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Secrets of a Pepto Bismol Casa

A THESIS

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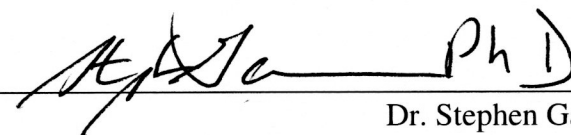
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Secrets of a Pepto Bismol Casa

A THESIS

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

AUTHOR: Alexandra Temblador

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Secrets of a Pepto Bismol Casa explores the journey of a young, Mexican American girl named Martha in Laredo, Texas, in 1990. The novel is set in first person point-of-view and is split into two threads—what occurs in 1990, the past, and what occurs in the present, some forty years later. Martha is abandoned by her mother in Laredo with her grandmother, who doesn't speak English and who Martha does not know. Abuela, Martha's grandmother, is a *curandera*, a Mexican folk healer whose position in the community is that of physical curer, spiritual guide, and secret-keeper of her patients. However, Martha discovers that these are not the only secrets being kept. Many secrets are being protected by her family, all of which seem to center on her mother's escape from Laredo eighteen years earlier and the reason for her mother's current disappearance.

Martha pursues the secrets of the past but not without adversity. There is the Spanish language barrier, her tight-lipped family that doesn't let anything slip, and a jealous bully, Marcella, who has it out for Martha from the very beginning. This novel explores the notion of secrets and the destructive nature they can have on a family, and depicts how the journey toward total healing can hurt along the way.

Secrets of a Pepto Bismol Casa is a literary fictional novel that fits under the genres of Chicano Literature, Latino Literature, Magical Realism, and Coming-of-Age.

This novel was influenced by authors like Sandra Cisneros, Isabel Allende, Ana Castillo, and Luis Alberto Urrea.

Secrets of a Pepto Bismol Casa

En El Presente

“You’re not going to like my story. I can guarantee that. You are not going to like the things I tell you. You won’t like the description of my mother, my grandmother, or where I grew up. My mother might seem like a bitch to you, my grandmother abusive or evil. Perhaps you won’t understand the Spanish words I use or the references I make, either. You aren’t going to believe the things that happened to me or the abilities that I have. But I promise you, I can do all that I say. It is all real, not imagination, not exaggeration.”

I pause. Alyssa opens her mouth as if she wants to say something but then closes it. She nods.

“You might even feel sad for me. Perhaps you will be overwhelmed with all you hear, and you won’t be able to feel any emotions—yet. I guarantee, though, you will, later. When you think back.

“I’m not the most unbiased person, I can tell you that. This is my story. The way it happened to me. The way I remember it. And you can take it as it is or leave it. But I’m telling you this for a reason. There have been too many secrets in my family and I am on a mission to wipe them out. These secrets have grown tall and gnarled like a tree and I’m the one holding the saw, God damn it. Forgive me, *Dios*, but you understand that I am serious about this, about getting rid of the secrets.

“I won’t apologize for telling you this story, for shattering all that you might have known.

“Because this is my story *and* your story.”

So where exactly to start? I sit back on the bench, taking a moment to feel the heat on my skin. It only takes a moment...just one, to figure it out.

“Have you ever been to Laredo?”

Uno

In Laredo, the houses are painted in outrageous colors of mustard yellows, baby blues, dark reds, light greens, dingy browns, or a white color that has yellowed around the edges. The houses are caged in with wrought iron fences spread between squared cinder block columns or brick posts. My mother and I drove through a sea of yellow grass, brown, scraggly bushes, palm trees, large spiky plants, and cacti. The scorched lawns of the houses came all the way to the street, leaving no room for sidewalks in the neighborhood.

Paint peeled down the sides of many houses in long, jagged strips and chain linked fences were bent and had turned orange and brown with rust. Basketball goals with wooden headboards from the 50's stood without their nets next to broken down cars with missing hub caps rusting in the street. We drove past a cemetery with hundreds of tombstones, each one covered in elaborate displays of floral arrangements and ribbons.

My first impression of Laredo, Texas, in August of 1990, at the age of sixteen wasn't too high, especially the neighborhood in which my grandmother lived. As my mother and I drove on the rocky asphalt roads in our maroon Pinto, the pit in my stomach became more hollowed. We drove from the real world, what I knew as America, into another country or realm, one that did not fit with any notion of what an American city looked like in my mind.

Commercial businesses were being built along the highway that we had drove into the city on, but they were tire stores, local restaurants, and clothing store names that I didn't recognize. The city still lacked the familiar American mainstream names that I was used to in the cities where we had lived.

Keep in mind, my mother and I had never lived in a house. Our “homes” consisted of cheap, moldy, one bedroom apartments on the run-down-side of town—if we were lucky. Our neighbors had been predominately black or white, with a few Hispanics from Puerto Rico or Cuba mixed in. The times we weren’t lucky, we stayed in carpet-stained, moth-eaten-sheets-kind-of-a-hotel with drug deals happening in the rooms next to us.

Despite this, I had a grand idea of what houses should look like. They were in magazines, on television, and in movies. Houses were supposed to be made out of rusty red to light tan bricks and were comprised of tan, white, or gray siding. Lawns were green and mowed evenly, the houses had a fresh paint job, and the sidewalks that ran in front of the houses were being used by neighbors walking their dogs or kids riding their bicycles.

And Laredo was not that.

Little children played on the lifeless lawns while their brown mothers melted in the heat on plastic green and white lawn chairs. Men stood in groups, some with their shirts off displaying hairy black chests tattooed with symbols and words that made my heart beat faster in fear. Others wore bandanas, and even the older men with peppered hair stood on porches or on the lawns with large beer bellies and hard eyes watching our car when we passed.

We were two blocks from my grandmother’s house when we stopped at a stop sign that had black symbols spray painted on it, none of which meant anything to me. Four men stood at the corner talking amongst themselves, but all at once they stopped to look at our Pinto. Their black eyes and brown eyes stared suspiciously through our

cracked windshield, glaring at us, as if they knew we were not from Laredo...at least not me. They stood closest to my door, the one that never locked. I reached out slowly and held onto the door handle, a naïve action, for if they rushed the car, I didn't stand a chance.

Everything about the men put me on edge. Their slicked-back black hair complimented their black mustaches and goatees. Three wore stained wife beaters with jeans and had tattoos up and down their arms. The oldest of the bunch, by forty years, wore a gray work shirt that he left unbuttoned to expose an oil-stained t-shirt beneath. The closest one to my door smiled mischievously and took a step forward at the same time my mother's foot finally found the gas and we left the men behind.

When the men were a block behind us, I turned to my mother. "Is this safe?" I asked her.

She laughed then said, "Is what safe, darling?"

"Is this, this area, safe to be in?"

"Of course it is, Martha. You've always asked this about everywhere we've lived. Your grandmother wouldn't live somewhere unsafe." Her black sunglasses with the silver rims hid her lying eyes. She smiled reassuringly.

I leaned forward and adjusted the air conditioner vent so that the cool air hit my sweating face. I missed Memphis and its ninety-seven degree weather. Memphis was like an igloo compared to Laredo's one hundred and twelve degree heat wave. I pulled my sweat soaked shirt off my chest so that some air could make its way through the cotton and to my burning skin.

"I can't believe you grew up here," I said.

“What was that, honey?”

“Nothing.”

My mother shrugged her shoulders, leaned forward, and turned the music up. It was the only station that she could find that wasn't playing Mexican music. I slouched back in my seat and stared at the dashboard, trying not to look at the next crappy city where we were going to live.

It was difficult to imagine my mother living in something so...Mexican. With her Dollar Store dyed blonde hair, her light skin, and her inch thick layer of makeup, she had worked hard to look as white as possible. She refused to walk in direct sunlight, in fear her skin would darken beyond its light tan hue.

That day, my mother wore a tight red spaghetti strap top that stopped just above her navel. Her jean shorts were shorter than mine and hugged her butt tighter than a child could hug its mother, and her feet were encased in bright red four inch heels. Her boobs bounced up and down, ready to fall out of her tight top as she danced to some Madonna song. Someone had a funny sense of humor placing me with this woman.

“How much farther?” I asked.

“Just down the street. You are going to love meeting your grandmother.”

A week before, my mother had come into our kitchen where I was practicing drawing hands for my art class and had announced that we were going on a “vacation,” a visit to my grandmother, whom I had never met before. She made it sound like a fairy tale, and I was little freaking Red Riding Hood. She started chatting away about how much fun it would be and how I would love Laredo, and this and that, and after a few

minutes I stopped listening. It was her way of keeping me from asking questions: had we been evicted again? And what do you mean I have a grandmother?

We never stayed longer than two years in one place, constantly moving from city to city. I had five spiral notebooks chronicling the places we had stayed with drawings. My mother wanted to be famous or rich and moved to any city where she thought she could do that. Atlanta, Boston, Memphis...I'm sure we had moved a lot more in the years after I had been born, I just couldn't remember. My youth consisted of moving from school to school, friends were far and wide, and I never owned more than could fit in my one large suitcase—which always sat next to my bed filled to the top with all my clothes.

We weren't visiting my grandmother because my mother thought she could become famous or rich in Laredo. Rather, I was sure we'd been evicted from our apartment in Memphis and didn't have the money to go anywhere else. Memphis hadn't been as successful for my mother as she had hoped. Waitressing part time at a local diner during the days barely paid for bills, and the men never paid up either. We had slept in our car in parks and campsites on the way here; we changed and washed up in gas stations that had rusty rings around the sinks, stained floors, and blackened toilet bowls. I didn't smell good, and my hair looked greasy from a lack of wash. The dirty water I had run through it at the last gas station to get rid of the oil only made it worse.

My mother had continued chatting even when I hadn't responded. I tuned in halfway to something she said. "...she's a very sweet woman, although she can't speak English, she can underst—"

"Who can't speak English?"

"Your grandmother, but she can understand you."

“What do you mean?”

My mother didn't reply.

“So how the hell am I supposed to understand her? I can't speak Spanish.”

She flipped her wrist in a backhanded manner which made me grit my teeth in annoyance. That movement could be translated to many things: “don't worry” or “you're crazy” or “no big deal” or “oh, stop!” The most annoying movement a person could do. I wanted to slap her hand every time she did it.

“It's so easy, and you're so smart. You'll pick it up in no time.” She thought flattery would make me feel better about anything. She used it so much that it had lost its power long ago, just like that damn smile she gave me.

My mother had this smile—the “Big Fake.” A big, fat, ugly, fake thing and it annoyed the hell out of me. She did it when I was little, and for a while it worked, but as I got older I saw it for what it was, a lie. The Big Fake consisted of her lips rising as far as they could, making her cheeks pop out like a chipmunk's full of nuts. Her shiny white teeth would sparkle in contrast to her bright lipstick, and each time I had to hold back a gag. She used it on everyone, not just me. Each time she did, I saw the quiver at the edge of her lips, shaking more and more each time. She hated the Big Fake more than I did.

We turned onto Garfield Street and a few minutes later the car slowed down. We parked behind a gold Cadillac that sat in the street. I sat up in my seat and looked out the window.

“She lives here?”

My mother didn't smile but only stared at the house before giving a slight nod.

“You’re kidding me, right? My grandmother lives in a Pepto-Bismol colored house?” She nodded again at my question.

God, it explained so much. The pink paint, even chipped and faded, made the house stand out bright and loud next to the blue and brown houses on either side of it. I looked up and down the street. None of the houses, as far as I could see, were pink like the one in front of us. Why would someone voluntarily paint their house that color?

My mother opened the door and stepped out of the car, not waiting for me to get over my astonishment. After she closed her door, she stretched, pushing her breasts and butt out at the same time. You would have thought she did it for an audience, but the only people I saw around were two old ladies sitting on a porch on the opposite side of the street.

I slipped on my sandals and followed her out of the car. The intensity of the sun and heat slammed into me as soon as I stepped out. My mother had already moved to the trunk and had begun to pull my suitcase out. I prayed to God or whatever the hell would listen that the person I found inside would not be a replica of the person I had been stuck with for the last sixteen years.

I reached into the trunk to grab one of mother’s suitcases when she batted my hand away.

“We’ll come back for mine later. I want you to meet your grandmother now.”

“But—”

She ignored me and shut the trunk. “It’s fine, honey.”

“Whatever.”

Behind us, a door slammed. We both turned to my grandmother's house. A girl around my age wearing a white t-shirt and blue jeans stood on the porch. Couldn't be my grandmother. So who was she? My mother stopped moving beside me. The girl finally noticed us as she stepped off the last step.

She stopped. Her body stiffened and her hands, which were at her sides, curled into fists. Her eyes darkened until it appeared that only black filled the white spaces. She was breathing heavily, boiling with anger. She looked over her shoulder at the house, then back at me, and gave me one last look full of malice. I flinched. She noticed, and it made her smile—a small upturn of the corners of her lips. Her smile scared me more than her eyes. After a moment, she stomped through the open gate and down the street.

My mother and I continued to watch the girl in silence. When the girl turned the corner and we weren't able to see her anymore the spell broke and I was able to move.

“Who was that?” I didn't even know the girl, and yet the hate that had emanated from her eyes had turned me cold in the sweltering heat.

“I don't know.” For once, her voice didn't sound fake. She really didn't know who the girl was. Her forehead wrinkled in confusion as she continued looking at the place where the girl had disappeared, as if she was thinking really hard, something my mother didn't usually do.

I waved my hand in front of her face. “Hello?” She blinked out of her trance and turned to me with the Big Fake. There was my mother.

“C'mon, let's get out of this sun. I can already feel my skin turning brown.”

As we walked up the steps to the cement porch, cramps assaulted my stomach. My mother had never spoken a word about her family before the day she told me we were going to visit my grandmother. For so long, I thought my mother and I were alone.

Questions ran through my mind—what would my grandmother look like? Would I look like her? Would she like me? Would we be welcomed or left on the porch homeless? Did she even know about me? I didn't have time to think about what was about to occur because my mother sat my suitcase down on the porch, opened the screen door, and knocked. I stood behind her and to the right. I pulled one of the short pieces of hair that had fallen in my face behind my ear even though I never put my hair behind my ears.

The porch was relatively small and felt crowded with all the potted plants on it. How had they not withered and died in the excruciating heat? Then again, I had seen an orange tree in the small courtyard and it didn't look dead. The plants bloomed in varying shades of green and yellow and some even sported small clusters of flowers.

Through my overview of the plants, I noticed a glass bowl with water sitting next to the door. Three limes floated on the surface.

“What's with the limes?” I asked my mother.

She looked down to where I pointed and pursed her lips. “That's not good.”

“What's not good?”

The locks on the front door turned and I forgot about the heat, the plants, the limes, and every doubt in my mind.

Slowly the door opened a few inches, and a short old woman stuck her head out and looked at us through the screen. I peered around my mother to get a better look, but

the screen door obscured the woman's face. She muttered something in Spanish that I didn't understand.

"*Máma!*" My mother said before she went off on a rampant flow of foreign words. The woman opened the door a little more and peered around my mother. She nodded toward me with her head and then turned to my mother and said something in Spanish. My mother replied with more alien words, but somewhere in the flow I caught my name. The woman shook her head and turned around. She left the door wide open as she walked into the house. My mother opened the screen door, picked up my suitcase, and walked in. She turned to see if I followed. Everything happened so fast that I stood there dumbfounded, unsure what had just occurred.

"Goodness, Martha, stop standing there. Get inside."

"Since when do you speak Spanish?" I had never heard my mother utter one word in Spanish my whole life, and here she was, speaking as if it had been a daily practice. How could she keep this secret from me? Instead of answering, she ignored me and disappeared into the house. I caught the screen door before it closed, released a breath of anger, and followed her in.

As soon as I stepped through the door, I was overcome by a variety of odors. A mixture of something spicy and hot and a hint of musk, like the house hadn't been aired out in years. It took my eyes a few moments to adjust to the dim lighting. I found myself standing in a small living room. On the opposite wall sat an old yellow couch with a brown coffee table in front of it. A shag carpet from the seventies covered the floor. It might have been brown or a light brown and had darkened over the years with dirt and filth.

Next to the couch sat an old, blue, metal oscillating fan that pushed the hot air around the room. Another one sat in the far right corner. Tiny figurines, pictures, and plates of angels, God, Jesus, and Mary littered every shelf and table and even covered the floor. I stood in a small Christian shrine. I looked around trying to take in every little object—a three foot wooden statue of Mary holding a baby Jesus in the corner, the quilted blanket that lay folded on the corner of the couch, and the many colored candles half way melted in their decorative holders.

My mother's voice interrupted my inspection of the house. "Martha, come into the kitchen. I want you to meet your grandmother. And close the door, you're letting the heat in!"

The heat was already in the house. I expected to be hit by the cold air from an air conditioner as soon as I stepped in but found ten-year-old fans instead, and they didn't do much to cool the house down. Regardless, I turned and pulled the door closed. I would have locked it but there wasn't anything to lock.

My focus went to the doorway that my mother had disappeared through. Sunlight streamed into the dimly lit living room from the doorway, causing the miniature statues on a table next to the door to sparkle. I couldn't walk through. My grandmother was in the kitchen. My grandmother, a woman I had never met. My doubts had returned and froze my feet. My mother spoke on the other side. If my grandmother responded, I didn't hear.

I took a deep breath and the ice that froze my feet melted a little. Be courageous, Martha. My heart beat faster and faster as I walked through the doorway and into the kitchen. I don't know what I expected when I walked through the door, but it wasn't the

burning smell of chilies or peppers. My eyes watered a bit and through the tears, I had my first look of the kitchen.

The kitchen had been painted yellow—a yellow kitchen in a Pepto-Bismol house. Everything had been painted varying shades of yellow: the walls, the chairs, the table, the cabinets, and even the little hand towels were white and yellow. The only non-yellow things in the kitchen were the worn out tan floor tiles, the white linoleum counters, and a large, square-shaped white fan that sat on the table, blowing a warm breeze.

During my overview of the kitchen, I spotted a few green peppers on a wooden cutting board on the counter. A knife lay beside the board, dripping in the spicy juice and seeds of the peppers. Strings of red and orange chili peppers hung on the opposite wall. Next to the chilies was a door with a window from which light shone. More pots filled with odd-looking shrubs and trees crowded around the door making the kitchen appear smaller than it already was.

My mother, who leaned against one of the kitchen counters, broke the silence. “Honey, this is your *abuela*, María.” She gestured to the brown woman sitting in a yellow chair in front of me. Her hands were clasped in her lap and her lips were pursed as she watched my mother with suspicious eyes.

“My what?” I asked.

My mother laughed nervously. “Your grandmother, honey. *Abuela* means grandmother. Your first Spanish word.” She gave me the Big Fake, and gestured once more to the lady in front of me. Even though my mother said it slowly, I couldn’t have repeated it back if someone had asked me to. My brain bleeped out the Spanish, leaving me without a word to grasp onto.

As I turned from my mother to my grandmother, my palms began to sweat at my sides. The woman in front of me had stood up and appeared to be studying me. I didn't know whether to say hello or to give her a hug. She walked to me and stopped a foot away.

My grandmother didn't reach my shoulders. I had to be more than half a foot taller than her, at least. Her stocky figure made her appear even shorter than she actually was. Her large breasts, which neither my mother nor I had inherited, stretched against her thin white blouse and her large thighs stretched tight her orange pants. She tilted her head to study my face, and as she studied mine, I studied hers.

Her dark, brown skin stood in stark contrast to her long white hair that had been braided into a single French braid down her back. Her eyebrows were the same color as her hair and went every which way. As she studied me, she sucked on her teeth, and as she sucked on her teeth her wrinkles moved up and down showing white crisscrossed lines between her wrinkles where the sun's rays hadn't browned.

My mother had a small, round button nose and I had always wondered if I had inherited my father's nose, but looking at my grandmother now, I discovered the truth. My grandmother and I both had the same long slender nose with a round tip and a small hook on the end. She even had a few age spots covering the bridge of her nose; the same place my freckles covered. Her lips were smaller than my wide and full lips. She and my mother shared the same lips; small in width and slightly pointed at the peaks. Unlike my grandmother, my mother smeared hers with cheap red lipstick. My grandmother's eyes were the only pretty thing about her. The irises, honey brown, shone with youth and

knowledge. Her eyelashes, still thick and black, surrounded her large almond shaped eyes.

She had finished studying my face, because she began to waddle around me, looking me up and down. I felt like a prized pig on display for a purchaser. I turned to my mother behind me and mouthed, *What is she doing?* Luckily my grandmother's height kept her from seeing me. My mother batted her hand at me as if to say "Don't worry." I rolled my eyes and turned around to find that my grandmother had finished. She gave me one last look, her right eye squinting as if she could see me better that way, and then mumbled something in Spanish under her breath. She shuffled over to the peppers, picked up the knife, and began chopping.

I turned around, confused at my grandmother's behavior. My mother whispered to sit down and waved her hand once again. I let out a sigh and walked to one of the chairs. A hollow empty feeling grew in my gut.

She didn't even speak to me! I felt like something to be measured or studied. Did she not like what she saw? And why didn't she speak to me or hug me or something? I didn't think grandmothers behaved this way the first time they met their granddaughters.

My mother, without noticing my hurt feelings, spoke to my grandmother in Spanish. My grandmother continued to chop her peppers, never once looking at my mother as she replied. When my grandmother did reply, her tone suggested that she didn't care one way or another about whatever my mother said. My mother's voice rose and she began to speak faster. She sounded like an angry woodpecker compared to my soft spoken, nonchalant grandmother. At one point my grandmother even put down her knife and flicked her wrist backwards at my mother making a 'psht' sound. I almost

dropped dead at that moment. My mother had inherited that gesture from her own mother. I held onto my hand in fear that I would begin to do the same.

My mother actually grew quiet when my grandmother made that sound. I watched as she took a deep breath and controlled her anger. She looked once more at her mother and pleaded for something in Spanish. I assumed she begged my grandmother to let us stay. My grandmother replied tersely. I grew impatient and a little bored with the exchange. I wanted a shower, a bed to fall asleep in, and something to eat. My stomach growled at the thought of food.

My grandmother's response pleased my mother because she nodded her head okay and then pushed herself off the counter. I stood up immediately.

Great, we were going to have to sleep in our car in little Mexico. I never cried, but I felt like crying then. Earlier, I had thought the small house unsafe in a scary neighborhood; it now appeared to me as the pearly gates of Heaven.

My mother plastered the Big Fake across her face, but it faltered when she looked at me. "Honey, you look scared." She rubbed the top of my arm.

"What are you doing?"

She drew her hand back and crossed her arms beneath her chest.

"We're leaving right?"

"No, of course not. Your grandmother is excited to get to know her granddaughter." The corner of her lips rose; as if she thought smiling bigger helped.

"I doubt that," I said.

"Well believe it honey; you and your grandmother are going to become so close. Now, you sit down and I'm going to go use the lady's room."

“You didn’t need to announce that.” I sat back down in the chair. She backed up toward another doorway that I assumed went to a hallway that led to the rest of the house, with the smirk still on her face. I had to do a double take, because she wasn’t giving me the Big Fake anymore. Her smile almost looked genuine. Which freaked me out.

“What?” I said.

“Nothing honey. Love you.” She winked and disappeared through the doorway. It always made me uncomfortable to hear my mother say the ‘L’ word to me. I glanced over at my grandmother. She stood with her back to me. Something had changed...she had stopped chopping. She still clutched the knife, but her head hung down and her body had stilled. Then after a moment, she took a deep breath. Her back rose and when she released the breath, her back fell to normalcy. And then as if she had never stopped, she began to chop the peppers again.

I watched my grandmother as she continued to cook, suppressing all the uneasy feelings that assaulted me. I sat quietly in my chair, unsure if my grandmother even knew I sat behind her.

When she finished chopping the peppers, my grandmother stood on her tiptoes, opened a cabinet, and pulled out a jar of white rice. She shuffled to the stove, which already had a large pot sitting on it. She sat the rice down and turned one of the knobs. From a pocket, she pulled out a match, lit it and placed it under the burner, allowing it to catch fire. I had never seen a stove that wasn’t electrical, and if we had a stove that used gas, I never knew. My mother never cooked, and at an early age, I became a protégé with the microwave. The kitchen lacked the tiny magical food cooker, which made me a little uneasy. Regardless, I continued to watch my grandmother with something like

fascination, since no one had ever really cooked for me or in front of me. She then poured some rice into the pot, pulled a wooden spoon from a drawer, and moved the rice around with the spoon.

After watching her move the rice around for a while, my attention wandered around the kitchen and soon landed on the windows of the far wall. Sunlight still streamed into the kitchen, lighting the entire room.

This little room and the bright sunlight almost made me forget the stark, scary neighborhood that surrounded the house. For a moment, I felt safe with this stout woman, until the silence was broken by some shouts in Spanish, the slamming of a car door, and the screech of tires on the road.

I jumped in my chair as my heart sped up. Yeah...safe my ass. If I didn't get mauled by a Pit bull or attacked by a creepy Mexican guy, I'd sure as hell get run over. My grandmother didn't look up or hesitate at the sound, just continued to brown the rice.

It took my grandmother pouring the tomato sauce, water, and spices into the pot, for the realization to hit me. I wanted to stand up and march around demanding answers. I watched my grandmother pull out a bowl of already cooked chicken from the fridge, tear it into pieces, and throw the pieces into the boiling pot. Her calm movements only infuriated the storm within me.

It had been long enough already. I knew the day would come sometime in my life, I just never expected it to be then. I thought it would be my decision, not hers. No matter how many times the thought had entered my mind before, I locked it away as paranoia. I wish I hadn't. Things might have been easier for me if I hadn't been in denial. But perhaps they weren't meant to be easier.

It wasn't until my grandmother sat a plate of an odd looking mixture of rice and chicken and a mug of white milk in front of me, that everything came together. The slammed door, the car, the screech, the yell, the Big Fakes, the 'Love you,' the suitcases.

Suddenly, my hunger vanished.

En El Presente

As soon as I step into the building, I pull my grey cardigan tighter to my body, as if the thin material will keep me from being cold throughout the service. It's funny how I hate the cold now, for once I had suffered miserably in the heat. I cannot complain too much. This part of Texas, the Dallas Metroplex, is cooler than the border, where I still live and work.

There is a woman at a desk with a cup of fresh coffee in her hand. The steam rises from her cup and the sweet aroma of black coffee with a hint of French vanilla soothes me. What I wouldn't give for a cup of black *café* now, even though I usually don't have a cup past eight in the morning, and it is now almost eleven.

"Good morning. Name, please," she says. I tell her the name, although it is not mine I am giving but the person I am here to see. Perhaps, "see" is not the correct term. The woman nods and looks down at something on her desk. Down the hall, last door on the left, she tells me. I thank her and smile. As I walk past her, I can tell she has a cold coming on. Without thinking I send her a bit of healing. She won't even get the sniffles now.

I am the only one in the hall walking toward the door. The carpet is maroon and the walls are tan and pastel-colored flowers are painted at the baseboard. I come to the last door on the left and stop for a moment. I'm not sure how I feel about this. I never imagined I'd come to this door, to step through it. It's not something one really thinks about, growing up. And in my case, it's not something I thought possible.

I make myself walk through the doorway. I've been through so many doors already. What is one more?

Dos

Black eyes pierced my soul. I clawed at my throat to no avail. Couldn't breathe. Darkness bearing down on me. Skin on fire. I raked my nails across my skin trying to push the flames away. Her finger pointed at me and her black eyes stared me down. Her midnight colored hair whipped around her head in a fiery wind. Then through the tornado of flame she yelled words in a language that made my skin crawl and with the last foreign sound that slipped from her mouth, I screamed—my body consumed in a burial of fire.

