SAN ANTONIO STORIES

by Dorothy M. Goepel

San Antonio Stories is a multiple genre work of short realistic stories, excerpts from a novella in progress titled Elena, experimental fiction, and brief memoirs. Themes addressed include cultural displacement, coming of age, survival, loss, poverty, and disability. Characters include a young Mexican-American woman who leaves her impoverished life in San Antonio to start anew in Louisiana; a young woman in the Navy who goes on a date with a young sailor and discovers her idea of romance turned inside out; and a woman who concocts elaborate stories to force her husband to leave and then must confront the events of a single day in her life.
SAN ANTONIO STORIES

A Thesis
Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
Master of Arts
Department of English

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2004

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Hunger

Elena Mariposa detected something peculiar in the dining room of her small rental house. She couldn’t pinpoint the disparity at first, standing in the middle of the room on a Saturday afternoon in 1958, scrutinizing the smoke-tinged yellow walls and the white ceiling splattered with thin, elongated fingers of corrosive stains in two corners. She let her eyes follow the lines of the room, shifting her feet on the warm linoleum floor, her body swaying in the stillness as she examined the walls, corners, and floor, until finally she had turned a full circle. She planted her feet and found herself staring through the doorway connecting the dining room and small kitchen, where she caught sight of the window above the kitchen sink. Daylight spilled through the panes, as it always had in the two months she had lived here with her husband Matthew. That’s when the realization hit her: the dining room appeared more illuminated than before. She tried to find a reason for the brightness and had to rule out the natural light from the kitchen, for the light of day was no stronger than on any other afternoon. She thought a new coat of paint would have made the room brighter, but Matthew had not painted this room, yet.

Elena and Matthew had found this apple-green, five-room house, plain and small in its construction, in the town of Joyce, Louisiana, in July when they traveled from Texas by train to introduce her to his long line of relatives. She and Matthew grew to admire the house, set off by an entire acre of land, and after inquiring, learned that the house would be up for sale at a cheap price, for the owner’s wife had died and the family wanted to sell it quickly and relocate to her birthplace. Although the interior needed improvements, the mortgage payments were affordable
and the land would allow them a wide open space for their two-year-old daughter and future children to play late into the evening. Most of all, Elena felt safe here.

The sound of water spilling into a hot burner on the stove pulled Elena to the small kitchen to retrieve a saucepan of boiling water, two coffee cups, and instant coffee. She poured the water into the cups and emptied a spoonful of coffee in each one. She placed the cups on the old-fashioned dining room table that Matthew had purchased at a thrift store in town. She then reached for the door of the refrigerator, located in the dining room for lack of space in the small kitchen, and scoured the shelves for the sticky buns she and Matthew had come to enjoy in the quiet times. Elena had brought with her a habit from her childhood to put breads and *pan de dulce* in the refrigerator, where they would be secure from the mouths of rats and the spindly legs of cockroaches. The package of sticky buns in her hands, Elena remembered her husband describing the store-bought sweets as a staple in his childhood and adulthood. Though she had acquired a taste for sticky buns, she knew they would never replace the hand-baked Mexican sweet breads she had purchased hundreds of times in years past from San Antonio’s bakeries, the *panaderias*. In her dreams, baked goods had become familiar visitors, making themselves so real that Elena would awaken with an intense craving for half-moon-shaped *empanadas* with sweet potato filling and moon-shaped *pan de huevo* with a lattice of white or chocolate, a hunger accompanied by tears tickling her skin and dampening her pillow. Dreams of Mexican breads would inevitably fill her waking life with memories of her neighborhood and her mother in San Antonio. She missed them more and more each passing hour, and each passing day.

Elena removed the package of sticky buns, closed the refrigerator door and slid into one of four chairs at the dining room table. She exhaled and positioned herself comfortably. She blew ripples across the coffee, feeling almost mesmerized by the steam curling away. From her position, she observed her husband as he cradled their daughter in the rocking chair in the next
room. She felt a rush of warmth travel through her body at the sight of him, blue-eyed and sandy haired, holding their daughter with such gentleness. Her husband wore khaki pants and a matching shirt with sleeves rolled up to the elbows. His sinewy frame exuded a special kind of protection from the world that only a father can give a child. Seeing his fatherly instincts in motion shot through her body and became a significant sensation for her. It was unlike any feeling she had experienced before. She told herself she would say a prayer that night to thank God for bringing Matthew into her life, and for the family they had created together.

Elena held tight to her memories, both good and bad. Living here in a rural area she now called home offered a chance for Elena to create a better life than she remembered growing up in San Antonio. Yet reality had been digging in from the very first day they had moved into the house, making her wonder how she thought she would ever fit into this strange culture. At least on the West Side of San Antonio, she had her mother as a next-door neighbor and the two women could arrange to spend time together, attend Mass together, and socialize in Spanish. At least on the West Side of San Antonio, she could actually follow a short path down Kicaster Alley and across El Paso Street and arrive at the H.E.B grocery store in fewer than ten minutes. There were people who lived in the neighborhood who would charge you two dollars if you needed help transporting your ten bags of groceries to your home, and Elena always needed help, for she and Matthew did not own a car, and never would. At least on the West Side of San Antonio, if she needed to connect with Jesucristo and light candles for an especially troubling time in her life, she had only to visit Our Lady of Guadalupe Church a half-block away. And on the corner of El Paso and South Brazos streets, you could indulge your senses by stepping into a panaderia and inhaling the aromas of freshly baked pastries and breads. Elena began to weep at the thought that her in her new house, she would never hear the bells of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church welcoming people in their time of desperation, nor would she be in the presence of
women of her generation who could greet her in Spanish and understand her ways and the deep longing she could not set aside. She thought of Matthew, born in Louisiana and reared on a farm, learning the ways of farm people, speaking in the only language he knew growing up. He had been drawn to San Antonio by his Mexican-American friends, their deep love of family, their holiday traditions, their faith in God, and their total acceptance of him into their circle of love. It was in San Antonio that he came to cherish the Mexican culture – her culture – and her, a bashful waitress in a Mexican restaurant. The first time she noticed him in the restaurant, his blue eyes penetrated all her layers of sorrow. His growing affection renewed her hope and her trust. She was a single woman then, a woman scared and alone after claiming her independence from her family, after having run away at age fifteen. She was twenty the day he walked into her life.

Elena heard the sharp and familiar squeak of the rocking chair as her husband stood with their slumbering child in his arms. He knelt on a thick blanket and transferred his little girl from his arms to the temporary bed. She did not awaken. He looked at Elena and lifted a forefinger to his lips. Elena imitated his gesture and smiled. In that moment, she was reminded of people who rise early to escape into the woods, hoping to catch a glimpse of an uncommon bird. Feeling as these people sometimes do, she observed in her husband something exceptional. This was a man who held their child and rocked her to sleep, with as much patience as a saint. Other men she had known seemed to avoid such parental affection toward a child, leaving the cradling and cleaning of children to the woman. Her husband showed no signs of hesitation or embarrassment in cradling their little girl. And for this she was grateful. Her husband also was blessed with a voice that she considered special, for it bore no resemblance to the gruff and stinging tones of the men she had known in San Antonio. His voice was pleasant in the morning and at night and when he called to her from another room, never like a man gone deaf. Unlike other men she had known, Matthew found nothing appealing in drunken behavior or vulgarities. He was a gentleman. Elena
sighed in her relief that this was the man she had married. Then came a knock on the door. Elena had always been suspicious of strange people who showed up at her doorstep, so it was with a combination of timidity and caution that she refused, as always, to greet the person outside the door. Gesturing to Matthew to find out who was interrupting the child’s nap, she remained at the table, guarded and ready to turn a frying pan into a weapon if need be.

Matthew moved as though in slow motion, away from the sleeping child and toward the door. He gestured to Elena that they should remain quiet, no matter who might be knocking.

“Howdy, Matthew,” said a female voice.

“How are ya, old fella?” asked a husky male voice.

“I’m doing well,” Matthew said.

“Mrs. Taylor and a few of the other women thought we ought to pay you a visit today,” said the man, whose voice Elena strained to recognize. Many of the male voices in this area sounded the same to her, as did the women’s voices, though the elderly Mrs. Janson’s voice was easily distinguishable, for it reminded Elena of a nun she knew in San Antonio, whose words were consistently precise and direct, as though she had no doubt what she meant to say.

“Our baby’s taking a nap,” Matthew said, bluntly.

“Well, well, Matthew, we won’t intrude. We wanted to see how you and Elena were coming along. We have a few gifts.”

“Gifts?”

“It’s part of our church ministry. We do this for all our visitors.”

“Oh? Thank you.”

“Will we see you on Sunday, Matthew? You know that Mrs. Janson’s volunteered to pick you and Elena up and take you to the Sunday service. It was good to see your wife on Sunday, but we miss seeing you, too. I think Elena misses seeing you in church as well.”
The man pronounced Elena’s name as Uh-layna, and she had grown accustomed to the sound, though she would never forget the rhythm of her mother’s pronunciation, Eh-leh-nah. Eh-leh-nah, donde estas? Elena, where are you? Eh-leh-nah, no seas cabezuda! Elena, don’t be stubborn! Eh-leh-nah, que verguenza! Elena, what embarrassment!

Elena heard footsteps on the planks of the porch and shortly, the start of an engine. Matthew returned to the dining room carrying a brown grocery sack and a shiny department store bag, bulging from its contents and topped by a white garment.

“Mr. and Mrs. Hemphill stopped by to give us a few things,” he said.

Mr. and Mrs. Hemphill, on behalf of the Pine Hill Baptist Church, had delivered a pan of corn bread, a two-layer pineapple vanilla cake and new and mildly worn clothes for the family.

“I thanked them for thinking of us,” Matthew said.

Elena and Matthew had visited Pine Hill Baptist Church several times, at the invitation of the middle-aged couple across the road, until the couple stopped inviting them, for Elena and Matthew did not own a car and were dependent on the neighbors for transportation. Mrs. Janson, from the church, volunteered to pick up Elena and Matthew, since the elderly woman lived close enough that it would not cause a terrible disruption to her schedule. On the first Sunday, Elena arrived at the church wearing a peach-colored cotton blouse and blue slacks, a contrast to the churchgoing women in pressed blouses and skirts or dresses, nothing too bland or flamboyant. Elena and her husband had no money for new clothes now, for the disability check he received for a service-related injury in the Army could only be stretched so far. But even if extra dollars were to come their way, Elena would never be inspired to buy a dress. She preferred wearing slacks. That’s what she had worn at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in San Antonio and besides, she had not felt comfortable in the Baptist church. The rituals of Mass were missing – the priest-audience responses, the way the voices of worshipers blended together into one wonderfully
spiritual hymn that floated up toward heaven and reverberated in the souls present, and the “peace be with you” and the “make me an instrument of your peace” that always touched her heart when she said the words. She missed the Holy Communion, rising without embarrassment to join the others in line to partake of the body and blood of Christ. She missed the services in Spanish, the warmth of the priests and nuns, the pews to kneel and pray at any hour, the statues of Jesus and Mary, the stained glass windows and an artist’s rendering of the Stations of the Cross that seemed to give a glimpse into the heart of man and the presence of God. None of these could be found in the Pine Hill Baptist Church. Neither could Elena understand completely all the words spoken by the preacher.

Elena said nothing to Matthew about the neighborly visit by Mr. and Mrs. Hemphill. She blinked repeatedly and blew on her hot coffee, her eyes following her husband’s movements to the corner of the room where he placed the shiny bag of clothes, and then to the table where he put the grocery sack. He removed the cornbread and cake, placing each on the table. Elena inhaled the sweet scents and thought of her mother’s kitchen in San Antonio. Her mother would make tortillas in the kitchen from flour, warm water, baking powder and lard, and prepare rice and beans and meat dishes. Elena had not wanted the life of her mother, the life of a cook, a cotton picker, a servant to a man. She ran away to make certain her life would not be ruined in this way. Instead, her life seemed early on to be ruined by the actions of men with a questionable conscience and by her own actions. When she thought about it, and Elena tried not to think about it, she would remind herself that she could not read all the words in a newspaper. If she dwelled upon this fact, she’d clench her teeth and mentally curse her father for pulling her and her brother out of school month after month to work at any conceivable job that a youth could do.

The sound of wood scuffing the floor brought her to the present. Matthew grasped the chair facing her, pulling it away from the table so he could relax and drink his coffee.
“Ahh, now I can enjoy the coffee you made,” he said, bringing the cup to his lips. “Did you notice anything different in this room?”

So focused was Elena on the department store bag that she missed Matthew’s question.

“Elena,” he called to her. “Wake up.”

She put her cup down. “What did you say?”

“Did you notice anything different about the dining room?”

Elena remembered standing in the room, thinking something was different.

“The room appears brighter.”

“Can you guess why?”

“It’s not the light from the kitchen window, and it’s not new paint. It’s a mystery.”

“I cleaned the light fixture,” he said.

She looked at the light and said in a low voice, “Now everything makes sense.”

“I removed the glass globe and whew, there was a layer of dirt outside and inside, enough to cut down on the light in this room. I also replaced two of the four bulbs.”

She stared at the light fixture, touching the coffee cup with her fingers, and looked around the dining room again. What a difference one simple action could make, she thought. She could see rust stains bleeding from the two corners of the ceiling and she could see the pattern in the linoleum squares, even the dirt buried where some of the squares squeezed against one another. The natural seams in the surface of the wooden table were visible now, and even Matthew seemed more animated and happy. She sipped on her coffee and smiled to herself. Then she let her eyes wander to the department store bag in the corner. The bag occupied its space silently yet with a presence as intrusive as the gunfire that cracked the night sky in San Antonio’s West Side, stealing one more piece of Elena’s sanity. The department store bag seemed to glare.
As a young girl, Elena had worked alongside her family, who traveled to Michigan and Wisconsin to earn a living picking cucumbers, cotton and other crops. She, her brother, her mother and her father labored from early morning to evening, in the heat of the sun, returning to their makeshift home with cut and swollen fingers, trying to work more efficiently day after day, trying to do exactly as they were told, sometimes having to do without meals, moving on when it was time. Oftentimes, in those years, Elena’s family would be the object of a church’s generosity and kindness, and her mother accepted, humbly, bags of clothing and staples such as flour for tortillas. On one hot July night when Elena was twelve, her father, a man easily angered, questioned her mother when the evidence of the church’s generosity became obvious to him. He had been drowning his bad fortune in bottles of cheap beer that night and he came home roaring with anger, ending his tirade by knocking Elena’s mother down with the back of his hand and telling her to never let those people inside his house again. The next day, he surprised Elena’s mother with homemade tamales that he had purchased from another family, and he bought RC Cola and sweet, creamy leche quemada for the children. Elena’s father could be a loving man most times, but it was harder for him to love when there was little hope. Accepting donated food or used clothes meant two things: You could not take care of yourself and you were not like the others who had money. You were an embarrassment.

“Would you like a piece of cornbread and cake?” Her husband’s voice and the clanging of knife against plate made Elena focus on the dining room again. Elena had never tasted a pineapple vanilla cake, but she had savored the delicious cornbread her husband baked in an iron skillet. The thoughts that occupied her mind at the moment spoiled her appetite for the baked goods. She motioned her head to say “no” and sipped her coffee, all the while staring at the shiny department store bag in the corner. It seemed to stare back at her. She wondered why people at the Pine Hill Baptist Church thought she and Matthew needed cornbread and cake and used
clothes. Did they think she could not care for her family? Did they think, as her mother had once thought, that she was an embarrassment because she wore pants to Mass? The questions carried her away, boring a hole into the pit of her stomach, releasing the truth that had been smothered by her idealistic views of her life in Joyce, Louisiana, by a culture she would never be able to call her own. She ached for her mother, she missed the West Side of San Antonio. These were feelings she could not ignore even by the prospect of a better life for herself and her baby.

Elena returned her cup of coffee to its saucer and scooted her chair from the table. She stepped into the kitchen and opened the cabinet closest to the sink. She saw where her husband kept a large box of matches. Without a word and as naturally as she knew how, she grasped the box from the cabinet and returned to the dining room. She moved past her husband and scooped the bag of clothes into her arms, stuffing the matchbox into it. She sped to the front door.

Elena dashed to the bottom of the hill, to the large black receptacle used for burning waste. The wind pulled her hair away from her face as she positioned the bag on the can’s rim and dug into the clothes to help them slide out. Some items draped across the rim, only to be lifted by a gust of wind momentarily before landing on the ground. With shaky hands she slid open the large matchbox and fingered the fire sticks, pulling one out and running its thick head against the box until a flame barely touched her skin. She flung the burning stick into the can and peered into the blackness of the receptacle, watching as the glow of the match died out. She opened the matchbox wider and lit three more matches, the number required for a spark to begin burning a hole in one of the garments at the bottom of the receptacle. As the heat of the fire warmed her cheeks, her husband arrived, a half-smoked cigarette pressed between his lips. Elena had grown tired of his smoking, but here he was, calmly puffing on the invasive tobacco.

Elena picked up a white cotton dress that had fallen away, but before she could toss it into the fire her husband snatched part of it and held on tightly. She tugged at the dress but he
wouldn’t let go. She could see ashes falling from his cigarette and blood flushing his face. His blue eyes were glued to her hands, as though waiting for them to tire from the spectacle, then they rushed to meet her eyes. She saw in his face a different form; she saw the terror in his eyes as if he were observing a stranger that had gone mad. His eyes seemed to hope that she would relent. She did not want his eyes on hers and looked away, turning her attention to the freckles on his hands, which appeared large as he clutched the white cotton dress. The knuckles on his hands reminded Elena of her father’s knuckles. At that moment she could feel tears forming in her eyes and a lump engorging her throat, setting off a stinging pain in her ears. She opened her mouth to release the emotion and catch her breath, but she would not release the dress.

“Damelo, damelo,” she screeched. Give it to me, give it to me!

Her husband tightened his grip.

On the ground Elena saw a pink blouse that had floated away. She continued gripping the white cotton dress in one hand and reached down to seize the pink blouse with the other, sending the top into the flames with a whoosh. At that precise moment, Elena saw the fire billowing into the air and heard the screams of her husband, evoking the cries of an animal caught in the teeth of a trap. He howled, jumped and smacked his right shoulder. Fire had raced to his shirt, onto his right shirtsleeve. He flung the white cotton dress away and as the fabric fluttered in the air, it seemed to Elena that it had suddenly metamorphosed into a graceful oversized pigeon with a wide wingspan or a swan whose long neck had become hidden behind two feathery wings. Her husband dropped to the ground and rolled to be doubly sure the fire was out. He lay on the ground moaning, an arm draped across his forehead and his shirt partially scorched. He spit the butt on the ground. He released a rush of words from his mouth to ease the pain, words Elena never imagined hearing from his tender mouth. A breeze swept the white dress against Elena’s body and she pictured the bird she had imagined earlier being pulled back to earth. She felt a
layer of warmth created by the garment as it draped her chest and hips. The dress clung to her body for a moment before falling away like the shadows in a room that are chased away by light.
Another Friday afternoon and thirteen-year-old Barbara Miller had nothing to look forward to except the things that weren’t right in her life. Giving in to a burst of impulse, she turned toward her grandmother’s home on Kicaster Alley, two blocks from her junior high. The instant her right foot touched the familiar asphalt of Kicaster, a sense of assurance flowed into her blood, streaming up, up with every step that moved her closer to her grandmother’s three-room home. Spotting the house, she remembered Uncle Chuy’s boss, a man who didn’t mind coming to the West Side of San Antonio to celebrate at a bar with his employees and who gave bonuses to families who needed a break from the hard times. He had described her grandmother’s home as “a charming cottage” with “a white stucco exterior.” Barbara loved the sky-blue wooden posts holding up the awning that shaded the tiny front porch with its cement floor and the tin roof that protected the house and soothed Barbara with the tap-tap-tapping of falling rain. These were the things she wanted to point out to the boss, if only she could form the words, for these were the things she appreciated about her grandmother’s home, a home that at times seemed to take on a fairy tale-like quality, like a magical place in the middle of a war.

Barbara kicked a stone to the side as she moved along Kicaster Alley, a short pathway that connected El Paso Street, where Our Lady of Guadalupe Church stood, and Guadalupe
Street, where a bar and an old movie theater converted into a place of Hallelujah worship spewed music and feverish shouts of human emotion in a competition for the souls of the lost and the near-lost. The majestic pecan tree beside her grandmother’s house marked the center of the alley, and the place where friends and family would crouch or stand with a bottle of RC Cola in one hand and recount stories of marriages, confirmations, enlistments, high school graduations, and imprisonments, and reminisce about friends and family now dead, with a motion of a hand or with fingers cupping their mouths as though to barricade the flow of hurt.

Barbara replayed the things that were not right in her life. She had turned thirteen at the end of the last school year and couldn’t seem to put on weight like the other girls. Vacant cupboards and a barren refrigerator in her family’s four-room home on Colorado Street left them with nothing except a gnawing hunger for part of every month, causing her grandmother and neighbors to throw up their hands, burdened by the thought of seven children going hungry. Barbara knew there were other families who missed meals as well, because they also were poor, yet it seemed that their children were fortunate. They were beginning to put on weight, forcing them to search for second-hand clothes that would fit their new bodies. Even if they tried, the girls couldn’t hide what they had become. Barbara thought it strange to see a girl who had been flat chested last year, return with a whole new body this year. It felt odd to see the transformation, and a little frightening. Then, it started happening. The girls with the new bodies seemed to be finding a common ground and a new interest – boys. They’d form huddles and giggle as they talked, about boys. They spoke in Spanish, and she could understand every word, though later she was confronted by one of the confident girls. “If you speak Spanish, why didn’t you join our group?” Barbara gave no answer, until the girl’s eyes swept Barbara’s face in puzzlement at the silence. “I don’t know,” Barbara stammered, looking at the girl’s coffee complexion and admiring the stylish blouse that shaped her body with sashes joined in the back.
“All right,” the girl said, her glossy lips moving into a half-smile. She turned away and rejoined her friends, never to invite Barbara into the special ring. Moments like these made Barbara feel like the snow-faced, ashen-winged pigeon that had flown low, hitting the chicken coop that Uncle Chuy had built in her grandmother’s backyard. The pigeon’s head was bloodied, whether from an attack by a bird or a human, or from the impact with the high wooden roof of the coop, no one could say. Compared to the other pigeons that landed gracefully on the ground, lured by Uncle Chuy’s chicken feed and dried corn cobs, the bloodied pigeon lacked size and, possibly, a sense of direction. Uncle Chuy put the pigeon in a cage and nursed it back to health, until it pecked open the cage door and escaped, fatter and happier than the day of its arrival.

