sit still, so I gauged him. As

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<sup>71</sup> That is not good!

I approached row sixteen to check for the plastic covers over the emergency window exits, the distinguished, silver-haired man performed an about-face and marched expeditiously towards me. I tried to backtrack, but my trailing bags became stuck. Sig's icy blue eyes narrowed in on me when he said, "Give me your bags, now."

Even though I had been wrong about him having a bald head, he still intimidated me. I didn't want to give him my bags. My work phone and personal phone needed to be put in airplane mode, and I would be retrieving things I needed, like Chapstick, before talking to passengers for the rest of the evening. Besides, Sig spoke as though he'd be throwing my bags off the plane from the rear door and onto the active tarmac for vehicles to run over and destroy. If I hadn't heard that everyone in management loved him, just like his co-workers, I might have started crying.

"No," I said, "There are things I need to take out."

He continued staring and finally said, "Fine."

As quickly as he had approached me, I retrieved the necessary tools for the flight and looked up at him, offering the heavy bags with a simple, "Here."

He slid the bags into the overhead bin without making a noise. His effortless motions resulted in remarkable results: quiet and speedy stowing of larger carry-on bags.

"Now, wasn't that easy," he said, before returning to his tasks in the galley.

At 35,000 feet, Sig and I pushed the beverage cart through the maze of elbows, shoulders, knees, and half-covered feet. We were flying to Chicago and expected to have larger body parts stick out into the aisle. The flight, after all, was to the heart of the Midwest. The plane's stock of allocated seatbelt extensions had disappeared during boarding. We assumed that, on the four-hour flight, we'd sell all our food, which consisted

of southwest barbecued chicken on top of steamed vegetables; fruit and cheese platters; picnic packs full of preservative-tainted treats; and beef jerky. With no turbulence forecasted for the majority of the flight, we figured the passengers would eat a quick meal and sleep the rest of the way to O'Hare International Airport.

We had provided beverages to the front half of the plane when a screaming baby in the last few rows began testing the passengers' patience.

One asked, "Can we drop the baby off somewhere?"

Some sighed and said, "This is going to be a long flight."

Sig and I ignored the comments and pretended that this sort of late-evening cry fest was typical and not bothersome in the least. After all, babies cry. At least that's how we felt at the time. But we were only an hour into the flight. The remarks increased in frequency and attitude as we moved from row to row.

A woman asked, "How much do you charge for earplugs?"

I said, "No worries, they're free. I'll be right back with some." Looking over the cart at Sig, I said, "I'm going for earplugs; need anything?"

He continued to pour soda into a cup as he said, "A martini, extra dry," without even a glance as he delivered the beverage. The next passenger received his friendliest smile and a can of soda with extra ice. He had taken to breaking the rules by handing out cans of soda to make the irritated passengers calm down.

I walked fifteen rows back and glanced at the crying baby and her mother to my right. From my peripheral view, the mother seemed pretty patient even though the baby's cries continued to unravel what had been a relaxed, tranquil flight. The young



woman, next to the screaming child, hung her head into the aisle, trying her best to preserve her endangered hearing.

As I reached the last row of the cabin, I opened the last overhead bin and grabbed the flight attendant supply bag. It felt light, so we probably didn't have shiny airplane wings to give the screaming baby as a distraction. I was desperate. We still had two and a half hours until our arrival at our destination. As the screams reverberated through the galley, I forgot what I needed. Just a half second later, the ear-piercing shrieks escalated to a level that would make any soprano envious of the baby's vocal range. *Ah, yes, I need earplugs.* Rummaging through the supplies, I wished for the squishy, feather-light earplugs to appear. To the future dismay of an entire plane, the bag contained not one pair.

As I returned to my side of the beverage cart, I saw that Sig was running out of supplies. He tossed out cans and extra cups of ice. I decided to use my easiest resource – alcohol, to appease the frustrated crowd. "Can I get you a beverage?" I asked a row of women in their late fifties.

"Can you please get that baby to shut up first, and then I'll take a red wine."

Quickly, I explored my options. The first option was to ignore the woman's first request and happily serve her an extra-full plastic cup of our red wine, keeping my fingers crossed that we would encounter just enough turbulence to stain her white outfit with the dark mulberry-colored wine. The second option included asking her, "What baby?" as I looked around and pretended that the baby's screeches were inaudible to the entire flight crew. The third option was my favorite. I would pick up the screaming baby

from his mother and hand him to this woman, but not before thanking her for helping to quiet the little one.

Instead, I smiled, conveying the message that I knew how difficult the racket of a screaming baby could be while onboard. My attention was brought back to the cart when Sig commanded me to have the mother take her baby to the galley so the passengers could rest. Slowly, I walked back towards row twenty-seven, keeping my eyes straight down as to avoid disappointing another adult who relied on free ear plugs to make the evening tolerable. Almost as an aside, I casually suggested the mother use the galley to get up and stretch with the baby if they should need it. Feeling guilty for intruding on the woman's important task of calming her baby, I returned to the cart embarrassed for imposing my opinion on a parent's tough job.

As I dug into the ice bucket to serve another cold beverage, Sig's eyes narrowed and demanded an explanation as to why the mother and baby remained in the seat.

He asked, "Well?"

How could I tell him that the mom decided to stay seated, that they were comfortable there? "She said they're just fine where they are and—"

"Oh, no, they're not," he responded and pushed the cart forcefully to the side of the aisle, where he pushed himself through the small crack between the cart and the aisle seat to get on my side of the cart. His swift walk and irritated face drew everyone's attention. As he pointed to the aft of the plane, I heard him say, "You, the baby, me. In the galley, now!" The mother nodded and followed Sig.