I jolted awake to the smell of onions and my own sweat. My breath came out in gasps, and I couldn't get enough air. Those eyes, that girl from the porch. For someone I had only seen for a few moments, she had stuck with me to the point that she showed up in my dreams. After a few minutes, I calmed down and then my real life nightmare hit me. It was Saturday morning. Only some hours before my mother had abandoned me with my grandmother, a total stranger, in Laredo.

Why the hell would she freaking leave me here? Gave me the Big Fake all day! I should have known she was up to something. I wanted to scream and punch the bed over and over and imagine it was her face with its stupid red lipstick and stupid pale skin and then tear out her fake blonde hair and show everyone what a bitch she was. Who leaves their daughter with a stranger? It wasn't like I was a burden; I took care of her mostly. I did not want to be here with some Mexican lady who didn't speak English. I'd rather suffer my mother's fake-bull-shitting-self.

Placing both of my hands on my forehead, I squeezed hard trying not to think about what had happened yesterday, but not trying to think about it only made me think about it. I needed a distraction.

I sat up, looked around the bedroom, and almost dropped dead. Easter egg purple walls? *Really, Grandma?* At the foot of the bed, three candles burned on a small dresser giving off a faint glow in the tacky colored room. A blue candle had been placed at the top, a red candle on the left side, and a green candle on the lower right corner. Something round sat in front of the candles but I couldn't see what it was from the bed.

Small gold and brown picture frames surrounded the candles in addition to sprinkling the purple walls every few feet. Most of the pictures were of Jesus and Mary, but there were a few black and white photographs of people I didn't know. Crosses hung above the doorway and over the closet door to the left of the bed. I choked on the religion in the room.

I fingered the fringe on the four blankets that covered me. No wonder I had been sweating. It was unclear how I had gotten to the bedroom from the kitchen last night, but my grandmother must have helped me under all these blankets. No A/C in this house and she had placed four blankets on top of me? I shoved them to the foot of the bed but left the sheet covering my legs.

The tendrils of sleep spread through my body again, my bad dream and real life nightmare mostly gone from my thoughts. I let myself fall backwards toward the pillow, but what I saw on the wall above me made me jump back up.

"Holy shit!" I scrambled to the edge of the bed.

Bloodied feet nailed to wood, and the somber face of a man dripping with blood peered down at me. The pale face and tears shone bright in the dark room. Hanging above the bed was the largest cross I had seen so far. It was porcelain or even a hard plastic. Jesus hung on a four and a half foot tall cross, his pale arms stretched two feet wide. The

thick rivulets of blood flowed down his cheeks and over the contours of his face. The artist had thought it best to add the gruesome ripping of his flesh around the head of the nails. Because the piece would have totally been ruined without it.

Weren't religious items supposed to be comforting? Jesus loves you and all? Suddenly the room felt cold and I pulled the blankets back over me. I decided to sleep on the far end of the bed for the rest of the night in case Jesus fell on me. I could see the headlines now: Death by Jesus.

The onion smell grew stronger now that I sat at the end of the bed. I searched for the culprit until I finally found it in a small purple onion that had been cut in half and placed against a picture of Mary. A cross had also been carved out of the onion. That nervous feeling that that had begun in my stomach grew more and more. Who was this woman my mother had left me with? For that matter, where was my mother?

I laid my head on the crook of my arm as salty tears pooled between my eyelids. I couldn't stop them.

It was the onion.

I swear.

A loud thud shattered my deep sleep and I awoke to my grandmother hauling my suitcase into the room. She leaned over and placed her hands on her knees, gasping for breath.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. "What are you doing? I could have brought that in here. What time is it?" When my hand dropped back to the bed it landed on something. I

grabbed the object and brought it close to my face. A lemon? I turned to my grandmother and raised it up.

“What’s this for?” My grandmother finally stood back up, her breathing returned to normal. She looked as she had the night before, long white French braid and all. The only difference was her clothes. She had on orange capris and a plain yellow shirt that buttoned in the front.

She squinted at my hand. “Ah!” Holding one finger up, she turned and left the room. The yellow skin of the lemon sparkled in the soft light. Wait a minute...my attention was diverted to the table at the end of the bed. The candles still burned and the wax hadn’t melted any lower. I must have fallen asleep for only a few minutes, even though it had felt like hours.

My grandmother returned to the room a few minutes later with a bowl in hand. She came and stood at the foot of the bed and said something to me in Spanish.

“I don’t know Spanish, remember?”

She made a frustrated noise deep in her throat. She pointed to my hand that held the lemon and pointed at the bowl.

“You want me to put the lemon in the bowl?” I placed it in the bowl.

“*No. No,*” she scolded then continued spitting out more words.

“You said to put the lemon in the bowl?” Good God. This was becoming ridiculous. I just wanted to sleep.

She grabbed the lemon and held it out to me. I reached with my right hand to take the lemon, but she shook her head. She nodded to my other arm. Why the hell did it matter? I slowly reached out. She pushed the lemon into my hand.

Then before I could ask what to do, she grabbed my wrist and yanked it over the bowl. She turned my hand over so that the lemon was closest to the bowl, then placed her hand directly over mine and squeezed.

“Hey!”

She didn't stop but kept squeezing my hand until the lemon was crushed beneath our grips and the juice spilled over my palm, down my fingers, and into the bowl. She continued to squeeze my hand until the last bit of juice left the lemon.

Satisfied, she smiled. At what, I couldn't say. She let go of my hand and shook hers toward the bowl so that drops of lemon juice flew into it. A few drops hit my hand that still hung suspended. I sat there staring at the woman. After a few seconds of my catatonic state, she had to actually take the lemon from my hand and place it in the bowl. Once she did that, she made the sign of the cross over me and then over the bowl.

She snapped her fingers in front of me a few times and then repeated something. I had no idea what the woman said or why she had done the freaky lemon thing, so to save my brain from exploding, I wiped my hand on a blanket and lay down to go back to sleep. But she wouldn't let me. She pestered me with foreign words until I got up and followed her to the bathroom where she pointed to the shower.

“Lady, it's the middle of the night; can't I just take one in the morning?”

She half smiled and pointed to a clock on the wall. Six o'clock in the morning. Forget that. I walked past her to the bed and flopped down. I needed at least three maybe four, more hours of sleep. The moment my body hit the bed she began slapping my leg.

“Okay! Okay! Stop.” I said. I fought not to groan, but instead muttered, “God, damn it.” Her head whipped around so quickly that I threw my hands up. “Okay, sorry. Won’t happen again.”

She gave me one last cold stare before snapping her fingers and pointing down the hallway. I hurried forth. Don’t say God’s name in vain. Got it.

Having not showered for days, I had hoped for a long hot shower—but not in Laredo. I was unable to differentiate the shampoo from the conditioner because it was all in Spanish, and my grandmother even made it a point to flush the toilet after I had been in the shower five minutes. The hot water turned icy cold, and my hollering mixed with her laughter.

After the shower, my grandmother made sure I didn’t fall back asleep by checking on me every few minutes. When she was satisfied that I appeared decent, she beckoned me to follow her down the hall. There were two other doors in the hallway besides the bathroom, but both doors were closed so I couldn’t see inside. Our destination was the yellow kitchen. My grandmother had turned the lights on since darkness still reigned outside. The light hurt my eyes.

She said something I didn’t understand and pointed to the table, where a breakfast had been laid out. I sat down, instantly ravenous, since I didn’t remember eating dinner the night before. In the background, my grandmother rummaged in the cabinets.

Breakfast consisted of a plate of scrambled eggs and a tortilla. I hated scrambled eggs; fried was the only way I ate them. I picked up the fork next to the plate and moved the eggs around, debating whether I should eat them or ask her to make me some more the way I liked them. After a few minutes, the banging ceased in the kitchen. I looked up

to find my grandmother glaring at me. Over her wide body she wore a white apron that had red flowers stitched around the edges. She held a towel in one hand against her hip. Her lips pursed and her tiny eyes narrowed sharply at me.

“I don’t like scrambled eggs.”

“*Come.*” She pointed to the plate. Co-may?

“I don’t know what you’re saying, but can you fry me some eggs instead?”

“*¡Come!* Eat now.”

“Thought you couldn’t speak English,” I muttered beneath my breath. I stabbed a few pieces of egg, a little more forcefully than needed, and placed them in my mouth. Cold eggs. Great. My mother had just abandoned me, one fried egg wasn’t a crazy request. My grandmother watched me until I swallowed. When she was satisfied I would eat, she turned around and started muttering to herself as she did whatever she had been doing before.

I ate my breakfast in silence, while my grandmother prepared something. At least “something” is the only way I could describe it. Bowls and jars filled at various levels with powders, spices, and other tiny things sat on the counter. Every once in a while she poured different items into a boiling pot on the stove; other times, she threw spices in and a few times she even went to the plants by the door, tore some leaves off, and threw them in the mix. Gradually, a horrible smell began to permeate the room. The words “rotting flesh” came to mind. It didn’t take long for the smell to become so pungent that I had to put down the cold tortilla I had just taken a bite from and breathe slowly through my mouth to keep from heaving up the eggs I had finished off. I was at the point that I had decided to go to the bathroom, at the same time the front door opened.

“*María!*” a shrill voice rang through the house. More words followed, filled with excitement and changing of tones.

Automatically, I sprang out of my seat to leave the kitchen. I didn’t want to meet anyone, especially not another Spanish speaker. Unfortunately, my grandmother turned to me, pointed a knife she had been holding in her hand, and said something that I imagined meant “move and I cut you.” I sat without thinking. Respect God and sharp pointy objects. We were getting to know each other well.

Seconds later, a short, skinny, wrinkly woman carrying a large burlap sack bustled into the kitchen never ceasing her chatter. My grandmother wiped the knife on the apron she wore and placed it on the counter, then put her hand on her hip and waited. The woman appeared the same age as my grandmother. Her skin, wrinkled and stretched, hung on her wiry frame, and her roots had a grayish tint that spoke volumes about her short black locks. The woman spied me before she noticed my grandmother and her words stopped mid-sentence. Her thin wrinkled lips pursed together and she looked around the kitchen until she finally found my grandmother.

The woman looked at my grandmother then at me, nodded her head a few times, crossed her arms, and then said something in Spanish.

A quick burst of laughter escaped my grandmother’s throat. “*No, no, no.*” She shook both her hands in front of her, to emphasize the “no’s.” The woman’s eyes narrowed at my grandmother, and then she looked away. She walked to the table and put her bag down before turning to me with a smile. My grandmother continued to snicker like a little girl. The woman smiled at me, and I fought not to tell her that her lipstick had smudged onto her skin above her top lip.

The woman spoke. I caught the name Gloria, but that was it. She grabbed my hand and before I knew it, I stood. And then without warning she kissed me on my cheek! No one had ever kissed me; I couldn't remember the last time my mother had kissed me. The woman had to stand on her tiptoes to do so.

When she pulled back, her hands remained on the tops of my arms, and she waited for a response, but "Uh..." was all I said. The force of this woman and her violation of my personal space shocked me.

Her forehead creased and her black eyebrows furrowed. Something about that furrowing triggered something in my mind. It looked familiar. Either way, I wanted this woman away from me, as in five to ten paces away. I looked to my grandmother, my face screaming for help. By now, she laughed so hard that tears rolled down her face. The woman looked over her shoulder and yelled something at my grandmother.

Through her tears and laughter, my grandmother strung a few words together and something she said hit home for the woman still holding my shoulders because her hands tightened on me and her body stiffened. And then slowly her head turned towards me.

"¿Martha?" But instead of pronouncing the 'h' in my name, it sounded more like "Marta." I nodded regardless.

I closed my eyes when the tiny woman grabbed me in a hug and kissed both my cheeks. I opened my eyes in surprise when she put her hands on my face, as she spoke extremely fast in Spanish. She pulled my face downwards and gave me one last big smack on my left cheek and then finally let me go. She smiled wide with thin lips and straight white teeth.

My body wanted to run but I couldn't. Her crazy behavior dumbfounded me. The woman's smile faltered. She spoke a string of words and pointed to herself with both her hands. Through the slur of words I picked out the name 'Gloria,' repeated over and over.

Finally, my grandmother spoke up. One sentence, simple and short.

Gloria didn't even turn around to look at my grandmother. Her lips pursed, and in a split second, a thought came to my mind. A moment after, Gloria spoke, confirming my thoughts—well kind of.

“What do you mean *my great niece* don't speak Spanish?”

For the next half hour my grandmother and newly discovered aunt chattered and twittered in a language that felt harsh to my ears and annoyed my whole being. I finally crossed my arms on the table and laid my forehead against them, trying to tune out the words that flew around the room and to keep the awful smell from entering my nose. I considered sneaking in a nap, but their gibberish prevented sleep from taking over my body.

As soon as my aunt had discovered my identity and the fact that I couldn't speak Spanish, she quickly switched from English to Spanish and began to hammer at my grandmother. My grandmother cleaned my breakfast dish and continued to brew her potion over the stove as she replied with short answers and sometimes with a backhanded flick of her wrist and a loud “Pah!” sound.

The noxious fumes assaulted my stomach and gag reflexes, and I prayed for the smell to disappear or to lose my sense of smell. Either would work for me. Thirty minutes later, a knock came at the door. Another visitor? I had to stifle my groan. My

grandmother didn't notice as she picked up the boiling pot with two potholders and shuffled out of the kitchen. She called out something over her shoulder and walked into the hallway. My aunt responded, and with a narrowing of her eyes at me, she left the kitchen to answer the door.

Gloria greeted someone in the living room. My aunt walked in first, followed by a tall, dark chestnut woman holding a plastic garbage sack that bulged and stretched with its items. My aunt said something to the woman in Spanish and motioned to me.

"She don't speak Spanish. Can you believe it?" Gloria said, then turned her attention to me. "Martha, this is Doña Lorena."

Doña Lorena had a frown on her very large lips. Her expression said she pitied me for my lack of Spanish. She had on a white dress with lace trimmings that hung loosely on her relatively small upper body. Her hips were so wide set that she looked like a bloated pear in a white laced napkin. I couldn't bring myself to speak so I just nodded once. I puzzled over her name. What kind of mother would name her child Doña? Doña Lorena nodded back and then turned to Gloria, and thankfully spoke in English.

"Where should I put this?"

Gloria pointed to the side of the kitchen, against the wall. As Doña Lorena went to set the black trash bag down, a boy walked in. Walked isn't exactly the right word. He limped into the kitchen, but it had to be the oddest limp I had ever seen. He limped on both feet.

They were encased in brown dirt-caked sandals, and I couldn't see anything that would show why he walked so. He moved slowly, walking on the heels of his feet. The strain on his face as he focused on each step resembled that of a scientist meticulously

mixing the right combination of volatile chemicals in a beaker. He bit down on his lower lip as his cheeks reddened with exertion.

“Oh *mijo*.” Doña Lorena stood up and looked at the boy, and I knew he was her son. Gloria took her chair and dragged it over to the boy so he didn’t have to walk any further.

“*Pobrecito*,” Gloria cooed.

The boy took even longer to sit down in the chair. I feared with any wrong move he would cry out, but he never did. Once he sat down, he wiped at his eyes. All my thoughts of what my mother did left for the moment. My hands became restless in my lap so that I had to clasp them together to keep from reaching out. I wanted to help him, but what could I do that his mother couldn’t?

His body sagged as if he had just run a marathon rather than walked into the kitchen, and perhaps it was the same. Gloria and Doña Lorena started a conversation in Spanish. Doña Lorena couldn’t have been family; I figured Gloria would have let me know by then. If she wasn’t family, why were they here? Gloria fetched a glass of water for the boy. He accepted the glass of water with a murmur.

The boy, six perhaps, had shiny black hair cut straight across his forehead and his heart shaped face resembled his mother’s. He had the same reddish brown skin too, but unlike his mother, he was skinny. His thin and faded shirt complimented his jeans that had a hole over the right knee. He sipped his water, and as he did, he noticed me. It must have been the first time he realized someone besides Gloria occupied the room. I smiled, which caused him to blush and look down at his cup. It was cute.

Seconds later, the squeaking of the floorboards warned of my grandmother's slow approach from the hallway. When she arrived, Gloria and Doña Lorena's conversation stopped. Doña Lorena moved to my grandmother and spoke to her. She pointed to the sack that lay against the wall, and as she spoke, my grandmother nodded every few seconds. My grandmother didn't have the stern look she had given me or Gloria a few times, but rather her features had softened to an understanding, almost concerned look. She walked over to the young boy and bent over, resting her hands on her knees.

She spoke to him and he smiled. She stood back up and said something, so that he handed the glass of water to Gloria. He took a deep breath, bit his lip, and stood up carefully, wincing as his feet touched the floor. He walked oddly as he had before, following my grandmother out of the kitchen and into the hallway. The slow procession ended with Doña Lorena, shoulders slumped, following at a slow pace. Eventually, Gloria and I were left alone in a claustrophobic silence, interrupted momentarily a few seconds later by the sound of a door closing down the hallway.

Gloria walked over to the backyard door, pushed aside a few potted plants with her foot, and then opened it. She pulled a cigarette out of her pocket and a lighter, with which she lit the cigarette, and then stood by the door and began to smoke. I hated smoke and how it burnt the canals of my nostrils. More noxious fumes. My mother used to smoke sometimes at night in our apartment, and each time I had to go in my room and get under the covers to escape the acrid perfume. Thinking about my mother made my stomach churn.

Gloria broke the silence. "I can't believe you don't speak no Spanish." I shrugged in response.

“Don’t tell your grandmother I’m smoking, ‘kay?”

“Why?”

“Because I’m your *tía*.” As if there would be any other reason.

“What’s tee-ya?”

“*Tía*. Not tee-yuh,” she emphasized the ‘yuh.’ “Your aunt.” She shook her head as she blew out the smoke.

“I’m bored.”

“Of course you are. Sorry that Laredo isn’t New York or all the fancy places you’ve been.” I gritted my teeth to keep from correcting her that I had recently come from Memphis, not New York.

“So how come you speak English and she doesn’t?” I asked.

Gloria blew out a puff of smoke. “I worked in the cafeteria at the Air Force Base for twenty years. Had to learn for *los gringos*.”

After a few seconds, Gloria asked, “Your *mamá* didn’t tell you about me?”

“Nope.”

Her eyes hardened and she shook her head back and forth as she muttered things in Spanish until finally she stopped. I laid my head back on my arms and relaxed. Maybe I could get a nap. Unexpectedly, a shriek cut through the house, causing me to bolt upright.

“What the hell?” The shriek held the innocent sound of a youth.

Gloria put out her cigarette on the door frame and pointed it at me. “Watch your mouth, *chiquita!*”

“What is she doing to him back there?”

Gloria closed the door and walked back to the table. She sat down and threw the cigarette in her bag as she answered me. “What you mean? She’s healing him.”

“Healing him of what? Why is he screaming?”

“From *El Diablo*. Didn’t you see how he walked in here? She has to purge *El Diablo* from his *patas*.”

“What? Speak English.”

She slapped her open palm on the table. “Ah *tú mamá* teach you nothing! The Devil! The Devil has poisoned the boy’s feet. Large sores cover his feet and threaten his life. *Tú abuela* is cleansing him of the disease. Why do you think she made that awful stuff?”

“Wait, so my grandmother is a doctor?” Gloria had begun to lean back in her chair when abruptly she popped forward at my question.

“What? Your mother didn’t tell you?” She turned her head, studying me with one open eye while the other squinted.

“Tell me what?”

“*¡A Dios mio!*” She put her hand to her forehead and pushed her hair back. “*Mija*, *tú abuela*, she’s a *curandera*.” Her voice changed as she said *curandera*. It dripped in awe of the word and whatever it meant.

“*Tee-yuh*,” I pronounced each syllable, “What is a cur-cur-dra?”

“*Curandera!*” Her lips and tongue pronounced the words with such intensity and purpose that I flinched.

“A *curandera* is a healer. They are better than doctors. They can cure anything with the power of God and your *abuela, mi hermana,*” she thumped her chest for effect, “is the best of them all! Not like these *charlatanes con* their stores on Saunders and McPherson. ”

“Are charlat—ta—, whatever you just said, is different than what my grandmother is?”

Gloria slapped her forehead. “Aye, *nombre*...you know nothing. No *charlatanes*, you know, charlatans in *ingles*? Are people around town claiming they have the gift to heal, opening stores in Laredo, selling fake charms, doing healings, all the while, stealing good people’s money! Giving my sister a bad name.” She began to shake her head back and forth in anger.

Thousands of questions hit me at once and I couldn’t choose which one to ask first. Gloria stood up and began rummaging in one of the cabinets, looking for something as if the news she just laid on me should be accepted so easily.

“So what is she doing with that stuff she made? Making him drink it, or what?”

“How would I know? Do I look like a *curandera* to you?” I had to bite my tongue from saying that I didn’t understand what a *curandera* was, much less what they looked like.

Gloria pulled a small ten-inch yellow television from a cabinet, placed it on the counter, and plugged the cord into a socket on the wall. She moved the antennae around a bit and then opened a drawer from which she pulled out a brown remote.

“How do you know it’s the Devil hurting the boy? What if he just has some type of infection?” Gloria pressed a button and the television sprang to life. Of course, the station was all in Spanish.

“You ask too many questions. Now *silencio, las telenovelas* are on.” I leaned back in my chair and let out a huge huff. Gloria’s attention focused solely on the events taking place on screen.

Sooner or later *someone* would give me the damn answers.

For the next half hour my mind reeled. Gloria, too involved with her television show, never gave me a second look nor did she speak to me. What did my grandmother do in the back room? Did the weird lemon thing she made me do that morning have to do with her cure—thing? Was my grandmother some voodoo witch or crazy religious exorcist? After a while, I debated whether or not to go to the bathroom to spy on my grandmother, but as soon as I thought it, a door creaked open in the back.

I sat up waiting for them to enter the kitchen. Gloria muttered something under her breath. She grabbed the remote and turned off the television, then looked down the hallway. Doña Lorena entered the kitchen first with a small smile on her lips. She had to turn sideways so her wide hips could fit through the doorway. My grandmother followed her, face stoic. Finally, the boy walked through. He limped but not as severely as before. His face didn’t strain as much and he didn’t bite his lips. Off-white bandages had been wrapped around his feet, and the lingering scent of the awful smelling potion filled the room when he entered.

He smiled at me before dropping his head in shyness. I returned the smile, glad that my hands weren’t restless. My grandmother must have helped him in some way.

Gloria spoke to his mother as my grandmother went to the trash bag that Doña Lorena had left in the kitchen earlier. She hauled it up and reached in, moving the contents around the bag until finally she pulled out something blue. It looked like a dress, only so large that it could only fit my grandmother.

Doña Lorena excused herself from Gloria and asked my grandmother something. My grandmother nodded and replied and then one side of her lips rose upward. She nodded toward me and said something to Doña Lorena. Doña Lorena nodded her head slowly as she studied me from top to bottom, and then nodded more vigorously. What was that about?

She went and grabbed my grandmother's hands once my grandmother had set the bag down, all the while speaking in Spanish. Doña turned and spoke to her son, who in turn spoke to my grandmother. His voice barely rose above a whisper as if he couldn't help being shy. My grandmother's face softened and she kissed the top of his head.

I envied the boy right then. Kindness from a stranger, my own grandmother. He had a mother who loved him, who would never leave him behind at a relative's house. A mother who kept him safe, who wanted him to be healed.

Moments later, the mother and son left and we were alone again in the house. My grandmother ignored Gloria and me and returned to the back room. I asked Gloria if I could go to my room. She said no and I asked why. She replied "because your *abuela* said so."

For the next two hours, I sat in the kitchen as more visitors came to call. Old men, young women, young couples, large women, ugly men, beautiful women, and even a wizened old lady who wore an orange hat. The only thing they had in common was the

brown color of their skin and the language they spoke. Sometimes they would go to the back with her, other times she would come to the kitchen and give them a small pouch or object. They'd hold it close to their breast or hide it from my prying eyes.

Some of the guests brought things like Doña Lorena had. One old man brought a bowl of tan eggs. A young girl, probably only a few years older than me, handed my grandmother a few hand painted plates of Jesus and Mary—as if she didn't have a billion already. Most of the time my grandmother would hand the gift back and shake her head no, but everyone pushed their gifts back into her hands and wouldn't take no for an answer.

And they all looked at me. Wondering who I was and why I stared at them. The bold ones asked Gloria or my grandmother who I was by nodding toward me or motioning with their hand. Most just acknowledged me with a nod or a smile when they discovered I didn't understand them. Luckily, no one attacked me with kisses, although one wrinkled man considered it, leaving me instead with a creepy wink and a smacking sound of toothless gums.

I was bored the entire day. When Gloria finished watching her television shows, she turned a radio on to some Mexican music station. After a bit, I asked her if we could change it.

“To what?” she said.

“Something that plays rock. You know, Nirvana, AC/DC, Pearl Jam?”

She crossed herself. “Rock music? *¡La caca!* Don't bring that devil music in here.” So I was subjected to long hours of music I didn't understand and didn't like—at all.

Finally, I was able to convince Gloria to let me run to my room and grab an old journal and a piece of paper. I passed by most of the time drawing the kitchen and the little boy from early in the morning. Gloria watched me suspiciously and every once in a while she leaned over and looked at my drawings. She never made a comment, only said, “Hmm...” which was probably the only bit of praise I would ever get from her.

After a long morning, my grandmother came to the kitchen and prepared us lunch—tortillas and some of the rice stuff from the night before. After a few moments of staring at it, smelling it, examining it from every angle, and after the pointed stares of my grandmother and Gloria, I finally took a bite of the rice stuff. Rather bland more than anything, it could have used some salt. But the tortillas were warm and the chicken didn't taste half bad. And yet, I wasn't all that hungry, so I left quite a bit on my plate. That is until Gloria told me to eat it all, that little children across the river were starving. I didn't know what she talked about, but my grandmother held a butter knife in her hand and considered using it on me if I didn't eat. So, I forced the rest down my throat.

Not even a full day and I had already been threatened twice with knives.
Welcome to Laredo.

After the meal, Gloria left and my grandmother and I were alone together in a house that shrunk with every breath. Once she had washed the dishes, my grandmother pointed at my feet and then to her shoes. It didn't take a rocket scientist to understand that she wanted me to put some shoes on. I trudged down the hall and grabbed my sandals. I wanted to try one of the doors to see what my grandmother had been doing with all her

“patients” but I feared she’d hear the creaking hinges. When I returned, she looked at the sandals I wore and chuckled.

“What?”

She went to my room and pointed to my tennis shoes that were on the ground next to the bed.

I shook my head no and pointed to my sandals. I’m not sure why. I just didn’t like this woman telling me to do things. My mother never told me to do anything. And anyway, who did she think she was, dictating what kind of shoes I wore? This wasn’t Cuba.

She shrugged and walked past me, grinning, into the hallway.

We left the house only to be bombarded by the sweltering heat wave of the summer. My grandmother walked to the street towards the gold car, but instead of getting in the car, she turned right and walked past it. I hesitated and then followed her, disappointed that we weren’t going to drive the car to our destination. And then a worse thought hit me—we were actually going to walk through the neighborhood. I caught up with her fast, stubby legs wanting to be as close as possible. Not that it would have helped. My grandmother had to be seventy or so—what could she do to those scary Mexican guys I had seen the day before?