Barbara thought that if she had inherited dark skin like the other girls, not the fair skin of her father’s, if she could put aside her shyness long enough to approach the other timid girls and boys in the neighborhood, if she could speak when spoken to, if she could say something interesting and smart in any moment, if she could find the right directions and arrive gracefully, then it wouldn’t be awkward to be who she was. Being at her grandmother’s home invariably made her feel comfortable about herself. Today, she needed to be there with her Abuelita.

Barbara pulled on the screen door that obscured the blue door of Abuelita’s home and finding it latched, rapped on the window frame. In a few moments she heard Abuelita call out, “Quien es?” Barbara responded loudly in Spanish, “It’s me, Barbara,” for her grandmother sometimes found it difficult to identify that a voice was a friendly one. Abuelita pulled aside the curtain in the only window next to the door and peered at Barbara, finally grinning, revealing her gapped front teeth. Barbara heard the click of three deadbolts being undone and the creaking of the door as Abuelita opened it. “Mija, eres tu!” she exclaimed, happy at the sight of her granddaughter. Abuelita spoke always in Spanish, except for the few phrases in English that she picked up from her sons. “No money, no money,” she learned to tell Barbara’s younger cousins,
when they pressed her for dollars that she didn’t have. “You crazy,” she’d yell at Uncle Chuy, when he arrived home drunk and wanted to show her a dance step he had learned at the Lone Star Bar. Her anger at Uncle Chuy’s antics usually would dissolve into a spurt of laughter that would slip through her teeth at the moment she tapped his back with the straws of a broom, aimed the straws at his chest and shoved gently so he’d lose his balance and land in a chair.

“Come in, come in,” Abuelita said. “I’m busy with Panchita. She hasn’t cleaned up for three days, and I’m trying to get her in the shower. I don’t want her to go out in public like this, dirty and smelling as though she doesn’t care about her hygiene.”

Barbara’s aunt Pancha hated to disrobe and step nude into a shower and then put soap and water on her body. Barbara imagined that her tia simply despised the sensation of her bare feet against the cold shower floor and her body soaked in soapy water, which seeped into areas she’d rather protect. Maybe Pancha had had a bad experience with soap stinging her eyes and maybe this was why she refused to wash up. Barbara put her books on the dresser in the front room, where Abuelita’s bed flanked one wall and Pancha’s bed hugged the other.

“Barbara just arrived,” Abuelita called to her daughter at the other end of the house. “You don’t want her to see you act like this, do you?” Abuelita disappeared behind a doorway of curtains and Barbara inhaled easily, content to study the space that doubled as a living room. Red and cream Mexican blankets were smoothed out neatly on the two beds and gray duct tape covered the bulging right armrest that had split open in the sea green vinyl recliner. Next to the dresser on the wall hung a calendar from a favorite restaurant, El Poblado. The calendar had been turned to the current month – September. Each month showed a different illustration and September’s image was of Jesus surrounded by little children. Tucked inside the mirror’s frame were pictures of Abuelita’s sons and daughters, current and younger versions of themselves. The only picture of Pancha was a wallet-size school photo, probably taken in first grade. In the photo,
Pancha has two braids, a smile showing three missing front teeth, and the milky face with freckles that distinguishes her from her dark-skinned brothers and sister. In those years, before Barbara was born, friends and neighbors would coo over the impish-looking Panchita, according to Abuelita’s stories. Pancha, now in her thirties, had coal-black hair, wild and thick, and had grown into a stout woman. People no longer said endearing words about her, but Abuelita seemed intent on making them remember they had once adored her daughter. She’d show old photos to remind family and friends of Panchita’s status as a precious child in the neighborhood.

Barbara heard Pancha’s shouts of protests and Abuelita’s demands for her daughter to get in the shower. Finally, the quarreling died down. Barbara moved from the front room to the middle room and into the kitchen, which adjoined the bathroom, and saw Abuelita standing outside the bathroom, speaking to her daughter through the door. “Have you washed your armpits? Make sure you wash that area twice, Panchita.” And then, “Ya, Ama, quit telling me what to do.” Abuelita then said, “Put the soap on the washcloth and make a lot of suds. Clean your private area with it, do you hear me?” Pancha said, “Ay, I don’t want to do that!” Abuelita called back, “Panchita, I don’t want to come in there and make sure you do this. You’re a grown woman. Act like one.” Then Pancha said, “Is Barbara out there?” Abuelita said, “Yes, she’s right here, listening to everything you’re saying.” Then, “Tell her that I can take a shower by myself. Tell her that I’ll be finished soon.”

* * *

In the front room, Barbara clicked on the black and white television set, turned the knob to a channel with a game show, and slid into the bulky recliner. A half hour later, Pancha emerged clean and fresh, her round face sparkling with a smile and her hands in the air, where
she rubbed them together as though to spark a fire. “Barbara, Barbara, que bien te miras. Y todavía flaca!” She closed her mouth in a moment of excitement as though to control an uncontrollable wave of joy, and released a steady hum and then a high-pitched squeal. Pancha’s display made Barbara smile, then laugh, which triggered a wide-mouth chortle from her aunt. She curled a wild swathe of dark hair behind her left ear, away from the line on the far right side that parted her hair. Her combed hair reached her shoulders rather than the middle of her back, for ease of grooming, and her plump body was covered in a loose-fitting dress with a high neckline and sleeves long enough to hide her armpits. Her broad feet seemed comfortable too in imitation leather shoes with low heels, which Pancha said were purchased by Abuelita at Solo-Serve downtown. “I have a secret,” Pancha said, as she stood with her hands on her hips in front of Barbara. “I’ll tell you later.” The enormous possibilities of those words and the fact that Pancha decided to confide in Barbara made her imagine all the things that were not right in her life being stuffed into a corner on the other side of the world. Pancha’s narrow eyes crinkled and Barbara heard in the background, “Congratulations, you are a winner!”

* * *

Abuelita emerged from the curtained doorway with instructions for her daughter. “Go to Lolita’s and buy a Big Red for me and one for Chuy, and whatever sodas you two want.” She handed a five-dollar bill to Pancha, and chided, “Make sure you pay Lolita. If she’s not there, pay whoever’s working, and give the change to Barbara so she can count it for you.” Pancha pressed her palms together and squealed, and Barbara inhaled the air as if it suddenly held more magic for them. She sniffed the aroma of flour tortillas and refried beans from the kitchen.
Stepping outside the small front porch and onto Kicaster Alley, Barbara could feel her blood speeding with the pleasure of a salvaged day, pulsing with anticipation for what was to come. She and Pancha headed the short distance toward El Paso Street, where Lolita’s Tienda, which sold corn tortillas hot off the machine, barbacoa, and assorted sweets and sodas, was located. “I’m going somewhere tonight,” Pancha said. “Don’t tell her.” A lavender fragrance, left by the shampoo Pancha used to wash her hair, drifted into Barbara’s nostrils. “Where are you going?” Barbara felt comfortable around Pancha, enough to be inquisitive. Pancha repeated, “I’m going somewhere, because I’m all grown up. Going out is what grown people do.” Barbara pressed for more details. “Where, exactly, will you go? What will you do?” Pancha said, “A friend promised that she’d take me to a dance. I’ve never been to a dance. We’re going to have fun.” Wanting to be included, yet feeling like a conspirator in bad behavior, Barbara replied, “Where is this dance? Can I go?” Pancha chortled. “You can’t go. This dance is for grown ups.”

* * *

In the front room, Abuelita selected the foot-end of her bed as a seat, rather than sitting in the recliner, which she thought suited her son Chuy best. Barbara leaned back in the recliner, feeling like Goldilocks who had discovered the chair too huge for her taste, and Pancha plopped down on her bed. Each held a can of Big Red and a platter of two homemade bean tacos that Abuelita had prepared from scratch. Abuelita could be counted on to cook food that melted in your stomach. She had prepared tamales over the years and one year Barbara had helped spread the corn masa on the sheaths. Several times a week, Abuelita would make a stack of flour tortillas with the right amount of flour, lard, and warm water. Occasionally, she would cook a beefsteak or round steak, Mexican style. Abuelita said, “It’s time for my show,” and clicked on
the TV to watch a favorite Mexican novela, or soap opera. As the first scene unfolded, she became engrossed, as she tended to do, and did her best to block every sound in the room out of her mind. From her bed, she leaned into the TV so as not to miss a single second of the drama. “That one, she’s a liar,” she said, as the guilty woman made her entrance. “She lied about Margarita so she could have Roberto all to herself.” When Pancha started laughing at the sight of a male actor who had gotten out of bed with his hair flattened on one side, Abuelita demanded with a gesture of one hand that her daughter stop breaking her concentration. Barbara wondered how Pancha planned on leaving the house, for Abuelita always kept an eye on her daughter.

*              *             *

As Abuelita remained absorbed by her novela, Pancha quietly announced, “I have to go to the bathroom.” She rose, carrying her empty plate and empty can of Big Red, and disappeared behind the curtained doorway. Barbara saw the curtains flutter and heard Abuelita say, “Ay, that poor Margarita, forced to leave her town because of a vicious rumor by that devil-woman.” Abuelita sighed and sipped on her Big Red. Barbara stared at the curtains, motionless and pale, and wondered if her aunt would be returning. Suddenly, she wondered, What if there are bad people at the dance? Barbara got up, leaving her plate and can on the floor, and hurried to the kitchen. She knocked on the bathroom door. “Pancha, Pancha?” No noise came from the bathroom. She pounded on the door, and pounded again. Maybe the pounding would make Pancha reappear. “What’s going on here?” Abuelita shouted, making her way into the kitchen. At that moment, the door creaked open from the force of the banging and Abuelita peered in and reacted with “Ay, Dios, where’s Panchita?” Barbara said, “Ay Abuelita, she told me she was going to a dance tonight, that a woman had invited her.” Abuelita put her hands on her head and
said, “Ay, no, no.” Then to Barbara she said, “Make yourself smart and look in the back yard. Maybe she’s feeding the chickens.” Barbara made her way out of the tiny kitchen and into the back yard, and looked behind the chicken coop and on either side of the house. Her eyes began to sting and she whispered, “Oh, Pancha, where are you? Why didn’t you take me with you? I could’ve looked out for you.” Barbara ran to the only gate in the front fence and stared at Kicaster Alley. She undid the lock on the gate and stepped underneath the awning of the porch. She stepped onto Kicaster Alley and looked to one end, toward El Paso Street, and the other end, toward Guadalupe Street. She thought if she looked hard enough, Pancha would reappear.

* * *

Barbara dashed to the back door of Lolita’s home, which housed Lolita’s Tienda and which shared the same back yard as Abuelita’s home. “Lolita, Lolita,” cried Barbara as she knocked frantically on the door. “Please, we need to use your phone.” Lolita came to the door. “Nina, que pasa?” Barbara related the story, trying to be sure not to confuse the details. “Entra, nina.” Barbara stepped inside Lolita’s home for the first time and stood in a spacious dining room with walls of peach color and a floor so glossy Barbara imagined a pool of water at her feet. In one corner a plant in a large black pot and with foot-long emerald-green leaves nearly touched the ceiling and on one wooden table against a wall were three Mexican pots made of clay, glazed and hand painted like the ones she had seen at the Farmer’s Market downtown. Lolita wiped her hands on the apron she was wearing and dialed the police.

“This is Lolita Salazar; I’d like to report a missing person.” In an authoritative tone, Lolita articulated precisely what had occurred and that Pancha was a special case. “This is a woman in her thirties who is malita. We don’t know where she went, but she did tell her niece
that she had been invited to a dance.” The police officer must have said something Lolita did not like, for she said, “Look, she has never gone out alone. Do you understand? The people she’s with might be taking advantage of her. If you would please make this a priority, we would highly appreciate it and her mother would feel assured.” As Lolita spoke, Barbara wondered what, exactly, Lolita meant by saying that people might be taking advantage of Pancha. Barbara wondered who had invited her aunt to the dance, and then scolded herself for not pushing to get a location. At least, if she knew where the dance was, she could tell Lolita and maybe Lolita would be driving her car at this moment with Barbara in the passenger seat to bring Pancha home. She wondered about the time that had elapsed. Not much. Someone must have picked her up in a car.

* * *

In Abuelita’s house, Barbara heard silence and found Abuelita seated on her bed, her face in her hand and her moans filling the room, like a ghost in mourning trapped in the walls. Then came a knock on the door, and Uncle Chuy’s familiar, “Ama, Ama.” Abuelita unlocked the deadbolts and let him in, her face wet from grief. “Pancha se fue, Chuy,” Abuelita yelled, as though she were in the middle of admonishing Pancha. “Lolita llamo a la policia, pero no se, no se.” Uncle Chuy’s face resembled a coal miner’s with a dust of black smearing the skin, except only part of the grime would wash off. His eyes turned somber at the news and he looked to Barbara for more information. She described what had happened, in a loud voice, for Uncle Chuy was hard of hearing. “La chita, probrecita,” he said in his shorthand language, created to compensate for a tongue deformity. He shook his head in dismay. Uncle Chuy guided Abuelita to the kitchen table and pulled out a chair for his mother. Abuelita slumped in the chair, looking like a pale-faced patient who had undergone major surgery and could barely speak except to
burst into tears. Kneeling beside her, stroking her forehead and brushing aside the gray hairs falling into her face, Uncle Chuy tried to console her. "Ama, Dios, Dios,” he said, pointing to the sky. “Cuida, cuida, Pancha.” God would take care of her, he was saying. He retrieved a clean white handkerchief from his back pocket and handed it to his mother. Abuelita sniffled, and blew forcefully into the handkerchief. She squeezed her eyes shut and whispered a prayer for Pancha. "Panchita, Panchita," she moaned, burying her tear-streaked face in her hands. Barbara felt a pinch in her heart for Abuelita, but it was a heavier hurt that she felt for Pancha. Her aunt at times had been the center of taunts by a few children from another part of the neighborhood, even her own brother Chuy. But Pancha seemed to know when to laugh in their faces or when to ignore them, as though their words and mocking meant nothing to her. Pancha had a way of making Barbara laugh and making what felt wrong about life feel like nothing at all.

* * * *

A police officer arrived at Abuelita’s house, spoke in Spanish to Uncle Chuy, but after finding it hard to understand him, turned his questioning to Abuelita, then to Barbara, who both retold the events of the afternoon. The officer jotted notes in his book. “I don’t want to sound pessimistic, but we have very little to go on,” the police officer told Abuelita. “A picture would help.” Abuelita sniffled into the handkerchief Chuy had given her and looked blankly into the curtained doorway. She then stepped to the dresser and touched the school photo of Pancha. “This is my child,” she said, turning to the officer. She very carefully pulled the picture from its place and handed it to the officer. “I always made sure she went to school clean and with something to eat,” she said. “I always treated her as best I could.” The officer didn’t interrupt her, but Barbara could tell he was becoming impatient by the way he looked from one side of the
room to the other and the way he fingered the gun in his side holster. He held the photo in his hand and said, “She’s a very cute child.” Then, “Your missing daughter is a child and not an adult?” Abuelita said, “She’s my child. That’s her.” The police officer asked, “How old is your child, ma’am?” Abuelita slumped on her bed and began to cry. The officer turned to Barbara. “Do you know how old her daughter is?” Barbara didn’t know her exact age and told the officer so. She said, “I think she’s in her thirties.” After answering the officer’s questions about Pancha’s height, weight, and any distinguishing marks, Barbara showed him out of the house and locked the deadbolts. She didn’t know what she should do.

*              *             *

Barbara heard a knock at the door. She drew the curtains, peered outside, and saw Senora Juana, an old friend of Abuelita’s. Barbara undid the bolts, click, click, click, and opened the door partway. “Barbara, I heard the news. I’m so sorry, mija, Where’s your grandmother? I need to speak with her about Pancha.” Barbara opened the door wide to allow Senora Juana, a rotund woman, room to move. Senora Juana was dressed in a matching blue skirt and jacket and shiny black pumps and smelled of the strongest scent of roses. A thin film of powder covered her face and a fresh coat of burgundy lipstick livened her expression. Shortly, she was sitting in the bulky recliner, her black purse in her lap, looking intensely at Abuelita, whose face, drawn and colorless from worry, appeared the opposite of Senora Juana’s. “Bueno, I heard that Panchita left your home today. I saw her, Sonia, on Guadalupe Street. I was on my way to the druggist and there I saw her on the corner of South Brazos and Guadalupe. I called her name and she turned to look at me. It was strange that she didn’t acknowledge me. She looked right at me. I know I wasn’t mistaken. Then I saw a man approach her. This man I’ve never seen before in my life. I
called her name again, but she ignored me.” Senora Juana fanned her hands, palms upturned, to indicate that her legs were in no condition to attempt any strenuous activity. “Had my legs been able to fight the arthritis in my bones and had I the health of my youth, I would have been able to run to Panchita and speak with her up close.” She paused and waited for a response from Abuelita, who could only sniffle and anticipate the rest of Senora Juana’s words. Senora Juana continued: “Entonces, Panchita and the man began walking toward the Casa Grande Restaurant. From my vantage point, I saw that they did not enter the restaurant; they remained on Guadalupe, heading toward downtown. This was about 5:30 in the afternoon.” Abuelita’s eyes now seemed to glisten, not from tears of grief, but from a flash of hope. She said, “Ay, Dios mio! You saw Panchita! And only a short distance away!” She blew her nose into her handkerchief and asked Senora Juana to repeat the details so she could imprint the events on her mind. “Oh, a man has kidnapped her!” said Abuelita, her uncombed hair framing her face with loose wisps of gray. Senora Juana said, “Sonia, the man looked clean and respectable, not like a drunkard in the bars.” Abuelita called out, “Ay Dios, please keep her safe” to which Senora Juana responded, “Remember what Father Renfroe said? God watches over special girls like Panchita.” She patted Abuelita on the shoulder and said, “Panchita has the protection of JesuCristo. She is an angel.” The words had an effect on Abuelita, who smiled through her tears. “Thank you, Juana.”

* * *

Barbara awoke to the smell of bacon and refried beans. Before she had fallen asleep on Pancha’s bed, she remembered seeing shadows flickering on the walls and Abuelita standing by a lit candle on the dresser, moaning and speaking as if to someone there. Barbara inhaled happily at the thought of being in Abuelita’s house, then felt her cheerfulness evaporate as she
remembered that Pancha had not yet returned. Barbara slid out of bed, her clothes not as
wrinkled as could be, and reached the kitchen. Abuelita stood by the stove, tending to a frying
pan sizzling with bacon, and tapping the edge of a flour tortilla on one burner, not looking at all
like the woman of last night. She wore a freshly scented housecoat, and her hair was pulled back
neatly in a bun, not like the loose one that had fallen apart last night. Abuelita said, “Sit down
and have some breakfast. I said a prayer for Panchita. God will be good to her. She’s going to be
all right.” They ate in silence, as though in memory of Pancha and as though to show
appreciation for the food. After breakfast Barbara made her aunt’s bed, tucking the sheets as best
she could and smoothing out the air pockets in the red and cream blanket. She touched her
fingers along a coarse line of threads in the blanket and stared at Pancha’s pillow, its white
pillowcase embroidered at one end with two bright red flowers with petals nearly an inch long.
Abuelita had bought the bed for Pancha three years ago, with Chuy’s bonus money.

* * *

No word had been heard from the police, and a search by Chuy and some of his co-
workers on the West Side produced nothing. They entered bars and places that had been
abandoned, places that had once been called home by mothers and their children. They asked
around for information, carrying with them copies of a picture of Pancha at age twenty-five,
which Abuelita had found deep in the bottom of her cedar clothes bureau and which Lolita took
to a downtown printer, who made copies at half the cost, because the owner remembered his own
daughter, who had been lucky to survive an attack by men some people were calling pachucos.

* * *
On Sunday morning, Barbara stepped to the front porch and wrapped her hand around one of the sky-blue posts. She looked to El Paso Street and Guadalupe Street and then up, into the pecan tree, where the blue sky glistened in between the leaves and branches, creating a sort of artwork, a painting maybe, that would be praised by some people downtown. She wondered if Pancha had gone downtown. Why stay in the West Side if you had the money to go downtown and enjoy yourself? Did she have any money at all? Did the man have money? Barbara noticed people at either end of Kicaster, the familiar people, on their way to Mass or on their way to Lolita’s Tienda for delicious barbacoa and corn tortillas. She watched the people and then, there, like the sky peering in through the pecan tree, was a figure she had seen before, but she didn’t want to jump to conclusions. It never helped to jump there. She kept looking and then the figure turned into a stocky form with wild black hair, someone she recognized. She waited, pushing her excitement back into her chest, for sometimes life wasn’t what it seemed. The figure moved toward her and Barbara raised her hand as though to draw the figure closer, faster. Barbara waved and the person waved back. Then the figure was joined by a male figure. Both were moving toward Barbara. She stared, as though she wanted further proof that the woman was Pancha and that the man, whoever he was, was actually walking alongside her aunt.