We suspended service while I restocked soda and alcohol. Meanwhile, Sig bent to the baby's level in his mom's arms. He started a staring showdown and the baby reciprocated.

"I'm doing everything I can, I swear. He's never like this. He'll fall asleep soon. I just don't know what's going on," the mom said. I interject that the baby is drooling and likely teething. The baby was more than a mess, with matted down brown hair, raging red eyes, and drool saturating his shirt, as he looked straight at Sig, equally, if not slightly more, intimidating. Sig – six and a half feet tall, disheveled, with matted down silver hair – hunched over to the baby's eye level with a glare and a whispering demand that the baby stop crying. The baby swatted at Sig's glasses, sending them across the galley where they bounced from one wall to another, before falling to the floor and rolling under the beverage cart.

Crouching down to the floor, I felt for the glasses and couldn't find them. I was fearful that the screamer had broken them. I also feared that if they hadn't already broken, that I would break them by moving the cart to reveal their location. I lifted the break, allowing the cart to roll back a few inches. The glasses came into view, and I quickly handed them back to Sig. As Sig adjusted them to fit his face, it became evident that he would take a stronger approach to the screamer who wasn't just playing but out to make trouble.

Sig said, "You are going to stop crying. Yes, you are. Yes. Yes, you are. Right now. No more crying. That's been enough. You've had your time, and it has ended." The baby's shrieks tempered to an almost evil-sounding grunt. Sig continued, "Stop. Everyone's had

enough of you. Just stop. Stop, I say. Right now." The grunting mellowed to huffy breaths. Slowly, I turned to face the mother, the baby, and Sig the Baby Whisperer.

"What did you do?" we asked Sig as the baby continued staring at him but remained silent. Sig had already returned to his duty of stocking the beverage cart to finish the first service.

"I taught him who's the boss. That's all."

With no further explanation, we returned to our duties with a collective sigh from the cabin. Sig, the problem solver, acted as though his full-fledged miracle was just a mundane task. He was instantly elevated to saint status in the eyes of 163 passengers. It marked the moment I began to idolize him. With the peaceful cabin, people felt free to stretch, converse, and even mingle with Sig and me in the aft galley.

"When are you working again?" he asked.

"Oh, I've been on for eleven out of the last twelve days. Tomorrow, I work a turn to San Fran. My husband lost his job so I'm the default breadwinner at home right now," I said. Reaching into his tote bag, he pulled out a book on German castles, published in the seventies. The torn binding and curled pages showed just how many people had perused the book. I wondered why he was handing it to me.

"Here, sit and look at this," he said.

There was no use in arguing with Sig after seeing how he could get a baby to obey his commands. Nine months had passed since I had strung so many trips together. After flying tens of thousands of miles and filling thousands of drinks, my feet were swollen, and my throat began to tickle. Exhaustion and the ensuing cold would stop me soon enough, but, until then, I kept on flying. I opened the book at the beginning, determined to

read each page. Reading at work, especially on a busy flight, only allows for perusing magazines. I was grateful that Sig allowed me time to appreciate his book.

The book's photos showcased the ornate decor and history of Neuschwanstein and Hohenzollern castles. I paid particular attention to the elegant artistry of the State Bedroom in the Hohenzollern castle.

"Well, isn't Versailles gorgeous? I won't ever forget its beauty." I looked up at the woman who stood behind my seat, staring at the same image. "This is a room inside a German castle," I said.

"No, I've seen that before. That's Versailles," she said.

*"Nein. Es ist nicht Versailles,"*<sup>72</sup> Sig said, with his back to the woman.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?" the woman asked in a thick Midwestern accent.

"That is the Hohenzollern Castle in Bavaria, the region where I was born."

"Bavaria?" she asked, "But where is that?"

"Here," Sig said, and he grabbed a service napkin to draw the shape of Germany. His circles marked the location of the biggest cities in Germany. He noted their relevance as he plotted small dots to show the two castle landmarks. I used his illustration to connect my own thoughts. The book had been used as a distraction, filling my mind with opulence and grandeur beyond anything imaginable. An image contained a side note, explaining the embroidery details of the state bedroom's bedding, taking thirty embroiderers over seven years to make. Not a detail was overlooked—from the oak to the granite and from the curtains to the doorknobs.

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<sup>72</sup> "No. That is not Versailles."

I closed the book and handed it to the woman and said, "You should take a moment to check out the other rooms, too."

Sig nodded once in agreement. As we went about our preparations for landing in the following thirty minutes, I realized what Sid had accomplished. His pointed and short statements lacked frivolous language. His solid, detail-oriented goals led to results. He commanded me by throwing a book in my hands and changed me for the better. Even though I didn't feel tired or stressed, Sig could tell a reprieve was needed, so he gave me one. In the simplest but sternest of ways, he saved me from myself. From then on, I'd stop pretending I had the answers, that I was invincible. I realized that it's okay to cry as long as doing so doesn't burden anyone else. I would stop and calm my spirit, just like Sig had done to the baby.

And then I would move on. Sig showed me that no matter what detours we face, ultimately, we must continue on and do what's needed to get back on track. When I'm so sick that I don't know how much longer I can take care of my children, I fight the tired, aching part of my physical body and the exhausted, self-doubting part of my mind that tell me to give up. No other option exists. My body's crisis comes down to the strength of my mind and spirit. With Sig's example, I'm on my way there.

## Vita

The author was born in Seattle, Washington. Her soul awakened during her upbringing in the San Juan Mountains of Southern Colorado. In 2004, she obtained her Bachelor of Arts in Spanish from Western Oregon University. After a ten-year hiatus, she returned to academia. The University of New Orleans has provided her the ideal framework to pursue an M.F.A. in Creative Writing with their Low Residency program. She looks up at the mountains and back to her roots for writing inspiration.