We walked on the right side of the street, since there weren’t any sidewalks. My sandals slapped against the pavement and echoed through the hollow neighborhood. There weren’t that many people out at the moment; perhaps they were at work? A few old people sat on their porches staring at us when we walked by. We also passed a few

ladies who chatted vigorously with one another. They called out to my grandmother in Spanish and waved. She just smiled and nodded.

The houses blurred as we walked by and I focused only on the back of my grandmother's head as I walked behind her. As I stopped focusing on everything around us, I gradually began to notice something else. My sandals had become unbearably hot, and they became hotter, until my feet were burning as if I had placed them over a blazing bonfire.

"Holy crap!" I ran to one of the yards, unfortunately without any grass and pulled my sandals off, but as soon as my feet touched the dirt lawn, they began to burn again. The lawn wasn't as hot as the street, but it still seared the soles of my feet. If the street was a bonfire, the dirt ground was an oven set on high. Through the scorching pain on the bottoms of my feet and the incessant ouches and ows that burst forth from my mouth, I heard my grandmother laughing. I looked up as I hopped from foot to foot.

My grandmother was bent at the waist with her hands on her knees laughing. She stood up and said, "Aha *tonta*." She pointed at me and chuckled a few times. She ignored my glares. Between laughs she said something else I did not understand. Finally, her laughter died down and then she said, "Okay, *vamos tonta*." She motioned with her head for me to follow her. I made a frustrated noise in my throat.

"You knew this would happen! You let me come out here with sandals on and you knew this would happen!"

She flipped her wrist backward, and said, "*Vamos tonta*."

I put my sandals back on my feet. What else could I do? My grandmother began to walk, expecting me to follow but I would not walk behind her like her own personal

poodle. So for the next three miles, I trudged through the yellow and brown lawns. Of course, I made my way into the street whenever a chained dog barked or someone sat out on their front lawn. I wasn't that stupid.

By the time we reached our destination, my feet were beyond repair. The straps had rubbed the skin raw on the top of my foot creating a sea of blisters. The skin on the bottom of my feet had been stripped away creating a non-stop scalding sensation with every step I took. I walked on the inner arches of my feet, like a pigeon-toed dog with thorns in its paws. I gritted my teeth and forced the hisses and moans down my throat—I would not give my grandmother the satisfaction of hearing my pain.

I'd have walked a thousand more miles until my feet broke off at the ankles, if only our destination had turned out differently. As I spied the red brick building splayed across a mile of deadened yellow grass, the star spangled banner waving high on a flag pole, and the large sign that said, "Go Conquistadors!" in peeling letters, the pain in my feet vanished and panic swept throughout my body.

I stopped in my tracks. "School! You're enrolling me in school?"

My grandmother's steps didn't falter as she trudged up the path toward the front doors.

Her laughter floated on the air, wrapping me in its mockery.

En El Presente

No noise greets me as I cross the doorway into the other room. Rather, I am confronted by a large poster on a tripod filled to the edges with pictures. I walk up to the poster surprised. I had thought I was going to be the one with the surprises today.

Whoever had printed the pictures, had printed them on glossy paper, which reflects annoyingly in the lights of the room. I have to move my head around to clearly see the contents of the photographs. My eyes skim over the entire poster. Smiles in all of them. The woman in each of the photographs stood or sat, sometimes with her arms around others, sometimes by herself. She does not look as I remembered her. Even when you think you know somebody, a picture can remind you, you don't.

She was beautiful at all ages. I smile in spite of myself. Wait, there. One picture, on the left corner. It is a close-up profile. She looks away at something that I can't see. Even with her gray hair and numerous wrinkles, she is stunning in her own way. Her eyes may not be looking at the camera but they tell me things I wish I had known.

I can't look at the poster any longer. I move around and look at the room. It is quite bare except for the rows of benches on either side of the aisle that lead to the front where flowers of magnificent orientations surround a deep red, chestnut coffin. The coffin is closed although next to it is another easel with a black and white photograph. My breath hitches in my throat at the picture and the coffin. Two images that I did not imagine could ever come together. It's a paradox. It's odd...I did not believe that the one I looked up to, the one I loved, even if I wasn't always sure of that love, could be a victim to the circle of life. But they live and they die and we must live and let die, as Paul would say. Yet, I was unable to see that until now.

I look around at those that fill the pews. There are quite a few people, perhaps forty or so in the small room. If they are alone, they stare ahead. If they sit with someone, they whisper silently with their companion.

A head in the front row on the left side of the pews turns around and finds me. A man, aged by life, the sun, and a short stint of hard labor, stares at me. He does not nod nor does he smile, simply looks at me for a few moments. I know his name, Charles. He called me last week, to inform me of the funeral. His shoulders rise with a deep breath, a breath he must not have taken since he turned around and spied me.

It breaks the spell between us and he turns around to face the coffin, once again. Finally, I find my feet and walk forward down the aisle across the maroon carpet. The second row on the right side is empty. This will definitely be enough room. I sit down, situating my skirt as I do, so that the folds of the skirt do not bunch beneath me—something I only have to do when I go to church. The rest of the time, I wear pants or shorts.

I want to look at Charles again, and more specifically the woman who sits next to him, but I make myself close my eyes and pray instead. If there was a bench below my feet, I would kneel like I had been taught to do in Catholic churches, but there is not. I concentrate and focus, letting all the fears and anticipation leave me, so that I may try to hear the spirit of the deceased.

Tres

As soon as my grandmother and the principal exited his office, I knew she had been successful in enrolling me in school. The principal's face was pale, the color of the white apron my grandmother wore to cook in. I fumed the entire way back to the house.

How did my grandmother do it? I couldn't imagine that my mother left my important paperwork behind before she hopped out the window and sped off in her car. It had to be against the law to let someone into school without the proper documents. Right? Perhaps my grandmother used some voodoo witch power of hers to convince him? Or a threat! He did look frightened when we left. And there hadn't been anyone else in the entire place to save me or the principal from this cursed enrollment. It was only the principal and us. Had she called him to meet us there? And when?

When we arrived at the house, I limped to my bedroom, finally understanding the pain of the boy with the disease in his feet. I had just fallen onto the bed, when I heard my grandmother shuffle into the room. She grabbed my foot. I almost cried out in pain, but she began to massage something soothing onto my foot and the pain faded away.

I sat up. She had pulled a stool up to the bed and rubbed onto my foot a brown paste from a clear jar. Her hands moved along the contours of my foot, kneading the paste into the blisters and sores. For a moment 'infection' crossed my mind, but the thought went away. Something that felt so good couldn't be bad. When she finished with my right foot, she worked on the left.

Five minutes later, she finished, and screwed the lid back on the jar before placing it on the table next to the candles.

I murmured thank you, when she stood up. She looked down at me and gave a slight nod. We had crossed an invisible line, and neither one of us knew what to do about it. My grandmother made the next move. She went to my suitcase and pulled out a ratty pair of K-Swiss tennis shoes that were covered in layers of brown dirt. She spoke, pointing at the shoes.

“We’re leaving again? Can I just stay here, please?”

She tossed the shoes at me. They almost hit me in my face. So much for that invisible line.

On Saturdays, my grandmother did not stay inside the house and receive the people, but instead went out in the neighborhoods to those that could not get out of their houses. For two hours that Saturday, we walked from house to house through the labyrinth of the neighborhoods. Most of the time, we handed whoever answered the door a jar or pouch from her large bag and my grandmother spoke with them and then we left. Sometimes we went into the houses, where my grandmother disappeared down the halls, and I waited in a living room or kitchen with someone until she finished. I never spoke to anyone and no one spoke to me. I assumed my grandmother told them that I didn’t speak Spanish.

After two grueling hours, we walked down a street where the houses thinned out until finally only businesses lined both sides of the street. At the end we rounded a corner, into a bustling market area downtown. Carts, booths, and stores lined the streets and men, women, and children walked between them. I smelled a mixture of things: cooking meat, sweet pastries, and the sweat from a crowd of people baking in the hot open air.

We walked down the market, looking at this booth and that. Everyone knew my grandmother. We hadn't even made it to our first booth when a man ran up to us with two large Dixie cups filled with a red juice that had oranges and other colorful fruit floating in it. I gulped it down, as he and my grandmother spoke. Others came up to us from time to time with smiles and handshakes, and even a few hugs for my grandmother. My grandmother bought items from each booth, although I never saw her exchange money with anyone. The owners scrambled to give her their tortillas, their drinks, their oranges, their bags of sugar for free.

The day passed by in a whirlwind. If the whirlwind had a sound it would have been the rapid tones of Spanish blowing me off balance with each syllable. Although by the end of the day, I had a sense of Spanish. I could tell when someone pleaded, or when someone showered my grandmother in thanks. Most of all, I knew when someone spoke about me. Perhaps, I only picked up on their body language or the tone of the language, but that's more than I had been able to do the day before and it surprised me.

By the time we made it to a clothing shop, the last stop of the day, my arms ached with the weight of our buys and my feet ached within my tennis shoes. Doña Lorena owned the clothing shop we stopped in. She greeted us at the door with a long plastic bag from which peeked a few hangers. The two talked and then my grandmother took the bag and draped it over her arm. We left soon after and made the long trip back to her house.

That night we had *molé*. I wasn't even hungry after a full day of walking. The bed called to my aching tired body, but my grandmother refused to allow me to sleep without eating. *Molé* ended up being lumps of meat under a chocolate-tasting sauce. I could only stomach a few pieces on my own, but I force fed myself the rest because my grandmother

would not stop repeating, “*¡Come! ¡Come!*” every few minutes. After dinner, I went straight to my room and fell into a deep sleep.

The next day, God slapped me in the face.

I woke up to my grandmother speaking in Spanish to me. She bustled about grabbing the clothes I had left on the floor. When I wiped the sleep from my eyes and pushed myself up on my elbow, she pointed at me and then at the plastic bag we had picked up from Doña Lorena that hung on the door.

“Okay, okay,” I said, anything to shut her up. I grabbed some panties and a bra. I’d look at whatever she wanted me to look at after I showered.

Ten minutes later, I stood in front of my door with the plastic bag in my hand.

“No way. There’s no way,” I said. My grandmother must have heard me because she came down the hallway. She started pointing and shaking her finger at me as soon as she saw me in my underwear and bra. That was the least of her problems. She started pointing at the thing hanging on the door and then at me.

“Why do you want me to wear this?”

“*Para la iglesia.*”

“What?”

She threw her hands in the air in frustration, then pointed to the large Jesus on the wall.

“For Jesus?”

She shook her head at me. “*Iglesia. Iglesia.*” She put her forefingers together so they pointed upward. What was she...wait...a steeple?

“Church? We’re going to church?” I shook my head no.

“*Sí, sí.*”

I let out a groan. “Okay, but if I’m going I’m not wearing that!” I pointed to the thing on the door.

My grandmother crossed her arms and gave me a cold stare. I crossed my arms and stared back. We stood there for what seemed like hours, until I looked away. The intensity behind my grandmother’s eyes burned through me until I couldn’t hold it any longer.

She smiled at my defeat and turned around and walked down the hallway. I made a frustrated noise and stomped my foot. Childish, but considering what I had to wear, it made sense.

A canary yellow dress made out of lace and silk hung loosely on my thin frame. It had yellow ruffles on the sleeves and a yellow bow that tied around my waist and fell limply in front. It hugged my neck, choking me like a boa constrictor and hid all of my dirty bits from God and Heaven above. The ensemble even came with white panty hose and matching white sandals. My short brown hair looked dingy against the yellow collar. A slight wave had formed on the right side of my hair and no matter how much I brushed it, it wouldn’t go straight. I huffed at the mirror.

I looked like a school-girl-gone-bad and everyone at church would see it. I was sixteen-years-old! The dress looked like something a freaking seven-year-old should wear. If my mother saw me now—she’d die. Did my mother stand here once in a similar dress her mother made her wear? Is that why she left?

My grandmother smiled when she saw me, and then smoothed out a wrinkle on the front of my dress. I fought not to vomit. We took the gold Cadillac and picked up Gloria on our way.

St. Agustin's was a light tan color with dark grey roofing and had one steeple, attached to the back of a long building, and it wasn't all that tall. What looked like a two story house stood at the very front of the church with Romanesque pillars. It was a plain church but better kept than the area in which it was set.

The polished wooden doors stood open wide and were taller than the height of two men. Other brown people flocked toward its doors, speaking rapidly to one another. Every other girl my age wore something horribly similar to what I did, which made me feel less like a freak. I have to admit, the boys had it worse; they wore long sleeve shirts and pants, some even had on suits and ties even though it was well over a hundred degrees already.

Just like in the market, people greeted my grandmother and Gloria as if they were queens. I stood by their side, miserable already, and we weren't even in the church. When we did make it inside, I almost stumbled. The ceiling stretched high, with bright lights shining down on us. Statues of Mary, Jesus, and his disciples lined the walls between the glass mosaics that depicted saints doing various deeds like healing the sick or praying on a hill.

The pews were filled, and for a moment, happiness filled me at the idea of having to leave. But my grandmother dipped her hand in a bowl of water next to the door, made the sign of the cross, and trudged forward. Gloria followed. I looked at the bowl for a moment and then followed Gloria up the middle aisle.

About halfway down the aisle, a bad feeling overwhelmed me until I cringed. That feeling of someone's eyes on my back made me turn around and look over my shoulder. It didn't take long to figure out whose eyes were trained on me. Sitting at the edge of the aisle, on the left, was the girl that had left my grandmother's house a few days ago. The same girl from my dream.

I almost didn't recognize her with her hair down and curled instead of up in a slicked back bun. She wore a black taffeta dress that covered her arms and fell to the floor. The only recognizable thing were her eyes, black fire, outlined in thick black eyeliner and blacker mascara.

I pulled at the neckline of my dress, hot all of a sudden. Who was the girl? And why did she hate me? Because it was obvious that she did. She'd only seen me twice now, and her hatred could be read on every feature of her face. I walked a little faster and caught up with my grandmother and Gloria in front of me, wanting to be as far from the girl as possible.

We finally came to the third row from the front, where, amazingly, a space for three had been spared at the end of the aisle. My grandmother kneeled, making the sign of the cross over her chest. Gloria did the same. I bent my head and sat down. My grandmother and Gloria were on their knees on a bench that folded out from the pew in front of us, their hands folded in prayer. My grandmother looked at me and frowned. She turned to Gloria and whispered something to her. Gloria's head whipped toward me.

"What are you doing?" she whispered.

"Nothing," I whispered back.

She frowned. "I see that. Why aren't you praying?"

“I’ve never been to church. I don’t know what to do.”

She clutched her chest and her mouth opened in shock. Her eyes bugged out and for a moment it looked as if she would suffer a heart attack.

“Never. Been. To church.”

I couldn’t tell if it was a statement or a question, so I remained silent under her accusing eyes. She shook her head and then made a quick sign of the cross. She closed her eyes and pressed her hands tightly in prayer. Her lips moved but no words came out. She probably prayed for my salvation from eternal Hell. My grandmother stared at me with lips pursed. She looked to the altar and began praying again.

Church consisted mostly of watching a graying priest in gold and green robes walking around the altar giving the sermon in Spanish. I worked hard not to fall asleep to his monotone voice. I woke only to the unexpected movements of the entire church. Everybody was privy to an invisible signal that alerted them to sit, stand, and kneel at different points of the service. The first time it occurred, I remained seated until Gloria turned to me with a fiery glare and told me to stand up. From then on, I sat, stood, and kneeled a second behind everyone else. By the end of the service, my back and knees ached.

At one point everyone filed into line and the guy in the robe placed something in their mouths and then gave them something to drink out of a gold goblet. My grandmother made me go to the front and cross my arms in an “X” over my chest. The man in the robes made the sign of the cross over me and spoke some words. The only other people I saw that happen to were little children. I hated that I didn’t know what anything meant, as if I wasn’t already lost here in the new world I had been dumped into.

An hour and thirty minutes later my boredom ended. I think I walked faster to the car than Gloria or my grandmother did. For the first time since I'd been abandoned, a smile formed on my lips at the thought of returning to the pink shack. Fifteen minutes later, we pulled up to a sea green house with white trim. Battered trucks and worn down cars littered the block and crowded the driveway. A spot just wide enough for the Cadillac had been conveniently saved directly in front of the house.

“Where are we?”

Gloria turned around and looked at me. “We are at your *tía* Juanita’s.”

I wanted to say, “great, another aunt?” Instead, I asked, “Your sister?”

She raised her eyebrow and looked at my grandmother who ignored her and got out of the car.

“Your *madre* tell you nothing. Juanita is your *madre*’s sister.” She got out of the car, without waiting to see my reaction.

My mother has a sister? A mom, an aunt, and now a sister. Did she have another child somewhere that she forgot to mention too? Any other important person she had kept me away from? My father?

I set my mouth in a firm line, refusing to let the lump forming at the base of my throat to rise. I opened the car door so I could meet another freaking aunt.

Gloria and my grandmother were already inside the house by the time I made it up the steps and to the door. I reached out for the handle and hesitated. I was going to meet my aunt, my mother’s sister. She probably hadn’t even known I existed. Would she know why my mother had left me? Or even why she left Laredo in the first place?

Perhaps my mother had stopped by here on her way out the city. Maybe she was still in the city and, if not, well, this aunt might know where my mother was. I needed these answers. I opened the door.

A din of noise assaulted my ears as soon as I opened the screen door, followed by sweet and spicy vapors of food that created a warmth deep inside my stomach. My mouth started watering for food that I probably would not recognize or even be able to pronounce. Words and laughter floated from other rooms—words I didn't recognize and laughter that I wished for.

At the end of the entryway my grandmother and Gloria were talking to a few people and had forgotten about me. To my left stood a small table filled with pictures. It didn't take long to figure out who my aunt was. She had long straight black hair and the same small button nose that my mother had. My aunt's face was longer and narrower like Gloria's, but she still had my grandmother's small thin lips. Children filled the pictures as did a man, whom I assumed was her husband. I came to the last picture and stopped short.

My hand reached out for the frame and I pulled it closer for a better look. The maroon frame held an old black and white picture of two girls standing in front of a white truck. One girl, older and taller than the other, appeared about ten years of age, and the other looked about eight-years-old. They both had their arms around each other's shoulders smiling with matching toothless gaps at the camera. I rubbed my thumb over the figure of the older girl—my mother.

Despite her young age, the contours of her face peeked through the youthful chubbiness of her cheeks. The other girl was my aunt. I stared at the picture willing some kind of feeling to rise up. My mother looked happy with her sister.

A feminine voice rang out in Spanish directly behind me. Startled, I hurriedly placed the frame down and turned around.

A young woman, a few inches shorter than I, stood smiling. She wore her Sunday best, a purple blouse and a flowery skirt, with her hair pulled back in a French braid. My Aunt Juanita.

“She didn’t tell you either?” Gloria said to my Aunt Juanita. The woman’s smile faltered as she turned to look at Gloria and my grandmother. The people who had been speaking with them had left, leaving us four women in the hallway together.

“Tell me what? *Máma, ¿Quién es ella?*” my Aunt Juanita said.

My grandmother looked at me and then at my Aunt Juanita, her lips set firmly and a tiredness forming around her eyes. She sighed and turned around, heading through a doorway as she shook her head once. Gloria, hand on her hip and a smirk on her face, appeared more than happy to relate the news of my identity.

“Juanita say *hola* to your niece, Martha. Rosa’s daughter.”

The woman’s head snapped back to me the same time Gloria walked away. Juanita’s wide eyes looked me over and within a few seconds she had studied every part of me. Her lips trembled and her mouth opened slightly. Her head whipped toward the screen door.

“Rosa?” she whispered. She looked for someone to come through the door that never would. Guess my mother hadn’t stopped by here on her way out of town.

“She’s not here.”

She reminded me of a young girl, scared and hopeful. She didn’t even argue with me, just said, “Oh.” I fidgeted, uncomfortable under her lost look, but she didn’t seem to really see me. Her eyes looked at something distant in time. After a few moments, she came back, shaking her head.

She cleared her throat. “Hi, I’m Juanita.”

“Martha.”

“Nice to meet you,” she said. I nodded.

Awkward silence. I stood quiet, too shy to break it.

“So Martha, how old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“Oh,” she pondered this, “You’re, uh, very tall for your age.”

“Yeah.”

She nodded her head as she smoothed out her skirt. “Well, let’s introduce you to everyone.” She smiled wide and genuinely, unlike my mother, and gestured at the doorway my grandmother and Gloria had disappeared through.

I hesitated for a second, scared of what or who I would find through there. After a second I took a step and then another, as Juanita followed behind me. Through the doorway, a number of brown faces and bodies pressed together in a living room, involved in conversations with one another. Dark haired children ran around in their miniature versions of suits and dresses. My grandmother and Gloria were nowhere in sight.

Juanita’s unsure hands placed themselves on my upper arms, a sign of comfort. No one noticed us at first. Juanita whistled a loud note and all the voices stopped at once.

Every pair of brown and black eyes turned to us; even the children stopped and turned to attention. A few heads popped out of a doorway across the room.

“*¡Familia! Este es la hija de Rosa—Martha. ¡Bienvenido a su!*” The words sounded friendly, but that was all that I picked up.

My body tensed. Mouths dropped, eyes bugged out, and bodies stilled.

“What did you just say?” I whispered to Juanita, turning my head slightly to see her face.

A small line formed across her brow, confused at my question. “This is your family. I told them who you were.”

“Family?” And with that one word, a hundred brown bodies came to life and converged on me with smiles and hugs.

My family. What felt like a hundred people turned out to be only about thirty or forty people crammed into a tight space. For the next couple of hours, they passed me from person to person and welcomed me home, even though this wasn't my home. They showered me with cheeky kisses and large bear hugs; no personal space existed between us. One young woman with a baby on her hip pulled me into a one armed hug and kissed the side of my cheek. The tallest and widest guy there, who called himself “Tanque,” pulled me into a big hug so that my face was squished into his belly and my arms were stuck to my sides.

It didn't take long for them to realize I didn't speak Spanish. Many switched to English or broken English but most were limited to Spanish. I would have laughed at the

way we tried to communicate if I hadn't been so disoriented and shocked. I kept an uncomfortable smile on my face and nodded or shook my head at most questions.

No one mentioned my mother or asked where she was, but only showered me with their attention, commenting on my height or asking how I liked Laredo. A few invited me to their houses or to future events. They encouraged me to get a plate of food, said how skinny I was and made disapproving faces at my thin figure. My grandmother and Gloria had helped to prepare the food in the kitchen while the family moved me about. Even the children tugged on my ugly yellow dress, asking me to play with their cute, squeaky, accented voices. Juanita introduced me to her husband and her children, my cousins, chubby eight-year-old boy, Tomas, and a three-year-old girl named Lilia who had large black ringlets and a big smile. She attached herself to me and called me 'prima,' which Juanita said meant cousin in Spanish.

Everyone showered me with love and acceptance. Even so, I felt a growing pressure in my chest with each smiling face, each hug, each compliment, or invitation to their home. After a while, I couldn't stand it any longer and finally asked someone to show me to the bathroom.

I stumbled into the bathroom, shut the door, and dropped to the floor. The tears I had been holding back for the last few hours broke free and my body rocked in sobs. A family. People who showered me with love the very first time they met me. She had denied me this. Denied me this love all these years. Ran from this place and kept me away from them. I had cousins, aunts, uncles, great aunts even. And she had never allowed me to be a part of this.

Juanita found me in there awhile later and knelt down beside me. She fidgeted, and then after a few moments she wrapped her arms around me and pulled me close. When the tears finally stopped I pulled back, wiped them away with my arm, and looked at Juanita. She didn't look like my mother, didn't even wear makeup. Yet, Juanita had shown me more love in the last few minutes than my mother ever had, but for some reason I couldn't stop thinking about my mother.

“So you don't know where she is?”

Juanita shook her head. “I was going to ask you the same.”

I laughed and a few more tears escaped. “She just left me here and snuck out a window. I mean, who does that?”

Juanita's mouth opened and shut a few times trying to find the right words until she closed it without an answer.

“Do you know why she left in the first place?”

“I have a good idea,” she said. I considered asking what she thought but I stopped. What did it matter? We sat quiet for a few moments.

“My mother might know where she's at,” Juanita added.

“Will you ask her?” The hope in my voice disgusted me. I had a family who welcomed me and still I wanted to leave. I mean, they didn't even know me. It wasn't like they'd miss me or anything. And I couldn't live here with some grandmother and her stupid rules. I was doing fine before with a shitty mother; at least I did what I wanted. Most of all, I wanted to find her and tell her she was not allowed to abandon me like this. And how the hell did my mother expect to take care of herself? She couldn't!

Juanita shook her head no. “If she knows, she won't tell me.”

The silence became awkward. “Well, you have a nice family,” I said.

The spell broke, her brown eyes turned to me, and she smiled.

“*Nosotros tenemos un buen familia.*” Then for my sake, she translated, “We have a good family.”

An hour later the sun set and the family left the house one by one, until my grandmother, Gloria, and I were the only ones left with Juanita and her family. I played with Lilia while everyone cleaned up the house and the kitchen. I was exhausted. Too many faces and too many questions from strangers who acted as if we had known each other our whole lives. And then there had been Gloria running around telling everyone I didn’t speak Spanish and could you believe it? A Mexican who couldn’t speak Spanish! My grandmother just sat there and watched me the entire time.

We left soon after everything was cleaned up, took Gloria home, and returned to the Pepto Bismol house. Before I went down the hallway to my room, my grandmother stopped me. I waited in the kitchen as she went back into the living room. She came back to the kitchen with a brand new black backpack. She handed it to me and stood there awkwardly.

I unzipped it and found paper, pens, two spirals, and a binder inside. I needed another spiral. The one I had was almost full. I zipped it back up. I had almost forgotten that tomorrow would be my first day of school here in Laredo. A groan almost escaped my mouth at the thought of school, but my grandmother might have taken it the wrong way. Her gesture had been nice. I had always had to buy my own second-hand backpacks from Goodwill and use them until a strap broke or the seam ripped.

“Thanks.”

She nodded her head once and said, “*De nada.*”

Discomfort crept around us, so I turned to go to my room but stopped and turned around.

“Where is my mother?”

My grandmother’s face didn’t change. Her eyes searched mine hard, until I had to look away.

“*No.*”

“No you don’t know where she is? Or no you’re not going to tell me?”

“*No,*” She repeated, before walking past me into the hallway.

Desperate I asked, “Why did she leave me?” But her retreating form never stopped to tell me. I stood holding the backpack in my hand as I heard a door close down the hall.

My grandmother wouldn’t tell me. Then again, maybe she couldn’t explain what I wanted to know because of the language barrier. If that was the case, then that only left me with one more option.

I needed to learn Spanish—become one of them, earn their trust, and figure things out on my own.

Cuatro

My first-day-of-school outfit consisted of a faded graphic t-shirt with the logo of a local rock band from Memphis on the front, shorts, and my white tennis shoes—I refused to stand out on my first day. My grandmother gave a narrowed look at my outfit before she rushed me to get my backpack and we headed out the door and into the early morning darkness. I should have been thankful she didn't make me wear another awful dress, like something pink. We took the same route as we had that Friday before, except this time instead of being the only ones on the street, we were among many teenagers going the same way, all of whom stared at us as we walked past. I kept my eyes focused on the heels of my grandmother's sandals the entire time.