Barbara released her elation, running inside the house and shouting, “Pancha’s back! She’s right outside. She’s home!” Abuelita emerged from the curtained doorway, followed by Uncle Chuy, who had shaving cream on his chin and a shave brush in his hand. Abuelita said, “What are you saying, mija? Did you see her with your own two eyes?” Barbara enunciated the word “Yes!” from the depth of her stomach and into the air with a force so urgent it startled Abuelita, even Barbara herself. “Yes, with my own two eyes. She’s right outside.” Barbara’s emotion coursed through her arms, into her hands as she motioned for Abuelita to look outside.
Abuelita brought a hand to her mouth and for a moment Barbara thought her grandmother might collapse right there on the floor. Chuy opened the door and looked out. “Que? Senor con Pancha!” he said. Abuelita pushed in front of Uncle Chuy and looked at her daughter through the screened door, the joy in her face now turning to shock. “Pancha, is it you?” as though she couldn’t recognize her own daughter. Slowly, she stepped to the concrete floor of the porch and Barbara followed. Abuelita said, “Panchita, my daughter, you’ve come home!” Pancha wore a short-sleeved dress of white with yellow flowers, and brown shoes, not the clothes and shoes she owned. Abuelita moved toward her daughter, but stopped, cautious about the man standing beside Pancha. The man wore a short-sleeved red-checkered shirt, blue workpants, and black boots, like the kind that Uncle Chuy wore to work. His skin was leathery brown and his black hair was peppered with gray. He appeared to be in his fifties, younger than Abuelita, and from the look of his slim figure and muscular forearms, his health was good, as far as Barbara could tell. Abuelita looked directly at her daughter and said, “Panchita, don’t you know I was worried? Don’t you know that I cried for you? Why did you sneak out of the house? Where were you? Who is this man with you?” Pancha held out her left hand and there on her ring finger was a gold wedding band. “This is my husband, Daniel. He and I were married today, downtown.” Abuelita gasped, forgetting for a moment that her mouth had dropped open. “We danced at La Villita.” Abuelita pressed a hand on her chest, looking as though she wanted to keep her heart from bursting. Barbara put a hand on Abuelita’s arm, steadying her.

“Senora Morales, I know this is a shock, but I fell in love with your daughter. And when you love someone, you’re supposed to get married. Well, we’re not officially married yet, but we will be, with your permission.” Not officially married yet caught Barbara’s attention. So they really were not married? Abuelita’s shock quickly dissipated. She said, “Who do you think you are, kidnapping my daughter and taking her away? You should be ashamed of yourself.” The
man listened like a child being punished, though if he had wanted to, Barbara thought, he could have easily turned the tables and spewed vulgarities and threats like some of the pachucos who wandered the streets without respect for women, even mothers. The man said, “No, no, Senora Morales, never did I kidnap your daughter. A friend of hers arranged a date, and Pancha was my date. I never forced her to come with me.” Abuelita’s eyes seemed tired from all the words being spilled. It seemed that the entire world had lost its sounds and colors in the moments that followed. Abuelita puckered her lips and shook her head. Then, she said, “You can’t be serious. You don’t even know my daughter or her family. We do not know you, mister, whatever your last name is.” The man said, “My last name is Flores. And yes, I am serious. I want to court your daughter. I want to ask for your permission to marry her.” The man looked at Pancha and clasped his hand in hers, causing Pancha to bite her lower lip and hum and squeal the happiness that would be too maddening to release otherwise. Barbara stared at their hands, the freckled skin of milky white against the brown leathery skin, and felt an overwhelming sense of loss. *Pancha, Pancha,* Barbara said to herself. *Why didn’t you take me with you?* Abuelita shook her head and in a commanding tone said, “Come in. You’ll have to meet her brother Chuy.”
Searching for Abuelita

Barbara Mason was living one thousand miles away from her hometown when her maternal grandmother died. The night she received the news, she learned her uncle Rogelio had arranged for her grandmother to be buried the next day, poof, just like that. How would Barbara ever be able to arrive in San Antonio in time? It made her brain twist in knots to think there was nothing an ordinary person could do to change the inevitability of what was to be. Had she been a celebrity with a jet plane, she could have boarded her own plane and arrived the morning of the funeral. But she was not a celebrity and she did not own a plane and she did not attend her grandmother’s funeral. Barbara wept at the kitchen table of her apartment in Maine, and soon after became reassured by what she remembered of her grandmother – she had been a contented person, as contented as a human being can be, never bitter in her old age, though she had many reasons to feel bitter. She had loved her children. She had loved her grandchildren.

Barbara envisioned her grandmother as she used to be, moving around her tiny kitchen, kneading masa for flour tortillas or frying round steak for her sons. She imagined her grandmother sinking into the one good recliner in the front room, leaning into the black and white television set, with visitors present, her very own flesh and blood, and becoming entranced by Spanish-language novelas, the soap operas emanating from Mexico. Barbara remembered the
times she’d spend the night. There was magic and mystery attached to an overnight stay at her grandmother’s home, a place of three small rooms. Her grandmother’s bed was located in the front room, which doubled as a living room by day. In the cold winter nights, Barbara and her grandmother slept side by side and the warmth of their bodies would become trapped beneath the layers of Mexican blankets, inspiring in Barbara a renewed feeling that her grandmother did care, though at times her words felt like a careless kind of empathy. Her grandmother sometimes recited the “Our Father” in Spanish into the air. Sometimes she came to bed with rosary beads entwined in her right hand to whisper prayers for her sons, especially the one who had yet to find his way home. Sometimes, she’d treat Barbara to homemade tacos and a Big Red.

The next night, after repeating in her head the news of her grandmother’s death, Barbara had a dream about her grandmother. In the dream, Barbara is standing on El Paso Street, across from Leticia’s home, where people are arriving and gathering in the living room. Leticia’s home is aglow with yellow lights and a woman is standing at the door, speaking to someone in the living room. Teenage boys chase one another out of the house, leaving a cloud of reprimands in their wake. Leticia and her four sisters were the generation of her father and mother’s union to be born in Texas. Maybe these are their children, the next generation, visiting the West Side to see their grandpa. Fond memories of that house incite Barbara’s heart to pump faster. She once was where they are, as a child and teenager. She and Leticia were best friends growing up.

In the dream, Barbara moves toward her grandmother’s home on Kicaster Alley, around the corner from Leticia’s house. There is a gathering at her grandmother’s home when Barbara arrives. Children surround the house. Adults are present, but their faces are imperceptible. Only shadows and movements appear with clarity. The voices of women drift through the open windows. Never has Barbara seen this many people flock to her grandmother’s three-room home, and amazingly, all of the visitors have a place to stand or sit and all exude a vibrant
presence; no one has a story of misfortune or heartbreak to tell. Barbara is now inside her grandmother’s kitchen, where a faint voice invites her to take a seat at the table. The voice belongs to a young girl who emerges from the shadows carrying an earthenware pot that Barbara instinctively knows contains a Mexican dish for everyone, yet when she peers into the pot, she is unable to distinguish the dish for lack of light in the kitchen. The young girl is hugging the pot to her body and approaches Barbara and gestures for her to reach inside the pot, but Barbara can only examine the little girl’s face. The face is not a familiar one. The skin is dark like a chocolate bar, the eyebrows are two perfect lines in a drawing, and the eyes are gentle-brown, a face like many of Barbara’s uncles and cousins, but still unknown. The girl belongs here, though. She is someone’s daughter, reaching out to Barbara. Does she miss Abuelita, Barbara asks. “Yes, I miss her,” the girl says, water forming in her eyes. She does not flinch then, she does not release one drop of sorrow, and the sight is too much to absorb. The girl only extends the container, her expression peering out over the earthenware pot. Barbara cannot let go of the girl’s expression and searches the eyes; Barbara’s grandmother, her Abuelita, is somewhere in those gentle-brown eyes. Barbara watches as the little girl steps back slowly and offers Barbara one more glimpse, before moving deeper and deeper into the darkness, finally fading and disappearing from view.

Barbara awakened from the dream feeling as though her body had been paralyzed from suffocation, for the hurt in her chest had risen to her throat, tightening the flow of air and forcing saliva from her mouth and tears from her eyes. Barbara opened her eyes wide and gulped the air, once, twice, three times. She turned to face the clock and wondered whether her older sister would mind a phone call at four o’clock in the morning. She reached for the light, twisting her body so as to be parallel from head to toe with the wall, and picked up the receiver. She punched in her sister’s number in San Antonio’s West Side and heard the phone ring eight times before a sleepy voice whispered, “Quien es?” Barbara said in a quiet voice, “It’s me, Barbara.” She heard
the movement of sheets and the echo of her brother-in-law’s words in the background and then her sister Licia’s words, “Where are you? What’s wrong?” The pause allowed Barbara time to think of an explanation, but all she could say was, “I had a dream about Abuelita.” And her sister said, “Oh, Barbara, I’m sorry you couldn’t be here.” Another pause came between them and Barbara said, “The dream was so real, Licia. I was back at Abuelita’s house and there were maybe fifty people visiting her and everyone had a place to sit, but I couldn’t find her anywhere.” Licia said, “Barbara, that’s about how many people came to the funeral. Senora Juana was there, and do you remember Juan Chueco? He showed up, too. Rogelio was there, and Panchita. Karen even videotaped the Mass and the service at the cemetery. We thought it might be inappropriate at first to do this, but then it made sense. Now we have it on videotape, so when you come down, we can see it together. Mija, say a prayer and go back to sleep. Abuelita’s gone. There’s nothing more to do. She’s in heaven.” Barbara said, “I want you to know...I miss everyone.” Licia said, “We miss you too, Mija. When you come down, we can put flowers on her gravesite.” Another pause between them, and Barbara heard her brother-in-law say in Spanish, “Tell her your grandmother lived a long life, and she cared for her family. It was in her blood.” Licia said, “Mija, she lived a long time, and she was content in her final months. I’ll call you later today, all right?” Barbara said goodnight and knew she would be calling Licia herself.
The summer of my nineteenth year began with a vaporous heat clinging to the city, constricting air and thoughts and dreams. With its mix of Spanish-language movie theaters and old stores such as Kress’s, downtown San Antonio seemed to create a distinctive heat in the summer that impelled people into the bracing air of a department store, restaurant or theater. A few miles away in my neighborhood, I was lucky to have a friend whose house was equipped with a working room air conditioner and not a window fan to chase away a houseful of heat, like the one in the window of my mother’s room. Sometimes she’d position the fan so rather than blow hot air into our apartment, the fan would pull hot air to the outside. No one in the family could tell the difference. Heat was heat, and you could pass out from too much of it.

The San Antonio Neighborhood Youth Organization, at the beginning of June, had welcomed me on board once more, and I was thankfully and predictably employed. I had signed up every summer for the SANYO work program for teens from low-income families ever since I turned sixteen. This summer, the program slotted me to work as a clerk typist for the Armed Forces Entrance and Examining Station, AFEES for short. AFEES, I learned, was located on
Houston Street in downtown San Antonio, which might as well be described as a fiery inferno – the heat seemed to live and grow beneath the surface of the streets and sidewalks and radiate from the slab and concrete of buildings, modern and historic, one-level and cloud scrapers.

The pattern of predictability that had been my life every summer took a different turn my first week on the job at AFEES. That’s when I met him -- a twenty-five-year-old sergeant in the Army, a slim man with a movie star like quality and blue eyes like my father’s. My father, an Anglo with roots in Louisiana, had started smoking when he was ten, he once had told me. He died from lung cancer when I was fifteen. He told no one that he had the disease, not even my poor mother. I guess my father thought it would be too much on her, but little did he know that she almost went crazy over his death. We all almost went crazy.

The people at AFEES called him Parker, and I soon learned that it was the way military folks here referred to each other, unless they were extremely good friends, then they called one another by their first name in private. Because everyone called him Parker, I called him that, too.

The first day that Chief Hunt introduced me to him I thought Parker disliked me because he seemed to not want to look up at me or smile at me or say to me, “Welcome aboard. If you have any questions, see so-and-so.” So, I had to conclude that he disliked me, though for what reason I couldn't imagine. Maybe I was too short. Maybe I was too timid for an Army guy to appreciate. Maybe I didn’t dress properly. I wondered if he knew that this work program for teenagers would last only the summer, and once it was over, he'd never see me again. Couldn’t he see right away that I could barely speak three words to anyone here unless I had a clear question to ask? Couldn’t he see that I was here to do a job, to do what I was told?

After a short time, I dreaded having to approach him. I imagined his fair-skinned face looking the same as the day before – reddened from either too much sun or too much pressure on the job. When I was forced to talk with him, I kept it brief.
"Parker, here are some contracts," I’d say.

"Parker, Chief Hunt asked if you would stop by his office," I’d blurt out.

Breaking into a smile with Parker wasn't easy because he would not smile at me. One day during my third week on the job, I thought I would step up to his U-shaped counter, and, avoiding any eye contact, slip my paperwork right in front where he'd be sure to see it. Then, I’d build up the courage to give him a message from Chief Hunt. I could easily have scribbled a note on a piece of paper, but this was not the best idea considering the number of messages that had been lost or ignored the short time I worked there. Parker was not an easy man to like.

He stood behind his U-shaped counter, a cigarette hanging from his lips, a look of boredom or apathy filling his face. He did not acknowledge me as I stood motionless in front of him and looked him straight in the eyes and said, "Parker, Chief Hunt would like for you to stop by his office.” In the awkward moment that followed, I watched him shove papers into a large envelope, cigarette ashes floating behind the counter. I waited, and I waited for him to acknowledge me, and in that long, silent wait, I could feel my heart thumping forcefully and my breathing becoming deeper. My mind didn’t help matters as I imagined myself buckling under and passing out on the floor from pure fear and wobbly legs. Why was he torturing me?

Parker calmly sealed the envelope and raised his blood-shot eyes at me, squinting to keep the curly smoke out. He placed the envelope on the counter and pulled the cigarette from his lips.

"Don't call me Parker. Derrick’s my name. Call me Derrick."

His response was not at all what I expected. I must have had a look of confusion on my face. I blurted how everyone called him Parker and that's what I thought I should call him.

“No,” he said, like a teacher talking to a student. “Many people here call me Parker, but I want you to call me Derrick.” I thought it was strange to call him by his first name, but later I concluded that maybe because I was a civilian, I had no right to call him Parker. He said what he
had to say in a few words and without a smile, and he sent me away without a smile and with a
knot in my chest. I was absolutely sure now that I wanted no more face-to-face contact with
him. He frightened me, and I worried that I would slip into my old habit and call him Parker.

The next day, I made it a point to approach his counter when he was nowhere in sight, but
as I tried to escape the scene, he called out my name, asking what work I had left for him. I
remembered Parker’s preferred name, with the help, I felt, of divine intervention.

"They're contracts, Derrick"

I didn't get a smile from him, and I hadn't expected one.

"Who else do you work for besides Chief Hunt?"

"Petty Officer Douglas."

His eyes, deep blue like my father's, locked into mine, and seemed to send an electrical
charge along the dips and knobs of my spine.

“So you’re helping them with Navy contracts,” he said nonchalantly. “The paperwork can
be a bear, so be sure you take a break every once in a while.” For the first time since working
here, I saw his lips curl into a smile, and oh it was so amazing I nearly tripped over myself. He
spoke to me in a different voice – kind-hearted rather than abrupt, attentive rather than cold. I
bolted off, my legs feeling like Play-Doh and my arms feeling like two useless limbs.

The next day I had this sick feeling in my stomach – I had thought too much the night
before about Parker's smile and what it had meant. I had thought too much about him, in a
different kind of way. Not like the guy who was abrupt and hardly responsive, but like the guy
with blue eyes and a slim build. His face reminded me of a young Clint Eastwood. So, I guess
Parker was handsome in that way. Now, why was I acting like a boy-crazy teenager? I mean, I
was almost not a teenager anymore. I was nineteen years old, not fifteen. Thanks to him and his
smile and my overcharged imagination, I was now absolutely trapped in my little corner office,
too nervous to venture out for fear of bumping into him. I had hoped to go through the entire day without ever having to see him, but Chief Hunt asked that I find Parker for an informal AFEES meeting planned at the spur of the moment for 4 p.m. Oh, how I wished at that point that I had had some predictability in my life. It would have been much easier.

So I breathed like a woman about to go into labor, as a way to calm myself and not give away any clue that I had thought about him last night. I slipped into the bathroom so I could do some last-minute fixing up. I looked in the mirror and noticed my dark brown hair, my face that was free of blemishes so far and my dark eyes and my full lips. I was not the type to spend much time in a revealing bathing suit sunbathing because I was self-conscious about my body. It simply had not developed as fast or as well as I had hoped. I think it had something to do with not getting enough nutrition in my body because there was never enough food in my mother’s apartment where I lived. I brushed my hair. I could tell that I had my father’s skin color – pasty white – and my mother’s dark hair and dark eyes. But I had my mother’s genes to tan very easily and get dark and stay dark, causing my looks to change into that of a native Indian. Once I felt I looked as best as could be expected, I stepped out of the bathroom and followed my usual route to his U-shaped counter. My heart was beating faster the closer I got to his desk. As I focused straight ahead, I saw him standing tall and blue-eyed behind the counter, a cigarette hanging from his lips. The walk to his desk seemed absolutely complicated. I had to remember to put one foot in front of the other. I finally reached the counter, stood in front and forced myself to say the words Chief Hunt had wanted me to pass on. “Derrick, Chief Hunt asked that I tell you there will be an AFEES meeting today at 4 p.m.” I made it clear that the commander had decided that afternoon to schedule a meeting. Parker removed the cigarette from his lips, and in that moment, the heartbeat in my chest began spreading to the rest of my body.

"Tell him I'll be there," he said, his blue eyes once again locking into mine.
As I turned to walk away, I breathed a quiet sigh of relief before practically losing my balance on the floor at his next words: "Do you like Mexican food?"

Stopping in my tracks, I felt like I had been thrown a crazy curve ball, and I so wanted to have a little predictability at this moment. As I carefully turned to look at him, I had to remember to close my mouth -- it had dropped open a few inches.

“Uh, yes, I do,” I said, sounding so amateurish at all this.

“There’s a little place called Rosita’s on Houston Street that is very popular with the folks here. Would you like to go there with me?”

I had to remember to breathe in, breathe out.

“Yes,” I blurted.

* * *

Keeping up with Parker as we walked down Houston Street during the lunch hour wasn’t easy because of the stampede of people and because I was five foot one and he looked to be more than six feet tall. In time he slowed his pace; I guess he saw me struggling to keep up.

Inside Rosita’s Restaurant, we sat at a table in the back against the right wall, where no one was seated at the tables on either side of us. The waitress arrived, her face perfectly made up, and said, “Sir, are you ready to order?” Her voice was playful and she filled out completely the pink polyester blouse she was wearing. Without looking at a menu, he ordered the luncheon special – cheese enchiladas, crispy tacos, and refried beans – along with a Coke and I ordered a Dr. Pepper and two soft flour papas con huevos tacos.

This was my first time out with an Anglo-American; my mother, or Ah-mah, rarely let me go out with any guys, no matter their background – she thought it was disrespectful to a
parent if a child went on a date except if it was a special event like the prom I had attended in my junior year with Michael Campos, a star basketball player at my high school. I had worn my godmother’s neighbor’s daughter’s prom dress, purchased for two dollars by my godmother. The neighbor’s daughter was slim and an inch shorter, so the dress fit. She was now in the Army for the next four years, and wouldn’t need the dress again. My godmother also made sure I had a nice pair of dress shoes to wear. The sad part was that I learned, the day before the prom, from school gossip, that I had been Michael Campos’s second choice.

Going on a date with a boy was also okay with Ah-mah as long as you didn't fall in love with the guy or go flaunting your relationship in public by holding hands and kissing. Once, in our local supermarket, H.E.B., I was holding hands with Nick Palacios, a college graduate. Ah-mah walked in, saw me and walked straight into my face.

"Que trais en tu mente?" Her words scolded me with a jab about my sanity.

I didn't expect my mother to stop by Rosita's because she had no money at the time – our family would use up the last of the food stamps and money the end of the second week of the month, which meant my mother and sisters were depending on me to do something miraculous with the amount I was being paid.

Sitting at Rosita’s in front of Parker, I felt awkward and unsure about what to say, so I remained quiet. When our food arrived I was relieved because now I had something to do, except that I also worried about eating properly in front of him.

“What do you plan to do after the summer’s over?” I could feel his eyes on my face, so I didn’t pick up a taco for fear of getting caught with food in my mouth.

“I’ll attend San Antonio College,” I said, my hands in my lap.

“That’s a fine thing to do, go to college.” His blue eyes looked straight into mine.
He picked up a taco, and I followed his lead. He took a bite, and I took a bite, only he finished chewing his food and he was on to the second bite when I was still on my first.

When I finished the first mouthful he asked, “Where is San Antonio College?”

“It’s not far from downtown.” It was strange how he looked at me, as though he could see into my mind. I waited for him to take another bite, then again, I followed his lead.

No matter how many bites he took, I was way behind, and by the time I started on my second taco, he had already finished everything on his plate.

I guess he needed something to do, so he lit a cigarette, and watched me bite into the half taco remaining on my plate. We sat in silence for a few minutes, and then he asked if I had ever ridden on a motorcycle. I said no.

“Riding a motorcycle gives you a feeling of freedom,” he said. “When you’ve got the wind whipping through your hair, and those open roads where no one can bother you, you forget about all your problems. You feel like a free spirit.”

I just listened. I knew nothing about motorcycles and nothing about what existed outside downtown and my neighborhood. My family did not own a car, nor did they go places.

“I own a Harley-Davidson 1340 cc,” he said, tapping his cigarette against the see-through ashtray on the table. “Motorcycles can be dangerous, if you don’t have the training. But I’ve been riding these things since I was fourteen. The best trip around here is through the hill country.”

I had never been to the “hill country” and I didn’t even know where it existed.

The silence that followed was broken by an amazing revelation. “I’m separated from my wife, I'm in the process of getting a divorce, and I have two small kids,” he said, as calmly as the smoke swirling from the tip of his cigarette.

I wasn't sure what to think when I heard all this, but it didn't take long for me to realize
that he seemed more direct and honest with me about his private life than other boys who had been interested in knowing more about me. As I chewed on the last piece of my taco, I took the time to examine the texture of his skin, his sandy hair and his uniform.

“I can’t wait to get out of this monkey suit,” he said, pinching the shirt from his chest. I thought he looked handsome in his uniform, even when he had acted coldhearted toward me.

I wondered what he thought of me. He must like me, I decided on the way back.

When I reached my desk, I began reviewing everything Parker and I had said at Rosita’s, and I wondered, Why had he invited me to lunch? Why had he told me about his personal business? I had a strong sense that he liked me enough to share some private details with me. No one shares these intimate things without a reason. He wanted me to know these things about him upfront, and for this I truly admired him. He was honest.

The rest of the summer Parker took me to places like Corpus Christi, Landa Lake and some fancy restaurant that made me nervous because I wasn't used to such places. Before introducing me to his friends, he asked me to make sure I told them I was nineteen because I looked a lot younger. At one get-together I wore a ball cap and one of his friends mistook me for a young boy. I was embarrassed, but Parker didn't seem annoyed.

Another time his friends invited us to spend the night at their ranch to go horseback riding. Parker and I slept in separate rooms because at this stage in our relationship, I was still inexperienced with the sexual stuff and I did not want for our relationship to go that far. I was not ready and he respected my decision. I absolutely loved him for that. That night at the ranch, I remember him slipping into my room thinking I was asleep. He kissed me lightly on the forehead and I pretended not to notice because it would have been awkward for me to respond in kind. He might have gotten the wrong message that maybe I had changed my mind about becoming intimate. I heard him whisper: “It would be like jumping out of the fire and into the frying pan.”
I wasn’t sure what the statement meant, but when he left my room, I rolled to my side feeling safe, secure and entirely happy because it was the first time I had ever been kissed on the forehead by a man. Even my father had never kissed me on the forehead. Not even Michael Campos.

Parker began driving me to the college campus for my classes. During one of these car rides, he told me I was intelligent and more mature than some of the older women he had dated in the past. Once, in his car, he said I would make someone a wonderful wife. I hadn't thought of marriage, but I knew I loved him. Then I thought it was strange he would say that, as if I would make someone else a wonderful wife. So he had no intention of him being that someone.

One day he offered to not only take me to college in the morning but also drive me home after my last class. I didn’t want him to drive on the gravel roadway where the rundown apartments, including my family’s, were located, so I asked that he park off the main road so my mother wouldn’t see us, not that she would criticize because she had met him once and actually liked him, but she didn’t know I was going out on dates with him. He turned off the ignition and lingered in the car, cradling my purse and hoping we’d plan our next date right then and there. It was in that moment that he spoke the words that I will always remember, the ones that hurt a thousand times worse than learning I had been Michael Campos’s second choice for the prom.

"The Army’s shipping me to Germany."

The words echoed in my head over and over again until gradually, what he said and what it would mean for me sank into my brain. We sat in silence and I occupied myself by staring at my purse and the tips of my brand new platform shoes. I leaned back into the seat, still clutching my purse for dear life, and grappled for the words I would say. What I wanted to do was burst into tears and yell, “No, you can’t go. You can’t leave me. I love you,” but instead I took the dignified road because I remembered what he had said about my being very mature. The first
words out of my mouth were, "I'll go with you."

He stared into space, not saying a word for the longest time. I didn’t know what he was thinking, but I knew what I was thinking. I wanted him to come up with a solution for this awful problem. I sat in silence, waiting for his response.

"It's not that simple," he finally said, his eyes fixed on the steering wheel. “You have your whole life ahead of you.” His voice trailed off and he turned to look at me. “I’ve been through the fire, and now I’m out of it. I'm not going to jump into the frying pan.” The expression he had spoken before started to crystallize for me. But why did he think it would be like that with me? Hadn’t we gotten along all summer? Hadn’t we enjoyed spending time with one another?

“The divorce has been difficult on me,” he said. “I’m still trying to work through it.”

I blinked back the warm water burning my eyes. His eyes appeared to glisten, at least that’s what I would like to remember, but no tears ever formed.

* * *

The following year, I said my oath in a mass swearing-in ceremony and joined the U.S. Navy. Chief Hunt and Petty Officer Douglas were on hand to witness the ceremony, as they were the ones who drew up the contract. I remember feeling lightheaded and feeling a knocking in my knees before the ceremony. I couldn’t believe I was doing this – signing up for four years and leaving my mother and the rest of my family in San Antonio.

In the airport the following May, I hugged and kissed Ah-mah and my two little sisters, and boarded a plane, courtesy of the U.S. Navy. I sat the first five minutes in my seat with my hands clamped to the armrest. I had never flown, and I prayed that this plane would arrive safely
in Orlando so I could begin boot camp and get the most difficult part of Navy life out of the way.

As I looked out the window, I focused on the airport to catch one more glimpse of my family. When I couldn't find my mother and sisters, I thought I would cry in front of every passenger on board. I tried to steady my breathing but my body wouldn’t allow it. My heart started beating wildly, delivering a pounding to my chest, wrists and ears. My mind was now churning thoughts so intense I felt I would scream out for myself and my mother and my sisters.

In all this confusion, I felt a message filtering through my body from another place, a divine place, I like to think: They haven't left, and tomorrow will bring something new for each of you. I wanted to yell: Please send someone to take care of them. Please, please, please. At that moment I caught a glimpse of my mother smiling and waving, looking directly at me, and my two sisters on either side of her, watching the plane pull away. The sunlight reflected off the glass where my family stood, creating a star-like effect above their faces. To me, it was a sign from above that my family would have guardian angels to protect them. With my mind and heart at ease, I waved frantically and smiled, gazing at them until it was physically impossible for me to do anything more to keep them in my line of sight.

I drew in a deep breath and exhaled all the confusion and tension that I had built up inside me. I leaned back into my seat and closed my eyes, smiling to myself and thanking God for this moment. Then I whispered a message to Derrick: “I loved you for who you were and how you treated me. We will never see one another, I know. I miss you so much.” My throat tightened and my heart seemed to be pumping blood in slow motion, as though death might be at my door. I blinked my eyes and licked the salty saline from my lips. After I wiped the wetness from my cheeks, I whispered: “Please, dear God.” Help me find someone who will speak to me honestly and assure me with a kiss on the forehead that tomorrow, everything will be fine.
Scenes from a novella in progress, tentatively titled Elena.

The summer of 1945 refused to withdraw from Elena’s mind. At times, she imagined that her sheer will and spiritual strength would force that summer from her thoughts. She had to accept the truth at last: It was her burden and obligation to remember, and she did, in the stillness of the night before falling asleep and in her waking life as she tried to absorb what her life had become and what it might be.

In 1945, from May to mid-September, thirteen-year-old Elena, her mother, father and eight-year-old brother lived in Michigan, in an overcrowded camp for families who traveled there to pick cucumbers, tomatoes, and strawberries. The decision to leave their rental home in San Antonio, Texas, and travel to Michigan had been her father’s.

“There’s money to be made in the north,” he had said to his family. “We must pack up and go where the work is.”

“Papa, what should I take with me?” asked Chuy.

Elena asked, “What day are we leaving?”
Her mother said, “I need to say my goodbyes. My mother’s going to miss us.”

Certain things were unspoken and only mentioned in private, such as the detail her mother had shared – Elena’s father was to be trusted with his decisions, for, as Elena’s mother reminded her, he always had the family’s best interest at heart.

Elena collected her tan cowboy skirt, boots, blue blouse, her old blue jeans, leather sandals purchased by her father, the teddy bear she had owned for seven years, her favorite hair bands and clips, red handkerchiefs to wear around her neck, and all the underwear and t-shirts she had. She folded all her clothes and placed them in a second-hand suitcase that a neighbor had given her mother last year. In a tiny pewter case, she found her fake gold necklace with St. Christopher medal. She spread the necklace on the surface of the dresser. The medal had been a gift from Elena’s grandmother, who had received it from her own mother. Elena had never met this great-grandmother, for she had died before Elena was born. Elena stood in front of a narrow dresser mirror and carefully put on the necklace; St. Christopher was the patron saint of protection. Making sure she was alone in the tiny bedroom, Elena whispered a prayer in Spanish: “Dear Father, please protect my mother, my father, my brother, and me on our journey to Michigan. Dear Father, can you change Papa’s mind? Thank you. Amen.”

On a dusty and muggy day in May, Elena and her family waited inside their three-room rental home as her father conducted his inspections of the truck and their belongings. Every once in a while, Elena would look out the front window and stare at her father. He wore a short-sleeved tan shirt, blue jeans, and boots. His hair was black and thick; his skin almost as dark as a Hershey’s chocolate bar. He stood in the midst of the bed of the truck, hunching here and there, occasionally pressing down with his hands to make sure an item or two was secure and would not collide with anything else. His movements stopped when something caught his attention. He dug with his hand as though fervently searching for gold. He lifted a furry teddy bear by a paw
and held it in the air. “Elena, why are you taking this toy?” The powerful tone in her father’s voice made Elena think that he might be angry with her. “Ama, he has my teddy bear,” Elena cried to her mother. Her mother marched to the door and Elena ran past her and stopped beside the truck. She looked up at her father. “Papa, that’s mine,” Elena said in a soft voice. “He goes everywhere with me.” Her father exhaled. “You’re getting too old to have stuffed animals, my little girl.” Elena’s mother interjected. “Benito, what is so awful that she wants to take her teddy bear with her? We all need something to hold on to. What do you want her to hold on to on this long trip to Michigan?” Elena’s father shook his head and groaned. “We don’t have that much room in this truck, don’t you see that, Maricela? We need every bit of space for the essential items.” He breathed out the long labor of hours of preparation. Elena’s mother said, “She is still a child, Benito. She’s going to need something to keep her company. If you need more space, then remove something of mine.” Elena’s father looked at his wife. “Bueno,” he said, finally. He looked at the teddy bear. “You better behave, or you’ll find yourself in the trash.” He stuffed the bear back into its original cradle. Elena had been holding her breath, waiting for a negative response from her father. “Thank you dear God,” she whispered. “I can’t leave Pablito behind.” Elena’s father continued with his inspection, sending clanging sounds into the air as he shifted cooking utensils. He lifted a camp stove and moved it further into a corner of the truck. He wrapped blankets from his village in Mexico around some of the items. He carved a place out of the bed of the truck and arranged blankets and pillows there, and Elena realized that she and her brother would probably be taking turns sleeping there since no one could tolerate being cramped one on top of the other in the seat of the truck. It wasn’t bad for an hour or two, but then someone had to move to the back. Elena continued to study her father’s movements. He used rope to tie some of the items down. When he had finished, he placed a large plastic cover over everything and tucked the cover’s edges in the truck. “Bueno, the tank is full of fuel, the tires are
fine, the engine works. We have everything we need in the bed of the truck. No more items, unless they’re critical. Maricela, let me know now if you have something else, because when we leave early tomorrow, you will not be able to add anything.” With his hands on his waist, he looked at the truck and then at his family. “The day after tomorrow, we will be in Michigan.”

* * *

Elena remembered the night her family arrived at the camp, after several wrong turns and a barrage of hand gestures from her father. No stars were in sight. Elena had wanted to see stars, for stars were like God’s eyes looking down on her, reassuring her that all would be well.

“This is it,” her father said. “This is the place where we will live and work.”

Elena, her brother, her father, and her mother stood on a dusty patch where cars were parked. They faced a tall gate that remained shut with a chain and lock.

“Are you sure, Benito?” Elena remembered her mother asking, innocently enough. “I can’t read the sign outside the gate. The paint on the sign is faded.”

Elena’s mother clasped her hands around the bars of the gate and stuck her face as close as she could without touching her skin to the imposing door.

“This is so strange, Benito. I see no lights, as if no one really lives here.”

Elena’s father stared coldly at his wife. “Don’t cross-examine my decisions, Maricela,” he chided, pronouncing the words the way he did when he wanted to make clear that no one should question his instructions or authority. “This is the right place,” he said. “I followed the directions of the clerk at the last gas station. He said to go down Route 401 and take the Ballinger exit. He said to turn right at the first stoplight. He said there would be a gate.”

In the English he knew, Elena’s father called out, “Hello, this is Benito Ortega.
We’ve been hired to work on this farm. Is anyone there?”

Silence fell on them for what seemed to Elena to be an eternity. Maybe they were at the wrong place, but she was not about to express that thought in front of her father. A wave of uncertainty passed through her body, and then a sense of comfort, knowing that her mother, father, and brother were with her. She would not have had the courage to be here, or know what to do, by herself. She felt she could be brave if she had to, but she was only thirteen.

Her father repeated his call, and before he had finished his words a gray-haired man with a lantern appeared and asked in Spanish, “Who sent you here?”

“Tom Weaver,” Elena’s father replied, his hands resting on his waist.

“Then, welcome to Ballinger Farms,” said the man, his hair tousled and his T-shirt partly tucked. He wore faded blue jeans, black boots, and a leather belt with a buckle engraved to show the state of Texas. “Excuse me for the way I look, but I was sleeping when I heard your calls.”

“We apologize for waking you,” Elena’s father said. “We’ve been on the road for twenty-three hours and I wanted to come here as soon as we arrived.”

“You’ve had a long drive,” the man said, scratching behind his left ear. He yawned and patted his chest. “You need rest more than I do.”

The man unlocked the gate and he and Elena’s father opened the doors as wide as possible to allow room for the truck. The man then held up the lantern to Elena’s father’s face.

“Where are you from?”

“We’re from Texas, San Antonio.”

“Ahh, my birthplace,” the man said. “See this buckle? It was a gift from a foreman I worked for in Texas, before we had a falling out. By the way, my name is Carlos Salinas. What’s your name and who are these lovely people?”
“My name is Benito Ortega, and this is my wife, Maricela, my son, Chuy, and my daughter, Elena,” he replied, a tinge of contentment in his voice. Hearing how he had introduced the family made Elena feel proud of her father.

“Well, welcome, everyone, welcome to Ballinger Farms.”

With that, Elena’s father and Carlos Salinas sat in the seat of the truck with Elena’s mother in between them. Elena and her brother climbed into the bed of the truck and tried to avoid stepping on the kerosene lamps and stove and suitcases. They pulled a Mexican blanket around their shoulders and found sacks of clothes to nestle with.

After ten minutes, Elena felt the truck come to a stop. Everyone poured out of the truck. When Carlos Salinas stepped out, he tripped and landed on his right knee on the crushed gravel. Elena could hear her mother gasp and tell her father to help Mr. Salinas. Elena’s father walked briskly to the other side of the truck where Carlos Salinas was crouched on the ground.

Elena’s father grabbed Mr. Salinas’s arm and helped him stand up.

“I think I injured my knee,” Mr. Salinas said. He held his kneecap and moaned. Finally, he rose and said, “I’ll have someone look at it in the morning. I’m OK for now.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, yes, I can stand and walk,” Mr. Salinas said. He shuffled in front of Elena’s family, the light from the lantern illuminating his white T-shirt. When Elena’s mother saw his outline grow smaller, she turned to her husband and said in a low voice, “That man has been drinking beer. I could hardly breathe sitting next to him. That’s why he tripped.”

“Hush, Maricela, you don’t want him to hear you. He might be our boss.”

Carlos Salinas turned around and stared at the troupe by the truck. “I’m fine. Let me show you to your cottage.” Elena’s father and mother slammed the truck doors shut and the
entire family followed Carlos Salinas down a gravel path. He escorted them to a tiny shack, a place tinier than the three-room home they had rented in San Antonio.

* * *

Scenes of Elena in Michigan

Elena awoke on their third day at Ballinger Farms to the aromas of hot coffee, flour tortillas, and pinto beans. She peeked through the tiny window of the room she and her family shared in this one-room cabin. Daylight had yet to arrive, but she could see shadows dancing on the grass and the huge barn where hay and horses were kept. Never had she lived on a farm; it was so different from living on the West Side of San Antonio, where tiny houses lined Guadalupe and El Paso Streets and where shadows at night were cause for alarm. She stared at her brother, sleeping peacefully on one of two second-hand twin mattresses on the floor. She would put extra blankets on her mattress tonight to smother the odor of the mattress. She suspected that a young boy or girl had once slept there, and they had weak bladders or else they had been thinking of going to the outhouse twenty feet away and they did go, but it was all in their dreams. They released warm fluids into the mattresses one too many times, Elena thought. Maybe she would ask her mother for perfume to spray the foul-smelling bed. Her mother used her perfume on special occasions, such as a wedding celebration, or midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. Why her mother had brought that bottle of perfume Elena could not understand. Maybe it was like Elena’s teddy bear, but you couldn’t cuddle with a bottle of perfume.

“Elena, come to breakfast,” her mother called out. “Let your brother sleep.”
Elena joined her family. In the stillness, they savored bean tacos hand made by her mother and sipped on coffee prepared in an old tin coffee maker over a kerosene stove by her father. The only words spoken came from Elena’s mother: “Be sure to pack some tacos and water; our foreman didn’t remember to deliver these to us yesterday.” Elena’s mother gestured toward Elena’s brother. “I wish we didn’t have to wake Jesus so early. He looks like an angel when he sleeps.” Elena’s father said, “When he wakes up, he won’t be an angel. He’ll be a worker making a living.” Elena’s mother remained silent, as though she had felt hurt by his words. “He’s just a boy,” she said, finally. “We should have left him with my Tia Conchita. She would have taken good care of him.” Elena could hear herself biting a bean taco in the stillness that had taken over the cabin. Her father stared at the coffee in his cup. “We have to stay together as a family, always,” he said. “Wake your brother,” he told Elena. Elena moved away and knelt beside Chuy’s mattress. “Levantate, Chuy. It’s time to eat breakfast.”

After breakfast, the four of them walked on the gravel path for about five minutes to the designated spot where the foreman would pick them up. Six other adults and three children arrived and waited. The only communication exchanged between them was a nod from Elena’s father to the men and phrases spoken by a man older than Elena’s father, “I hear we might have a light rain today. That would be welcome in the heat of mid-morning.” The foreman, Mr. Beckett, drove up in his truck with an extra long bed. He was on time again. “Ya’ll ready? Let’s go to work!” His words sounded funny to Elena, but more than that his face was ruddy, as though he had not spent much time in the sun. He wore a ball cap and a light work jacket with the name “Gary,” embroidered on the left side. “I apologize that my assistant forgot to bring you that batch of water and food yesterday. I reprimanded him good for that.” Elena’s mother said to her, “What did he say? I didn’t understand.” Elena had grasped all but the word “reprimanded.” She had never heard that one before. She translated the rest for her mother and father. “Come on,”
Mr. Beckett drawled, “git in the truck. We got a lot of work to do.” He motioned with his hand for them to climb in. Some of the men pulled themselves into the bed of the truck and reached out to help the others. Elena and her family stayed close together as though, Elena thought, one instant of separation would cause them to lose one another forever. Elena felt the warmth of her mother next to her. She turned to see her mother gazing at her. “Today will be another good day,” she told Elena, and smiled. Elena responded with, “Ama, what made you smile?” Her mother clamped her lips together as though Elena had embarrassed her, and looked in another direction. Elena put her hand on her mother’s arm to get her attention, but her mother did not respond, not even with a cursory glare. Elena noticed the tiny cabins growing smaller and smaller and imagined the time of day that she would see them again. She wished she hadn’t asked her mother a foolish question, but sometimes questions like that would slip out of her mouth and before she realized anything, she had embarrassed her mother or infuriated her father or irritated her little brother, and not on purpose, either. She remained silent and prayed that her emotions would not overwhelm her and cause her to weep. No one understood her weeping, anyway, not even her own mother. Elena knew it would be days before her mother would smile at her again. She thought of the cucumber fields that remained ahead, ready to be harvested.

The ride was bumpy and uncomfortable as it had been yesterday. Elena endured. If the others were feeling uncomfortable, their faces did not say so. Even the boys, about Chuy’s age, didn’t complain. They held on to whatever they could and remained expressionless. Elena then sensed something – a mild pain in her abdomen, pain she had not felt before. She wondered if perhaps she had eaten too fast or drank too much coffee. She retraced her actions of last night and this morning. Nothing was different. She had eaten only what her mother had cooked. Maybe it was the putrid odor of the mattress that was causing her to feel such sickness. She wondered what she could do to remove the stench from the mattress. She would have to tell her
mother and father, although she was not looking forward to that, because it would seem to her father that she was complaining and misbehaving. She concluded that in the cucumber fields, she would have time to think of something she could do to make those odors disappear. In the meantime, she’d try and will the pain away. Mr. Beckett brought the truck to a stop. “We’re here,” he yelled. The men hopped out of the truck and helped the women and children. One of the younger men held out a hand for Elena and she took it and slid off the truck. She said thank you to him and he smiled in an embarrassed way. Elena wondered why he looked embarrassed. As the workers milled around and began collecting their buckets, Elena’s father took her aside. “Don’t let that young man help you off the truck again. Do you understand?” Elena didn’t understand, but she agreed. She never knew what was going to make her father upset. She had started praying that he would become a warm and gentle man, like Mr. Mendoza, the grandfatherly gentleman who liked to sit outside Lolita’s grocery story in their San Antonio neighborhood, sharing consejos, advice, and encouraging youngsters to stay in school.

Elena placed a hand on her abdomen. She felt that if she willed it, the pain would go away.