When we arrived at the school, my grandmother headed straight to the front office. I didn't have time to study every group of kids on the lawn, except to notice that everyone appeared Mexican. A first at a new school.

A girl with glasses, a student like me, worked at the front desk and an older woman on the phone sat at another smaller desk behind the main one. Offices lined the walls to the left, and despite it being the first day of school, we were the only ones in the office. My grandmother headed straight to the girl and spoke to her in Spanish.

The girl regarded me as my grandmother spoke, looked me up and down as if she were assessing me as a threat. I was used to such looks at new schools. After a moment, she turned around to a file cabinet against the wall. She came back and handed my grandmother a few pieces of paper. My grandmother shuffled the papers around, looked them over once, and then handed them to me. She pointed to the top one, a white sheet

that had a class schedule, and then showed me the school map beneath it. She gave my arm a hard pat, which sort of hurt, and then left without any other instructions.

Wait...what? She's going to leave me like *that*?

Terror spread throughout my chest for a moment. At every other school I had gone to it had been routine—go in alone, new schedule, go to classes, go home. No one knew me or my mother. But Laredo was different. People knew my grandmother and that brought attention on me.

I looked at my schedule. Well at least, I was in an art class. My only saving grace. Besides all the advanced classes my grandmother had enrolled me in, something else on the schedule caught my eye. My name was printed on the top, but instead of saying “Martha George” it read “Martha Gonzalez.” I walked up to the desk and pointed it out to the girl.

“My last name is George, not Gonzalez.”

The girl frowned. “Isn't your grandmother Doña Gonzalez?”

“Yeah. But that's not my last name.”

She rolled her eyes as she turned around to look through the files again. George didn't sound like a Mexican name. My mother's last name was George too, so I had always assumed it was my father's name and my father wasn't Mexican. Wherever the hell George came from, it didn't matter. My name was *not* Gonzalez. My grandmother couldn't dictate my life by changing my last name to whatever she God damned felt like.

“There's no George here. Your *abuela* said your last name was Gonzalez.”

I wanted to take her stupid glasses off and stomp on them. It didn't matter what my grandmother had said, couldn't she understand that? It wasn't my name. It was

useless to argue with the girl because she'd probably just roll those damn eyes. It was 7:30 so I had fifteen minutes to get to class. I asked the girl for directions to the library and then left. After school, I'd have to have a talk with my grandmother about this name situation.

Halfway to the library, I got lost. There were so many people in the hallways that it was hard to maneuver. And the noise was unbearable. And the mixture of body sprays and too much cologne made me want to gag. This was why I hated big schools. The library was empty except for a young librarian who looked no older than me, seated at a desk on the far side. I walked to her and asked if she had any books on learning Spanish. The woman gave a small laugh, but then stopped when she realized I wasn't joking. I tried not to narrow my eyes at her in annoyance, but maybe I did, because she hurriedly showed me to the right shelf and pointed out a few books.

Although the books were ten years old, they appeared brand new, which confirmed that I was probably the first person in ten years to attend this school and not know Spanish. Perfect. I checked out three that looked easy to understand and headed to my first class. I had four minutes to get there.

When I made it to the correct wing of the building, the halls were clearing up. I was searching for room 3B when someone grabbed me from behind and shoved me into a girl's bathroom.

"Hey!" I said.

When I got my balance, I saw pink tile and three stalls with white paint peeling off the doors. I was surrounded by three tough looking girls led by the girl with the black eyes. She stood a few feet in front of the group with the most pissed off I'm-so-ready-to-

kick-your-ass look, complete with penciled-in eyebrows, an overabundance of mascara and eyeliner, and lips that had been outlined in dark red lip liner but had not been filled in with lipstick.

Her hair was parted down the middle and slicked down with gel. Without her weird makeup she could probably be pretty with her small button nose and almond-shaped eyes. She reminded me of my mother, but at least my mother didn't look like a scary Chucky doll. The other girls stood around the dark-eyed girl and had the same style in makeup and clothes.

I'd been in a lot of fights when I was younger—everyone wanted to mess with the new girl. But no one had ever tried to fight me the first day of school. Something about the way this girl looked at me, how she had looked at me at church—this was personal, at least for her.

“What's your problem?” I asked.

The black-eyed girl spoke in Spanish and took a step toward me. I might have been more scared if I knew what the hell she was saying. It was like listening to the Tasmanian devil, slobbering and yapping about God knew what.

“I don't know what you're saying,” I said.

The girl stopped and tilted her head for a moment. And then she laughed, triggering a laugh from her minions, like this was a bad cartoon stand-off.

“Look *chicas*, we got a *wea* here with us.” They laughed again. “That *bruja* grandmother of yours chose a *wea* over me?”

“What are you talking about?”

The girl took a step closer to me, followed by the three other girls. Instinctively, I took a step back. I could take on one, but four—I'd be dead.

“What? You don't understand English either, *fea*?”

“Look, I don't know what you're talking, but I need to get to class.” I tried to sidestep around her and her friends, but she stopped me by shoving me up against the wall. As my back hit the cold tile, I smelled the strong acrid scent of the perfume she must have bathed in that morning. My heart beat a little faster. Could I not get a freaking break this week? First my mother left me, then my grandmother ordered me around like Hitler, and now I was going to be jumped on my first day of school.

“You can leave when I say you can leave, *puta*, you hear me?” I didn't respond. Because I would probably say something extremely stupid which would make the punches come harder. I focused on keeping my face under control. Flat with no emotion.

“Listen, you tell that *bruja* of yours she better watch her back. And you, *fea*, stay out of my way. I run this school, and I'm more than happy to beat your ass. But since it's the first day, you get a free pass.” She slapped the wall right by my head to emphasize her threat. I flinched, which made her smile. She gave me one more intense look, bared her teeth, and then walked out of the bathroom followed by her friends.

A nervous sweat broke out on my neck. I leaned back on the wall for support. So now my grandmother's enemies were my enemies? This family thing was not what I had expected. I leaned my head against the cool tile.

A shrill bell echoed in the bathroom.

“Damn it.” I banged my fists backwards against the wall, then headed to my first class.

I finally found room 3B. The teacher, a woman, was speaking in the front, explaining the course—Algebra 2. She stopped speaking and turned to look at me, as did the entire class.

Ducking my head, I said, “Sorry,” and hurried to a seat in the back.

If only that could have been enough.

“You’re late,” the teacher, Mrs. Herrera, said. Had I not just said sorry? I sat in the desk. Mrs. Herrera, with her bird-like features, stared at me pointedly, her cheeks drawn in and her eyes squinted behind her glasses. She was waiting for me to respond, but I didn’t. The less one said, the better. At least, that was always the case for me at other schools.

A guy next to me snickered behind his hand. I wanted to turn and give him a nasty look but I held back the urge. Mrs. Herrera realized I wasn’t going to say anything else. She grabbed a clipboard.

“Name?”

“Martha George.”

She looked through the list. “I don’t have a George.”

“Gonzalez then.” Stupid grandmother.

“¿*La nieta de* María Gonzalez?” Mrs. Herrera’s voice changed. It didn’t sound so disapproving anymore. My classmates turned in their seats and stared at me.

Not again. “What?”

I wanted to hide behind my hair. More Spanish. Confused lines appeared on Mrs. Herrera’s forehead. She was slowly figuring it out.

“You are Doña María’s granddaughter, yes?”

I nodded yes.

Mrs. Herrera smiled, her cold features softened. She hurriedly walked to me and held out her hand. “Welcome, Martha. I’m so glad to have you in my class.” I shook her hand, my cheeks burning with all the attention. When I pulled my hand back, I murmured thank you.

She added, “And don’t worry about your tardiness. It’s your first day here.” With a last smile, she returned to the front and began speaking again about the course but with a new found bit of excitement in her voice and gestures.

I wanted to hide, to run out of the classroom. Be as far away from here as possible. For the rest of the period, my classmates stared at me or whispered with neighbors, giving me furtive glances over their shoulders. I even heard one girl sitting two seats in front of me say, “I can’t believe she can’t speak—” only to be interrupted by her neighbor who said, “I know! *Loca*.”

That wasn’t the most uncomfortable part of the class, though. At times, Mrs. Herrera would translate something she had said in Spanish. Other times, students would raise their hand and ask a question in Spanish and she would respond in Spanish. Those times, she would turn to me and translate everything that had been said in Spanish to English.

“Martha, Jose asked how many tests I would give this semester. The answer is four.”

Death would have been so much sweeter than the embarrassment I suffered.

In each class that morning, it felt like everyone whispered as soon as I entered. I suspected they spoke about the incident with the black-eyed girl or my relation to my grandmother. A few of the teachers made comments when they called my name out. “Oh! You’re *Doña*’s granddaughter?” Or my lack of ability to speak Spanish. Being quiet and keeping my head down was not going to allow me to be invisible at this school.

This was the second worst day of my life. The first— being left in Laredo.

At lunch, the cafeteria was filled with students, even though some went onto the lawn to eat their lunch. Kids sat at tables grouped around their plastic trays. Most walked from table to table and yelled at each other from across the room. A few monitors walked around trying to keep the peace.

I didn’t even get a chance to look around the cafeteria for an empty seat after I grabbed a tray of food, before a short girl with jet black hair pulled back in a ponytail and a deep widow’s peak walked up to me.

“Martha?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m your *prima*—Laura. *Vamos*. You can sit with me.” Before I responded she headed in the direction of a table on the far wall.

When I caught up to her, I asked, “What’s *vamos*?”

“I thought it was just a rumor that you couldn’t speak Spanish.”

“Not this time.” There was an edge to my voice. Why did everyone assume that I should know Spanish? Was I the only Mexican in the world who didn’t know how to speak Spanish? I mean, what if you were orphaned and then adopted by a non-Mexican or non-Spanish speaking family?

“*Vamos* means let’s go.”

We came to a table and sat down. A few students sat at the end while we had the other end to ourselves.

“So, you’re my cousin?”

“Yeah, my *abuelo* was your *abuela*’s brother, but he died five years ago.”

“So *abuelo* is grandfather?”

“Yep. And *abuela* is grandmother.”

We started eating our lunch. “So how come you weren’t at Juanita’s house yesterday?”

Laura laughed. “Our whole *familia* couldn’t even fit in this cafeteria. Besides my mom and I sort of aren’t welcome.” She stuck her fork in a peach and took a bite.

“What do you mean ‘sort of’?”

“Okay, we’re not welcome at all.”

“Why?” I asked.

She ate another peach then shrugged. “Your grandmother doesn’t like my mom.”

“What did your mom do?”

“She didn’t do anything,” Laura said quickly, then a little unsurely, “at least, I don’t think so. I really don’t know why your *abuela* doesn’t like my mom. Just that they’ve always had something going on for as long as I remember.” That’s weird. As Laura said, sort of. My grandmother didn’t seem like the kind of woman to forgive and forget.

“And you and I hanging out at lunch aren’t going to cause the next Civil War?”

She smiled. “Would you care if it did?”

As I was about to answer, a loud crash echoed through the cafeteria followed by laughter. I turned around to find the black-eyed girl surrounded by her group of friends and a bunch of tough looking guys wearing button up grey shirts and slicked back hair. They sat on top of a few tables and were laughing at a girl who had dropped her tray. One boy who chewed on a cigarette, stood up and did an impression of the girl dropping her tray. Everyone laughed and he sat back down and kissed the black-eyed girl.

The girl who had dropped her tray looked as if she was trying not to cry as she picked her food off the floor. Her friends had already left her and her embarrassment behind.

I turned around disgusted and shook my head. Laura was looking closely at me.

“I also heard Marcella is pissed at you,” she said.

“You hear a lot of things. So, the witch’s name is Marcella?”

She nodded.

“What’s her problem?” I asked.

“You mean, why is she such a bitch?”

“Yes!”

Laura laughed. “She used to be...” Laura blew air into her cheeks.

“Fat?”

She laughed again. “Yeah. Sort of teased when we were younger. Then around junior high she started hanging out with these real tough *cholas* that were in high school and suddenly she starts losing the weight and fighting everyone who ever made fun of her and it just escalated from there.”

I blew air out my lips. “So the bullied becomes the bully. *How nice.*”

“You’re funny,” she said, she added, “But you know, it’s not good to be on her bad side. But you couldn’t help that, could you?”

“I couldn’t help it? I don’t even know her. Why does she have a problem with me?”

Laura leaned closer and lowered her voice. “You know how your *abuela* is a *curandera*?” My thoughts went back to what Gloria had said. I nodded yes.

“Well, Gloria has been telling people that Marcella went to your *abuela* and asked to be her apprentice but Doña turned her down.”

“Apprentice? You mean Marcella wants to be a *curand-* what my grandmother is? Why?”

Laura bit into her sandwich and then answered after a few chews. “If you have the gift, you have the gift, and your *abuela* is the best *curandera* around. Although I wouldn’t put my life in Marcella’s hands, ever. Your *abuela* has never taken an apprentice before. Until you.”

I put down the apple I was about to bite into. “Me? No, no, I’m not her apprentice I’m just living with her. Wasn’t even my choice.”

“That’s not what Marcella thinks, and that’s all that matters.” She looked over my shoulder. I turned around. Marcella’s eyes had found me all the way from across the cafeteria, like she knew that at that exact moment we were speaking about her. All hopes of her forgetting about me was ridiculous—I had an enemy, and she wasn’t going away.

School ended with my backpack full to the brim with beaten-down textbooks, homework, and the Spanish books. When the last bell rang, I headed to the front yard of the school, nervous because I only remembered then that my grandmother hadn’t said

whether she would be there to walk home with me. When I stepped out the front doors I spotted her standing by the flagpole with a straw hat and her braid draped over her shoulder. When she saw me she turned around and started walking to the house. I had to run with the twenty pounds strapped to my back.

If I ever caught up to the old lady, I might have confronted her about my “new” name or about Marcella.

Whichever one I’d be brave enough to ask about or whichever one she’d listen to.

The remainder of the week went something like this: I woke up, went to school, returned home to do homework and study the Spanish books I had checked out. My first task was to memorize a few words before I started using them. I tried to pick up the pattern and movement of the language by listening to my grandmother and Gloria speak at dinner, which was like trying to identify which musical note went with what sound.

“*Ay ¿Dios Mio, te interaste de lo que paso con Lupe?*” Gloria said.

Gloria was talking about someone named Lupe and did so as a question.

“*No, ¿que paso?*” My grandmother took a bite of bread. ‘No’ was the same in both languages. Another question.

“*Su esposo la esta dejando por una mujer mas joven,*” Gloria said.

Abuela gasped, then said, “*Ay, ¡no!*”

“*Es verdad. Me lo comento Doña Teresa en la iglesia.*”

Church! I remembered *iglesia* meant church. Something about church...

“*¡No puedes ser!*” Abuela replied.

“*Dios nos libre. Esas mujeres no son buenas,*” Gloria said. I was lost; they spoke so fast. Up and down. Syllable after syllable. Rolling the r’s. Loud gasps and signs of the cross.

Gloria turned to me suddenly, “Don’t be like these *cochina*’s around here!” My grandmother nodded in agreement while I sat chewing my *fideo*. Oh yeah, I was still a beginner in this language game.

Laura sat with me every day at lunch. I was a junior and she was a senior, almost two years older than me if you went by our birthdays. She even introduced me to some of her friends, and halfway through the week they came and sat with us during lunch. The twins, Bella and Estrella, drove me insane, and many days, I wished they had never joined us at all. No other students were keen on getting to know me. I didn’t know if it was because I was new, because of my grandmother, or because of Marcella.

Every time I saw Marcella with her boyfriend Eduardo or her group of thugs, I went in the opposite direction. It wasn’t that I was scared. It was because Laura was right; Marcella would probably use every chance she had to get back at me, no matter how ridiculous her thoughts on my non-existent apprenticeship were. And it was a ridiculous thought. Voo doo, mumbo jumbo healing magic? Like my grandmother could *really* heal someone. Cura—that ‘c’ word...I’d never heard of such a thing. And why would I want to apprentice to my grandmother, anyway. I lived with the damn lady; spending more time with her did not appeal to me.

I decided against asking my grandmother about why she hadn’t taken Marcella as an apprentice. First of all, I couldn’t ask her in Spanish. Within that week, I had only advanced to small greetings, numbers, colors, and items around the house—so that was

out of the question. And I kept having trouble with words and their gender. That was the weirdest thing about Spanish—words were either male or female. That made little sense to me. I thought I had figured it out, though; for instance anything ending in “o” was masculine and anything ending in “a” was feminine, but then Spanish would switch it up on me. Like you would think “*dias*” or day was female but it was actually male, and you had to say *buenos dias* and not *buenas dias*. And it was the opposite for “night.” The o’s and a’s were kicking my ass.

Second, it wasn’t hard to guess why my grandmother hadn’t chosen Marcella—she was a bully and wasn’t the kind of person that would do well with instruction. She had her own agenda. And Marcella’s problem with me, well, what went on between Marcella and me was between Marcella and me. I’d handle it. She looked scary, but, really, what could she do? Laura had mentioned some rumor about Marcella stabbing someone, but that sounded a little too far-fetched to me. She’d have been sent to juvenile hall, right?

On the Friday of my first week of school, during study period, I got a bathroom pass and was on my way there when something caught my eye. In the hallway, were two large glass display cases that I hadn’t really taken note of before. Because I didn’t want to get back to study period, which would consist of working on a one page response to the first few chapters of *The Great Gatsby*, I looked in the cases to waste some time. Besides, I’d already read the book the year before at the last school I had attended, and I didn’t relish the thought of revisiting the Gatsby and Daisy drama. I had enough drama of my own.

One display case was filled with academic-related awards—certificates, trophies for the debate team, pictures of the Math club at a competition, a plaque presented by the governor for “Most Improved School in South Texas.” Most of the items were ten years old or older. The school had not been successful in anything lately.

The second case was sports related, a faded letterman jacket, trophies, a picture of a winning baseball team, and pictures of the homecoming queens and kings and their courts. I’d never been to a homecoming, although I had witnessed girls and boys vying for the court by hanging posters in the hallways and handing out candy between classes for a vote. Part of me liked to think it was pathetic. It was a popularity vote. However, a small part of me secretly wished to be a part of homecoming elections, have lots of friends, be liked by many, thought of as pretty...but whatever. Didn’t everyone secretly wish the same thing some time or another?

The homecoming court pictures ranged from last year all the way back to the 1960s, beginning with colored photos and ending in black and white. The frames and photos dating back to the mid-1960s were larger than the recent ones, and when I got to the picture of the homecoming queen of 1971 I did a double take. My hands reached forward but were stopped by the inch-thick glass.

My mother had been homecoming queen when she was seventeen. I barely recognized her in the black and white photo. Her face was younger and smoother, and her hair, jet black, had been styled in large curls that fell to her waist. She wore a sequined dress that fit her curvy frame perfectly so that it fell like a waterfall to her feet. And she smiled—she actually smiled without the lies around the edges of her lips. This was a

truthful smile, something I had never witnessed. The crown stood tall on her head, and in her arms she held a large bouquet of roses.

Unlike the other more formal photographs of the homecoming court with the king and queen surrounded by the princes and princesses, this picture was a candid shot with my mother looking up at the football stands. It must have been the moment just after she'd been crowned. On her right stood the king, who instead of looking where my mother was, was caught by the camera looking at her. And on my mother's right side was another girl with straight hair and her arm around my mother's shoulders giving her a congratulatory hug. She had a crown half the size of my mother's atop her head. The girl's face looked worn and her skin stretched thinly over bony cheeks pronouncing her already large bug eyes.

At the bottom of the frame lay an engraved plate that read:

Left to Right: Senior Princess: Carlita Juarez; Homecoming Queen: Junior, Rosa Gonzalez; Homecoming King: Senior, Jorge Valdez

I stared at the photograph and tried to imagine a mother I had never known, a girl that had walked these halls. How did my mother go from the black and white photo to the woman I had known for sixteen years? Or the woman I had never actually known. I didn't really know her. Did I? Who was she, this homecoming queen? A Big Fake? I just didn't get it. How come I had never pushed my mother to tell me where she'd come from?

Something in me couldn't shake the questions for the rest of the day, until finally I decided that I'd rather run into the open arms of Marcella than let these questions go unanswered.

That Friday after school, I finally felt confident enough to use Spanish with my grandmother. I figured she would laugh at me or ignore me. Either way I was determined to try. Although I hadn't counted on Gloria coming over for dinner. Oh to the hell with it, I'd have to speak in front of her sometime. I brought one of the Spanish books into the kitchen with me. It was more for encouragement rather than to look at. Maybe that's why my grandmother carried a Bible with her when she left the house. Encouragement.

A sweet aroma of potatoes and meat filled the kitchen. *Papas y carne*. Gloria was speaking to my grandmother when my grandmother set a glass of milk, a plate of food in front of me, and a piece of chocolate cake for dessert. I ate quickly, enjoying the spicy flavors that Abuela had used. When I finished eating the *papas y carne*, I finally summoned all the courage I had and spoke my first Spanish words to Abuela.

“*Muy bueno.*”

The words felt like jello in my mouth, not fully under my control and awkward as they rolled across my tongue. Gloria, who hadn't stopped talking since she had arrived, suddenly stopped speaking and looked at me. Her head reared back like a bird unsure of what had come across its path. I risked a glance up at my grandmother who regarded me with an expression I couldn't quite read. Somewhere between interest and amusement.

Gloria laughed loud. “*¿Muy bueno? Mira, you hear her? Oh, speaking Spanish now? A real Mexicana we have here.*”

My grandmother smirked, and my cheeks grew hot. Gloria continued with what she thought were witty jokes as I ate my desert.

“Repeat after me, Martha. *La chica es inteligente.*”

And lastly, “Remember, Martha, *es muy*. Not moo-ey. Nothings worse than saying it like a *gringo*.”

After the last one, my grandmother said something to her which made Gloria stop. And yet she still smiled and laughed at random moments for no reason. I stifled the urge to stab her with my fork, but instead jabbed my chocolate cake. Honestly, it wasn't *that* funny. I didn't say anything else, only ate, then hurried and placed my dishes in the sink.

I was determined to say one more thing in Spanish. Gloria thought she could make fun of me? Fine, I'd throw something else in her face. So before I walked out the kitchen, I turned around and looked at my grandmother and aunt who were speaking rapid Spanish.

Without waiting for them to stop I interrupted them with, “*Buenos noches señores*.” I overtly pronounced each syllable before stomping out of the kitchen and to my room.

“*Buenos!* She said *buenos!*” Gloria exclaimed. They didn't stop laughing for an hour.

Those damn o's and a's.

My Spanish continued to improve, especially with my grandmother's help. I didn't really ask her for help, but she wouldn't stop looking over my shoulder when I studied from the Spanish books at the dining room table before meals. Then she proceeded to point her finger at different things, flip the pages while I was reading, and kept saying “No, no, no, no right.” I didn't get any studying done during those moments. From there she inserted herself, quite forcibly, into my Spanish education. Which was

kind of funny, since the reason I wanted to learn Spanish was to grill her about my mother.

My grandmother came up with this idea to go around the house and point out every object and give me the name. I took it a step further and wrote the names of the objects on pieces of paper and placed them on everything in the house so that little white pieces of paper were taped on everything. My grandmother didn't like it, it took away from the religious gaudiness, but in the end she allowed me my scraps. On weekends she'd quiz me by taking all of the papers off, pointing to the object for the name, and and waited for my answer. For each name I got wrong, I had to scrub the floor of a room in the house. Not my idea—at all. My grandmother could come up with the most creative punishments. But after three weeks, I knew hundreds of nouns, could count to infinity (or close to it), could name the colors, every basic greeting, and the floors were entirely too clean. I had worked up to basic sentences and was starting to learn to conjugate verbs. And by the middle of September, I was able to speak basic sentences to my grandmother.

At school, I tried to stay out of Marcella's way, although she made it a point to find me. If I saw her in the hallway she'd try to trip me or say things under her breath in Spanish which I didn't know yet or make threats in English that I *did* know and *didn't* like. I sidestepped her trips or ignored her words and kept moving. One day I was waiting for Laura at our table, when she came in and slapped her tray down next to me. I jumped. Heads turned from up to three tables away.

“What's wrong?” I asked.

She glared over my shoulder at Marcella's tables, which only made her widow's peak stretch farther down her head. “*Esa puta,*” she said, “cornered me in the bathroom

earlier.” Laura had taught me all the bad words in Spanish weeks ago. *Putá* was my favorite word for Marcella.

“Wait, what? Why?”

“She wants to know what your *abuela* is teaching you. Still thinks you’re her apprentice.”

I put the chicken sandwich I had been holding down onto my plate. “So what happened?”

She picked up her slice of pizza and took an angry bite out of it, causing the grease to drip down her chin. She didn’t wipe it off. “*¡Nada!* I couldn’t tell her nothing, because you’re not her apprentice. She didn’t like that. But whatever. That’s her problem. All I know is I hope *tu abuela* starts teaching you to be a *curandera*. Ah *Dios*, I’d love to see her face then!”

I didn’t agree with Laura. Since I wasn’t at home anymore during the days, the only time I saw my grandmother do her *curandera* work was on Saturdays and even then I stayed in whoever’s kitchen we were at and did homework or read my Spanish books. Besides, learning the *curandera*’s secret healing magic wasn’t important to me. Finding out the location of my mother was at the top of my list. I’d even go look at that homecoming picture at times to not forget.

Every once in a while I’d ask my grandmother, “*¿Dónde está mi madre?*” Where is my mother? And she’d purse her lips and go off on a rant that she knew I wouldn’t understand. I had to learn more. I had to become fluent. My mother couldn’t just leave me like she did. I wanted to know why. Why she left me, why she left all those years ago, why she changed.

But what I wanted never happened, at least, not in Laredo. I could have jumped in the Rio Grande in hopes of floating to the ocean, and somehow, someday I'm sure that river would have turned me right back around and flopped me on the front lawn of the Pepto Bismol *casa* where my grandmother would be waiting with a bucket of water and soap to tell me I got it all wrong once again.

En El Presente

I look at my plain black wrist watch. The second hand is creeping on eleven-thirty. The service will start any minute. I turn around and look at the door that is closed. After one more second, I turn back around but only because a few of the people behind me are looking at me strangely. They think I'm staring at them. A man is now speaking with Charles and the woman next to him. The man appears to be a preacher or a pastor; I get anything that is not Catholic confused. He is something, though, because he holds a Bible in his hand. Then again, I could be absolutely wrong. Anyone can hold a Bible, and it doesn't indicate anything. Just like anyone can call themselves a *curandera* or a *curandero*.

Once, during my undergraduate study at the community college, my friend Elizabeth, a country white girl from Waco, Texas, whose dad worked at the border, took me on a surprise trip.

"Where are we going?" I asked her.

"You'll see!" was all she would say.

Minutes later we pulled up to a brick building that had been painted white, and held three doors for three different businesses. One was a flower shop, the other a nail salon, and the last door had the words "*Curandero: Palm reading, protection amulets, limpieas, and other services*" written in yellow glass paint on the front door. Elizabeth quickly hopped out and waited for me. I got out slowly, knowing exactly where were going.

"I saw it when I passed by the other day. Cool, huh? *Curandero*—like curer or something."

I only nodded, my lips shut tight. I had managed to stay away from those charlatans until then and now look where I was! We went inside, Elizabeth absolutely unaware of my displeasure. It was small, about twenty-by-twenty feet. Hanging on the walls were amulets in small plastic bags, silver charms, and bundles of incense. There was a large glass case and behind it stood a dark, skinny guy in his late 30s.