The sun began peeping from behind the horizon as Elena placed five neatly stacked buckets on the ground. She removed the top one and knelt beside an elongated mound of soil laden with vines of deep-green cucumbers. She put the bucket where it would be within arm’s reach. Until yesterday, she never had seen a cucumber except in a grocery store in San Antonio, and now she was seeing dozens and dozens of them in a field of rich dirt. She pulled a cucumber from a vine, held it up in the air and laid it in the palm of her hand. The cucumber extended from below her wrist to her middle finger. She wiped away the dirt to reveal a shiny green rind. She placed the cucumber in the basket and pulled another and another cucumber from the vine. It was difficult to see where one vine started and another began because they were intertwined with one another. For each three-foot portion of ground, there were at least ten cucumbers. After she had
removed every cucumber she could find in one section, she inched to the next section of dirt and
dragged the bucket behind her. Mr. Beckett had reminded everyone to fill each bucket to the top.
She and the other workers would not be paid if the buckets were partially full. She estimated that
each bucket could hold roughly eighty cucumbers. She worked steadily until cucumbers were
practically falling out of her bucket. She lifted another bucket from the stack and placed it on the
ground near her. As she reached for the next cucumber, the pain that had troubled her earlier
reappeared, more intense this time. She gasped and looked to the sky. The sun had moved farther
away from the horizon. She rubbed her neck and felt the heat of her body; she could feel the pain
spreading in her abdomen. *Ay Dios mio,* she thought. Am I dying? Am I going to die right here in
a cucumber field, not even in my hometown? She looked at the bucket piled with cucumbers,
ready to be collected. She rested her head on a mound of dirt and stretched her legs, placing her
hand on her abdomen. She whispered a prayer. She saw what she imagined to be red and yellow
paint spilling before her. Her legs came into focus and she noticed what looked like a trickle of
blood on her left leg. She reached down to touch the blood and see if it was real. She pressed a
forefinger against the blood and smeared the blood between her fingers. *Ay, Dios mio, it’s real
blood.* She rose, slowly, and began flagging down one of the farmhands across the field. She
wondered whether or not she would be able to reach one of the outhouses. She began walking
toward the farmhand. He seemed to understand that it was an emergency, for he got in his truck
and drove toward her. When she reached the edge of the field, he approached her. “What’s
wrong?” he asked her. She responded, “I don’t know. I have a lot of pain and some blood. I must
have cut myself somehow.” He led her to the truck and she got in. “Can you take me to one of
the outhouses?” He said no, that he would take her to the barn. “You can use the bathroom inside
the barn,” he said. “It’s much nicer.” He pulled up in front of the barn and she got out. He
showed her the bathroom and gave her a First Aid kit. “You’ll find some Band-Aids in here,” he
said. She took the kit and entered the bathroom. He was right; it was much nicer than the outhouses. She locked the door and wiped the blood with tissue paper. She undid her shorts and traced the blood. She opened the kit and removed several of the larger Band-Aids. She peeled away the backing and carefully placed the Band-Aids where she thought they needed to be. She pulled up her shorts and washed her hands with scented soap. The pain wasn’t so intense now. She splashed water on her face. *God, thank you for lessening the pain,* she whispered. She put the lid down on the commode and sat, wondering what she should do. There was a rap on the door. “Are you all right in there? Do you need to go back to your place?” Yes, she thought, that’s where I need to go. “Yes,” she yelled. She opened the door and showed her face. “Can you take me to my place?” The young man responded, “Yes, of course I can.” She handed the kit to him and he returned it to a cabinet on the wall.

In the truck, Elena started feeling better. They arrived at her cabin and she stepped out of the truck. “Would you let my mother and father know that I’m here?” He asked, “What are their names?” Elena responded, “Maricela and Benito Ortega.” She gave him the Spanish pronunciation, but he couldn’t repeat the names precisely. He said the names in a funny way, but Elena didn’t care. He had the right idea. “Thank you,” she told him. She walked behind the cabin and found the special rock under which was a spare key. She unlocked the door and stepped inside. The place seemed odd without her family there. She looked at her mattress on the floor. She’d throw up if she had to sleep on her foul-smelling bed right now. She looked at her mother and father’s bed with its headboard and footboard that barely jutted out over the mattress and pressed her palms on her father’s Mexican blanket. Then she lay down, careful not to disturb the perfect look of the bed, and inhaled the blanket’s fragrance, a familiar and pleasing scent. She let herself feel comfortable on the bed. Her parents wouldn’t mind.
Bodies in Motion

No matter how much you think you know someone, you really don’t know that person. Not that I thought for one moment that I knew Helen Steinburg simply because her nephew Bruce had been my fiancé for five years, before we broke up by the Liberty Bell, when I discovered he had accepted a job offer in a suburb of Philly, obviously a decision made in a comatose state, for my heart’s desire had always been to return to my hometown of San Antonio.

Maybe I didn’t know Helen Steinburg the way a churchgoer with a vocabulary sharpened by “sanctification” and “consecration” would know her, or like one of her intimate friends in the 1950s, but I had seen Helen, or Aunt Helen, as I started calling her, in some of the happy and tragic moments that united the family, and I had gained a sense of the code she lived by.

In her home in Alabama, she occasionally showed an air of self-importance that she’d always bring to family gatherings in the Philadelphia home of the patriarch – her father-in-law and Bruce’s grandfather. And her voice, scratchy and high-pitched when someone would contradict her, would wring my ears. Sometimes it was difficult to tell from her voice, until you saw her face, whether she intended to show surprise, girlish amusement, or exasperation.
My understanding of Aunt Helen was this: She had been a preacher’s wife since the fifties when she gave up a career as a bookkeeper for a hardware manufacturer to marry a sailor in the Navy who later was called to preach. Aunt Helen, I think, got more than she bargained for – she would be a preacher’s wife and later, raise three children in the course of two decades. There was more: She and her husband had been in a car accident that left her husband, Joe, with broken kneecaps that couldn’t be salvaged. That tragedy changed everything. At the time of the accident, the children were building their own lives, but Aunt Helen was still a preacher’s wife, and after the tragedy she had to be more than that – she had to be her husband’s nurse, waitress, chauffeur, secretary, and anything else that a person with limited mobility needed. Uncle Joe had slowed down at first, as though he would be settling into a pleasant retirement, but then he sprung back with a force that surprised everyone – he agreed to drive one hundred miles every week to start a new church in a town where he said people were being “stifled by unbelief.”

After fifty years of marriage, another tragedy occurred. Uncle Joe suffered two strokes that left him paralyzed. Recovery was slow, but he happened. Then one night Aunt Helen turned to him in bed to whisper something in his ear and when she heard no response, she placed a hand on his shoulder to nudge him gently. “Joe, I think you should tell Reverend Thomas that you can’t do it anymore. You’re in no shape to drive one hundred miles each week. Joe?” Her hand rested on his chest and then she knew. His body temperature had dropped and his heart had petered out in the hollow of his chest. His soul had floated out of his body to meet its maker.

My ex-fiancé Bruce and I attended the funeral, which took place in December. It was June now. Aunt Helen had been asking Bruce when we planned on escaping Philadelphia to visit the small town of Foley, Alabama, and shop at the area Farmer’s Market for specialty jams and pecans, tour one of the naval stations in Pensacola, Florida, dine at the China Buffet in
Pensacola, and ogle the beaches. Bruce, in a moment of insanity, forgot to tell her that we had broken up. Instead, he said he’d have to check with me before making any plans.

“Aunt Helen really likes you,” he said on the phone. “She’s alone, and needs us to be there with her. Can’t we put aside our differences for her?”

“We’re not together anymore, Bruce. Have you forgotten?”

“None of my cousins have vacation time left to visit her. She’s depending on me and you. She needs some company, that’s all. Where’s your sense of compassion?”

“Back at the Liberty Bell.”

In the end, my sympathy for Aunt Helen grew as I imagined her without the man who had been her companion for more than fifty years, yet I couldn’t forget her idiosyncrasies. “I wish Wal-Mart carried peach soda,” she said during one of our visits to her home. “I never knew about peach soda until I discovered it at a Winn Dixie.” Her voice would rise and fall as it normally did when she reminisced about hardware or groceries that she could no longer locate. “Robertsdale and Mobile are the closest cities I know with a Winn Dixie. Well, Winn Dixie is my favorite grocery store.” Six months after her husband’s death, I could empathize with Aunt Helen and even accept her quirks, because in reality, I had a few quirks of my own. Maybe Aunt Helen and I had more in common than I wanted to admit. So, in the end, I said, “Yes,” to Bruce’s proposition. The drive on I-10 would be therapeutic, too, outside Houston’s city limits, across Louisiana’s Cajun country, across Mississippi, and into Alabama. I scraped together some vacation days where I worked as an information specialist for Canyon Lake Parks, an hour’s drive north of San Antonio, and Bruce’s boss said he could release him for a week, but then at the last minute, the boss had other thoughts. Could Bruce cancel his plans and attend an important software conference in Florida? Rather than revamp his schedule, Bruce suggested that I go it alone in Alabama, which felt like a blessing in disguise, of sorts.
“I’ll let Aunt Helen know,” he said, sounding purposeful. “Hey, when you’re down there, please don’t enjoy yourself too much. I’ll be jealous.”

“Maybe I’ll have a ball.” He laughed at my remark, and I caught myself. When we were together, he’d make an effort to keep me engaged in the world of computers – a place I found intimidating and suspicious – by telling jokes that weren’t overrun by computer terms that made no sense to me. He tested the jokes in our circle of friends and each squeak of laughter was like another cup of courage that sent him sailing in search of more jokes.

It was on an evening in June that I arrived in my used Corolla at Aunt Helen’s mobile home, or “manufactured home,” as she called her place in the Blue Bird Hills Subdivision. “The homes weren’t built for mobility, so they’re not mobile,” she had reminded Bruce and me when the subject came up. The sky looked like a pale blue canopy decorated with puffs of cotton.

On the back porch ramp that had been constructed for Uncle Joe, I ducked my head to avoid the sagging boughs of glossy leaves growing from the laurel tree beside the ramp.

“The thing’s grown wild,” Aunt Helen said, standing on the porch looking more like a neighbor in the community than herself. “With my arthritis, I can’t do as much yard work as before.” She embraced me and rubbed my arms as though protecting me from cold weather.

“I’m sorry Bruce couldn’t make it,” she said, “but we’ll do just fine by ourselves.”

Aunt Helen, who was five foot and three inches tall and had a large mid-section all the years I had known her, had lost weight. Her figure appeared in proper proportion and the blue jeans she wore delivered an extra surprise, for I had never seen her in blue jeans. Something else about her was different: she had on a sweet fragrance – perfume maybe or a scented soap.

“Are you hungry?” she asked.

“Yes, definitely. My last fast-food stop was four hours ago.”
Aunt Helen led me to the kitchen, where she heated a casserole dish of home cooked chicken and dumplings and set on the counter a jar of tea brewed for hours in the sun. She dipped a ladle into the casserole dish and motioned for me to sit at the table. Doughy dumplings and chunks of chicken flowed from the ladle and into a China bowl of pink apple blossoms.

“You’re sleeping in the guest bedroom,” she said, placing the bowl in front of me. “The sheets and pillowcases on the bed are clean,” she continued, and then, almost as an afterthought, “Please use the brand-new hand towels in the bathroom. My friends from the Maryland church came to visit two weeks ago and were afraid to dry their hands on the towels. ‘Oh, I didn’t know they were there for us. I thought they were for decoration,’ is what they said.”

Breathing in the aroma of chicken and dumplings jogged my memory to Aunt Helen’s practiced art of home cooking, yet it was her courtesy and understated manner that put me in a relaxed frame of mind that day. She poured tea into a glass and handed it to me, then asked about my trip. As I described my trip from San Antonio, she appeared puzzled. “I thought you and Bruce were in Philadelphia still. Didn’t he accept a new job there?”

“Yes, he did. He’s in charge of computers for the Philadelphia Mint.”

As if she sensed the truth of the matter, she stopped asking questions, instead bringing me up to date on the house repairs of recent months and the church friends who called and purchased things she needed, such as light bulbs and a new cord for her television set.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I’m going to turn in. You stay up as long as you need to.”

I would have stayed up longer except I was exhausted. I stepped into the guest bedroom and admired the king-size bed and closet, which would come in handy for my clothes. This bedroom was unlike the third bedroom, in actuality a family room with a television set and a sofa that unfolded into a round bed. A trendy piece of furniture in the seventies, the moon bed offered little comfort, so I was relieved to know I would be the only guest staying for the week.
I unpacked my pajamas and swimsuit, and showered away the stickiness and tension that pulsed through my body from a long day of travel. Before falling into bed and into a welcomed night’s sleep, I knocked on Aunt Helen’s partially open bedroom door to say goodnight.

“Have a good night’s sleep, Aunt Helen,” I said, standing at the threshold.

“Come in,” she said, pulling the door open. A fuchsia-colored robe enfolded her, a Christmas gift from her daughter, Abigail, and beneath the robe, a light-blue nightgown.

Aunt Helen’s master bedroom reflected her talent for color coordination – the curtains were the hue of the inner lip of a large conch shell, the pillowcases matched, and the burgundy comforter offered a harmonizing contrast. On one wall hung snapshots taken of Aunt Helen’s fiftieth wedding anniversary celebration and a professional studio picture of her three grown children, and on another wall were two picture windows that looked out onto her neighbor’s home and a field of pecan trees. The room had enough square footage for a large-sized recliner.

“I’m reading a new novel that Abigail gave me,” she said, holding up a paperback with a front-cover illustration of a wide-eyed woman in the foreground and a chiseled man in the background. “It’s part of a series of Christian romance books she’s been wanting me to read.” Aunt Helen threw a skeptical look my way and smirked, waving her hand in the air as a gesture of “no thank you,” and said, “I had my reservations about those books because I didn’t know the work of the authors and then I had to wonder whether or not the author would remain true to the spirit of the Scriptures. I’m halfway through this book and so far, I haven’t jumped ship.” The edges of her mouth turned up, lighting her face. “The story’s realistic and moving, but you can also tell that the author is a strong Christian woman. Abigail has other books for me to read.”

Mother and daughter enjoyed a close, sometimes thorny relationship – their openness as wide as a free-swinging door and as narrow as the paper trapped inside one of Aunt Helen’s picture frames, when a situation warranted a measure of discreetness to prevent Mom from
tearing her hair out and proclaiming, “I didn’t raise you kids that way,” and to her youngest son, “Marry the girl for goodness sake, and be done with it. You love her, don’t you?” Intrigued by Aunt Helen’s foray into new territory, I asked for the names of authors her daughter had recommended. Aunt Helen seemed pleased by my response and pinched the bridge of her nose, closing her eyes like a psychic preparing to reveal the truths of your present and future life. She opened her eyes and scribbled the names on a pad of paper advertising her church. “If you have a chance to read their works, let me know your opinion. I think you’ll be surprised, too.”

Before I turned to leave, I glanced at her dresser and noticed a picture, in a three by five inch frame, of a man who wasn’t Uncle Joe, or either of her sons, or anyone I had ever met at her church. I said nothing about the picture. She took my hands in hers and said, “Jessica, I’m happy you’re here. We’re going to have a great time.” She looked into my eyes as though searching for something more to say, and then squeezed my hands. “We’ll talk more tomorrow night.”

The next morning, we discussed Aunt Helen’s itinerary for the day.

“Here’s what I thought we would do,” she said, reading from a note she had scrawled that morning. “We’ll stop at a Wal-Mart first – I need to pick up a few things – then we’ll drive to the base to see Joe’s gravesite. We can tour Fort Barrancas, if the humidity stays low, and on the way back, we’ll eat at the China Buffet in Pensacola or at a seafood place I found close to Foley. The seafood place isn’t high-priced like the food at that fancy shmanzy restaurant in Gulf Shores that my neighbor Jane raved about. Oh, she went on and on about that restaurant and of course, I had to investigate. I asked to see a menu and oh my, I won’t be going there again.”

As my mind registered her words, it also registered my thoughts of the beach. Aunt Helen made no mention of it, and I wondered if she felt the beach would bring back memories she wasn’t ready to process. Perhaps the subject was a touchy one, but I had to speak up.
“I’d love to go to the beach,” I said, feeling like Oliver Twist asking for more gruel. “If you don’t mind, that is. Maybe we could go together.”

She looked at me, her cheeks puffed out as though filled with food, which I interpreted to mean that her disapproval was simmering right below the surface. In the silence we exchanged, she widened her eyes and stretched a smile that made taut the skin on her cheekbones, chasing away the coldness in her face and revealing her true feelings. “I splurged on a new bathing suit, and Abigail bought me a beach chair and umbrella. I’m ready for the beach, Jessica!”

Aunt Helen gave the impression of a teenager about to experience her first trip to a beach. She never stopped astonishing me, for good or bad. It took a while to absorb her words and her thrill at the thought of the two of us spending time in the sun and sand.

“I’m glad you feel that way. I’m aching to relax on a beach – it’s been years.”

“It’s been years for me, many years,” she said, examining her note once more. “The last thing on my list – I need for you to look at my answering machine before we go. People have tried to leave messages but they can’t – something’s wrong with the machine.”

The answering machine had been a gift one Christmas from Bruce and me, a practical means of staying in touch and showing we cared, and now a glitch had made the machine useless for recording. “I’ll take a look at it now,” I said, and stepped into the small dining room, where a black phone with an old-fashioned dial sat next to the answering machine. I popped open the cassette module to erase the incoming messages and examine the outgoing message tape.

“Be sure not to erase the outgoing message,” she said, the pitch in her voice rising to make her directive clear. A few moments after fingerling the tapes, I sensed her eyes on me.

“You’re not erasing the outgoing message, are you?” Her voice had a different tone – that of restrained concern – and her eyes looked liked two magnified punctuation marks.
“I have to examine the tapes, Aunt Helen, to see where the problem lies. I thought I’d erase the incoming messages, unless there’s a message you want to keep, but I’m not erasing the outgoing message.” For clarity, I repeated, “I’m not going to touch the outgoing message.”

“Erase the incoming messages,” she said, and with an apologetic tone in her voice, added, “Oh, don’t pay any attention to me. I won’t say another word.”

Her remark surprised me because normally, it wasn’t like Aunt Helen to soften her comments. I breathed easily and scrutinized the machine. As soon as I managed to fix the machine, I was more relieved than Aunt Helen, who fished out a cell phone from her purse.

She punched in a number. “Don’t answer; it’s me calling,” she said. The black phone vibrated at the sound of four rings that seemed to yank us back to the 1950s. At the start of the fifth ring, the outgoing message kicked in, and the voice I expected of her oldest son, who had recorded the original message, had been replaced by a voice belonging to a man unknown to me.

Aunt Helen left a voice note: “Thank you for repairing the answering machine, Jessica.” I told her, “You’re welcome, Aunt Helen.” She smiled and raised her chin in the direction of the tree. “The laurel tree looks wild and messy,” she said. “The branches are dangerously low; they could poke you in the eye. I’ll call Toby to have him prune it.”

“Who’s Toby?”

“Don’t you remember? I told you about him,” she said, her face frozen with bewilderment over my inexplicable memory lapse. “He moved in with a friend who was renting one of my properties, then he moved out after he found a job with a different construction company. He’s the one Joe and I hired to fix the leaky faucets and put in new carpet.” She stuffed the cell phone in her purse.
Thinking back on some of our long-ago phone conversations, I realized I hadn’t paid enough attention to the information Aunt Helen had passed along. But, it wasn’t easy to retain all the minuscule details of her words. So – Toby was the repair main.

* * *

We collected folding chairs, beach umbrellas, towels, snacks, and a cooler of drinks for our trip to Barrancas Beach at Pensacola’s Naval Air Station. Aunt Helen insisted that we take her 1995 Lincoln Town car, purchased used about two years ago.

I unlocked the trunk and peered inside. The wide, ashen trunk reminded me of the wheelchair that would no longer occupy a place there. It made me think of the times Bruce and I had hoisted it into position and the times the four of us would sightsee in Pensacola. A sting of melancholy flowed through my body as I helped Aunt Helen place beach chairs in the trunk.

The sky, a blue domed heat lamp, caressed my face with the awareness that in an hour we would have sand and salty water between our toes. In the days when there were four of us, we would drive to a beach in Alabama or Florida and breathe in the coastal air and toy with the idea of splashing in the water. Uncle Joe didn’t have the mobility of the rest of us and preferred to admire a beach from the comfort of a car, so we were careful to only sample what was before us.

Aunt Helen jolted me out of the pictures in my mind with her unbendable attitude. “I’ll do the driving.” I acted as though I had no objections and tried my best to not give away my true feelings. She slid into the driver’s side and positioned the cell phone into its cradle on the dashboard, and I plopped next to her, hoping for open lanes. A few miles later we were on U.S. 98 merged with traffic heading for the Florida beaches, and her cell phone started ringing. “I better answer that,” she said, her eyes bouncing back and forth between the highway and the
phone. She reached for the phone, tried to detach it from its base, and returned her hand to the steering wheel. In her next try, she retrieved the phone and pressed the receiver against her ear.

“Oh, we’re on our way to the Naval Air Station,” she said, gripping the steering wheel in her left hand. “I felt like driving today, so I’m the one behind the wheel.” Niceties were exchanged and then she said, “If you can quit for three days, you can stop cold turkey.”

Aware of the sport utility vehicles boxing in our Lincoln Town car and mindful of the important lane coming up for Pensacola, I began pushing my right foot against the floorboard, as though that would reduce her speed. At the same time, my fingers inched out, searching for a way to relieve the tenseness in my body. Any distraction aimed at Aunt Helen would land us off the road, I thought, or worse, in a car crash that would leave the vehicle looking like an accordion. Her chatting continued. I thought she was talking with her neighbor Jane, so naturally I questioned the sanity of this neighbor of hers. I wondered, *don’t you know that this is a seventy-three-year-old woman behind the wheel of a car and she’s talking on a cell phone, a dangerous activity for any motorist?*  

Finally, Aunt Helen said goodbye to the caller and placed the phone snug near her thigh.

“That was Toby,” she said in a cheerful voice. “He wanted to know where we were going.” I wanted to ask the obvious question – *Why does the repairman want to know our plans?* – but thought it would be rude to pry directly. She said nothing more about Toby and inquiring about the man at this juncture would be unwise; after all, she was *driving*. My curiosity would rise again, I knew, and then it would be a matter of delicate wording.

Aunt Helen pulled into a Wal-Mart parking space and switched off the ignition. “Wal-Mart still doesn’t sell peach-flavored soda. If they did, I’d buy a case.” She turned to me, the grin on her face like a child’s, and made me smile. She added, “Between the two of us, we could have moved that case from the cart to my trunk.” Inside the store, she bought vitamins, powdered
fiber, suntan lotion, and lip balm, and I checked out with Ocean Potion Moisturizing Lotion. In the parking lot, I volunteered to drive the rest of the way, and Aunt Helen must have been tired or maybe she was feeling charitable because she agreed and handed me the keys.

Barrancas Beach at the Naval Air Station in Pensacola was our next stop. When we arrived at the main gate, a guard checked my Navy Reserve I.D. card and waved us through.

We pulled into the Barrancas Beach parking lot and, entranced by the body of water and sugary sand that lay before us, remained in the car in silence as Uncle Joe had done so many times before, a theater audience admiring a grand performance, captivated by Pensacola Bay and what lay beyond – the Gulf of Mexico. Once the spell was broken, we got out of the car and estimated with our naked eye that the beach extended for a mile. The ample beach pleased us, as did the shelter houses with two picnic tables apiece. Towels, sun tan lotion, and other items ended up on one table and potato chips, donuts, and the cooler on the other.

“Would you like a can of peach soda?”

I had no idea she had actually packed that particular soda in the cooler. “Sure,” I said.

She opened the cooler, lifted one of the cans, and handed it to me. I popped it open and took a sip, the mildly sweet carbonated drink coating my tongue with a touch of peach flavor. I gulped the liquid and let my approval show on my face – Aunt Hilda hadn’t been exaggerating.

“You made a nice discovery,” I said, as I got ready to take my second sip.

“I thought you’d like it,” she said.

Seagulls glided overhead and a Navy helicopter hovered above the buoys that marked the underwater hazards. We were mesmerized by the show and after speculating about the helicopter’s mission, decided we were observing a training exercise in progress. When the helicopter disappeared behind a dune of wispy grass, we rose simultaneously.
“My bathing suit’s underneath,” she said, pinching the blue blouse of her summer pantsuit away from her chest, “but I don’t like the idea of peeling my clothes off in public, so I’ll go with you to the ladies’ room.” I hadn’t worn my swimsuit because its flimsy fabric lining wouldn’t conceal the outline of my breasts beneath my cotton blouse. I grabbed my beach bag and we headed for the women’s lavatory, where we each selected a curtained changing stall.

When we finished, Aunt Helen was wearing a blue one-piece suit speckled with yellow flowers and ringed by a skirt that reached her mid-thigh. Seeing her standing on the wet floor, her bare feet reflected in a film of water, singed my sensibilities like a scar drawing attention to a period of vulnerability and resiliency. Never had I seen her in a swimsuit, but this portrait of her seeped into my eyes and into my veins, converging at the very center of my consciousness.

“You have good taste in bathing suits,” I said, still processing the image.

For the first ten minutes on the beach, Aunt Helen and I sat in our beach chairs, protected by her paisley umbrella and her daughter’s red and white umbrella, and exchanged a few words about the perfect location of this beach – only a handful of people had the same idea to come here today. The conversation progressed as Aunt Helen reminisced about her years a young wife.

“I used to go to the beach all the time when Joe and I lived in California,” she said. “I’d pack a lunch and we’d go with his Navy friends and their girlfriends to different beaches. When the kids were born, we’d load them into our station wagon and I’d make sure to pack enough food for everyone – that way we could spend a whole afternoon at the beach if we wanted.”

The sparkle in her storytelling dissolved when she mentioned the car accident.

“Joe withdrew after the accident,” she said, looking away to consider a seagull pecking at a morsel in the sand. She paused as though hypnotized by the roiling waves, and then continued: “God shook him up, told him he had to keep preaching.” She turned to me, the gray in her eyes like an impending rainstorm, and said, “People were shocked when we began preaching in
different churches. Here was a man in a wheelchair, preaching the Word. They probably wondered how he was able to evangelize from California to Maryland and back again.”

The water surged and landed on the beach, and receded again. She gazed at the water and said, “Joe put on too much weight after the accident for me to lift him out of the wheelchair and help him use his crutches on the sand.” Her voice softened: “We had to compromise: we’d park at a beach for a short while, enough time for him to breathe the ocean air and enough time for me to find seashells. Spending hours at the beach wasn’t an option after the accident.”

Aunt Helen turned to me, her eyes squinting. “I enjoyed those long days at the beach.”

After reflecting for a moment, I said, “Three years ago Bruce and I went to Wildwood, New Jersey, with his sister and her kids. We rode bikes on the boardwalk and got on the carnival rides. I was too afraid to swim in the water – the deep ocean and the jellyfish made me nervous – so I stayed on the beach, soaking in the sun and reading. When it comes to large bodies of water, I’m not bold like Bruce. If he were here, he’d splash and swim and coax me to get in the water.”

“All this beach talk,” I said. “I think I’ll dip my feet in the water.”

“I’ll go with you.” She clutched the armrests tightly to lift herself out of the chair.

I moved from my beach chair and curled my toes in the sand as I waited for Aunt Helen. She stood by my side, grasping my right arm, and together, we moved toward the roaring water.

“This looks like a good place to sit,” she said. We touched our feet to the wet sand and a foamy wave crashed into our ankles, spraying our knees. Aunt Helen shrieked with laughter and so did I. She balanced herself with one hand palm down and one hand on my arm. Once her underside touched the sand, she shifted her bottom to form a dent and twisted her heels to fashion a tiny footstool. She cupped her hands and scooped the granules around her like a moat.
As she settled into her space, I pressed my toes into the sand as a test. Satisfied that it contained nothing prickly or sharp, I crouched down and positioned myself into the sugary seat. Before I could get comfortable, another wave rolled in and crashed into our legs.

“Ahh,” shouted Aunt Helen. “This is why I enjoyed sitting at the edge.”

“I’ve never sat this close to the water,” I shouted.

“Jessica, get ready!”

Our mouths released a synchronized “Ahhhhhh” when the next wave rolled in.

The wave receded, and Aunt Helen twisted her feet inward, toes almost touching, reminding me of a movement a child would make. Her feet were short and spread out, her toes knotty. Her little pouch of a stomach was visible, and her short, salt and pepper hair twirled in the breeze. She clasped my arm, her thick, arthritic fingers pressing my flesh, and said, “I have something to tell you, Jessica. I thought I would tell you tonight, but now is a good time.”

“Is something wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, as far as I’m concerned.”

Another surge of water engulfed our legs and soaked our hips, leaving a jellyfish and pieces of shells behind. As I processed her words, I focused on the jellyfish and the days I had failed to out-maneuver these marine creatures in the Atlantic Ocean the first and second times I had ever submerged my body into the churning waves of an ocean. The red blotches on my legs as I hurried to the safety of my beach towel weren’t as ghastly as the stinging sensation delivered to my skin by the tentacles of the jellyfish. For an hour I remained on the beach, staring at the reddish marks and feeling the ocean droplets evaporate from my skin, as though the sun were tending to the injuries naturally. I was alarmed and then I was upset. Upset to know that invisible creatures floated in the water capable of ruining a beginner’s experience of the ocean. Finally, it was fear that stayed with me, and it was Bruce who had been helping me overcome it.
“Maybe we ought to move,” I suggested.

“All right,” she said, letting out a soft laugh. “How far do you want to move?”

“Oh, a foot would be fine,” I responded, my palms pressed against the sand. She began shifting her bottom away from the rolling swells, and I did the same.

After we settled into a good mound of sand, she looked at me and said, “Toby and I are in love.” She squinted her eyes, waiting for my reaction, and I imagined her words sounding like a foreign language I had never heard and would never be able to master. An awkward pause later, I pushed myself to say, “Oh,” trying hard not to appear stunned but I wasn’t sure I had succeeded. My mind grappled for more words to say, searched for the best words to tell her, but it seemed all the words I knew were insufficient for the subject that had thrust me into an undertow.

“After Joe died, Toby was the first one to knock on my door and offer his condolences,” she said, as direct as she had ever been, clearly having no trouble finding the words she needed to tell me. “For two hours, he listened to me and watched me cry. He’s been there for me ever since. At first, I was shocked when he said he was in love with me. I laughed in his face because he’s forty-seven, the same age as my oldest child. ‘You can’t be in love with me,’ I told him.”

The next wave caused a jellyfish to land near my left hand.

“Let’s move to our beach chairs,” I said, yanking my hand away.

She rose and snatched my arm, slipping her fingers into my hand, like two steadfast girlfriends who had just grown closer after confiding their deepest emotions. She patted my hand and seemed relieved to have told me her story. We moved toward our chairs unhurriedly, the soles of our feet sinking into the sand and drawing comfort from the warmth to be found there.

Standing by our umbrellas, we toweled off and she said, “I want to show you his picture.”

We fell into our chairs and she fumbled in her beach bag, retrieving a seven-by-five-inch photo album, where she kept a close-up picture of a tanned and muscular man seated in an
earthmoving tractor, a mermaid tattooed on his exposed right arm. The man had a pleasant face; his smile indicated confidence. “Look at how physically fit he is,” she said, her smile widening.

The moment was a strange one: Aunt Helen and I had bonded at the beach, hadn’t we? Hadn’t we become girlfriends? What was I supposed to say? It struck me as odd that this man would be romantically interested in her – why not someone his own age? My instincts told me to suspect his intentions, yet I couldn’t hurt her. “It’s obvious he works in the sun a lot,” I said, yet my thoughts were on his smile, confident, yes, but perhaps there was something I was missing.

* * *

We loaded our beach items into the Lincoln Town car and I got behind the wheel again. Our next stop was the cemetery on base. Aunt Helen insisted she knew the route, but after a few turns and not finding a cemetery, I drove back to the main gate, where a different sailor standing guard duty gave precise directions to the graveyard. We arrived there in minutes.

“I found the cemetery from memory before,” Aunt Helen said, sounding dejected.

She did remember the location of Uncle Joe’s grave marker – the exact street, the fact that it was near a fence and not far from the main road. We approached the white marble headstone that resembled all the other government-issue monuments for military members here. The stone remained clean and free of nicks and other imperfections.

“They put a lot of care into the headstone,” I said.

Aunt Helen gave credit to her daughter. “Abigail contacted the officials just in time to have a mention of his honorary doctorate engraved on the stone.”

We lingered in the cemetery and looked at nearby monuments. In the plot to the right of Uncle Joe was the stone of a man who had died the same day. “Remember the hearse that arrived
after the burial service was over?” Aunt Helen pointed to the stone. “This was the man.” I wondered: Was his family still grieving? Had they found comfort in the memories?

Aunt Helen looked away and fingered her hair to keep it in place. “Going to cemeteries to see a relative’s gravesite isn’t something my family did, and personally I don’t think it’s necessary, but I thought you’d like to see it,” she said, like a gust that spins in and out quickly.

She stared into space and put a hand over her eyes like a visor. There were no sobs, but grief is hard to ignore. “No one knows what Joe and I went through in our marriage.”

She pulled a Kleenex from her pants pocket and dabbed her eyes and nose. “Don’t worry,” she said, “I won’t unburden on you; it wouldn’t be fair.”

She continued: “What I will tell you is that I miss Joe; I truly loved him. Now I’m alone – I’m free to do so many things.” She shifted her weight and caught her breath as though she had ended a long walk on the beach. “Freedom is a strange thing – it can make you strong, or if you handle it badly, it can hurt you.” An easy stillness fell on us for a moment as she gazed toward the horizon and then looked into my eyes. “I miss Joe, but now I’m in love again.”

“Follow your instincts, Aunt Helen,” I said, and the second the words were out of my mouth I wondered whether I was saying the right thing. God, if you’re listening, please help Aunt Helen to remember what it was like dealing with the rough characters in the outreach program.

“You have a right to be happy,” I said, and when those words were out, they sounded so familiar.

She mentioned Abigail’s husband. “Dave despises my relationship with Toby,” she said as she folded the tissue. “I know what he’s thinking, that Toby is only interested in me because he thinks I’m wealthy. You and I know I’m not wealthy, not by any stretch of the imagination. I own two small rental properties.” No, she was not well off; the income from the rental properties covered her mortgage payments and modest living expenses, yet, I couldn’t help but fall in procession with the probability of Dave’s line of reasoning.
She said, “Do you know that Toby attended Sunday School a few times as a child and as he grew, he never found a faith to hold on to? I told him that I couldn’t date a man who wasn’t a Christian. He was heartbroken, thinking I was calling off our relationship.” My first thought was to imagine Toby’s reaction to her Christian convictions, how he likely had squirmed by the obstacle that had been dropped in his path. Aunt Helen’s faith would scare him away, I thought.

Aunt Helen blew her nose into the Kleenex. “Toby accepted my invitation – we’ve been going to the morning service since May. He says I’m his guardian angel, that I’m the first woman who truly cared about his life and his soul.” Her eyes were like pools of water reflecting back the image in front of her. “We love each other, but people won’t understand.”

Her words contained a fullness of expression that settled into me – she really cared about this man. But what did he feel for her? I imagined for a second that he was stringing her along, making all sorts of claims that a deceptive lover would make, just to sponge off her or borrow some money or drive around in her Lincoln Town car. I could have imagined other scenarios, and maybe later I would, but for now I wanted Aunt Helen to be happy.

Wrapping her in my arms, the sparkling scent of bay water lifting my senses, I said, “I’ll try to understand.” It struck me that I meant the words for myself as well as for her.

She dug into her pocket for another Kleenex and pressed the tissue to her nose.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “cemeteries are the last place I want to be.”

Then, she composed herself and said, “Bruce has his uncle’s ingenuity. Do you know that in high school Bruce saved money from his part-time job and money his grandma gave him to buy a ten-gallon aquarium and a bike? He needed the bike to get back and forth to work. When Bruce has a goal, he commits to it. He won’t let you down, Jessica.”

In some sort of second sight, I understood the truth of Aunt Helen’s words. I knew that Bruce would not let me down, not in a permanent sense. I felt he had let me down in the short-
term, and maybe it was a result of our personalities. He felt convinced he should stay in a lucrative job to save the money he thought was needed for a major relocation to San Antonio, and I felt passionately that we had worked long enough to secure our future in a new place.

Aunt Helen stepped up to the car and touched the handle of the passenger door, turning her head to glance one more time at Uncle Joe’s headstone. “Joe and I committed to one another. That’s why I became a preacher’s wife.” Her words made me wonder: What had I become with Bruce and without him? What did I want to become? Was I committed to our relationship as much as Bruce said he was? Aunt Helen pulled open the door to show that she was ready to go.
What are you waiting for?

In my bed, at three o’clock this morning, my brain was out of sorts. No use imagining I could even fall back to sleep, I thought, as though I meant the comment for the wind whirling outside and the shadow of tree limbs quivering on one wall. I slid to the edge of the bed and pressed my toes against the red-carpeted floor, appreciating for the first time the floor’s stability.

As I stared into the darkness, the room came into focus with the help of shafts of moonlight streaming in through the window. I forced myself to move from the bed, through my small apartment, switching on the lights as I stepped into each room. Examining the living room, I folded my arms and wondered why the room hadn’t looked cluttered before. It was so obvious now. I ran with those thoughts and began instilling order. In thirty minutes, the framed art filling two walls and multiple framed pictures crowded on two end tables had been replaced by a print of a sugary beach and a white cottage flanked by a clothesline with a bikini flapping in the wind, and a still life of different country kitchen utensils. I breathed in and exhaled with satisfaction.

In the tiny kitchen adjoining the dining room, I contemplated what to do. Make breakfast? Read? Vacuum? The kitchen floor felt cold against my bare feet; the thought of digging in my sock drawer for a pair of thick socks crossed my mind. My eyes skimmed the kitchen, then the dining room and the dining room table, where a letter from the mother of one of my students – Ofelia Salazar – remained, unopened. The plain white letter had arrived in the
The letter made me think of Ofelia, a shy girl who had blossomed gradually and had displayed an eagerness to do well in my English class. She had begun to believe in herself and the possibility of attending a local community college. “Mrs. Spencer, what’s college really like? Can you see me attending college?” I gave her encouragement, for that’s what she truly needed, someone to tell her she had the ability to achieve and plan for a good life. My throat hardened at the sight of the letter, and as before, I realized with clarity that I wasn’t prepared to read the contents.

I turned my attention to the kitchen, where my eyes settled on a collection of knives on the counter on the right side of the kitchen, a wedding gift that had motivated Kevin and me to develop our culinary skills in our domestic life together. Something was odd about the block of wood that contained the knives – the knives remained in their slots, but the scissors, included in the set of knives, were missing from the wider slot. I ran eyes across both counters, absorbing the images of tiny pink and white tiles and the assortment of kitchen accessories that occupied both counter tops – a ceramic pitcher crammed with spatulas, ladles, and other utensils; a coffee maker; cooking books, etc. – but still no scissors. A different perspective was needed, so I moved to the window at the end of the kitchen, which offered a view of the back yard. Instinctively, I pulled the cord on the blinds. There was the moon, plump, unsullied and luminous, looking down from a clear sky and spreading a layer of light on the trees and grass. My breath skipped, but it was the moon itself, ever-positioned in the universe, always stable, that provided a measure of comfort that eased my body. I turned away, faced the kitchen, and scrutinized the counters once more, knowing that the scissors had to be in this room. The second I spotted the scissors was an unbelievable moment – the scissors were on the first counter I had examined, in plain view and under my nose. The question was: What was to become of me? A pair of jumbo black scissors on a counter of pink and white tile had escaped my eyesight. The scissors hadn’t pranced across the
counter and magically reappeared to spook me, I knew that with certainty, for I didn’t believe in
the supernatural; I did believe in providence. Maybe my mind didn’t want me to see the scissors,
I thought, as I fingered them and studied their plainness. Seconds later, I slipped my thumb and
index finger into the handles and lifted the scissors to the level of my eyes. I sliced the air with
the scissors as if to make them more tangible and visible. The sound of metal on metal tingled in
my ears. Finally, I dropped the scissors in their slot.

The sounds of nothing occupied the kitchen, except for the distant echo of Kevin’s words.
“You’re so stubborn,” he’d shout, confronting me in the kitchen we once shared. “You think you
know what you want, but you really don’t know.” At one time I thought I wanted to teach in
low-income area in San Antonio, in a district familiar to me. The district had been calling my
name, pulling me back to a place I knew well, a place suspended between the precariousness of
life and the excess of despair. In a world flipped upside-down, the tangibles that students needed
to concentrate on schoolwork and give an appearance of “normal” were few or non-existent for a
number of students in the district. Some students clung to school like a person thrown from a
ship in a violent gale, for school carried a promise of survival. In my imagination, I saw myself
as a teacher in that neighborhood, someone who understood where students were coming from. I
imagined doing more things right than wrong. I had grown up there, hadn’t I?

There were times Kevin accused me of wasting the best years of my life on insignificant
jobs that paid very little. “Why are you working for a volunteer organization that pays only
$8,000 a year?” The words felt like a nail file scraping the knobs in my spine. “I don’t care about
the money,” I’d say, over and over again, ever hopeful that he’d understand. “It’s the experience
that counts.” And then, “I enjoy what I do.” Our dueling words shrank my conviction bit by bit.

In an effort to earn more money, I applied for a job as a reporter for a small daily
newspaper, earning $10,000 a year. I worked nights and some weekends, and Kevin wasn’t
pleased with that job, either. “You haven’t been home for three nights this week,” he’d shout into the line at my desk in the newsroom, where I’d respond as though I were speaking with a civilized, supportive husband. “The meeting is from 7 to 8, and then I have to come back to the office and write the story.” Naturally, the subject of overtime entered the conversation, and he became furious when we discovered that, in fact, the paper expected me to write the story without applying for overtime. “You’re working more but earning less,” Kevin would point out in one of his better moments, using the gentle voice I wished he had used more often. “Makes no sense whatsoever.” Then, trying to talk some sense into me, he’d ask, “Have you ever calculated how much you earn per hour?” No, I hadn’t, fearful of facing the truth. Diligence and hard work would see me through, I told myself. “Why don’t you find a job at a public relations agency?”

When old memories surface, Kevin’s words of advice resonate in my head: “What are you waiting for? Get out there and make a name for yourself.”

How had I been so lucky to get rid of him early on? Some couples stayed together until they could no longer stand one another. The visiting minister at the Ridge Baptist Church offered the congregation his spin on relationships: “My wife and I have been married for fifty years and never once did we bring up divorce.” He paused, and with a knowing expression added: “There were times I’m sure we thought of killing each other, but never did we consider divorce.” Churchgoers, myself included, screeched with laughter, as did the teenagers, who huddled like sheep in the pews they claimed as their own.

Similar thoughts of Kevin had passed through my mind, more often than I would like to admit. My view of society and living, it turned out, clashed with Kevin’s outlook. Ideas that seemed logical and doable in my mind were extreme or dangerous in Kevin’s police officer’s mind, especially for a woman with no training in shooting a gun for protection, or with no
training in sniffing out criminal intent. A woman who pitied stray cats, alcoholics, and kids suffering from hunger, was an especially vulnerable target.

Our arguments became more frequent the longer we remained together. It was hard work arguing with Kevin, for he expected facts and logic, and not the emotion that tended to overwhelm my arguments. Sometimes, I gave Kevin a good argument, like the time I convinced him to return to college, just in case he decided to switch fields in the future. He started taking one night course a semester at a local community college. Other times, I wilted under his judgments. How do you get through to a man who doesn’t play fair? He was like the Blob, terrorizing inhabitants and gobbling up air and bodies as it rolled down Main Street. Up you go, baby, into the bowels of the Blob, where you were forever doomed to remain cut off from humanity and your own desires. My wish had been to teach in my old neighborhood, but Kevin refused to go along: “You’re crazy to want to teach there. Too dangerous. I won’t allow it.”

In time, I decided to get rid of Kevin, since he refused to leave the premises. “I don’t love you anymore,” wasn’t a suitable argument because people fall out of love temporarily and then fall back in love just like that, which Kevin strongly believed in. “You can fall in love with me again,” he’d argue. “You loved me once and you can love me again. You just have to try.”

I didn’t want to try. I wanted him out of my apartment.

Determined to make him leave, I decided to concoct a story that would be so outrageous and so perplexing that he’d have no desire to remain with a supposedly sinking ship – a woman who had contracted a debilitating disease, who had lost her job, who had found out she had a mental disorder. It all started the night I told him about my disease and the doctor’s instruction that I lay off the lovemaking because such activity would only aggravate the disease and make it gain force. “Baby, at least it’s not a fatal disease,” I told him. “And in time, I know I’ll be able to love you again.” Gradually, as he became accustomed to a monk’s life of celibacy, I informed
him that I had lost my job at the newspaper (I convinced my editor to allow me to use a pseudonym). “Baby, the editor realized that he couldn’t depend on me to cover nightly government meetings, and that he couldn’t convince me to work late for free; yes, I stood up to him and said I expected to be paid overtime for actual overtime work. I’m sorry, but I won’t be able to contribute to the rent until I find a good-paying job, and that could take months.” The finale of my grand strategy was my supposed mental condition. One weekend I jerked my head up from the book I was reading in bed and said, “The phone’s ringing.” Kevin met my eyes and said, “There’s no phone ringing. There’s not even a phone ringing on TV.” I told him, “There, there it goes again. Can’t you hear it?” He lowered the volume on the TV and said, “Hon, there’s no phone ringing.” Finally, closing my eyes and putting myself into the academy role of my life, I yelled, “Don’t tell me it’s not ringing, Kevin. Kevin, answer the damn phone!” Not surprisingly, the dramas in my life were too much for Kevin to handle and he moved out a year ago, with the stipulation that he would call me regularly, which he did. Yesterday, he called to say he wanted to be by my side. “I love you,” he said, and offered to go with me on my next visit to a psychiatrist. “I know what it’s like to lose someone,” he said, his voice soft and gentle. “You can’t shut people off and expect to get better, you just can’t.” The strange thing was, I had a real appointment with a genuine mental health professional and it would be my first time speaking with a psychiatrist, though Kevin thought I had been seeing a therapist ever since March 5.