“*Hola,*” he said, watching us, but mostly Elizabeth as she ran back and forth from the case to the wall. The case was filled with cards of Saints, statues, more amulets, and candles. I stood by the door, unable to move with all the contempt that boiled inside me.

The man showed Elizabeth the stuff in the glass case. “You see this amulet, it will bring you good luck,” he pulled out another, “and this one, will protect you from *malo*, evil spirits and bad thoughts people have toward you. It would be best if we did a *limpia*, a cleansing, on you. You have a lot of bad air around you.”

Her eyes grew big. “Martha, come look!”

The man nodded at me. “Your aura, its dark. I have incense and a charm that will help it.”

I crossed my arms and thought, if you can see my aura, you fake SOB, it ain’t because I’m sad.

When Elizabeth pulled out her wallet to ask how much the charm for good luck cost, I grabbed her arm and pulled her out the store, spitting on the glass door after I had slammed it shut.

Later, Elizabeth freaked out when I told her who I was and what I could do. We soon lost touch after that.

The woman sitting in the front pew, the one who sits next to Charles, pats her eyes with a tissue and nods yes to whatever the man with the Bible is saying.

Moments later, I feel a change in the air. I scoot over, farther into the row to allow more room. As soon as I move, I see her shuffling sideways into the aisle. Her large thighs and behind are covered by a lacy black dress, the kind of dress I hated wearing to church in Laredo when I was young, but now is the only thing I feel comfortable in at church.

She is careful not to look at me as she sits down. She puts her purse down on the bench between us, still staring ahead as if I am not there. I study her face, trying not to be as obvious as I probably am. Her cheeks have puffed out and sagged past her chin over these years. She has a lot of liver spots on her face, but she still looks the same. Her hair has been meticulously done, her makeup as well.

Her lips are set into a thin line and her eyes stare forward, angrily at the casket. She lets out a huff of frustration that I assume she had stored up since I called her last week. I'm just glad that she is here. Mostly, because I don't want to be here alone and partly because this is every bit as much about her as it is me.

“Why am I here, Martha?” she mutters in Spanish beneath her breath.

I smile again, forgetting I'm at a funeral.

Cinco

One Sunday after church, it was Juanita's turn to host the family again at her house. Her house didn't smell like dogs like, Tio Jesus' did and wasn't miserably hot, like my cousin Elva's house. Elva, like many people in Laredo, didn't have an air conditioner, but she also refused to open windows, because what if someone stuck their head out of the window and the window fell and sliced their head off? She didn't have fans because *Dio* forbid someone might have their finger chopped off...the time we had it at her house, my other cousins and *tias* and *tios* had begged her to open the windows and insisted on fans until Elva with her *loca* nature, ran at my cousin, Mario, with an ear of corn to beat him over his head. She did something similar to one or two of the *familia* each time someone suggested not having Sunday meals at her house.

Lilia and I played dolls in the living room that particular afternoon after we had eaten. The house still smelled of *carnitas* and rice. I was beginning to like this new diet. I inhaled the sweet and spicy aftermath of a large lunch. My clothes had already captured the perfume of the food which would only be removed with a good washing. Lilia and I were both sucking on watermelon lollipops *con* chili as we played.

"Martha, I need *mi otro muñeca*, Mimi," Lilia said. She was in the middle of a reenactment with her dolls of an argument she had had with some girl in the Sunday school class at church over a crayon.

"Lilia, there's five dolls here. You don't need Mimi," I said.

She put the two dolls down and stood in front of me. "*Pero* I do. *Ella es mi favorita*." She was doing it again. Using her cuteness to convince me otherwise. Those

large brown eyes and cute little accented voice that switched between English and Spanish so easily made me slightly jealous. She was six years old. It wasn't fair.

"Fine, go get Mimi."

"I can't. I'm busy. Could you go get her for me, *por favor*?"

Oh, a little *diablita*. "*No podría* Lilia. You go get her."

She took out her sucker and pushed out her bottom lip. *Trumpas*, Juanita called it.

"Martha! Pretty, pretty please? I can't leave *mis muñecas aquí*. *Los chicos* will get them." She pushed her lip out farther. I wasn't going to win this one. Lilia was too horribly cute. And she was the only family member that I felt comfortable talking to in Spanish. If I messed up, she didn't notice, and if she did notice, she corrected me but it didn't bother me too much. Not like when one of my *tias* did.

"Alright, okay," I said and got up. She smiled and popped her lollipop back in her mouth.

The hallway had four doors. The bathroom and Lilia's room were on the left side while Tomas's room and Juanita and her husband's were on the right side. I was about to open the door to Lilia's room, when I heard voices coming out of Juanita's room. The door was half cracked. Juanita stood in the room, her hands on her hips and her mouth set in a firm line. I looked down the hall. No one would find me watching. Most everyone was outside watching my cousins and *tios* play a game of soccer in dress pants and their nice, leather shoes.

"What are you waiting for? You have to tell her," Juanita said. It didn't take long to figure out who she was speaking to.

“*No, no tengo que hacer nada.*” I don’t have to do anything, my grandmother replied.

“You know as well as I that Rosa didn’t just abandon her here. And you’re letting all this time go by. Mamá, start now. Why are you waiting?”

“*Sí, estoy haciendo algo. Le estoy enseñando español, ¿no? Le estoy dando un lugar donde querarse, un educación, y una familia. Y no le ayudes a hermana. Esa cochina.*” I am doing something, I’m teaching her Spanish, no? Giving her a place to stay, education, a family. And don’t help her, your sister. That *cochina*.

“Really, Mamá? And don’t flick your wrist at me like that. Rosa is giving you what you wanted, and you know as well as I that Martha has more of the gift than either Rosa—”

My grandmother cut off Juanita. “*No digas su nombre.*”

Juanita put her hands through her hair in exasperation. “Mamá, you can’t just let this continue. You are getting old. You need help with everything, need to pass it on, and, trust me, I wish it had been me, not Rosa, who could have done that for you, but it’s not. And she left, and you refuse to even acknowledge the possibility of asking—” my grandmother made a noise in her throat to stop Juanita, but Juanita stared my grandmother down and said, “—*her.*”

Who was she talking about? My mother? My grandmother remained silent.

“It’s obvious then. Martha is your only option, Mamá. Make things right, finally. *Por favor.* I can’t continue watching. This has to stop. You just have to.”

“*Yo siempre trato de hacer lo que pienso que es mejor.*” I always try to do what I think is best.

“*Yo sé Mamá. No es suficiente.*”

That was enough. I opened the door. “I’m the only option for what?”

I expected my grandmother to yell but I didn’t expect it from Juanita. “Get out, Martha! This doesn’t concern you!”

“But it does—”

“I said out! Now!” She pointed at the door and stomped her foot at the same time.

I slammed the door and headed to the living room. Lilia wasn’t happy that I didn’t bring her doll, but I was too angry and intrigued at what I had heard to really care. It was clear that my grandmother and my family knew more things about my mother than they let on. How come no one told me anything? What was with all the secrets? I was sixteen-years-old—not a child.

Apparently, a direct approach wasn’t going to get me anywhere. My grandmother refused any inquiries I made, and Juanita wouldn’t go against her mother’s wishes, even for her niece. But why would she? She didn’t know me. I was just some stranger who had appeared abruptly in her life.

But I knew a few things now. My mother hadn’t abandoned me for no reason exactly. Part of me couldn’t believe it, but I wanted to at least. Juanita had a higher opinion about my mother than I or my grandmother seemed to have, so who knew what was true? Regardless, it sounded like I had some kind of gift. It had to be *curanderismo* and my mother had had the gift, too. Which was ridiculous. If I had the gift, wouldn’t my grandmother have said something by now? And I had never seen my mother do anything magical. Rather, she had always made fun of the psychic, Cleo, on television. Even threw

food at the TV a few times. Besides, I couldn't do magic or whatever my grandmother did. And I knew that for sure.

By Monday, I had two goals in mind. Find the old yearbooks in the school library and glean any information I could from them about my mother. During study hall when I asked to go to the library, my teacher, glad that anyone wanted to go to the library, was quick to give me the pass. The halls were mostly empty, except for one white haired janitor who was mopping when I passed. The school smelled of Clorox with a hint of lemon which reminded me of Saturday morning house cleanings that my grandmother made me participate in.

As I was about to push the double doors forward to go into the library, a whistle echoed through the silent corridor. It was one of those whistles that went high then low then high again—the universal whistle that says, “Hey, good looking.” I turned around, hoping that the whistle wasn't for me. Maybe it was for the janitor? I wouldn't judge.

Behind me, stood a boy with black Dickie jeans and a plain red t-shirt with two other guys. The boys stared at me with smiles, up and down, taking in my legs in the cut off shorts I wore. I immediately regretted my outfit choice.

“¿*Como te llamas hermosa?*” The boy in the red shirt said, then licked his lips.

I wanted to say something but nothing came out of my mouth. My tank top felt too tight and the back of my neck felt hot and sweaty. I looked behind the boy and his friends for the janitor, but he must have walked off because I was alone.

“Look! The girl lost her voice,” the tall guy behind the boy in the red t-shirt said.

Okay maybe I had. But whereas my mother basked in male attention, I ran from it. I didn't like when any guy called out to me, but especially not *this* particular guy.

"Come here, I want to talk to you," the boy with the red shirt said, then puckered his lips and made a kissing noise

Finally, I found my nerves. "Oh, shut up!"

I felt my legs again, and without hesitation, I went through the double doors into the library, my stomach a mess of knots. His and his friends' catcalls rang out after me. I took a moment and caught my breath. Great, great, great. I peeked out the window and saw the boys walking down the hall away from me. This wasn't good. The guy who had whistled at me was Eduardo, Marcella's boyfriend.

I found the yearbooks fairly easily. After finding a corner among the bookshelves, I spread the four yearbooks out around me so I could easily flip through the crisp, glossy pages. It was the first time I had ever looked through a yearbook. We couldn't afford to buy a yearbook for me the last two years and even if we had, why would I buy memories of a year of people I didn't know and who didn't know me? And for that matter, I hated taking pictures. My hair was never fixed or I had a stupid smile on my face each time the camera flashed. If there happened to be a picture of me in a yearbook—I did not want to know.

Based on the first three yearbooks, my mother was pretty popular. In every single picture, whether it was a still class photo or a candid shot, my mother looked happy. She had been involved not only in Student Council and theater but also softball. I loved the candid pictures the most, although, seeing her wide, genuine smile hurt since she had

shared only a few with me. And in almost every picture with my mother was the girl, the princess from the Homecoming Court photograph, Carlita Juarez.

Carlita was a year older than my mother. They were in the same clubs together and always stood next to each other in every photograph. By the time my mother was a junior, Jorge Valdez, the Homecoming King, began to pop up in a few pictures too, always with his hands around my mother's waist or holding her hand. He must have been her boyfriend. My mother had friends and a boyfriend. I never even had the chance to have friends.

We moved so much, and I learned that most people didn't like forming bonds with the new girl. Boyfriends were a big no for me, too. Crushes and flings were okay, but boyfriends involved having to make up excuses as to why I never wanted one to meet my mother or come to whatever dirt trash motel we lived in. Besides, I had my drawings. It sounded pathetic, but I had never noticed how alone I was when I had a pencil and a paper.

In my mother's senior year, there were only three photos of her in the entire book; I know because I checked five times, scanning every face and every name. My fingers ached by the end with paper cuts thanks to the crisp, thick pages. One of the pictures was her class photo. In the other two pictures my mother stood alone in photographs. Maybe because Carlita and Jorge had graduated her junior year? My mother smiled, but now instead of the genuine smile, it had a small hint of the smile she had used for so many years with me. Was this when the Big Fake started? Something had gone wrong? So her friends weren't at school with her any longer, but that didn't mean my mother should want to flee from Laredo. Something was still missing.

I'd been in here for forty minutes and I had to get back to the study hall classroom. On my way back I wondered where Carlita and Jorge were now. Did they live in Laredo still? Did my mother keep in contact with them when she left?

Looked like I had found my next step in operation uncover-all-these-damn-secrets.

The next day brought a few clouds, a miracle in Laredo. Laura and I decided to eat outside on the pavilion. We sat at one of the picnic tables enjoying the mildly hot afternoon. There was even a slight breeze—a magical unicorn in the heat-driven weather of Laredo. Today had to be the closest thing to paradise.

And it would have been perfect if Laura could have stopped her incessant chatter about some guy named Rafi. It'd been going on for twenty minutes already. “So Lala told me *que* Rafi likes me, *pero no se. Espejo* that it's true you know? He's a junior and—” Her words fell off and her eyes grew big at something behind me while her mouth opened slightly.

I turned to find Marcella walking toward us and followed by her group of friends.

“*¡Aye puta! Te he estado buscando güera fea.*” I've been looking for you, ugly white girl.

I understood a lot more Spanish than I could speak. And I usually filled in the words that I didn't know by guessing.

Marcella yelled loud enough so that everyone outside turned and stared. I felt the chant “fight, fight!” hanging in the air, ready to be taken up by my on-looking peers. I stood up, glad that I was a few inches taller than Marcella and sensing she hated looking

up at me. Marcella and her bullshit had gotten on my last nerves. It didn't look like I could avoid her any longer.

“¿*Qué quieres?*” I asked her.

She hesitated, surprised that I spoke Spanish. “Oh, you speak Spanish now? Decided you want to be like us *mexicanos*? Learn to speak Spanish and then steal our boyfriends? And you ask what *I* want?”

“I don't want your boyfriend. At all.” I tried to turn around and sit down but she grabbed my arm and turned me back to her. As soon as her hand touched me, my skin burned beneath her palm. Taken by surprise, I let out a slight hiss of pain. What the hell was that? I pulled my arm out of her grasp. Before I looked at my arm she spoke.

“I'm not done talking with you.” Marcella's eyes looked even more intimidating when she was angry because her thick black eyeliner framed the black fire that danced within them. “Keep your dirty hands away from *mi novio*. You better be glad we're at school or I'd kick your ass so—”

“I don't want your boyfriend, Marcella. He was the one hitting on me, and if you have a problem with it, you can turn around and tell him.” Marcella's face was red now in anger, which shone through the layer of white powder she had caked on. I looked over her shoulder. She turned around.

Eduardo and his friends watched. His friends slapped him on the back and laughed at the entire scene. Marcella turned back to me and muttered, “to hell with it.” She was about to jump on me, when a teacher's voice rang out. “¿*Aye!* What are you doing? Break it up, break it up!”

A crowd had formed around us and a young male teacher pushed through to us. Marcella gave me one last look before turning around and stomping toward her boyfriend. I sat down hoping the teacher would just let it go. Luckily, he was more concerned with dispersing the crowd.

“*¡Perra desgraciada!*” I said and pushed my tray forward so hard that it would have fallen off the table if Laura hadn’t caught it.

“Whoa. Chill out. *Perra desgraciada* is right, but who taught you that?” I shook my head, not wanting to answer. I had heard my grandmother say it when Gloria brought up Laura’s mother’s name one evening at dinner.

“Hey, what’s that?” She pointed to my arm. I looked down and as soon as I did, I felt a throbbing pain. It looked as if my arm had been burned, but in the exact outline of Marcella’s fingers. The skin was red and a few blisters were forming.

Laura made the sign of a cross. “Does it hurt?”

“Kind of. Why’d you do the cross thing?”

“Marcella did that, huh? That’s not,” she faltered for the right word, “good. That’s *bruja* work.”

“*¿Bruja?*”

“Witch,” Laura whispered.

I was going to say something like “bitch.” Especially since I didn’t believe in witches.

By my last class, the burn had spread out so it didn’t look like human fingers so much, but more like a Sasquatch’s. And the skin had risen into a thin layer of blister.

Every time I moved my arm, it was followed by an involuntary hiss, or a cuss word, especially when I accidentally rubbed up against something. I thought about hiding it before I went home, but my grandmother was a dog that sniffed out trouble. So what would be the point?

When I returned home, she wasn't looking at me when I walked into the kitchen, but rather was grating cheese. However, she turned around as soon as I had taken two steps in.

“¿Qué es eso?”

Too worn out to speak in Spanish, I replied in English. “What’s what?” I was not in the mood to have any discussion with my grandmother. Especially not one about Marcella.

“¿Eso! Quien hizo esto.” That! Who did this?

She rushed over to me and grabbed hold of my arm. I pulled my arm away but she held tight. I fought not to make any noise out of anger and pain. Something like this wouldn't have happened if I had still been with my mother.

“¿Dónde está mi madre?”

My grandmother looked up, *“¿Qué? ¿Por qué me preguntas eso? Mira a tu brazo. ¿Quién hizo esto?”* What? Why are you asking about that? Look at your arm. Who did this?

“No entiendo.” I pretended like I didn't understand her Spanish.

I kept my lips shut and refused to answer. Which only infuriated her. If my grandmother wouldn't tell me her secrets then I wouldn't tell her mine. Two could play the secret game.

My grandmother threw my arm down, turned on her heel, and went to the counter. She pulled out a bottle of some kind of oil and returned to where I now sat at the kitchen table. Without saying anything, she squirted oil on the burn. I hissed and pulled back. It stung.

“Gah dang it!”

My grandmother didn't say anything but returned the oil to the cabinet. I got up and headed straight to my room and didn't come out the rest of the night. My grandmother didn't even ask if I wanted dinner.

The next morning the burn was gone. The annoyed and frustrated look my grandmother had had the night before was replaced with something else. It wasn't a look that I had seen before on her face.

It was a look of resignation.

That Saturday morning we didn't go on my grandmother's rounds. Right after breakfast, she walked from the house, straight to the Cadillac, and got in without saying a word. I climbed in beside her.

“¿Adonde vamos?” Where are we going? I asked after closing the car door.

She started the car. “¿Por que siempre haces preguntas?” Why do you always ask questions?

By now, my Spanish was developed enough that I was able to have conversations with my grandmother and actually understand her. Which was great...sometimes.

I opened my mouth to respond but she held up her right index finger to me, before putting the car in drive and heading out. Why do I ask questions? Why don't you ever

answer anything? I buckled my seatbelt. Whatever. I was just glad that we weren't walking around in the heat. It was early October and the temperature was still over 100. Driving was faster than walking and even if we were going to some unknown destination...it was worth the mystery.

My grandmother didn't turn on her radio, so the only sound we heard as we drove was the noise coming through the rolled down windows—children playing, the rustle of the wind created by the car, and the wheels on the road. Staring out the window, I saw the dry grass lawns, the brown children with their brown mothers, the peeling paint of the houses.

We didn't drive far, only a few blocks away into a different neighborhood to a house painted a burnt orange. My grandmother hopped out and I followed her. We were met on the front porch by a frantic man with a large, bushy mustache that curled slightly at the ends. His face was slick with worry and sweat. He was young, perhaps thirty. His hair went every which way as if he had been tugging at it.

“Doña Gonzalez?” He said to my grandmother.

“Sí, where is Señora Flores?”

“In the bedroom. Hurry, please. My wife is—”

The man wasn't even able to finish his sentence when a cry broke through the house. The cry of a woman in immense pain. It was loud and long so that when the cry broke off, it still hung in the air. I froze, but the man didn't. He groaned and became more agitated, pulling at his hair as he doubled over, then shot back up.

“Oh *Dios, por favor Señora*. It's all my fault.” My grandmother hushed the man, grabbed my arm, and pulled me into the house and down the hall to a closed door. We

left the man on the porch groaning. Usually I sat in the kitchen with the patient's family or alone. Why was my grandmother taking me with her?

"No, I don't want to..." I said trying to turn around. My grandmother's grip on my shirt didn't loosen as she whipped me back. There was a lady yelling like a banshee behind that door—I didn't want to go in there.

"*Vamos*," my grandmother said as she opened the door. Instantly, I was overcome with the metallic stench of blood, sour sweat, and other fluids. I didn't realize that smell is a sense that is lost in so many ways, until it overpowers and demands that you recognize it.

A woman sat up in a bed on her elbows and looked at us. Her hair was plastered to her face with sweat and she wore a blue sleeping gown pushed up past her waist. Her knees were raised and in between her legs sat an older woman with streaks of gray in her hair. Her head and body blocked an area that I wasn't even aware of on myself. The woman on the bed groaned, threw her head back, and grinded her teeth. Another woman, maybe her mother, wiped her daughter's forehead with a cloth. The pregnant woman's knuckles were white as salt gripping the woman's hand.

"Who are you? Out, out now!" The pregnant woman yelled.

I flinched and covered my nose with my hand. I tried turning again to leave but my grandmother, ignoring the pregnant woman's yells, kept a tight grip on my shirt, and walked forward with me.

"*Bueno Señora Flores*. How is everything going?" my grandmother said.

Señora Flores glanced over her shoulder, and I got a glimpse of something blood red between the pregnant woman's legs. I turned my head away, embarrassed.

“It’s a big one. Is the girl ready?”

“Sí.” My grandmother replied then turned to me, letting go of my shoulder.

“Martha, *ayuda*.”

“Help with what?” I said. The woman giving birth screamed through her teeth.

My grandmother pursed her lips and dragged me over to a wash bowl sitting in the corner. She made me wash my hands with soap and water, then pushed me to Señora Flores. What the hell was going on?

I tried not to look at the woman’s spread legs when I stood next to Señora Flores, but it was hard not to. I didn’t want to see this—*ever*. Señora Flores stood up from the stool. She was larger than my grandmother in height and weight, but her eyes were soft and kind, and she looked calm in the chaos that surrounded her.

“Are you ready?”

“Ready for what?” I said, fumbling over the words.

She grabbed my hands and pulled me down so that I squatted in front of the woman’s spread open legs. Ah, *Dios mio*. The smell was worse this close. Bile rose in my throat. I didn’t want to look. Didn’t want to get any closer. But Señora Flores grabbed my wrists and pulled me so that I was directly in front of the woman. She scooted her stool over so I would have room.

I turned to Señora Flores. “Are you serious? No, I-I-No, I—”

Oh, God. What was I about to do? Deliver a kid?

“Tell her to push.” This lady was as crazy as my grandmother.

I shook my head. “I can’t, I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Martha, just do as she says. *¡Hijole!*” my grandmother said.

Señora Flores ignored my grandmother and said, “I’m here. All you have to say is push.” Something about her eyes, her calmness through the screams, calmed me. I nodded a few times. Took a breath. And then something happened. A thrill ran through me, opening up something that I didn’t know had been closed off inside me.

I turned to the woman and in Spanish I said push, but Señora Flores urged me to say it louder. I did, and the woman pushed. The top of the baby’s head appeared, and within the next ten minutes I caught, turned, and pulled the child from her mother without Señora Flores’ help. The baby wasn’t even in my arms for a few seconds when she started to cry. Instantly, I placed my knuckle in the little girl’s mouth and she began sucking on it, quieting. How did I know to do that?

Señora Flores who was in the process of cutting the umbilical cord asked me, “Have you ever delivered a baby before?”

I laughed, surprising myself, then said no. God, that was a rush! For a moment, with the child in my hands, I forgot about the mother who lay sighing and panting on the bed. Probably on the verge of fainting.

“Have you ever even held a baby?” Señora Flores asked.

I took a moment, then replied “no” again. She smiled at me, then looked at my grandmother in the corner and gave her a nod. What was that?

After handing the baby girl to her mother, Señora Flores showed me how to soothe the afterbirth from the mother by kneading the mother’s stomach so that it came out on its own. Although it was a gross and a messy ordeal, I barely noticed and was proud that I didn’t gag when she handed my grandmother a jar filled with the afterbirth. I had forgotten about my grandmother for the most part, engrossed in everything Señora

Flores was doing to help the mother recover and watching how she checked the child's health.

An hour later we left, I in a t-shirt my grandmother had brought in her bag. The shirt I had on before was covered in blood and other unmentionable substances. But Abuela said she could wash it all out without leaving a stain.

In the car, I sank into the seat suddenly, drained, like I had just scrubbed Abuela's entire house without a break. I was tired but not too tired to question my grandmother as we drove.

"What was that about?" This had to be about *curanderismo*. What other reason would she have brought me there? It wasn't like knowing how to help bring a child into the world was something every girl learned to become a woman. At least not in this century, right? Hell, it might be some weird Laredo Mexican girl's rite of passage.

Her sagging cheeks rose in a smile. "You did good, granddaughter."

Surprised by her praise, I couldn't help but smile. "Señora Flores is a *curandera*?"

My grandmother nodded. "*Una partera*, a midwife. She helps women who are pregnant."

"That's all?" She nodded yes in response.

"So...are you a midwife?"

My grandmother snorted. "No. I do more than help pregnant women."

"Like what? And you still haven't said what that was all about?"

"You still don't appreciate praise *nieta*."

Typical Abuela response. "Where are we going now?"

"To see a *yerberero*."

“What’s a *yerbero*?”

“You’ll see.”

I leaned back onto the hot leather seat, letting the warm Laredo air blow my hair off my face.

The *yerbero* was a plant specialist, an old graying man with dark leathery skin and maybe some African ancestry. Señor Diaz, whose hands shook slightly except when he was making his concoctions, spoke very low and slow so that I had to get closer with each word. For some reason, I instantly liked him. When he smiled, his wrinkles cracked so that thousands of latte colored lines appeared on his face and his surprisingly white teeth stood out. Something about him was genuine and truthful. And nice.

Thousands and thousands of plants filled his one bedroom house and overflowed into his front and back lawn. We walked through his house, and he introduced me to his plants. My grandmother stayed in the kitchen while we walked through the house.

“This is Charlotte,” he said as he touched the leaves of a large plant with small heart shaped leaves, turning them each way, putting his face closer to see them better. “See how thick the stalks are? That means she’s healthy enough to do her job.”

“Job?”

“Charlotte’s leaves can help with stomach aches when put in a tea. Now you feel.”

I smiled. The stalks did feel strong.

Señor Diaz loved his plants more than anything. He told me he had had an apprentice once, his son, but he had moved to Mexico and become a *yerbero* in a small city. Señor Diaz asked me to touch the plants and even the soil in the pots.

“Now speak to it.”

“The plant?”

“How else will it know how to grow?” I felt somewhat ridiculous but I did what he asked.

“Um...” I looked at him and he nodded smiling. “Grow strong, um, please?”

Later, while we were looking at a big spiky plant that sat inside his bedroom, a woman came for help to rid her of a red rash on her hand. He examined it, then showed it to me. Small circular dots covered the top of her hand. They clustered close together and were flat to her skin. The woman had been scratching them because a few were bright red and bloodied.

“What do you think, *mija*?” I was taken back when he called me *mija*, my daughter, and even more so because he asked me what I thought. That never happened.

“I really don’t know. I’ve never seen anything like it. What is it?”

He shrugged. “It doesn’t matter what it is, but how we heal it. Choose the leaves and we will make something for her.”

My head reared back. “You want me, *me*, to choose the leaves? There are thousands of plants. You know how to cure it, not me.”

“I trust you. Now hurry. More people will come soon, and I don’t want to get behind.”

I turned slowly on my heel catching my grandmother's eye. I mouthed, what do I do?

"Do as he says," she said.

Thanks for the help. I maneuvered between the plants, letting my hands fall to my side and brush over the plants just as Señor Diaz had. Maybe, it'd help?

I chose two leaves from a purple plant that sat on the TV in the living room, one small pea pod from a plant on top of the refrigerator, and as I was about to hand them to Señor Diaz, I saw a large red plant on the back porch. I don't know why but I ran outside, plucked a leaf off, and ran back in to give Señor Diaz my finds.

He put them in his hands and felt them. He hummed in his throat as he rubbed the leaves. The patient sat in the living room, nursing her hand, so she didn't watch me squirm.

"Ah!" He winked at my grandmother in the corner. She sighed. Not a sad sigh or a mad sigh, but just a sigh. I couldn't really read her expression.

"I got it wrong, huh?"

"Actually you surprised me with what you chose. This will work."

Señor Diaz showed me how to cut, squeeze, and grind the leaves with holy water, soil, and egg to make a thick sandy paste to place on the woman's hand. Was this what my grandmother did when she helped patients?

When we left, Señor Diaz told me I was welcome back anytime and that he would be glad to teach me the secrets of his plants. I thanked him and surprised myself when I gave him a hug. He laughed and patted my back. Part of me wished he was my grandfather. Even though I was given a family, I'd never had a father or a grandfather. I

never would. Gloria had told me a month earlier that my grandfather had died in the Korean War. Or at least that's what everyone thinks, since he never returned home.

As soon as we got in the car, Abuela turned to me and told me to shush, she had thinking to do. I didn't argue but fell asleep on the way home, my mind and body exhausted. That night eating *carne con chili rojo* and rice with Gloria, I confronted my grandmother.

“So Señora Flores and Señor Diaz—does this mean?”

“You went to see them? Why?” Gloria asked my grandmother.

“You know why,” my grandmother said to Gloria. Before Gloria responded, Abuela put her fork down, leaned back, and looked at me. “Yes,” she paused, sighing, “You are going to learn *curanderismo*.”

I placed my cup of milk down on the table not caring that my mouth burned from the *chili rojo*. Gloria dropped her fork and it clanged loudly against her plate. It's not like I didn't guess it. But still the words were a little disconcerting. I wasn't sure what to think.

Before I could speak Gloria did. “Are you crazy, sister? Look what happened last time.”

My grandmother narrowed her eyes at Gloria, the same angry look that she had given to Juanita the other day when they were speaking in the room about my mother.

“What happened last time?” I said.

“Why would you bring that up?” Abuela said through clenched teeth to Gloria.

Gloria flipped her hand sideways twice at Abuela, as if saying, “forget it.” “The girl just learned Spanish; she doesn’t know a thing yet.”

This was getting annoying. Couldn’t someone answer me? I spoke a little louder, directing my attention to Abuela. “Why now? Why teach me now?”

Abuela opened her mouth, then closed it.

“Yes, María, you knew she had the gift the whole time, why now?” Gloria said.

“*¡Aye chingao!*” Abuela looked like she wanted to stab Gloria with her fork.

“What? Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked Abuela.

Abuela gave Gloria one last glare then, stuck her fork in a piece of steak. “Just because you have a gift doesn’t mean you should learn *curanderismo*. You think everyone who has a gift uses it?” She took a bite, not looking at me.

“So what? Today was a test? If you knew, why did I need to do that stuff?”

“To see what areas you might have a natural infinity in.”

Something hit me. “Did my mother know? About me? My gift?” Gloria let out a harsh ‘Hah!’

I looked at Abuela. “She did, didn’t she?”

Abuela sighed, “She did.”

“Is that why she left me here?”

Abuela wouldn’t look at me when she softly said, “Martha, she would have said anything to be able to leave you here.”

I sat back in my chair. My throat felt tight and my stomach ached like someone had punched me. They continued bickering.

“I still don’t think this is a—”

“Pah! Gloria, don’t start—”

My mother knew about my gift. She could have left me here because of the gift...No...that wasn’t true. She jumped out of a window—if she truly left me here for the gift, she could have just said that...that would have been better. But now...it appeared that she left me because she just didn’t want me. Despite this new knowledge, something in me wanted my mother still.

But this apprenticeship...Learning the things that my grandmother did in her back room? Part of me felt like arguing with Abuela. Maybe I didn’t want to be a *curandera*. I mean, who was she to say what I was going to do or not do? And maybe I didn’t have the gift. Abuela could be wrong. Part of me knew that was a lie. I’d never felt like I had earlier, helping Señora Flores and Señor Diaz. It was exhilarating. I finally felt like I was good at something.

God, Laura was going to die when she heard about this. Oh, shit, and Marcella. She’d be all over me when she found out. Then again, it’d serve her right. Burning me, that *bruja*. What I saw today...no wonder Abuela didn’t take Marcella as an apprentice. Marcella speaking to leaves. Yeah, right.

My thoughts boiled as I listened to Abuela and Gloria speak about me as if I wasn’t there. Gloria telling Abuela how ridiculous this was. Abuela telling her to shut her mouth. They didn’t even care about my thoughts, and this was all about me!

“Doesn’t anyone want to know what I want?”

Gloria and my grandmother stopped speaking and looked at me with the same expression: eyes opened wide, nostrils flared, and lips pursed.

“¡No!” They both said.

“You will do what I think is right,” Abuela said.

Abuela wasn't listening when I said, “Maybe I don't want to do this.”

En El Presente

I am not sure how I convinced Marcella to attend the funeral. I was a little wary when I called her a week ago and truly did not think she would even stay on the phone, much less attend. She didn't say much when I gave her the news and asked her to be here with me. A noise that sounded similar to "hmp" was the only indication I had received before she said she had to go, she had *frijoles* cooking, and then click, the phone went dead.

It feels awkward sitting here, as if I should say something. I turn to ask her how she is, how she has been doing, but she speaks first.

"I can't believe I am here," she whispers.

"Trust me; I'm a little surprised, too, but thank you."

Marcella turns and looks at me, her eyes narrowing.

"Of course, you didn't think I'd come."

"*Hijole*, you know that's not what I meant," I whisper back. The man in front of us looks over his shoulder, but she doesn't notice.

"Ay, ¡claro que sí! Yo se que..." but before she can continue, the man that had been talking to Charles speaks into the microphone on the podium in the front. He must have walked up there while we were bickering like the old ninnies we are.

"Good morning. My name is Pastor Mike. I want to thank you for coming today..." The words send the full force of where I am. My eyes focus in on the thin line between the top of the coffin and the bottom, and I tune out all of Pastor Mike's words. I expect the coffin to move, for the lid to lift, a hand to reach out as it does in every horror

movie, and a spirit to appear more angelic than Our Lady of Guadalupe, and tell me...something, anything.

Despite my gift, I cannot satisfy this wish of mine to talk to the dead. Some can do it. But all gifts have a limit. My gift is about life. I had felt the life power of my gift when I first held the newborn girl almost fifty years ago during my first experience as a *curandera*. I didn't realize it then, but that's because it was almost too natural to even recognize. They named the girl Bertha. It was a horrible name, but it fit the square faced, large girthed woman that the child became. I still know her to this day; she lives next door to her mother, her frantic father has passed, and she has four *hijos* of her own, each that I delivered, each that I helped give life to.

My thoughts are interrupted. "Can you believe this? *Valio mierda.*"

"What?" I say automatically, even though a second later I realize what she said.

Marcella shakes her head, annoyed by me.

Maybe it is all worth a shit. I'm not even sure what she meant by that. But it sounds right at this moment. I look at the coffin again and then at how Pastor Mike's lips move. But that's all it is—movement. I look at the coffin once more.

If I can't even hear Pastor Mike, how could I hear the dead?

Seis

“Um, Juanita can I ask you something?” I said.

Juanita sat in the front room. The rest of the family was in the living room, doing impressions of the visiting Bishop from church that morning. He had spoken with a lisp, stuttered over his words, and even said “Omen” instead of “Amen.” Even though there were fewer people this Sunday at my cousin Carlos’ house—a few of the families were in Mexico visiting relatives—the regular noise level was being maintained. In front of me, Juanita was tickling Lilia on her lap.

She picked her daughter up, set her down on the floor, and patted her back to go and play, which was all the encouragement Lilia needed. Lilia stuck her tongue out playfully at me as she ran to the living room where the others were.

“*Hola*, Martha. How’ve you been? How’s school?”

“School’s great. Actually, the other day I ran across this picture of my mother as Homecoming Queen.”

Juanita’s face dropped at the mention of my mother, but she quickly resumed a nonchalant look.

“Yes, Rosa was the Homecoming Queen her junior year. She loved being the Queen.”

“I’m sure. She looked a little different in the picture, too.”

“Ever the pretty one.” Okay, this wasn’t going well. I didn’t want to piss Juanita off by bringing up old jealousies. Get to the point, Martha.

“There was a girl and a guy in the picture. Carlita and Jorge? Were they all friends?”

“Carlita Juarez and Jorge Valdez? I haven’t heard those names in a while. What made you think they were friends with Rosa?” Her eyes regarded me suspiciously.

I shrugged trying to feign naïveté. “They seemed really close in the picture with their arms around each other.” Juanita didn’t buy it yet. Her lips had set into the famous Gonzalez woman line of anger. I had to come up with something more.

I looked down at my hands and traced the lines on my palm so Juanita wouldn’t see my face. “I only want to know my mother a little better. It helped, seeing that photograph. I miss her so much, and I don’t know, but it just helped. I mean, I felt connected to her. I know that sounds stupid.”

“Oh, Martha, don’t say that.” I looked up. A string of emotions crossed her face. Concern, pity, and finally belief. I tried not to smile at my victory.

“Carlita and Rosa were best friends and Jorge and Rosa dated for a year or so. They were a crazy lot, always running around, giving *mi madre* headaches all the time.” I laughed at that and Juanita did too, breaking the tension. This was as perfect a moment as it would get.

“So, do they still live here? In Laredo, I mean?”

“You know, I think they moved,” she stood up, “I’m going to go see if *Mamá* and Gloria need help in the kitchen.” And she walked away without another word.

I had my answer. They were still here.

After finding my cousin Carlos alone, I asked him if he had a phone book. Abuela didn’t have a phonebook. Hell, we barely used the phone, only when someone called Abuela with an emergency. Thankfully, Carlos did, and it was in the drawer of his

bedside table and not in the family room or in the kitchen where Abuela or Gloria might see me. He showed me where it was then left me to join the rest of the family.

I turned to ‘J’ only to find a thousand Juarez’s. It was the same for Valdez, although Valdez was shorter by a few names or so. There were four Carlita Juarezes and seven Jorge Valdezes. Some had addresses, while others only had numbers, and a few had both. I wrote down each number and address with a pen and a piece of paper from a small notepad I found in a drawer. I wouldn’t be able to call any of these numbers soon; it might take weeks. But at least this part would be done.

When I left the room, I stuffed the papers in the only place I could hide them—my bra. There were no pockets in the horrendous flowery Sunday dress Abuela had made me wear. As I left the bedroom, I bumped into Gloria who was heading to the bathroom.

“What were you doing in there?”

I put my hands to my breast, feeling the paper beneath the fabric.

“Praying.”

I returned home on Monday after school to find my grandmother sitting in the kitchen strumming her fingers on the table, staring at the entryway.

“What took so long?” she asked and then stood up.

“It’s the same time I usually get home.” I flung my back pack in the chair she had just gotten up from and sat down myself.

“Don’t sit. Come. You learn today.”

“¿*Curanderismo*? But I have a lot of homework.”

“After.” She waddled into the hallway.

“But, you know I—”

“¡*Vamos!*”

When I entered the hallway, Abuela stood at the mystery door, the one she went into to do her healing work. She pulled out a key from her pant pocket and stuck it into the lock.

Abuela opened the door now and walked in. I moved forward and stopped just before the door. I was reminded of the first day I had walked into my Abuela’s canary yellow kitchen. That feeling of what would come, of change, of the unknown, of rejection, all of those feelings returned now. I pushed my hair from my face and felt the nervous sweat on the back of my neck.

When I crossed the threshold into my grandmother’s secret room, I would be crossing over into the world of *curanderismo* and it would forever change my life. But I had to do this. Wanted to. I took a deep breath and stepped through. I had survived Laredo so far.

Abuela’s house reeked of religious items and paraphernalia, but the religion wasn’t overcrowding this room as I had thought it would be. My grandmother had walked across the room to what looked like a small altar on the far wall. She knelt down slowly onto her knees as I walked to her.

Drying herbs hung from the ceiling like the limbs of drooping trees. Some hung so low I had to be wary not to hit them with my head. I was taller than my grandmother and she must have hung them so as to not hit *her* head. But they made the room smell divine so I couldn’t complain. Like sweet, wet earth and lavender. With each breath, I felt calmer.

In the center of the room was a long wooden table standing two feet off the floor, covered with a brightly stitched yellow and red zigzag pad. Woven blankets, like the ones I slept under, were folded at the end of the table and a small stool sat next to it. Hanging on the walls were old wooden shelves. Some shelves were filled with pans and pots while others were filled with jars of a variety of things. I couldn't tell what filled the jars; only that some looked like powder, while other jars held actual objects that my eyes and brain were unable to recognize from so far away. Small paintings printed on cards of angels or Jesus stood between the items on the shelves.

Despite all the different things, the room was quite organized and clean. The rest of the house was clustered and chaotic compared to this. When I arrived at the altar I knelt down in front of my grandmother and sat back on my calves as she did. I wasn't sure what else to do. Do as the *curanderas* do, right?

The altar was a small wooden table covered in a white cloth embroidered on the edges with different colors of thread in looping flower designs. The fabric looked old with its slightly yellowed edges. A larger ceramic statue of the Virgin Mary holding a baby Jesus stood in the center. A cross made of yellowish leaves leaned against it. Surrounding Mary and Jesus were the holy troops, saints and angels, hands folded before them looking upward at Mary and Jesus in holy reverence.

Small picture frames littered the table. Photos of my mother when she was younger, Juanita and her family, even an old yellowed picture of my grandfather in his army uniform. He looked to be in his twenties. Small knick knacks of pouches, rocks, and dried flowers also decorated the altar, but I wasn't aware of their significance and they didn't seem to be placed in any particular order.

I felt nervous, like I was going to accidentally hit something and then ruin the entire ambience of the room. Keeping my elbows close to my body, I turned to Abuela. She waited impatiently. Not that she said anything, but I had become accustomed to noticing the pursing of the lips, the tight way in which she held herself.

“Okay, we pray first.” Abuela closed her eyes and interlaced her hands in her lap.

“Why?” I whispered. There was an essence about the room that didn’t want to be disturbed. It felt wrong to speak normally, so I whispered.

She took a deep breath of patience. Maybe she was nervous too. “We must ask *Dios* to forgive us of our sins so that He may give us strength and guidance. A *curandera* is nothing without *Dios*. *Dios* gives us our gift to heal.”

“Oh. So do we say it aloud or to ourselves...?”

“Have you *ever* prayed?”

I averted my eyes. If I wasn’t “godly” enough, could I still be a *curandera*?

“What do you do at church?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know...At first I just looked at everything, you know, the paintings, the statues, the candles and all. Or keep up with all the sitting and kneeling. Now I just try to translate all the words the priest says.”

“That’s not bad, exactly. But church is more than statues and words. It is *Dios y Cristo y Maria*. You must believe if you are to maintain your *don*.” Believe? A little easier said than done.

“What’s a *don*?”

“I will explain later. Here we will pray together.” She grabbed my hands and held them between us. This was a different side of my grandmother; a calm woman without the toughness. I closed my eyes before she began.

She said the prayer aloud: “*Dios*, Forgive us of our sins. You have given us the gift to heal and we are humble to this gift. Open up the soul of my granddaughter to you, her ears to my learning, and her body to the power of healing,” she paused, “And please give me strength and knowledge to teach the daughter of my daughter. Amen.” I followed with an “Amen” of my own and opened my eyes.

Abuela sighed and the chocolate-colored shadows beneath her eyes descended further down her face. She let go of my hands, pushed herself to a standing position, and went to the front of the room near the door. I followed and stood next to her facing the room even though I wasn’t quite sure what was going on.

“Now we start.”

“Start how?”

She motioned with her hand to the room. “You will learn everything in this room. Everything has a purpose in here, and you will learn its purpose. Learn the material and the spiritual.”

“What does that mean?”

“May I have a chance to explain without you interrupting?”

Abuela looked at me, waiting for something sarcastic, but I refused to ruin this. I didn’t want us arguing when she could be telling me things.

“Material *nieta* is what Señor Diaz and Señora Flores do. They make teas and pastes, use herbs, give massages, sweat cleansings—physical healings. They heal with

the earth and with physical labor. But spiritual is more than that. It's healing on a different plane. And there's mental healing."

"And?"

"And what?"

"And I still don't really understand what you mean about spiritual and now mental. You didn't really tell me anything."

"Impatience will not help you to be a *curandera*. Besides, you must learn the physical before the spiritual and the mental."

She stepped forward to one of the shelves on the right side of the room. This was overwhelming.

"Wait," I said. She stopped and looked back at me. "I don't know if I can do this. I've never done magic or anything. Maybe you are wrong about my gift."

"Like I told you yesterday, I've known you've had the gift since the first day you arrived. And I'm never wrong." She smiled.

Suddenly, her voice was hard and serious, "And we don't do magic, only *brujas* do! Magic. Pah! *Loca*."

She turned and walked away. I'm the *loca*?

Abuela grabbed a stool next to one of the shelves, climbed up, and handed me a few jars. I placed them on the counter beneath the shelves.

The first one I recognized before she even opened the jar. "Garlic," I said.

"Yes, *para* bowel pains, toothaches, and stomach troubles."

She grabbed a second jar. "And this one?"

I shrugged. It looked like a bunch of leaves to me.

“*Este alcanfor*, camphor.” I took a step forward and peered into the jar. The jar smelled like moth balls. The leaves were glossy, yet waxy looking too, and a few black colored berries were sprinkled among the leaves.

“It helps with pain. Like headaches and rheumatism, even with faintness. Now this next one—”

“How?” I said.

“How what?”

“Well, how does camphor help with pain? I mean does someone drink it or touch it? How does it cure those things?”

“It depends. Right now you only need to know what they treat.”

“That just doesn’t seem like the best teaching method. Shouldn’t I learn how to treat something at the same time?”

Abuela jammed the lid back on the jar even though it was one of those lids that needed to be twisted on. “Forgive me, Almighty *curandera*. I forgot you know best.”

“No. Sorry. Okay, just go ahead. I’ll listen.”

She pursed her lips and grabbed another jar. “Aster, for coughs and congestion of the chest.” Then another one, “amaranth, for *la corazon*, heart trouble.”

An idea hit me. Crap, she wasn’t going to like me interrupting, but this was a good reason.

“Hold on, before you continue.”

Abuela threw her hands in the air, “*Aye mija, qué ahora?*”

“This is only the third jar and it’s a lot of new words I’ve never heard of. Can I get a notepad or something to write it all down, maybe make a few sketches of the plants, to study?” I smiled.

“Pen y paper? Aye, *jchingao!* My grandmother handed me this information down and her mother before her and her mother before her and not with any fancy pen and paper.”

“But it will take me weeks to memorize all this—without paper!”

“That’s how you will learn. No more questions.”

“Pen and paper isn’t even fancy. They have computers these days.”

“Pah! *jTechnologia a la caca!*” she said and climbed on the stool to bring down more jars.

For the next few hours, my grandmother pulled out different jars filled with spices, oils, dried fruit, dried leaves, stems from plants, and even jars filled with dead animals or animal parts that smelt so bad that I gagged a few times. She opened each jar and let me smell and even touch its contents, even though I blanched at touching the dead animals. A lot of the leaves looked the same. How would I be able to tell them apart?

So much information—it felt like thousands of hands pushing on my brain and there just wasn’t enough room. How could there be all this knowledge? And if these things did what she said they could, then why were there doctors at all? But now I understood a little why Marcella wanted to be an apprentice. If I knew all this stuff that my grandmother was showing me, I would have some kind of power. I would be special, more so than the average person, and that was the appeal of *curanderismo*.

It was impossible to remember everything she told me that day, and it would take weeks to remember how everything was used, thanks to Abuela's "traditional ways." Although, I can't lie—that night, I found some empty pages in a spiral and tried to write down as much information as I could remember, with a few drawings of the plants here and there. It was pretty difficult to do since there was so much to fit into my mind—ingredients with weird names, leaves and stems with funny, little details.

We only got through half the jars that night and when we returned to the kitchen, Gloria was already there cooking a meal of *nopales* and *huevos*. I didn't realize I was starving until I smelled the food.

Even though I didn't fully believe the magical mumbo jumbo, something about it was enjoyable. Abuela and I were connecting, sort of, and I was learning something different that other people didn't learn. I smiled throughout the meal and shrugged off Gloria's sarcastic remarks that evening with a roll of my eyes, and I wasn't even reprimanded for it.

The rest of the week transformed into a new routine that I would maintain for many months after. Enter the room, pray, and then learn about all of Abuela's tools, objects, herbs, and plants. I learned how to use incense and candles and that certain colors healed certain things; I memorized plant abilities, which herbs cured what and how to squeeze precious juice from the roots of a plant; I practiced with different tools, using certain knives to cut leaves and other knives that made slicing and dicing dead animals easier. I learned that religious objects had a purpose besides decoration. Even discovered

that a pouch that hung on the wall protected from evil spirits and a broom swept away *malo* and all other forms of evil.

The most important thing I learned was basically meditation, although my grandmother didn't call it that. She called it '*reflección*,' but the process was much the same, except for one particular thing.

"Why are we doing this?" I said as I opened one of my eyes to peek at Abuela. We sat with our legs crossed in front of the altar, facing one another, our hands turned down, and lying flat on our knees. My lower back ached after five minutes of sitting there and I kept squirming to get comfortable. Abuela sat straight backed and did not appear to be in any state of discomfort.

She kept her eyes closed. "You have an extra healing gift that others do not. Your *don*, the place within you where your gift comes from. It is spiritual and mental. When you learn your body, you find your gift."

"So this *don* will do all the healing for me?"

"No, you heal through your *don*," she said.

"So how would I know if I'm using my *don* or not?"

Abuela laughed. "Oh, trust me you will know. It's like nothing you've ever felt before."

I raised my right eyebrow. Okay, whatever.

"How am I learning my body by sitting here with my eyes closed?"

"Aye, girl! Can you ever be quiet? Stop talking and breathe in and out. Allow yourself to leave your body. Only then will you be able to see your *don*."

I stuck out my tongue in annoyance.

“I saw that.”

I opened my right eye, but Abuela’s eyes were shut. I closed my eye.

“Saw what?”

“I saw what you did. With my *don*.”

I opened my right eye again and stuck my tongue out once more.

“I saw that, too.” Her eyes were closed the entire time.

I closed my eyes, maybe a little more of a believer in this whole ‘*don*’ thing.

That weekend on Saturday, Abuela resumed her rounds to the neighborhood helping the sick. Instead of sitting in the kitchens of the homes she visited, I now went into the rooms with her and her patients. I assumed it was like a typical doctor’s visit that I had seen on television, since I had never visited the doctor when I was young. I can’t ever remember being sick. I asked Abuela if that was normal. She nodded. “Your *don* protected you from illness.”

When Abuela entered the room where the sick person was, her entire mood changed. A load was lifted, she smiled more, laughed at times, and her voice did not hold the toughness it usually did. Her mood was infectious, so that I found myself smiling goofily as I watched her interact with the sick.

Usually, my grandmother swept the room with incense that she pulled out of her bag and then proceeded to hold the patient’s hand and prayed with them. After that, she would immediately begin her healing by telling the patient what needed to be done to cure the sickness. At first, I believed she had already been previously told the person’s sickness, until once an old woman said, “How did you know that I had migraines? I never told you, did I?”

My grandmother only smiled and repeated the instructions for the tea that would help relieve the migraines. As soon as we left the house, I asked the same question.

“How did you know? Have any of these people that we’ve seen told you what was wrong with them?”

“Yes, some have told me.”

I walked faster in front of her to be able to see her face. “But did they need to tell you? Or did you already know?”

Abuela’s face had lost the light heartedness that it had had ten minutes ago, so that now she looked annoyed by me. “Of course, I already knew. I saw what was wrong with my *don*.”

“What do you mean by you ‘saw’ what was wrong?”

“Saw, see. With my eyes. I thought you were smart.” She nudged my shoulder.

“I am! But you’re telling me something that sounds crazy. You make it sound like I will be able to see the disease.”

She nodded. “Yes, that is exactly it.”

“I don’t know if I buy it. What does disease even look like?”

“Dark and ugly.”

Figures. “So if I this is real, how do I make it happen?”

“With your *don*.”

“I know that, but *how*?”

She stopped and looked at me. “By not complaining during *reflección*, by trying to find your *don* inside you, and by believing.”

I silently vowed to never complain about *reflección* again. Even though Abuela said this *don* stuff wasn't magic, it sure sounded that way to me and I wanted to experience it myself.

Still, watching my grandmother work on patients was another experience entirely. I had started to become comfortable in the closed off, culturally unique world of Laredo. Perhaps it was because I had learned Spanish so rapidly and it linked me to the culture. But after witnessing how my grandmother cured illness, I was thrown seven steps back from what I thought I had gained in understanding the Mexican culture.

She used eggs to massage the arthritis joints of her ailing patients. She spat on the chest of children to rid them of a whooping cough. She gave a woman a dried hummingbird as a love charm. She threw holy water in the shape of a cross on the bodies of dying patients and knelt praying for hours, sometimes aloud, sometimes not, and then she'd place her hands on the parts of their body that were failing and pray to God to heal them. She cured someone of fright—*susto*—yes, fright! As if someone could get sick by being scared? I gained a whole new set of vocabulary words that dealt with illnesses that weren't illnesses at all. *Susto, mal ojo, nerviosismo*...Illnesses caused by fright so that the soul became lost, illnesses caused by people looking at you with jealousy, illnesses caused by nervousness. We were not supposed to just cure the physical ailments of someone's body but their mental state too!

It sounded like something a psychologist should cure or a mental hospital. How could someone get sick by being scared? Abuela tried to explain it was the soul we were curing. And yet, that scared me more. She wanted *me* to cure a soul? That was a lot of responsibility. The soul is a big deal. I listened more carefully when she explained the

spiritual illnesses because I never wanted anyone to come back and say I had ruined their soul.

“And sometimes they aren’t cured,” Abuela also told me.

“So, what’s the point of all this if we don’t actually cure them every time?”

“Do the white doctors cure their patients of everything every time?”

She had a point. Abuela explained it was a give and take in the world, and mostly God’s will, and how much the person believed in what we did or if they wanted to be healed.

I was still an outsider to the religious aspect of *curanderismo*. I did not understand something I had no attachment to yet. And I definitely was freaked out by the folk healing aspect of the rituals, the spit, the eggs, the lemons, the limes, the spices, the weird pouches with beads and coins to keep away the *ojo* and other illnesses that had no physical ailment to them. It took time, and day by day, the things I saw and experienced in the aspect of curing started to become more normal to me, started to make sense.

Abuela did not allow me to help her with the patients right away. Not until I had memorized what each plant or material item in her *curandera* room was and how it should be used and definitely not until I spotted my *don*.

A few weeks after I had begun my apprenticeship, Marcella and her friends marched up to me in the hallway on my way to class.

“Hey yo, *puta*, I heard you have a new job.”

Instead of stopping, I kept walking, so she had to walk faster to keep up with me.

“You hear a lot of things about me, Marcella. Some would call it an obsession.”

Everyone stopped in the hallway and stared at us as we walked by. Suddenly, Marcella sprinted ahead of me and cut me off, so that I had to stop.

“What do you want? I need to get to class,” I said.