After Kevin moved out, I discovered that living alone in my apartment had been liberating. I could be up at all hours of the morning typing and reading and eating in bed. No one could tell me to please stop; you’re keeping me awake. No one could tell me to please come to bed and stop wandering through the apartment like a lost soul. Before concocting my story, I would have to listen to Kevin tell me to stop acting as though I had lost my bearings. “You’re not lost,” he’d say. “You’re not confined to that life anymore. You are all right. You’re going to
make it.” He thought that my erratic moods and odd behavior were linked somehow to my being raised in an impoverished neighborhood. In actuality, now that I look back, I think it was the disagreements that were the problem. My wanderings would always happen a week or two after a harsh disagreement. It was like my body was absorbing the words and actions of that day and producing a delayed response. I couldn’t go to sleep, and I’d stay up until two or three in the morning and then fall asleep in the comfort of the sofa. After hearing my concocted story, he refrained from making such declarations, and he even stopped shouting. The peaceful atmosphere raised my spirits, and with Kevin gone, I completed an application to teach in my old neighborhood, and got hired to teach this school year. March 5 was my last day; it’s May now.

The kitchen floor remained cold beneath my feet, so I moved from the kitchen, back to the bedroom, to the drawer filled with socks. My favorite socks, a thick pair of maroon, blue, and white striped socks that at first reminded me of the socks worn by the Munchkins in The Wizard of Oz, gave me a sense of assurance. Carefully, I unrolled the socks and slipped them over my cold feet, then I put on a pair of red house shoes.

In the kitchen, I mulled over what to do and let my eyes settle on the dining room table and the letter. The letter contained Mrs. Salazar’s cursive writing, which seemed to call to me, pulling me into a place I wished had never existed. Approaching the table, I let the tips of my fingers rest on the black ink on the return address, and with an index finger traced the lines, loops, and indentations of Mrs. Salazar’s handwriting. Doing so made me imagine Mrs. Salazar sitting at her kitchen table, writing with care on her daughter’s notebook paper and addressing the envelope meticulously to ensure its legibility and safe arrival. I returned to the kitchen, where I lifted the scissors, and then moved to the dining room. I slid one blade into the envelope, nicking it open. I placed the scissors on the table and carefully removed a one-page letter. “Dear Mrs. Spencer, I am writing to let you know that we placed a headstone on Ofelia’s gravesite,
thanks to the contributions of our friends and family in the neighborhood, and of course, thanks to you. We remain in mourning, and we pray that God will give us strength to carry on. We will never be the same. This neighborhood will never be the same. We invite you to stop by our home whenever you are in the area. Sincerely yours, Mrs. Lorenzo Salazar (Letty).”

Inside the envelope was a small card containing an illustration of Jesus and below this image, the words to the “Our Father.” My hands began to tremble so badly that the letter and card slipped from my fingers and sailed to the floor. “Our Father who art in heaven,” I whispered, feeling a tightness in my throat. The letter and card appeared small against the beige-carpeted floor, yet they exerted some sort of force, like the distant flashing of a lighthouse that calls out to sailors who refuse to end their night of fishing until they can return with a logical story. I picked up the letter and card and placed them on the table, then moved to my bedroom, where I rummaged for a photo album that I had hidden away in my closet. The album sat on the highest shelf, and felt cold against my hands as I lifted it carefully into my arms. The album appeared strange, as if it weren’t my album but someone else’s, and I tried to remember when and where I had bought it. My mind seemed unable to retrieve those details. It felt peculiar to hold the album in my hands and carry it to the dining room table. Sitting at the table, I flipped open the album and turned the pages to pictures of relatives; snapshots of Kevin and me in his stomping grounds, the Jersey shore; and photos of Ofelia Salazar and Alfonso Guerrero.

“Mrs. Spencer, I had a fight with Alfonso, and I don’t know how to work things out.” Ofelia’s concern about her boyfriend began overshadowing our talks about English papers, presentations, and applying to college. The day she came to class with bruises on her arms and a layer of liquid makeup on her face obviously meant to mask a quarrel that had gone too far, I took her aside after school. “Ofelia, there’s no need to be ashamed. Alfonso hurt you, I know; those bruises weren’t your fault.” At first, she denied anything had gone wrong, clearly wanting
to protect the boy she loved. Then she whispered, “I’m afraid he’ll do something horrible to me and no one will ever know.” Then, she asked, “What do you do when you have a fight with your husband Mrs. Spencer?” Her dark eyes looked to me for the perfect answer, the answer that could be applied to any situation. I said, “I’ve had fights with him. All couples have fights, but there’s a line that shouldn’t be crossed. In my case, my husband never crossed that line, though sometimes I thought he would. Ofelia, he and I aren’t together anymore. He was trying to control every part of my life. I felt like a prisoner in my own apartment.” She smiled and said, “I understand the feeling, Mrs. Spencer. I wish Alfonso would leave me alone. He’s like one of those stalkers, always wanting to know where I’ve been and what I’ve done. I’m afraid of him.”

We laid out a plan that Ofelia agreed to: Inform the school of the abuse, inform the family of his behavior, and file a protective order with the police. Eventually, Alfonso was removed from school but a protective order didn’t keep him away.

On March 5, a clear, sunny day, Alfonso accosted Ofelia in the student parking area. A student noticed them from a classroom window. Alfonso had pushed his body against hers and grabbed her chin to force her to look at him. The student rushed to my classroom. “Mrs. Spencer, come quick. Alfonso Guerrero is in the parking lot. He’s got Ofelia.” Students stared and gasped. One said, “Mrs. Spencer, he’s going to hurt her.” Then someone screamed, “Ay, he’s got a gun!”

I fumbled for the key to unlock the drawer where I kept a Tazer gun. I grabbed the gun and shoved it deep in my skirt pocket. I ran down the hallway, down a flight of stairs and into the sunshine of the parking lot. “Alfonso,” I said, trying to calm my voice. “You’re breaking the law by being near Ofelia.” He hid the gun behind his back and with the other hand, squeezed Ofelia’s right arm. “Mrs. Spencer, this is none of your business.” I breathed in and out, remembering I had to be five feet away to hit my target. I moved slowly toward him.
“What are you doing?” he yelled. I said, “Alfonso, I’m coming to you, to speak with you as one adult to another. You are an adult, aren’t you?”

Alfonso shook his head as though he disagreed with my motions. “No, Mrs. Spencer, stay away. Don’t come any closer.” I said, “Hey, Alfonso, what do you imagine you’ll do? Don’t you care about Ofelia? Don’t you want her to have the best in life? Just let her go, Alfonso. Everything will be all right. You’ll be all right.”

“No, no, Mrs. Spencer,” he said. “Don’t you see? She’s my girlfriend, and we’re supposed to be married. MARRIED. She’s not supposed to go out with anyone but me. That’s life. You make a promise and you stick to it.”

“Listen to her, Alfonso, please,” Ofelia said. “Don’t hurt me.”

“Hey, I’m not hurting you, OK?”

“Then let her go for God’s sake,” I yelled, imagining myself in Ofelia’s shoes.

As though something had cracked in his head, Alfonso started crying and fell to his knees, the gun in full view. Ofelia seemed unable to move.

Carefully, I pulled the Tazer gun from my pocket and aimed it at Alfonso.

“Run, Ofelia,” I shouted.

She ran to a street and I shouted to him, “Shove the gun away from you.”

He put the gun down as though he would follow my instructions, but in a split-second, he raised the gun and fired. I felt as though I were floating toward him in a dream, the voices of students echoing around me, “Shoot him, Mrs. Spencer” and “Save her, save her.” The wails and screams were sharp at first, and then seemed to be absorbed into the concrete of the parking lot and walls of the building. The last thing I remember is Ofelia’s body strewn in the road, hit in the back by a bullet from Alfonso’s gun; Alfonso kneeling, his gun raised, his eyes lining up with the nose of my Tazer gun. My hands clasped the gun as though in prayer.
Kevin had bought me the handgun, convinced that I needed protection in my old neighborhood. I was against carrying anything that fired live bullets. Really, I had wanted nothing to do with a gun. After several emergency school assemblies regarding frequent fights on school grounds, an assault on a female sophomore right outside the front gates, and the shooting death of a resident near the high school, I became convinced of the logic of Kevin’s argument that I needed to protect myself. But, it wouldn’t be with a gun. I would instead carry an Air Tazer gun, a non-lethal weapon, a weapon that would not take a life. I started packing the gun in my purse, carrying it into the hallways of the school, locking it securely in my desk, and going against a policy of the district that prohibited bringing any type of weapon inside school grounds. If a situation arose, I reasoned, I’d be prepared for it. Kevin had given me instructions. “You have to be no more than five feet away for the gun to be effective,” he had said.

Delicately, I remove from the album a photo of Ofelia and Alfonso taken in my classroom. I hold the photo in front of me and try to absorb its messages. In the photo, Ofelia is wearing a lavender blouse and blue jeans and her gleaming black hair is falling past her shoulders. Her lips curve to form a mile of strong white teeth, which remind me of her mother’s. Alfonso’s head is tilted back, his lips not touching, almost a smile. He appears secure in her presence. Mesmerized, I lift both the picture and scissors to the level of my eyes and slice the picture in half. The image of Alfonso clings to the scissors and the image of Ofelia falls to the table, face up. “Save us, Mrs. Spencer,” her eyes seem to be saying. “What are you waiting for?”
Starry, Starry Night

The grass has been crushed underneath her weight and the soil feels cool on her back. The stars sparkle like the promise rings worn by the girls who left their boyfriends to join the Navy. She didn’t leave a boyfriend when she enlisted, and no boy surprised her with a ring. She lives on base in a decent room that she shares with two roommates in the Bachelor Enlisted Quarters. Her roommates are more experienced about guys than she is. She’s nineteen years old.

Tomorrow her roommates will ask: Did he take you to the enlisted club? Did he take you to see a movie on base? Was he a good kisser?

Tonight she’s in the woods near the base, concealed behind white hydrangeas, Florida pine trees, and orange-berried shrubs. The sailor who brought her here sent her a message with his brown eyes and shapely lips during their Morse code class, which she ignored at first. Late one night, at the back entrance to the BEQ, he was entangled with a proportionately larger woman, so she thought he preferred large-sized women. Their arms crisscrossed and their lips were compressed together. She ignored them as she passed by.

After their Morse code class one day, he said: “I joined the Navy because my parents were concerned that I was drifting. They wanted me to be a productive member of society, so here I am.” He flipped his cigarette on the ground and crushed it beneath his Navy issue boots. “They also wanted me to learn discipline.” He grinned and asked, “Would you go out with me?”
They met at the chow hall and sat across from one another, he with his salad, baked fish, and macaroni and cheese and she with her baked chicken, mashed potatoes, and carrots. The grace with which he lifted his fork and knife and sipped his tea told her he had manners.

After dinner, they relaxed in the BEQ lounge, along with other couples. He wasn’t as talkative as he had been in school or at the chow hall, so she wondered whether or not she had said something to make him think badly of her. Then he said, “I’m tired of seeing the same gray buildings; I need to see something new.” He arose and his physique seemed taller than before as she remained seated in one of the couches. He held out his hand, a clean, manly hand, and she extended hers into his. He guided her outside to a hiking trail that led to the main gate. His hand felt warm and inviting in hers, and hope soared in her soul that he might become her boyfriend.

She wondered at that moment: Will he be my boyfriend? Will we clasp hands on base and play table tennis and hitch a ride with other enlisted members to the beach? Will he appreciate me in my bikini, which my roommate insisted I buy? “Show it off, girl. You’ve got a good body.” Will he press his lips against mine in public places – the chow hall, the recreation center, the laundry room – to declare his affection for me?

Will he tell his parents about me? Will he love me?

He guided her outside the main gate and down the road that lined the woods. “Let’s go in there.” Where? “In there.” He pointed into the shadows. “It’s all right. This is a safe place. We can talk.” The softness in his voice reminded her of a Chinese boy she knew in high school who was kind, always polite. She wished she’d had romantic feelings for him; he seemed to care about her. Now, she was on a night hike with a sailor whose face was blemish-free, whose body appeared lean and glamorous in a white summer uniform. She thought: Others desire him and he wants to be with me.
The sailor selected a clearing and squeezed her hand in his. “Let’s sit and talk.” She located a grassy area and he positioned himself cross-legged by her feet. She remained standing, she didn’t know why, and he said, “Look at the stars.” And she did. “Here, sit down.” She thought she must have appeared awkward as she bent her knees and settled on the ground. He positioned himself so that his breath was on her cheek, and he lifted a forefinger to the sky, tracing in the air a group of bright stars. “Look, that’s the Big Dipper. Do you know that the Big Dipper is part of the constellation called Ursa Major?” She remembered hearing of the Big Dipper, but never had she seen it live. As for Ursa Major, it was foreign to her and that foreignness crept in like someone trying to scare her at a haunted house. “Oh, really?” she said. He put his hand on her shoulder and pressed gently. “Here, lean back. You’ll have a better view.” The leaned back together and when she felt her head touch the ground, she positioned her right arm to serve as a pillow. He shifted his body closer, and continued speaking of the stars. “It’s supposed to be good luck to see a clear sky, and then to see the Big Dipper.” His claim made her feel optimistic about the two of them. Even if she didn’t know about Ursa Major, she could learn. “See the handle? That’s called the Great Bear’s tail. The Dipper's cup is the bear's flank.” She had never heard of the Great Bear’s tail or the bear’s flank. To her, the stars looked like a cup with a long handle. When he stopped speaking of the stars, he caressed her cheek and studied her face. “You’re beautiful.” His voice sounded soft again, and honest. His eyes traced her face, and then, as though he had released his words too soon, he corrected himself. “You’re pretty.” He moved his face still closer and she froze, wondering what the next moment held. Her eyes remained open as his face closed in, his lips finally touching hers for the first time. The kiss made her think of the chemistry experiments in her San Antonio high school – two substances mixing to form a complex material and two substances becoming a compound, with one being replaced by the more active substance. “A mixture consists of two or more unlike substances that
do not react chemically and can be separated by physical means,” Mr. Scott had told the class.

“Any combination of solid, liquid or gas can be a simple mixture. A mixture is different than a compound. In a compound, substances do react and combine chemically, but cannot be separated by physical means, only by chemical means.” She remembered the fire beneath the Bunsen burner. She remembered that water could be chemically divided into Hydrogen and Oxygen.

After a few seconds, with her eyes still open, she began wondering when the kiss would end. The sailor’s lips had fused with her, longer than a kiss should last. She imagined a pillow smothering her. When she tried to break free, his lips refused to let go, as though the two of them had entered a ruthless kissing contest that he wasn’t about to lose. He shifted his body so that his right leg rested on her legs, an anchor pinning her to the ground. Then she felt his hand surveying her belly, tracing on her blouse small circles the size of promise rings. His hand traveled past her belly button and to the buckle of the wide leather belt that looped through her blue jeans.

She broke free to ask an obvious question: “What are you doing?” When she heard nothing from his lips, she asked again, her voice rising. “What are you doing?” She tried to peer into the darkness between their bodies as though she might be able to observe for herself, but it was impossible to see his hand. She moved her left hand between them and devoured his hand in hers, squeezing as hard as she could. His hand fingered her belt buckle . . . Trying to undo it? Words floated out of her mouth in a rational tone. “Please stop.”

The sailor continued fingering the belt buckle and she continued squeezing his hand. Seconds passed like a clock ticking slowly the last five minutes of the final class. She lay there, absorbing the reality of what was unfolding. My God, is this really happening? Part of that reality was that her hand, which had somehow metamorphosed into a fist of authority, was crushing his hand to prevent him from unfastening her belt. But she wasn’t Hercules. She knew she would need to find a way to make him stop.
Two crime dramas projected onto the movie screen of her mind as she skimmed scenes and characters in hopes of discovering a practical technique for foiling an assailant. All she needed was for one drama to deliver the valuable instructions, but the scenes became one big blur. One victim with multiple personalities and one attacker wearing pantyhose and a ski mask over his head, brandishing an arsenal of weapons, materialized in her mind. *How can you make this attacker stop?* Wait, wait. She had it wrong. He was *not* an attacker yet. He was still a person. That’s who he was. She had to speak to him as a person.

“I know you can stop,” she said to him.

The sailor continued fingering the buckle and she continued crushing his hand.

“Please stop. I know you can stop.” She repeated the words calmly, rationally, as one human being to another. She did not become emotional.

He jiggled her belt buckle, trying to loop the belt through the buckle. When that didn’t produce quick results, he pulled the buckle up and lifted her off the ground about a half-inch.

“Look at what you’re doing,” she said to him. Recalling their earlier conversation, she said, “Your parents want you to be a productive member of society.”

In another attempt to make him stop, she appealed to his sense of duty. “You can’t let this happen to me. You’re in the Navy. Show that you have discipline.”

Then, as if the Big Dipper had spread some kind of magic on them, the struggle ended, and when it did, she refused to believe that it was the end and she kept crushing his hand.

“It’s all right. I’ve let go.”

She refused to believe him. It was a ploy, she thought, to catch her off guard.

He wrenched his hand away and rolled off her. He lay beside her, one arm resting on his forehead, the other draped across his waist.

She stared at the Big Dipper and breathed steadily, grateful for what had not occurred.
They remain on the grass, neither of them moving or speaking. She continues to stare at
the Big Dipper, wondering how many lovers, real lovers, are observing those stars and
describing the Big Dipper as part of the constellation of Ursa Major. It saddens her to think that
when she sees the Big Dipper again, it will remind her of tonight.

Tomorrow her roommates will ask: Did he take you to the enlisted club? Did he take you
to see a movie on base? Was he a good kisser? For all three questions, she will have to respond,
“No.” If they want to know whether or not she will go out with him again, she will say, “No,”
and they will find the answer hard to accept because this sailor looks glamorous in a white
summer uniform.
La Luna, Los Locos

La luna, los locos. The moon, the crazies. They say the crazies come out at night when a perfectly round moon, an immense, white-dazzling moon, pops up and puts a sheen on everything around you, even the smallest leaf. She never met a so-called crazy in her neighborhood while being entranced by a night-time canvas of stars and a big, portly moon, and if she did happen across a so-called crazy, she doesn’t remember looking up to see if tonight happened to be a full-moon night. There must be some truth to the link between the moon and behavior, for why else would such a notion remain alive all these centuries?

La luna, los locos. The moon, the crazies. They continue repeating the words, connecting one to the other, describing this man or that woman as a certified lunatic for doing the crazy things that have become a patchwork of life. She’s done crazy things in her life, but she didn’t view them as crazy at the time because of her state of mind. Maybe she was lost in love or ready for a change, so she did what she thought she had to do. Maybe others described her actions as loony or misguided in private, without her present, and this is fine.

La luna, los locos. The moon, the crazies. The words circle around and around in her head as she tuck myself in with fleece blankets and struggles another night with what her mind is telling her and what her heart is screaming. Years and years of back and forth, back and forth and finally realizing the choice must be made if she is to be happy. "Are you happy?" Sister Agnes
asks her. She says, “Yes, I’m happy to hear your voice on this phone line after all these years, happy that you’re still teaching the schoolgirls in San Antonio. They need your encouragement and jokes, Sister. You don’t know what your attention and humor has meant to me.”

La luna, los locos. The moon, the crazies. She lies awake on her sofa thinking of the childhood of her brothers and sisters and uncles and aunts and her grandmother. Their lives form a patchwork of family history, reaching all the way to villagers in Mexico and Camanche Indians in Texas, the history from which she can choose to learn.

Light is pouring through the blinds, refusing to let her sleep. She rises to switch off the outside lamp and draw the blinds. After she snuggles in her sofa again, she finds she has not eliminated every source of light. She rises again and looks out the window.

La luna is the culprit, brightest and portliest of all full moons she has ever witnessed, pouring the most incredible light into her neighborhood. Looking at the moon causes her to smile and she senses the moon smiling back. La luna is doing a powerful job of intensifying her thoughts and emotions for her own sake and sanity.

There’s no switching off the moon, she whispers under her breath, and returns to the sofa. The next thing she knows, she’s unlocking a beautiful memory – a boy takes her hand in a protective gesture as he prepares to lead the way across a busy street that’s unfamiliar to her.
The Man Outside My Door

The man outside my door, actually to the left of my door as I look at him from the peephole in my room at the Villa Maria Residence, is a tall man in a blue shirt, blue jeans, and a tool belt wrapped around his waist. At 7:20 this morning, he announced his arrival with obnoxious squeaking and creaking noises that grew louder as he plunked himself where he needed to be. I did not know who or what was near my room until I pulled the piece of paper out of the peephole and positioned my left eye there. The first time I looked I saw a ladder and part of a man’s torso next to it. Ah, he must be with maintenance, and he must be a good worker because he works here, for the nuns. Nuns have a way of attracting people who care, and I think workers at the Villa Maria care, because this place is for women – women attending San Antonio College and women who are here for one good reason or another.

I returned to what I was doing when it dawned on me – here’s my moment. Write it down. I peek again and this time I observe for a good ten seconds. Whoa, I see him standing on the second step of the ladder this time, facing left, so I pretty much have an excellent view of his blue jeans, his yellow work boots, his short-sleeved blue shirt, and the back of his head, which is flaunting a full head of dark hair. I stop peeping and begin writing. Then I peep a third time and it seems he’s disappeared into the ceiling and left some silver tube hanging from the ceiling. I focus on that ladder. It has orange sides and silver steps.
I return to my makeshift desk and I scarcely write two lines when I hear a loud voice on a radio, “Hey Dave,” and the guy talks about a phone jack and other odd communications devices. Dave says he’s going to use 27-inch pieces for this particular job. The first guy says, “No, that won’t work.” And then the guy says something technical and ends with, “We’ve got the wire hole box figured out and mounted. Ten-four.” Ten-four – I know that means over and out.