Marcella’s eyes darkened with anger and the vein on her forehead pulsed faster. “I asked you a question. Are you apprenticing to your fucking grandmother?”

I don’t know if I had been tired from all the extra work Abuela had given me, or if I was just tired of Marcella speaking to me like that and speaking about my grandmother so negatively.

“Yes! What does it matter?”

“You told me you weren’t her apprentice.” Her pale face reddened beneath her face powder.

“I wasn’t then, but now I am. And I’m tired of you being pissed off because my *abuela* turned *you* away.” As soon as I said the words, I felt so much truth in them. But I wanted the words back in my mouth because I had pissed her off more than ever.

Marcella pulled her fist back ready to take a punch, at the same time that I made my hands into fists.

It was then that some ninth grade science teacher spoke up. “Is there a problem here?” The teacher stood by her door on the opposite side of the hallway staring at us. In our section of the hallway it was quiet, tensed for something to happen. I returned my focus back to Marcella. I saw it. She hated me with so much passion. Could barely hold all that hate in.

One of her thug friends moved between us, gave me a cold stare, and said in a low voice, “Come on, Marcella. You know you can’t get expelled again.”

The teacher... It wouldn’t do for her to run and tell Abuela anything. This was my business. “We’re fine, Mrs...” I looked past her at the sign next to her door. “Mrs. Gomez. Everything is fine.”

I turned back around to see that Marcella had moved closer to me while her friend had moved to her side. She was so close that I saw the lines between the shades of grey and black eye shadow she had applied that morning.

Marcella spoke low so that not even her friend who stood nearest to us heard her. “Talk to me like that again, little girl, and you’re going to feel my steel in your gut.” She patted her jean pocket for measure where something stretched against the fabric. I couldn’t tell if it was a knife or not. My first thought went to the rumor Laura had told me when I first moved here of the girl that Marcella had almost beaten to death two years ago. First fear shot through me, then anger.

“No, you listen to me. Leave me alone. With the stuff I’m learning from *mi abuela*, your ‘steel’ couldn’t hurt me.”

It was a lie. I knew it before the words were coming out but Marcella didn’t know that. Marcella wanted something stronger than steel, something that would bring fear just by saying the name. I only knew the basic healing properties of herbs. I didn’t know curses, or spells, or any *malo* that could hurt others, but I wanted Marcella to think I did because I knew she’d believe it. Because that is what she wanted. Power. Control.

Her eyes widened a bit and she stepped back. Not exactly in fear, but in awe or perhaps it was for want. She wanted to be my grandmother's apprentice. Wanted the knowledge of *curanderas* but for all the wrong reasons.

I walked past her and headed to class.

Sunday when we were at another *primo's* house after church, I snuck into the bedroom and called the list of Jorge Valdezeses first. While some numbers were disconnected, a few Jorges answered. Most of the ones who answered did not know who my mother was and some said they were too old or too young to have known her. It wasn't until the sixth number I called that I had some kind of luck. The man who answered wasn't Jorge, but his cousin, Felipe. He said my mother's name sounded familiar, maybe Jorge knew my mother and maybe he didn't. He gave me the address of Jorge's job, Gutierrez's Shop, a place that fixed cars. He said I would find Jorge there seven days a week. I thanked him and hung up. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to call any of the Carlitas because a few of my little cousins found me in the bedroom and dragged me out to the front yard to push them on an old wooden swing.

The next day when the last bell had rung for school to be let out, I asked Laura if she knew where the garage was that Felipe had told me about. She readjusted her book bag to her other shoulder and grabbed the paper with Jorge's name and the name of the garage that I held.

"Yeah I know it. It's down the street from the downtown market where my mom's shop is."

"Shop?"

“My mom owns a boutique. *Sofia’s Cosas*. Horrible name, but she sells knick knacks, jewelry, clothes, house stuff.”

Laura gave me the directions to the garage from the school. The downtown market was the same one that Abuela had taken me to on the first weekend I had arrived in Laredo. It wasn’t that far from the house, so the garage must be within walking distance, too.

Before Laura gave me the piece of paper back she pulled it closer to her face and squinted. “Valdez?” She looked up at me.

I grabbed the paper from her. “Just someone I need to talk to. Why?”

“Just weird. I’m a Valdez.”

I fumbled one of my textbooks and then caught it. She was right. I vaguely remember her telling me her last name was Valdez when I met her. God, I was stupid. “Do you know a Jorge Valdez?”

She shook her head no. “Sorry, I don’t even know my own dad.”

“How do you know his last name then?”

“My mom gave it to me but she won’t even tell me his first name. Says he died long ago, that there’s no reason I should know it.”

“Sounds like something Abuela would say.”

Laura giggled. “Well, good luck with finding the guy. What was the reason you needed to find him for?”

“I got to get home. Abuela will kill me if I’m five minutes late.” I waved and started to turn away.

“Martha, wait.” Laura looked behind her, then in front, then to her side. She walked closer to me and spoke low. “Look, if you get a chance, come by my mom’s shop sometime on a Saturday. I work there on the weekends.”

“Why? You know if Abuela found out, I’d be dead.”

Laura’s eyes darted back and forth. “I know but this is important. I have to show you something. My mom works in the back doing inventory on Saturdays so she wouldn’t even see you.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I could tr—”

“Okay, good.” Laura smiled. “I’ll see you soon, okay? Soon.” She gave me one last stare before turning around and walking off.

That was weird. I headed out for home. Didn’t really have time to think about Laura’s weird request. Besides, I had more important things on my mind. Like how I was going to actually go to the garage since my grandmother was always at home and with *curandera* apprenticeship, I barely had time to do homework at night. More patience? It was almost the end of October. As soon as I found out where my mother was, I was going to flip out on her for making me go through all this work.

A few days later, I returned home to find the Cadillac missing and the house empty, no Gloria and no Abuela. I was more of a believer in God at that moment than ever before. There was a note on the kitchen table written in English. It said that my grandmother had been called to an emergency on the opposite side of the border and that she’d return home late. There were leftovers in the fridge. It was signed by Gloria with

the following written beneath her name: "P.S. Act right chica." Abuela a healer and Gloria a psychic?

I didn't waste a second thinking but dropped my book bag and rushed out the front door. It was a thirty-five minute walk to the garage and I didn't know how long it would take to talk to the guy. Besides, I wanted to return much sooner than Abuela might, just in case she returned early.

I practically ran to the garage and got there in twenty minutes, sweating. Even though it was October, it was still hot. The garage, a rusted gray building that looked ready to topple over, stood on a corner. Cars in different states, some fairly old, yet with new paint jobs and new parts, stood in between newer, broken down cars with missing or rusted parts in the front drive of the garage and in the street. I didn't know a thing about cars except for the broken down Pinto my mother had driven us around in, so I didn't pay much attention to the vehicles. A large garage door stood open on the left side. Three guys worked on a red Chevy truck with the hood popped open while another watched.

This was it. Would he be here? Would he be the right Jorge Valdez or was he lost and my mother too? I didn't have long to think or be nervous. Abuela was going to come home whether I got my answers or not. I walked to the open garage door. Before I was even fifteen feet from it, the man who had been watching the three guys work on the Chevy noticed me and turned to me.

"Can I help you?" he asked. My mouth became dry. He looked down at me over his bushy, grey mustache.

“*Sí*, uh, does a Jorge Valdez work here?” I asked. The man regarded me for a second, debating whether or not to tell me. Then he motioned with his head to my right. A lone man worked under the hood of a cream colored car.

“*Gracias*.” I felt the eyes of the old man watching me as I walked away. Now that I was in the garage, the overwhelming stench of oil and grease and the hard, rubber smell of tires assaulted me. Instead of pulling my shirt over my nose, I focused in on my target.

The man known as Jorge Valdez was hidden in the depths of the opened hood of the car. I wasn’t sure if it was him. The man wore a white wife beater with faded blue jeans that had oil and grime marks down the sides of them—as if he had wiped his hands on them every few seconds. His arms were tanned brown and held no muscle but were a little on the meaty side and his stomach rolled over the edge of his jeans, even more so since he was bent over.

As I walked up, Led Zeppelin’s “Black Dog” rang out. No way. Rock in Laredo? I couldn’t contain myself.

“Is that Zeppelin’s “Black Dog” playing?”

The man stood up, pulling a screwdriver out in his right hand and turned to me. It was him. The Jorge Valdez I was looking for. Even after all these years, the youthful teenager shone out from the hardened lines of his face. His deep widow’s peak look more pronounced with the straight, black, shaggy hair that fell around his face. He had a thick, black mustache that coated his upper lip now but damn it, it was Jorge.

He looked at me, his head cocked to the side. “You like Zeppelin?”

“Yeah. But I didn’t know anyone else down here did. I’ve only heard Tejano and cumbias and stuff.”

Smiling, Jorge placed the screwdriver in his front pocket and grabbed a towel hanging on the hood. He leaned casually against the truck as he wiped his hands.

“There’s a few of us down here who like rock. There’s a group of us who get together and play but we don’t get many gigs,” he said. I smiled. And he played in a band? My mom’s cup of tea.

Then he asked, “How old are you, kid?”

“Sixteen.”

“Don’t know many sixteen-year-olds who still like bands like Zeppelin. You guys are usually into that punk stuff.” I didn’t know how to respond, so I just shrugged.

My mother had dated a guy once, Bob, who had worked for a radio station for forty years. Each time she took me to his radio station he’d introduce me to a new album of a different band. Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, Aerosmith, The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, and the list went on. Bob was the only guy who ever paid me much attention.

“Is that on the radio?” I asked.

He laughed and it was his laugh that made me see why my mother had fallen for him. He was pretty handsome even for an old guy. “No, that’s a tape a cousin from Austin sent me.”

I replied “cool” just as he finished wiping his hands.

“So you come to the garage to talk rock or can I help you with something?” Jorge asked.

Jorge was a cool guy. I wasn’t so nervous anymore.

“Uh, yes, I think so. My name is Martha George. I’ve been looking for you.”

“Need a semi-good band for a gig?” He joked.

I took a second and licked my dry lips. “Because, my mother is Rosa Gonzalez.”

As soon as her name hit the air, his shoulders stiffened for just one second. His feet shuffled away from the car while he looked behind me as if expecting her to be there in the shadows. He was not the joking, relaxed guy he was a moment ago. Jorge was on edge, a scared animal backed in a corner.

“Sorry, but I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do. You used to be her boyfriend in high school,” I said.

He laughed mockingly. “Look there were a lot of Rosa Gonzalezes at my school. And I had a lot of girlfriends.”

My face burned. “Look, I only need a few answers and then I’ll leave. I just want to know why my mother left eighteen years ago and if you’ve seen her since.”

His mouth was set in a grim line and his dark eyes looked at me with such anger, as if I was ruining something he had tried to forget for so long. What had just happened? One moment we were talking rock, he was being cool, and now he was lying to me, insulting me. We stared at each other for a few moments, neither one wanting to blink first. The chorus played and I caught the lyrics, *Eyes that shine burning red...*

“I don’t know who—” he began but I cut him off.

“That’s bullshit. I know you know her. I saw Homecoming pictures of you two at school. I know it’s you.”

He shuffled his feet some more and shook his head, looking like a mad child. “I haven’t seen your mother since high school. And if you want to know why she left, ask her.” He turned away from me but I stopped his movement short with my next words.

“If I knew where she was, I’d ask her. The only people who might tell me something I want to know are you and Carlita Juarez. And since I found you first, I’m here.”

His body slumped and his arms hung at his sides. He refused to look at me.

“Leave things in the past. Move on. Your mother did.”

My fists clenched at my side. “Thanks for the advice, *cabrone*. At least tell me if you know where I can find Carlita Juarez.”

Jorge looked inside the front hood. “I don’t know anyone by that name.”

Whatever had happened with my mother had been big. It had to be. Jorge wanted to keep the secret just as much as Abuela and everyone else in my family did, which told me more about this secret than anything else. But why? I didn’t know if he knew how to contact Carlita or not, but fuck it. *Pendejo* wasn’t going to help me, and for a moment I had thought he was cool. I turned around to leave.

“Don’t come back here,” he said softly.

“Gladly!” I yelled as I stomped past the other workers and the old man with the bushy mustache.

When Abuela returned home that night, I was already in bed. She opened the door and looked in on me, but my body was wrapped in blankets, turned away from her. I stared at the wall with so much anger that I’m surprised the religious paraphernalia didn’t fall off the walls and clatter to the ground.

En El Presente

Marcella can't stand Pastor Mike's words and her anger is becoming bothersome. His prayers for the deceased, his praise for her kindness, his description of her charitable work. I'm angry as well, but I've never had the capability to be as angry as Marcella can.

I look at the woman sitting next to Charles. Her hair falls to her shoulders, thick and styled in large loose curls like the hair of models in magazines. I have not seen her face yet but I have a feeling that she will look like one of those mid-forties, business fashionable women in *Vogue* that everyone tries to imitate but never can. Her existence makes me feel less than special, less unique than I thought I was...I shake my head to stop these thoughts. This is ridiculous! Have I not learned anything over the years? Where is the profound wisdom and confidence that I was supposed to have gained with old age?

"She was a great woman to others. Never forgetting the birthday of her neighbor, or..."

"Pah!" Marcella spits beneath her breath. "*Olvida, mi cula.*" I turn and give her a stare. To say such things at a funeral! Her heart has turned cold. I wonder sometimes if I am the reason she is this way. She returns my stare just as hard, her eyes all too familiar. I can't look at them.

I turn away, back to Pastor Mike.

"I'd like to invite Betsy Miller to say a few words now." The woman, Betsy, has to be about eighty-five-years-old with glasses that don't help as she makes her way to the podium from the first pew on the right side of the room. She weaves back and forth and grabs at the podium as if it isn't right in front of her.

Betsy is wearing a short sleeve dark purple dress with gold buttons down the middle. It falls to her skinny calves that are covered in black panty hose. Her white hair has been curled but doesn't hide the pink and blue-veined skin of her skull. Her thin face looks puckered with wrinkles and her pink lipstick stands out in contrast to her pale skin. I shiver. *Dio*, forbid me from ever getting that old. Then again, there is some beauty in that old age. To have seen the changing of the world.

When she finally finds the microphone, she begins to speak with a voice so dry and soft that I would be unable to hear her without it, even if we sat a foot apart.

“We met forty-three years ago. I was the manager at a diner on Fortieth, Piangi's, it's called. Charles' diner.” Her thin finger shakes as she points at Charles. The woman next to Charles leans her head on his shoulder and brings a wad of tissue to her eyes.

“She came in looking for a job. She was the prettiest thing, and nice, too. A proper lady that didn't mind hard work.”

Now it was my turn to huff.

Marcella smirks at my huff. Happy that I am giving into what she thinks is “suppressed” anger. I ignore her and continue to listen.

“And we remained friends for all these years even after her and Charles married. I was there for everything. There were no secrets between us. She was a best friend, if I ever had one.”

Marcella and I turn and look at each other. Our eyebrows rise at the same time. Secrets, eh? What we knew about secrets...

Siete

About a week after I had found Jorge Valdez, I returned home from school to find my grandmother waiting on the porch for me, her short, chunky arms crossed over a pale pink sleeveless top and her lips pursed in an angry line set aside especially for me.

I almost stopped when I saw her. Nervous, because I wasn't quite sure what she was upset about. Unless she had heard about Jorge.

“*Buenas tardes, Abuela.*”

“You’ve been going behind my back? Keeping secrets in my house?”

I stopped. Damn. The sun beat down on my head and I fought the need to look down or anywhere from her squinting eyes.

Keep your cool. “What are you talking about?” I walked up the steps to escape into the shadow of the house. She walked to me as I opened the screen door. I had to escape her. Keep the guilt from showing on my face.

“Threats to my granddaughter? *¿Mi nieta?* And you threatening back?” Marcella. Thank God. I walked to the kitchen to grab some ice water from the pitcher in the fridge.

“Abuela, it was nothing really—” she cut me off.

“*¿Nada? ¿Nada?* That little girl, causing trouble for my granddaughter! I won't allow it.” Hearing my Abuela speak with so much passion and protection made me smile. My mother had never done that.

“Stop that smiling. Turn around.” God, how did she do that? I turned around, trying to wipe the smile from my face with little success. She got closer when I had turned around and now her finger pointed up at me. “*Nunca*, never, never threaten someone with your gifts—do you hear me? I won't be having a *brujita* in my family.

Curanderismo is good. Evil intentions, even evil thoughts, won't be tolerated. And stay away from that girl. Don't speak to her, and tell me if she bothers you again. Do you understand?"

I nodded. It was best not to say a word. She snatched away the pitcher of water and the cup I had in my hand and ushered me into her *curandera* room for two hours of *reflección*.

Thankfully, I still had Carlita to rely on for answers about my mother, since Jorge had refused to help me. The only problem was that I had a list of Carlitas, some with numbers and some without. Each Sunday at a different family's house, I snuck into a family member's room to use their telephone. Sometimes I got in two calls, sometimes only one, before I had to sneak back out into the family area so Abuela and Gloria wouldn't discover that I was missing. It took six Sundays to make it all the way through the numbers without any luck. It appeared that my only chance of finding the Carlita I searched for would be to go to the addresses listed without numbers. Which sucked...how was I actually going to go to the houses without my grandmother knowing? Despite the fact that it was hopeless, I had to stay positive. And patient. Which was worse than staying positive. Because I had to know. I just had to. I had found out too much already, so much, in fact, that I felt as if I would die if I didn't ever find out the truth.

I decided to map the houses regardless of whether I would ever actually have a chance to go there. There were three street addresses without numbers. I asked Laura if she recognized any of the street names. She recognized one, said it was a few blocks from the Pepto house, but the other two streets she didn't recognize. I went to the school's

library and found a map of the city. One house was located three streets over, another was four blocks away, and one was located on the other side of the city. I prayed Carlita was in one of the three, even if it was the house that was on the other side of the city. Because without Carlita, I'd be stuck.

No Carlita, equaled no mother, equaled no answers.

Eavesdropping was the only way I was going to find anything out in Laredo. One Sunday, we were at my *primo* Lolo's casa. The kitchen had a revolving door which you had to push to go into or out of the kitchen. Abuela, a few *tias*, and a few cousins were in the kitchen cooking. I was thirsting for Kool-Aid and I had barely pushed open the door when I heard my name.

"You still teaching Martha that witch stuff, María?" My Tia Julia said.

Before my grandmother responded, Gloria did. "Julia, how dare you! María heals your kids and treated your husband all these years of that *cochino* disease and you call her a *bruja*?"

"María isn't supposed to tell you that!" Tia Julia said.

"Ah, pah! Everyone knows where your husband goes every night. From now on, tell your *esposo* to go to one of those fake healers with their stores and see how much they steal from you!"

No one spoke for a few minutes. *Cochino* disease? Sounded like Tia Julia's husband wasn't all that faithful and Gloria had just said the thing that wasn't supposed to be said. I smiled. Most times, I couldn't stand Gloria, but this was one of those moments where her brashness was sort of funny.

My cousin Sonia tried to steer the conversation to less violent waters. “I heard Martha is learning much. To have a gift is such a blessing.” Other murmured their agreement. Abuela remained quiet.

Laura’s cousin, Tierra, who happened to show up at this family gathering spoke next, “Laura tells me that Martha is enjoying learning and she is doing well in school, too.”

A loud bang echoed after Laura’s name was spoken, followed by Gloria saying, “¡Chingao! Can no one keep their mouth shut today?”

Which reminded me. I still hadn’t gone to Laura’s mother’s store to find out what Laura needed to tell me.

“As long as Martha stays away from the *pachucos* she will have no problem,” some other cousin commented.

My Tia Elsa spoke next. “Speaking of Martha, I saw that boy that Rosa dated in high school the other day. He remembered me. Works at an auto shop fixing cars and...” My heart pounded harder. I released my hands on the door a little in case someone looked my way and noticed the door open. Did that *cabrone* tell Elsa that I had stopped by his shop? She couldn’t keep her big mouth shut to save her own children.

Elsa continued speaking. “Had some child with him, *nombre*, so disrespectful! What’s wrong with these parents in Laredo? Raising Godless *cochinos*. Thank goodness Rosa and he broke up, I mean if—”

“Elsa!” Gloria shouted with an edge to her voice. “*Callate* already! Hurry and finish the *frijoles*; chatting away. Like we don’t have a thousand Mexican mouths waiting to be fed!”

I wished that I had seen Abuela's face. I wished Gloria hadn't been there. I only had the outer pieces of the puzzle and someone or something always kept me from obtaining the pieces that filled in all the holes.

Even though my family was intent on keeping something from me, I didn't act any differently with Abuela. Actually, we were closer than ever as I continued to learn all the healing arts and discover my gifts.

Señor Peña had come to Abuela for help with kidney stones. It had taken many visits to convince him to let me work on him. It wasn't that he didn't like me; it was just that many of Abuela's patients didn't trust me to heal them, yet. I was young in their eyes and they trusted my grandmother's gifts.

"She heals you or you go to doctor. Your choice," Abuela told Señor Peña.

He chewed on his bottom lip, placed his bony hands on his hips and looked me up and down. Which kind of pissed me off. I crossed my arms and stared back.

After a moment, he looked down and gave a sharp nod. He chose me over the doctor.

The doctor was three things in Laredo: expensive, sometimes white, and sometimes, the devil. Señor Peña was part of the older generation here in Laredo. People like him were used to *curanderas*, natural healings. Doctors, their pills, and their surgeries were not for people like him. Although, some of those from the old generation fell for the commercialized *curanderas* that had set up shops on Saunders street and McPherson street with their promises of healing. Many lost their money and their hope, only to return to Abuela later with apologies for trying out something new.

I looked at Abuela and she gave me a nod to go ahead. I had the floor.

“Would you please lay down Señor Peña?” I motioned at the table.

He shrugged his bony shoulders toward his ears. “If you say so.” I had to fight from rolling my eyes.

I got a whiff of bacon as he was lying down. He fidgeted on the table watching me as I knelt down beside him. This was how it was going to be for a while.

Without waiting, I began a prayer: “*Dios*, please guide me in this healing. Through you I can do all things and through your guidance, help rid your son of his pain. Amen.”

“Is that it?”

Through gritted teeth I said, “Yes.”

His eyes were closed, but his eyebrows rose as if he was surprised. “Amen then.” Oh, I was fighting the frustration. I looked up at Abuela who was watching me closely. Just keep on moving, Martha, I told myself. After lighting some incense and sweeping away any *malo*, I began the healing.

Abuela had shown me how to massage the stones into the body so that Señor Peña wouldn't have to pass them in pain. But it was difficult to do. I was still trying to find my *don*. According to Abuela, if I found it, I could use it to push healing power into the diseased area of the body. I tried focusing on breathing in and out, evenly, in rhythm. I searched for the quiet place that I sometimes found during *reflección*.

As I massaged, I didn't notice that Abuela had been walking around Señor Peña until I caught a flash of light from the corner of my eye. Instantly, my concentration

broke, and I stopped massaging. Señor Peña, who had been lying down with his eyes closed, lifted his head, and looked at me. I ignored him and turned to Abuela.

“What was that?” I asked. She stood near Señor Peña’s feet.

“What is what?”

“That light.”

Abuela’s head cocked to the side and her eyes narrowed.

“You see nothing. Get back to healing.”

I wanted to argue but instead let go a sigh of frustration. If my grandmother didn’t want to tell me something, she wasn’t going to tell me anything. No matter how much I asked.

“Yes, finish please. I need to pick up *papas* for my wife for dinner,” Señor Peña said.

“I am. I am.”

I was about to close my eyes, because it helped me to concentrate, when suddenly I noticed something near my hands. It was dark. I stopped and moved my hands away. Yes, it was right there, on Señor Peña’s skin. Or, no, it wasn’t on his skin. I reached out hesitantly and tried to brush away the dark spot, but it wouldn’t go away.

I pulled my hand back. Señor Peña asked, “Is everything okay?”

I looked down and then back at him. Never make the patient uncomfortable. I tried my best to smile. “Yes, everything is fine.” I began to massage again. He leaned back and closed his eyes.

But the spot didn’t go away. I turned to search for Abuela but she had her back to me. She was doing something near the shelves that held the ingredients.

Moving my head closer, I tried to study the darkness further. It wasn't on his skin. No, it was beneath his skin and it surrounded something. Oh my god, this was crazy. I shook my head and closed my eyes. I was not seeing things. Nothing was there. I was dehydrated or tired or something. I worked on returning my breathing to an even state as I massaged. Breathe in for five counts and out five counts. I had just reached the point that it felt natural when...I felt it.

I've only had a panic attack once and it sort of felt like that. My chest contracted and then as it spread open to contract again, it continued spreading and didn't stop. Of course, this is only how it felt. My chest didn't actually split open. But it felt as if it was fighting to expand past my muscles and my chest cavity and my skin.

I didn't know if I was breathing and in some ways, I couldn't feel my body, didn't know if I was still massaging Señor Peña or not. I couldn't stop it. I think I tried to fight it, I'm not even sure if I can say that. Alarms were going off in my mind, and somehow I knew I could not fight it, that I had to give up.

And I did.

For anyone who has ever been on a river that was managed through the use of a dam system, they know that the river barely runs when the gates to the dam are closed. One can relax on an inner tube in the same spot for hours...until the gate is opened. The water rises quickly over the next twenty minutes, spreading out into shallow channels with dirt embankments, until the water rises well beyond the peaks of the red muddy mounds, until they are no longer visible. And the river runs swiftly, outward, filling each tendril of the small rivers and creeks that spread laterally from the main river.

That is what happened inside of me. Or that is the best way I can describe it. Power flowed from my center and through my body, so that every cell in my being vibrated with energy. I was the river when the gates of the dam were open, charged with new energy, and rising with every second.

I opened my eyes and saw that I was still massaging Señor Pena but now there was something coming from my hands and it was going into the dark spot. It was light that came from my hands, but then it also wasn't light. That's about as best as I can describe it. I watched as the power consumed the darkness bit by bit until it disappeared, all within a few minutes.

As soon as it was gone, I felt the power recede from my hands and from the other parts of my body, back toward the center of my chest. Although I couldn't see it, I felt it condense into a small pinpoint and move into some secret area inside of me, and immediately the gates closed.

I looked up and found Abuela standing at the end of the table, near Señor Peña's feet. "You felt it," she said.

I let go of a large breathe and put my hands behind my head.

I didn't know how else to answer.

When Señor Peña left, with only a tiny bit more respect for me, I turned to Abuela who had begun to wipe off the table that Señor Peña had been lying on with a rag and water.

"Good job, granddaughter."

I sat down on the table, not caring that Abuela was still trying to wipe it down.

"Good job at what?" I said.

“You saw your *don*.”

I stayed quiet for a few seconds. Abuela waited for me to respond. “I don’t know if I did,” I finally said.

She sat down next to me and put the rag in her lap. “You did. I saw it inside of you, saw you heal Señor Pena.”

I heard what she said, but some part of me wasn’t convinced. I had felt something but that was more than I had ever imagined. Abuela watched me.

“I remember the first time I felt my *don*.” I turned and looked at her.

“My mother was helping a neighbor next door and a young boy from the neighborhood came to the house, said his throat hurt. So I think, ‘I can help him. I know some things.’ But I was foolish. I didn’t respect the gift I had.”

“So what happened?” I asked.

“I placed my hands around his throat,” she puts her hands out to demonstrate, “to see if his lymph nodes were swollen and it happened. It only took a few minutes, but it was so much at once, that as soon as it was over, I screamed and ran to my room.”