I return to my writing and in a moment I hear the sound of a paper being forced underneath my door. The paper is lavender and decorated with confetti and birthday cakes. I pick up the paper and take a closer look. An elderly nun’s picture is in the top left-hand corner and at the bottom is a picture of other nuns who live and work here. The paper is an invitation to attend Sister Maria Isabel Perales’s birthday party tomorrow. She will be one-hundred years old.

“Please join us in celebrating Sister Perales’s birthday! There will be cake and ice cream, and of course, music from our friends in India, Mexico, and New York City. We will even have a guest from London who is bringing a special gift for Sister. Please join us on this most happy occasion. God bless you and may He guide you in all your endeavors.”

The invitation is so positive and sincere that I cannot resist. I make a decision right then and there to go to the celebration, all by myself, and meet Sister Perales. I wonder what to bring with me and then I decide to splash water on my face and brush my hair into a ponytail.

As I make my way down the hallway, the man outside my door has moved to be the man outside someone else’s door. He does not notice me, but I imagine that when I return, he and his co-workers will have everything in tip-top shape.

I step outside the Villa Maria, into the clear skies of San Antonio, and the daylight hurts my eyes, for I’ve become accustomed to the soft light in my room, which I haven’t bothered to leave in two days. Squinting my eyes, I think the first thing I must buy is a pair of sunglasses. I board a bus that hisses and creaks toward downtown. I don’t know where I’ll end up, perhaps at
El Mercado or maybe a Mexican restaurant and bakery, but when I return I’ll have a gift for Sister Perales, and I’ll have pan de dulce to go with tomorrow morning’s cup of coffee. And hopefully, the guy outside my door will still be on duty and I’ll tell him “thank you” for keeping the Villa Maria in top-top shape, for helping to make the Villa Maria a special place for women.
My Father

My father’s eyes are glassy, distant blue, and his Adam’s apple sticks out like a walnut lodged in his throat. The hair on his head is auburn and soft to the touch and the hairs on his forearms glisten red to golden in the sunshine. My father smokes cigarettes he himself rolls using paper flimsy like onion skin and tobacco he pinches in his fingers from a palm-size cloth pouch that he secures with a yellow drawstring. After finishing the tobacco, he gives me the pouch and it becomes a storage place for coins that my uncles give to me. Rolled cigarettes and Maxwell House Coffee flavored with Carnation evaporated milk keep him company in the morning and soothe him as he sits on the edge of his bed at night, waiting for his thoughts to fall in line so he can corral them. I’m not sure if my father has anything other than khaki shirts and pants to wear.

My father’s face is hollow below his bony cheeks and his nose is long and beautifully angled. It’s as though his face was sculpted to show a classic form. He’s five feet and eight inches tall and his feet are the size of my mother’s. Once he tried on a pair of women’s supple leather penny loafers at a discount store and they fit snug enough that he told the salesman, “I’ll take them.” They were for my mother, but the salesman would not have known that. My father, I felt then, was an odd person who did things I never saw anyone else do. One time at another store my father placed his elbow and fist into the waist of a pair of women’s slacks, like a clothes hanger, as a measure of the space my mother’s waist would require. This way of measuring had
been proven to work. My mother and father rarely went out together, and he wanted to surprise her, so he had to “try on” the pants in that way in her absence.

My father crisscrosses the streets of the West Side of San Antonio, as if it’s the place where he grew up, which it’s not – it’s my mother’s neighborhood. My father is the only “bolillo” who sleeps and wakes and lives in this part of the neighborhood, the pale cottontail in a field of brown ones, so he stands out. My father is affectionately described as a “bolillo” by my mother’s mother and friends, a colloquial term with two meanings. The meaning that fits him is “white person.” In the heat of the day, his face blushes pink and his arms hold tight to the sun’s rays. His exposed skin is peppered with brown specks. On El Paso Street he’s met with bemused looks and raised brows by men and women who do not know him as he advances down the hot asphalt concentrating on his goal, sometimes with a cigarette pressed between his lips, unaware of his effect on passersby, who throw inquisitive looks and thoughts that seem to say, “Who is he and what is he doing in our neighborhood?” I’d like to say, “He lives here, just like you and me.”

Some of my father’s journeys take him to the home of his mother-in-law, Antonia Badillo Mata. One day, outside my grandmother’s three-room home on Kicaster Alley, my father greets Juan Chueco, though the surname isn’t his real name, it’s a given name – Spanish for “crooked.” Juan Chueco’s left arm is a petrified tree limb resting on his belly and his hand is frozen into a permanent claw. He says, “Rufo, panadería close early Sunday,” or “Tomorrow, it rain.” Juan Chueco can’t understand all the English words coming out of my father’s mouth and that’s no wall between them because he and my father connect with unspoken words and a goodwill they exchange like gifts. Juan Chueco is one of my favorite people because the goodness in him shimmers like a gemstone – you can’t help but see the quality of his soul. Juan Chueco always pauses in front of my grandmother’s house, waiting for her and her family to come out, as if he knows she will peek through the window, smile when she sees him, and step to the front porch to
hear news of church activities and the weather. After making us feel light as a balloon with his words and kind face, Juan Chueco raises his left leg, which is slightly shorter than the other, and limps across the pavement, heading to who knows where, making us onlookers feel a rip in our hearts and leaving us to wonder what happened to his body to make it turn out that way. What is it about him that makes the day turn lovely and makes me sad to see him leave?

My father has arms, hands, legs, and feet that bend, stretch, swing, and move like they’re supposed to – his insides also function well enough for the time being. There will come a day, though, when his chronic smoking will turn the tables on him, catch him off guard. Smoking is a habit my father formed as a young boy, I am told. Thousands of cigarettes he rolled and smoked have burned brown stains into his thumbs and forefingers and into my mind’s eye. The pouches that now belong to me I turn inside out to release bits of curled tobacco trapped in the corners.

Cigarettes have conspired to trick my father into a sense of calm and balance, accompanying him on every journey until he can no longer move from his bed. My mother, Amelia, with the help of one of my brothers, will lift my father from his bed and carry him to the bathroom where, behind a closed door, she will undress him and slip his body into a tub of warm water. Standing outside the door, I will listen, envisioning my mother in this way: She will see the tiny wedge of Zest soap and work the last of the soap into a wet washcloth, a routine charged with many implications. She will wash my father’s face, neck, chest, stomach, arms, legs, back, feet and toes, in that order. She will dip a plastic tumbler into the tub and pour water on his head, then pour diluted baby shampoo into her palm and massage the liquid into his scalp.

We will learn weeks later, when an ambulance is summoned for my father and he is transferred to the Veterans Hospital in Kerrville, Texas, that he is dying. My mother and I will feel like two people in a foreign land who cannot process all that is being said around us – “Morphine, lung cancer, bed sheets, visitation, bus trips.” I will continue to wonder why my
father never spoke of his biggest secret to my mother – and I speculate that in his mind, he
developed a logic for his actions and inactions. Maybe he knew she would fall apart by the news
that he would soon be gone forever. Maybe he recalled his relatives in Louisiana, who, one by
one, died shortly after surgery or after chemotherapy treatments and maybe he pictured himself
lying in a hospital bed, awaiting a similar fate. Maybe he couldn’t bring himself to hurt my
mother with the horrible news. Maybe he thought that by some miracle, he would overcome the
cancer and live to see his children grow to be adults.

After the bus trips to visit my father in the Veterans Hospital in Kerrville, after the
funeral arrangements, after we see his coffin poised by a Fort Sam Houston cemetery plot, my
mother and I will turn into lobos howling in the night, crying for my father, our eyes swollen,
unable to sleep. My mother will be so consumed by grief that my father will appear by her
bedside to console and guide her. “Amelia, take care of the kids. I love you.” He will vanish as
mysteriously as he appeared, leaving my mother with one final memory of a human being she
characterized as the only man who had ever allowed her to be free. My mother and I will hide
inside our private thoughts, sinking peacefully into a state of breathing slumber for many more
months. In time, I will return to school, but my mother will seem to never fully recover. She will
lift herself out to make an effort to live and appear to have found her way, only to be lost again.
My Mother

My mother has sad eyes the color of night. When they look at you and you look back, you sense her eyes have seen things that cannot be experienced in a full sentence. These things unfamiliar to you and known to her are conveyed in a look, a glance, or a spate of warnings meant to wrap you in a protective cocoon, high up and far from the reaches of morally inept men. My mother’s face is narrow in the chin and ample in the cheekbones; her lips release coos of affection regardless of the fact you’re no longer a baby. These same doting lips are capable of denouncing men and the precariousness of marriage in one breath and, in another, of putting your father on a pedestal: “There’s no one like your father in this world.”

If you look into my mother’s face, you’ll see her skin is the color of chewy caramel, and if you keep staring, brown splotches on her cheeks and forehead will come into focus. You’ll wonder about those discolorations, how they got there, but you will never ask because you sense it would be disrespectful, even hurtful to mention that you noticed, as though you are undervaluing her in some way. Years later, you will listen as she reveals the mystery of those stains and you will be saddened to hear her story.

My mother is slender and a few inches taller than five feet. Her hair has lots of volume and is a shade darker than her eyes. Some days she sits on the edge of the bed that lulls her and my little sisters to sleep, her feet planted on the bubbled linoleum floor, and grooms her hair like a mad woman until her arms hurt. In front of the tarnished mirror, a wide rubber band clenched
between her teeth, she collects her tresses until the hair is positioned in a ponytail in the
imagined perfect center of the back of her head. She then stretches the rubber band around her
hair, twists the band, and repeats the pattern until the band is tight enough to snap. In between
the stretching and twisting, she cries out, “Este cabello! I should cut it all off!”

When her hair is in a ponytail, my mother looks young enough to be my sister, something
that doesn’t bother me as much as it did when I was in third grade and my Louisiana classmates
thought I had brought my sister and not my mother to Parent-Teacher’s Day. Other times, after
wrestling her unwieldy tufts into compliance, she lets the strands fall to her shoulders and keeps
them out of her face with a flowered cloth hair band.

My mother’s moods are split evenly between periods of anger and periods of tranquility.
Our family’s permanent companion, poverty, or the unsympathetic words of a relative or a
stranger, hover nearby and connive to push my mother into restrained bitterness, her anger
simmering below the surface. The happy times – seeing the christening of her daughters or
hearing someone say, “que agusadas y bonitas tus hijas” (your daughters are so smart and
pretty), rescue her from those blue periods, allowing her to smile even when I think the day has
given her nothing special or miraculous. I imagine that she smiles because she has her children
and her husband and she is in San Antonio near her mother, sister, and brothers and who is she to
ask for more? She smiles when I arrive from school, if she isn’t distracted by one of my siblings,
and she smiles as she tells the story of my brother George, too young and naïve to know the
biological differences between girls and boys. “He showed me the muscles on his arms,” she
says. “He wanted to know why I had musk-uhls on my chest.” For effect, she puts emphasis on
his pronunciation, musk-uhls. She breaks into laughter and turns her head slightly to show a
contorted face. I think my brother’s words weren’t that funny, but after seeing her reaction, it’s
impossible not to laugh right along with her.
When my mother smiles, she reveals a tiny gap with blackened edges where her two top incisors meet, possibly a reminder of an accident. The rest of her teeth are healthy, though she’s brushed them for years with leftover baking soda or a wet toothbrush when nothing more could be squeezed from flattened tubes of toothpaste.

My mother likely finished elementary school, but probably didn’t go beyond seventh or eighth grade, but she’s a stickler when it comes to expressing yourself properly in English and in Spanish. *Esta abierta Lolita?* We’d ask, running to our apartment, knowing that my mother would have a few dollars to give us to splurge on Big Reds, hot corn tortillas, and Mexican barbacoa at Lolita’s Tienda, with its machinery churning masa at one end and dropping corn tortillas at the other. *Esta abierta Lolita?* Is Lolita open? My mother would grit her teeth and say, *It’s the store that opens and closes, not Lolita.* We’d feel her reproach to the bone, and wonder if we’d ever break out of our careless speech patterns.

My mother can be two different people – her public self, shy, reserved, and moving with very little confidence, and her private self, the person my brothers and sisters and I know can become emotionally charged and militant, like those protesters who cross the line into intimidation and illegal activity to fight for their rights. She wants me to fight for my rights as she stands in front of me, giving me the evil eye that spells doom. How our conversation escalated to this level is hard to say. We are in her small bedroom when she asks, “How many children did you and Nancy baby sit?” And I answer, “One boy and one girl.” I add, “Ama, these friends of Nancy’s father own a beautiful home – it’s air conditioned and we practically froze both nights we were there.” The mother picked Nancy and me up from the West side, the poor side of San Antonio, and drove us to another part of San Antonio, an area with nicer homes, where she lived. The mother and father went away for the weekend and left us in charge, in their gorgeous, icy home. Nancy and I were allowed to sleep in the master bedroom – it was like
sleeping in a giant’s bed and living in a giant’s home. We never found out how to make the air go from cold to warm.

My mother asks, “How much were you paid for babysitting?” And before I can think, I blurt out the amount that Nancy received, and the amount that she gave me for helping her, which worked out to be roughly one-third of the total. My mother flashes me an indignant look and stands there, her arms by her side. “Don’t you know that you’re supposed to receive half of the total amount?” And then I try to explain the qualifiers: Nancy was the responsible party, Nancy was the one they hired, not me, Nancy asked me to do things, but she was the one in charge. My mother does not understand. There’s revulsion in her eyes and it’s not until later that I sense she might have thought I had been taken advantage of. She turns from me in disgust.

In the days that follow, I’m alert to my mother’s moods and go with her – to the Laundromat, to her mother’s place, to Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, which is located right across from Nancy’s home – to collect intelligence and avert an embarrassing scene. A short time later, maybe a week later, we cross paths with Nancy and her sister Sally at the H.E.B. Grocery Store and naturally, I’m mortified by the words that will burst from my mother’s mouth. My mother is cordial to Sally, and then turns to Nancy and asks about her father. Nancy says he’s in good health and that he still works at the Mexican Manhattan Restaurant. My mother says something along the lines of “He’s a good man, your father.” It’s a surprising conversation, and a relief. No bombs, no verbal attacks, no awkward scenes, only warmth pouring into the air.

My mother has experienced a harsh life – at the hands of her first husband – an abusive drug addict – and at the hands of family circumstances that required migrant work as a way of survival. She would not have resented so much the decision for the family to work in the fields if she could have been allowed the opportunity to remain in school. My mother has experienced the abuse of men after divorcing her first husband and she has experienced what could be described
as revenge or envy. The way my mother tells the story, as she sits in our tiny kitchen, in one of her tranquil moments sipping Maxwell House Coffee, a friend of her mother’s recommended a product to improve my mother’s facial skin. My mother must have been a teenager herself or in her early twenties when she was encouraged to use the miracle mixture to clear up her facial flaws. Maybe it was acne she was struggling with, or maybe some other condition. The woman, a good friend of my mother’s mother, suggested she try the product whose origin my mother never made clear. Sometimes I imagine that it came from Mexico, sometimes I imagine that it was a home remedy. My mother tried the product, for how long, I don’t know. At the time, my mother was in the prime of her youth and I’m sure attracting men of all consciences. Perhaps the woman gave her a faulty product, on purpose, to diminish her looks. This is my conception of the story, but maybe I’m trying too hard to search for a villain in this narrative. The product caused those blotches on my mother’s face, and when my mother confronted her, the woman had little of consequence to say. I sometimes imagine that if the woman had felt deep regret, she would have taken my mother to a doctor, or been willing to make amends by offering to help with the children to atone for her sin, of which she would be reminded whenever she’d see my mother.

When I see my mother, I see a woman whose external and internal beauty prevailed despite the harshness in her life. The memory that allows me to view my mother in a larger canvas, rather than in a distorted picture, is the one shared by my brother George. He told me of an elderly woman who lived in the nearby Courts, one of the housing projects in our neighborhood. The lady knew my mother as a young woman and apparently had treated my mother as a daughter. Impoverished and frail in her old age, this elderly woman had no one to care for her. My brother remembered accompanying my mother during one of her secret escapes from our apartment. They marched to the Courts to visit this elderly woman. He saw my mother tidy up the place and chat with her in Spanish. He said she performed other chores, and I imagine
that she bathed this woman and prepared meals for her, a surprising thing because she rarely cooked for us. At first I thought my mother had been hired by someone to care for this woman and that this was a way to earn money. But the woman had no one, and there was no exchange of money that day or any other day, otherwise she would have stopped at a grocery store to buy food and toiletries. There was no money. My mother wasn’t tending to this woman for money, but for something deeper – she really cared about this woman, enough to cook and clean for her.

In my apartment in Cincinnati, I held the receiver against my ear and listened as my mother gasped her last words to me from George’s arms: “I . . . love . . . you.” My mother is buried with my father in Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery in San Antonio.
Pictures

Polaroid snapshots, black and white photographs, and images in vibrant colors of aqua and lime are organized on a wall in my office at home, reflecting the faces of my brothers and sisters and mother and father. Sometimes I cannot bear to let my eyes settle too long on one picture, for the rush of emotions would be too much to handle and I’d cry to myself and to no one there. Valuable time would be lost, valuable time wasted reassessing what I know can never be put together in a tangible sense. It is a hard truth that stares me in the face. It is why I cannot dwell, as I might be tempted to do, on what the past meant and what the past was worth. The pictures try to tell me something of this every day, it seems. And every day in the silence of this room I find it difficult to quiet the thoughts in my head and listen.

The pictures remain in place beneath a thin white ribbon crisscrossing a French picture board, a novel way of showing a conglomeration of scenes and emotions belonging to a particular time and place, a particular heart and soul. Smiles echo from my youngest sister at three years of age on a horse swing, and my mother beside her grasping the swing to make it go at the Hemisfair Plaza; from my young mother and her many children standing in front of a majestic tree; from my mother in her blue, red, and yellow striped dress, standing in the living room of her first rental as a widow on Cecilia Street in San Antonio, the year before she died.
It is a truth that my mother was shortchanged in life before she ever breathed her last breath in the arms of my brother, George, the intuitive one. This is my assessment, my limited view of a life that I can never piece together completely, for no one can know the full range of one human being, sometimes, not even that human being.

The loss of my mother affected all the children in ways that were expected and unexpected. In the years that followed, each child retreated to a place apart from the others. Connections were rarely initiated. Later, after a long passage of time between us, one by one, we began making contact. The first attempts were awkward, as though we had nothing in common but our mother and the miserable memories of our childhood. But we discovered in our face-to-face visits that the more we talked, the more we felt connected. We inspired smiles and timid hugs in one another. We’d recall the odd and funny characters from our neighborhood, and relate stories of our uncles or grandmother. There were colorful stories of other people’s lives, but rarely stories about our own lives. Our conversations seemed to circle the stories of our family.

Years would go by before we would stop circling for a time. In the stillness of an evening or the comfort of a warm kitchen, we began to release stories of our lives that had been locked away for years. One of my sisters described how, in her grief over our mother’s death, she caught the elevator one night to the top of the more than six-hundred-foot Tower of the Americas in the Hemisfair Plaza. When she had reached the top, she had made a decision. She stepped out of the elevator and saw no one else there. She stepped forward to examine the vertical bars framing the observation level and noticed the twinkling lights of San Antonio spread out before her. She wondered for a moment whether she might be able to find a wide enough space between the bars. I imagine that might have closed her eyes for what felt like hours until a warm breeze surrounded her, a sign, it would seem. She returned to the elevator and to her life. I wish I had been with my sister during those hours of unbearable grief to console her. Maybe I would have learned about
the need to hold on to one other. Maybe I would have realized we were a family, no matter the intrusive thoughts to the contrary.

For a large part of my life, I had resented my mother for not being like some of the other destitute mothers in the neighborhood. They held two jobs – that of a homemaker and that of someone in the workforce. When our father passed away, my mother was left with too many children to care for. A nun in the neighborhood had suggested that my mother might be able to find a job to earn money. I thought it was a wonderful idea – my mother, a member of the San Antonio workforce. I wanted to be proud of her. I wanted her to work. When the nun arrived at our apartment to suggest the idea, my mother simply shrugged and said nothing. I stood by, my enthusiasm spilling out. “You don’t have to work full-time, Momma,” I implored. “You can work while we’re all in school.” She shook her head no and the nun persisted. I stood by, perplexed by my mother’s resistance, confused by what I saw as a lack of logic on her part. Then I grew angry. The nun turned to me with a few calming words to restrain my emotion. She took me aside and said, “Your mother is afraid.” I couldn’t understand the entire scope of that answer. I knew my mother was shy, but she had worked years ago, before she met my father. Why was she fearful now? For months afterward, I wondered about my mother and her reasons for not going into the world and learning new skills. The nun’s idea never was raised again.

The story that my brother George related – of accompanying my mother to the nearby Courts, one of the housing projects in our neighborhood and seeing her tend to an elderly woman she had known long ago – made me see my mother in different way. Why had I not known this story before? It was out of a sense of love and compassion that my mother visited this woman, since my mother never received financial compensation for the work she did for her.

It’s strange how an idea lodged in the mind for years can create an impression that turns out to be groundless. For years I viewed my mother’s actions as a sign of a woman struggling
with the emotional drain caused by widowhood and motherhood. Many times, I questioned her logic; sometimes, I believed she didn’t care. Hearing my brother’s story changed my perception – my mother had strength of character, and this is what I will remember about her now.

When I reflect on the past, I’m thankful that my brothers and sisters and I have been able to stop circling long enough to share personal stories that validate that we are a family, in spite of everything. The pictures in my office resonate with the evidence. And I wonder: Will I have the courage to portray the stories behind these pictures with honesty and honor for my family? Maybe one day, I’ll be able to quiet the thoughts in my head and listen.