I started laughing. “You didn’t!”

She smiled, “Don’t tell anyone that story. Only Gloria knows of it because she found me huddled in the corner of the room.”

I laughed a bit more. “And the boy?”

“His throat was healed, but until this day, he is still scared of me.” She smiled slyly.

Abuela placed her hand on mine. “It’s a scary thing, *mija*. But it is also something amazing. You have the gift to help others, to truly make their lives better. Remember to respect it—do not take it for granted, and do not use it unwisely.”

I nodded and looked down. Abuela’s hands were like my mother’s—small, thin fingers with perfect oval shaped nails.

“So this means I’m a *curandera* now, huh?”

She stood up, “It isn’t that easy, Martha.” She threw the rag in a basket with other things that needed to be washed.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“You asked about a light, before you felt your *don*. Do you know what that was?” I thought about it. It wasn’t from me. The light had come from near Abuela.

“Wait, were you healing Señor Pena? I thought I was healing his kidney stones?”

She said, “You were. While you were healing his kidney stones, I was keeping his arthritis from flaring.”

“How were you healing him without touching him? And why didn’t you just say you were healing when I asked?” I stood and walked over to Abuela. She was starting to make a salve on the counter. She grabbed jars left and right, taking bits and pieces from each one.

“Those with our kind of gift do not need to touch someone to heal.”

“Really?”

“*Sí*. You made a lot of progress today; you saw your *don* for the first time, and you healed your patient. But you can do a lot more with your gift.”

More to learn? I had already memorized and made over two hundred different salves, and potions and mixtures. I had helped bring three babies into the world, massaged out arthritis and kidney stones and even set a few bones. Hell, I had even tried to cure *mal ojo*, with Abuela's guidance, and according to the patients, it had worked. And now she tells me I can heal from a distance? Always more to learn.

“So why didn't you just say what you were doing in front of Señor Peña?”

She started to grind the ingredients in a mortar with a pestle. “*Porque*, I didn't want him to know I was keeping his arthritis from flaring.”

“But why? Shouldn't he know?”

She stopped grinding, put the pestle down, and turned to me. “We are *curanderas*. If they knew we healed without touching them, what would they say? *¡Brujas!* We aren't *brujas*; we just have gifts they cannot understand.”

“And the cures we give them? The massages? Do they even matter if we can heal them without touching them?”

“Of course. Material cures are from the earth, as are we. Our spiritual gifts are extras in healing. Why use our spiritual gifts if we can just make them a tea? Better on them, better for us.”

I asked what she meant by that, “better for us.” She told me that using too much of one's *don*, could wear out a *curandera*, even make her pass out.

And in extreme cases, perhaps die.

Even though Laura and I never really spoke about the fact that I still hadn't gone to her mother's shop, it was always there boiling under our conversations at lunch or the

question of “What are you doing this weekend?” Finally, one Saturday Abuela sent me to the market area downtown, the same one we had visited my second day in Laredo. Doña Lorena needed to fit me for my Christmas dress so it would be done in time. It was going to be a red and green velvety disaster. The dress fitting didn’t take long and before I left Doña Lorena gave me a bag with a new nightgown for Abuela. I left and quickly found Sofia’s Cosas. Almost walked past it since the sign was only about eight by eight inches and hung on a nail on the wall next to the door.

I looked around to make sure no one watched me before I went in. Wouldn’t do for someone to go tattle to Abuela that I was at Laura’s mom’s shop, a woman she despised, and for what reason, I still didn’t know.

As soon as I stepped in, I understood where the name Sofia’s Cosas came from. *Cosas*. Things. The store was full of knick knacks. Hanging on the walls, stacked on tables, stacked on the floor. There was a large collection of pottery plates, hand painted with Aztec-like symbols hanging on the wall next to an assortment of crosses ranging from small to little, wooden to metal. Some things were still wrapped in their clear plastic bags while cloth and scarves were stacked on display cases, scrunched close together to allow more room for other knick knacks and baubles to crowd the shelf. There was a large section of candles of all different colors and sizes, some had the Virgin Mary’s picture glued on the front and some had Santa Muerte’s picture, the Saint of death, who helped keep the balance in the world. The shop did not lack in piñatas, kites, peasant skirts, or huaraches either. And the store smelled of must and dust, and if there had been more lighting, I am sure I would have seen tiny dust particles floating amongst the mass of things.

Amidst the clutter, I noticed that I was the only person in the store.

“You’re here!” someone whispered. I stepped to the right and saw Laura’s head peeking between a mass of jewelry shelves on the check-out counter. She disappeared for a moment as she ran around the counter and to me.

“Come on,” she said grabbing my arm and pulling me back to the counter.

“Laura, I don’t have a lot of time.”

“And you think I do? My mom would kill me if she knew you were here. She doesn’t want to piss your abuela off.”

Behind the counter she let go of my arm. I placed the bag Doña Lorena had given me next to some jewelry stands.

Laura bent down to one of the bottom shelves pushed up against the wall. They were full of binders and folders with papers sticking out of them. Between a blue spiral and a Lisa Frank unicorn folder, she pulled out what looked like a stack of photos. She stood up and placed them on the counter.

“This is what I wanted to show you.”

They were pictures. Of my mom. And another woman. I pushed the photos around. Silly photos of two young girls sticking their tongues out at the camera. A picture of my mom as a teenager, standing at the front altar of the church next to the other girl smiling as they held candles. Another one, when the two were toddlers sharing a *raspa*, a snow cone, on someone’s porch.

“Who is she?” I pointed to the other lady.

“My mom.”

I turned and looked at Laura. “So they were close?”

Laura nodded. “I figured they kind of were, being cousins and all, but these prove they were *really* close. Think they were the same age. She never talks about your mom, but I found these the other day between those folders. On the back of one of the pictures was your mom’s name and my mom’s name. My mom must have been hiding them from me. But why hide them?”

I held one of the pictures up. It was my mother and Laura’s mom swimming at the beach. Did their friendship have something to do with why Abuela and Laura’s mom had a falling out?

“You thinking what I’m thinking?” Laura asked.

“I think this is—weird. I really don’t know—” Suddenly, someone from the back shouted Laura’s name.

“Damn it!” Laura whispered. She grabbed the photographs, even the one I held and shoved them between the folders. “It’s my mom. *¡Nombre!* She never comes out on Saturday.”

A door opened in the back. Laura pushed me from behind the counter and to the door, but as we were running I remembered the bag I had left on the counter. I turned around and ran back for it. As soon as my hand latched onto the bag a woman came in my view.

“Hello, welcome to...” Her words trailed off. Shit.

We stood there, Laura’s mom and me, looking at each other. Her jaw moved as if she wanted to say something but didn’t know what to say. It was the same girl in the picture, but she was older now. She had a mass of dark, tiny curls that circled her face and stopped at her shoulders, which was weird because Laura’s hair was so straight. The

loose black dress she wore hung on her thin frame and her wrists were covered in large wooden bangles that I had seen on one of the jewelry cases on the check-out counter. She looked older than my mother—maybe it was because she had on no makeup, not even lipstick.

Finally she spoke. “Laura, go make some *café*.”

I felt Laura walk up next to me. “Mom—I, she was just leaving. She needed—”

“Laura.” Her mom crossed her arms slowly over her chest. “Go.”

Laura didn’t look at me as she walked past her mom and disappeared to the back.

Laura’s mom walked toward me.

“You must be Martha.”

“Um, yes, I—”

“I’m Sofia.” She held out her hand to me. Hesitantly, I shook it. She gave me a small smile. Sofia walked around the counter and stood behind it.

“So did you come by my store to shop?”

“Yeah, um, Laura told me about it. Thought I’d look for a birthday gift—for a friend. But I think I should go now.”

“What friend? What do they like?” She leaned forward onto her elbows.

“I should go, if Abuela knew I was here...”

Sofia pushed off the counter and threw her hands above her in a mocking manner.

“The heavens would pour down with María’s wrath.” Her face was serious for a moment but then she smiled. I couldn’t help it and smiled too. She was funny. Why didn’t Abuela like Sofia?

“Don’t worry, Martha. I won’t let this get back to her. Just because she’s mad at me doesn’t mean she should take it out on you. Or my daughter.”

I walked forward a little. “What is she mad at exactly? Everyone keeps it a secret.”

Sofia picked some necklaces that had fallen off their display cases and hung them back up. “Martha, you will find out that this family keeps secrets about everything. They think if we keep it quiet, it never happened, it will all go away.”

“I’ve noticed,” I said. Sofia paused in her movements for one second then continued.

She hung the last necklace. “Look, I know your grandmother wouldn’t want this known, but the reason she and I...don’t speak, is because I helped your mother out a long time ago.”

“That’s it? Abuela’s mad because you helped my mother?”

Sofia crossed her arms beneath her chest. “I helped her out with something pretty big and your grandmother didn’t like that—at all.”

“Helped her out with what?”

Sofia smiled. “It’s not the ‘what’ that really matters. And it’s not really important anymore. The main thing is your grandmother can hold a grudge.”

“Thought you said secrets were bad.”

“No, I said this family keeps secrets to pretend like things never happened.”

“So you’re going to keep this a secret from me?”

“I’m sure you’ll find out one day. But for now, you need to get home without your grandmother finding out you’ve been here.”

“But—”

“Martha,” her voice took on the authoritative tone she used with Laura earlier.

She was almost as scary as Abuela in that moment.

Sofia let me leave through the back door so no one saw me. When I got home, I found a wooden bracelet, just like the one Sofia was wearing, in the bag Doña had given me. Did Sofia sneak it in? I snatched it out before Abuela saw it and kept it hidden in my backpack until I had the chance to leave it in my locker at school. Laura and I didn't talk about that Saturday at lunch on Monday.

Guess we figured if we kept quiet, it never actually happened.

A week later, Abuela asked me to change the sheets on my bed, so they could be washed. In my unorganized attempt to take off everything at once, I kicked a pillowcase beneath the bed. I dropped to my belly to look and found the pillowcase, but as soon as I pulled it out, I noticed something hidden between the wooden slats of the bed frame.

I don't know how it caught my eye. It would have been quite easy to miss since only a small purple corner was visible. It was in the center of the bed frame, so I had to push myself with my elbows forward until I was able to reach up and slide it through the slat. When I finally pulled it free, I saw it was a purple leather journal.

I scooted backward, out from beneath the bed, and sat up with my back against the side frame. What if this was my mother's? I had searched this room from head to toe when I had discovered my mother and Juanita had shared it growing up. That was at the end of August, and I hadn't found a single thing that I could confirm had been my

mothers. But I had never thought to look in the slats of the bed frame. It couldn't be this easy. Could it? Maybe I really wouldn't have to find Carlita.

I opened the journal and found nothing on the first page. Disappointed, I turned a few more pages until I found handwriting. To my disappointment it wasn't my mother's handwriting. I flipped to the front cover to see if there was a name, but it wasn't until I flipped to the back cover that I found in blue cursive handwriting: Juanita Gonzalez.

Damn it. I closed the book. What should I do? Give it to Juanita or read it? It might have some clues to why my mother disappeared and the secrets everyone kept from me. I opened the journal again—no dates. I needed the journal to be around 1971 and 1972, my mother's last two years in high school. Without dates this journal might start and end way before the year my mother had left. I grunted in annoyance.

I didn't have time to think, though, because Abuela yelled for me from the kitchen where she was hand washing her sheets and was ready for mine. I stuffed the journal beneath the mattress and quickly got up, grabbing the sheets as I did. I stopped and looked to where I had hidden the journal. If there was any way that journal could tell me what happened with my mother, I knew I'd read it. And when I was done, I'd return it to Juanita. Eventually.

I took the journal to school because I didn't want Abuela to know I had it, and I would never have time to read it at Abuela's house anyways. I read the journal before class began, in study hall, or any other free moment I had. I always kept it in my backpack and before I left school, I locked it in my locker.

Juanita's handwriting was in cursive and she used exaggerated loops and curves so at first it was difficult to read the entries. At least it was in English. After a few tries, I was able to decipher the first page.

Sister Maria gave me this journal. She asked to see me after Sunday school one day and handed me this beautiful book. I didn't even know nuns had money to buy things! Anyways, she asked me to write down my thoughts every day and to bring it to her at the end of every month. She said it was important to use full sentences and to write down every detail. I asked her why she wanted me to keep a journal. I never have before! She said she noticed I had difficulty expressing myself, not just in Sunday school class, but with Mamá and Rosa too. Can you believe it? I mean, I never thought about it...but I guess she's right. They are just so loud and strong and sometimes they don't listen to me. Sister Maria says this will help. And even if it doesn't, what can it hurt? Besides I can't say no to a nun!

After the first page, I read three pages of Juanita explaining her life, as if she had to introduce herself to the journal. After that she began to write about her days in so much detail that I wanted to poke my eyes out! Who cares about what she ate and every single step she took that day? Did she really need to write down that she went to the bathroom after lunch?

Then I came to the *quincenera* section. Juanita was almost fifteen and she was obsessed with *quinceneras*. She planned every single detail out in her journal: the location, her court, the crown, the shoes, and she even drew a crude drawing of what she wanted her dress to look like. Apparently, nothing went the way she wanted because there were five pages of rants about how her mother got everything wrong, her dress was

ugly, and the decorations weren't as cool as some girl named Roselia's *quincenera's* decorations, and Juanita's uncle got drunk and embarrassed her with a slurred speech in front of everyone where he continually repeated, "*Mija*, we love you!"

Finally I came to a passage in the journal where Juanita mentioned that Abuela would begin teaching my mother *curanderismo*. I punched the air in relief and excitement when I read that sentence. Thank God! This had to be near 1971. No more stupid dresses or talks about boys and friends! Juanita was a little jealous that her sister was being taught to learn *curanderismo* but she was hopeful that maybe one day her mother would see the gift in her too. But it was there. My mother was learning how to be a *curandera*—something I was doing now.

Funny. My mother and I had never had anything in common, except the same gift.

Ocho

The next few days, I couldn't put the journal down. Most of the entries were useless: Juanita writing about her day, someone she liked, who she had kissed. Even though most of it didn't matter I was too scared to skip over anything in case I found something significant.

I almost fell out of my chair at lunch one day when I read a very small passage about my mother winning homecoming queen. Juanita-of-the-past didn't seem too happy, with the comment, "Rosa won't shut up about her stupid dress and stupid crown." But that didn't matter to me. I was elated. The journal was written around 1972—the year that my mother's life changed—in some way.

Each time my mother's or Abuela's name popped up, I would stop and go over the entry, trying to read between the lines, trying to see something that wasn't there. It wasn't until I had read over half of the journal that something interesting finally came up one day at the end of math class. I had already finished my worksheet and had turned it in so I was free to do whatever I wanted—like read.

Rosa has been a puta lately. She keeps sneaking out the house at night to meet up with Jorge and then she expects me to lie for her! She doesn't even say thanks! She's moody all day and pissed off. Mamá and her are fighting so loud that I can't concentrate on writing this! They shout about nothing most of the time!

Was this it? I read the next page.

Rosa is refusing to help Mamá with her healing. She says she's too busy but I know she is lying. She doesn't ever do anything. I know it has

something to do with Jorge. I can hear Rosa and Jorge arguing through the window when she's sneaking back at night. I think Jorge wants to get married or something stupid like that. It's so hard to hear. Doesn't Rosa know how lucky she is? She's such an idiot.

The lunch bell interrupted my reading, forcing me to go to lunch. I packed up my binder and notebook but left the journal out. I was going to start reading it as soon as I sat down anyways. In the cafeteria, I got in line, grabbed a tray, a burger, and fries. A line had formed at the cashier. I looked ahead. Some guy was arguing with the lady about something while he searched through his backpack. Probably lost his money.

I grabbed a fry from my tray and popped it into my mouth. Might as well read a page while I waited.

I could kill Rosa! We had the biggest fight today. I walked into the bathroom on her and she was just standing over the sink, one hand on her head, and she was taking fast, deep gulps of air like she was having a panic attack. Her face was pale and I thought she was going to throw up or faint or something. When I asked if she was okay, she went crazy on me! She started yelling at me to get out, to mind my own damn business. That's what I get for being such a good sister? My own sister calling me a puta? Fuck her. I hope Mamá finds—

The next instant, the journal was out of my hand and flying in an arc away from me. It took me a second to realize that Marcella had walked past me with her friends, laughing. She had grabbed the journal and had thrown it.

“Hey!” I dropped my tray and a loud clang echoed throughout the cafeteria. I pushed past Marcella, hitting her shoulder with mine as I did. She stumbled back and I glimpsed a pissed off face.

The journal had fallen onto the floor, but it was worse than that. Somebody had dropped a carton of milk on the ground. The milk had spread across the floor, and the journal had fallen right in the middle of the large liquid puddle.

“Fuck!” I didn’t care who heard. I squatted down slowly and picked up the journal, careful not to get milk on me. It was hopeless. Half the journal was soaked through, the blue ink bleeding into misshapen blobs. I shook off some of the milk and looked through the dry pages. Most of the dry pages were at the beginning of the journal—stuff I’d already read! And the dry pages at the back of the journal were starting to get moist and stick to the wet pages. Damn it. I was getting somewhere. I had felt it, I was about to find out. And even if I wasn’t, I would never know now. Marcella had taken that from me.

My neck grew warm, and then warmer, and then burning hot. Anger built in me. Sweat formed on my brow. I dropped the journal back into the milk. It was useless, gone, done. My only chance and Marcella was to blame. She had caused this.

As I turned around, I said, “You bitch!”

I moved toward Marcella, my fist raised ready to strike her short, evil self into oblivion, when I man called out, “Hey, you! Put that down, now!”

Marcella held a butter knife in her hand and was walking towards me. We both stopped as soon as she heard the voice. The cafeteria was quiet. Everyone watched us.

The man, a young teacher on cafeteria duty, walked up swiftly from my right and Marcella's left. I lowered my fist.

Marcella still held the knife. She looked at me, her eyes black and her shoulders tensed. What was she going to do with that knife? Stab me? I felt her anger across the short distance. It pulsed, over and over again. Least I thought it was anger until, suddenly, something happened with my vision and I saw that it wasn't anger that was pulsing out of Marcella. It was something more—she had a *don*? It looked just like Abuela's *don* but different. Marcella's was darker, warped.

No, that couldn't be it. No... I shook my head a little and my vision cleared and all that stood in front of me was Marcella.

"I said *put it down*." The man now stood on Marcella's left, about a foot or two away.

Her hand tightened on the knife for one second before she dropped it. One, two, three, four, five tiny pings, until the knife fell flat on the cafeteria floor. Each ping echoed throughout the large, silent room.

"Principal. Now." The man grabbed Marcella's elbow, and dragged her away. With the dark expression she gave me when she looked over her shoulder, I knew Marcella and I had reached a new level in our dislike for each other.

After the teacher took Marcella to the principal's office, I walked out of the large room. No one spoke to me; no teacher stopped and asked if I was okay. Although I did hear a guy say, "Why didn't Martha just zap her with her witch power?" There were a few snickers from the surrounding tables, but when I looked at them they stopped quickly and tried looking anywhere but at me.

I left the journal where it was. Somebody else could throw it away. It was no use to me now. I felt bad that I couldn't give it back to Juanita, but she had forgotten it anyway and wouldn't miss it now.

When I got to the hallway, I thought I heard someone call my name. Maybe it was Laura. I didn't stop and no one came after me.

I couldn't quite say how the rest of my classes went. My body went through the motions, but I wasn't there. I was thinking too hard about Marcella. I had felt it in the cafeteria—her power. Didn't I? It was all in her anger. And Laura had been right; Marcella really did have the gift, or some kind of gift, since she hadn't exactly been trying to heal me.

But that was crazy. It couldn't have been a *don*. Could *don*'s look like that? They were gifts, meant for healing. Could you use them for *malo*? And why did I see it? Or did I? This was becoming too much. All this *curandera*, *bruja* crap. Because that's what it was. Crap. I didn't sign up for this. Seeing things that aren't even there.

And if Marcella did have a *don*, and I'm not saying she did...but if she did, Abuela would have seen it in Marcella the day she came to the house asking Abuela to apprentice her. And she turned Marcella away anyway. Why? If there hadn't been anyone else in so long that had come along with the gift, and if Marcella did have one, then why not accept Marcella as an apprentice? Perhaps, the difference between Marcella and me was that Marcella had picked up a knife and I hadn't. Is that what Abuela had seen in her? That capability? Probably, since Abuela always preached against evil thoughts and any form of *malo*.

By the end of the day, there were a lot of rumors about Marcella and me. A lot of people had heard that Marcella really had stabbed me. In my physics class, one girl turned to her friend and said, “See? I told you, nothing happened to her.” I wanted to punch this one guy during last period when he tapped my shoulder and said, “Is it true you stopped her with your mind?” I rolled my eyes and replied, “Don’t be stupid.” He just shrugged and turned back to the teacher.

There was one rumor that was true. Marcella was expelled and sent to a juvenile detention center for two weeks, which meant I wouldn’t have to see her until next semester since school would be out in exactly two weeks for winter break. Thank you, Mr. Principal. Now I wouldn’t have to watch my back at every corner—at least in school.

At the end of the day, Abuela waited for me outside my last class.

“Why are you here?”

The corners of her lips fell farther down her face, stretching out the skin of her flabby cheeks. She didn’t say anything but rather turned and began walking to the front of the school. Abuela’s forceful steps were a billboard for her anger. Someone had told Abuela about the incident with Marcella. Still, I had not imagined she would pick me up from school.

Abuela had brought the gold Cadillac and parked it on the left side of the school—right in the way of everyone else who was trying to pick up their kids. Either Abuela didn’t care, or she didn’t realize where she had parked. It was probably a combination of both. We got into the car, and Abuela took off, jumping into the traffic seamlessly as if the traffic had been waiting for her to pull out.

Her hands gripped the steering wheel so tightly her knuckles were white. She looked straight ahead, leaning forward in her seat, so that her large chest almost touched the steering wheel. And her lips were pursed, as they always were when she was angry.

Once we made it into the neighborhoods, only a few minutes from the school, Abuela spoke.

“What did I tell you? I said stay away from that girl!”

I had been slouched before but feeling attacked I sat up in my seat. “I did! I didn’t do anything. She started it!”

“So, you think it’s okay to retaliate? To push her? To raise your fist? Over a book?” How the hell did she know all this?

“You weren’t even there. You don’t know the whole story. She—”

“Aye, she nothing! You! I said stay away from her and you don’t listen. How can I trust you—”

I yelled back. “Trust me? How can I trust you? You changed my freaking last name! Who does that?”

“I can do whatever I please! You are a Gonzalez whether you like—”

“You never tell me anything! I’ve done all you’ve asked and you blame me for stuff—”

Abuela’s voice rose louder. “Of course I blame you. I expect more from you, and you let me down, just like your mother!”

She slammed on her brakes and I was jerked forward in my seat belt. For a moment, I couldn’t breathe because the seat belt cut into my chest and then I was slammed back into the seat.

“Gah!” I yelled when I could breathe again.

I turned to Abuela, fuming and wishing she was Marcella so I could hit her. The area just below Abuela’s white hair line was tinged in pink and her eyes were dark with a similar rage I had witnessed earlier. “Go. I need to do some things,” she said through gritted teeth. I turned and looked out of the window. We were at Tia Juanita’s house.

I jerked my seat belt off and pushed the door open, but before I stepped out, I turned back. “I’m not my mother. But it’s not hard to see why she left this place. She couldn’t stand your craziness!”

I hopped out of the car and slammed the door. Stomping to the house, I silently cussed Abuela out with every single cuss word I could think of in Spanish and in English.

My grandmother sped off with a screech of her tires and I was once again reminded of the day my mother left me.

En El Presente

Betsy leaves the podium when she can't stop a coughing fit that takes hold of her and won't let go. I allow my *don* to reach out to her, but it doesn't do much to help. Betsy is old, and I can't cure old age.

Pastor Mike returns to the microphone. "Thank you, Betsy. The next person who would like to speak is the daughter—"

Here it comes...

"—Alyssa."

Marcella's face turns to mine, "*¡Qué!*" She whispers so loud that the man in front of us looks over his shoulder again. I put my finger to my lips to tell her to hush. She turns back to the front where the young woman who is sitting next to Charles has stood and is making her way to the podium.

The young woman is beautiful, more so than I ever was, but what can you do? She is younger, so that helps. Her skin is much lighter than mine. More like the skin color my mother had always strived to attain for herself. Alyssa has deep set brown eyes, a straight thin nose like her father's, and thin lips. And she is as tall as I am, but thinner, more muscular. Probably works out daily, whereas my workouts are the walks to the houses of my patients who refuse to see me at the clinic. It is better if I go to them, before they go to the fake *curandera* shops that sprinkle Laredo every ten feet, and lose their money and their faith.

"You knew," she says. Not a question, a statement. "Why didn't you tell me?"

I shrug unable to express my reasons aloud.

“*Mas* secrets. She *would* do this to you...” I fight to correct her. Marcella seems to forget her position in this as well. She begins muttering and somewhere in the mix I hear the words “leaving” and “*puta madre*.” She moves to grab her purse, but I am quicker. I snatch it and place it on my other side, so that my body is between her and the purse.

“Stay,” I whisper. And then, because I can’t help it, my voice becomes softer, and I whisper more gently, “For me, *por favor*.” Her lips purse in anger. I know she is considering jumping over me. I can only imagine what everyone will say—two old ladies fighting over a purse at a funeral. Marcella must think better of it, or perhaps she really wants to stay, because she sits back, crosses her arms, and looks forward at Alyssa.

“It doesn’t even feel like she is gone...” Alyssa begins, “The day she passed we were...” Alyssa pauses and takes a deep breath. She is trying not to cry. “We were sitting at the house, wrapped in blankets watching *Pretty Woman* on television, and just talking. That was the greatest thing about Mom; we just talked about everything and anything.”

“Pah!” Marcella says, but not loud enough for anyone but me to hear. I can’t blame her. It frustrates me to listen, too. It is hard for me to hear of a mother who gave everything to her daughter. I was given lies and secrets from my mother; Alyssa was given love, attention, probably even a brand new car at sixteen, vacations, and full funding from her parents for college. And yet, I need to listen to this woman’s story...To hear this story. And so does Marcella.

“No one ever imagines the possibility of their mother dy—passing away. Not being there. I just assumed she’d be around the rest of my life. There were so many things I wanted to ask her, that I never did. Things I only realize now that she is gone.”

I wasn't ready for my mother to leave me all of those years ago, either. I had always assumed she would be there for the rest of my life, even though I didn't particularly like her. She was my mother and because of that I had some innate instinct to love her, to want her in my life. But as I grew older I had to come to terms with the fact that my mother was a part of my past, and that she wasn't going to make any attempt to make things better. I had made my peace.

Or at least I told myself that I had.

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Nueve

Tia Juanita gave me my space, at least for a little bit. I flew past her when she opened the door and stomped through the hallway, into the kitchen, and then out the back door, dropping my backpack on the ground before I threw myself into an old, woven, plastic, green lawn chair. I was left alone for about an hour, seething in anger.

How could Abuela think that I was anything like my mother? She was delusional. I couldn't stand these crazy mood swings and the ridiculous stuff that came out of her mouth. No wonder my mother had left. There's your answer, Martha! She left because her mother was a lunatic.

Tia Juanita came outside with two *panes de dulce* and a glass of milk. She sat down in the other lawn chair next to me, separated by a small, plastic, round table where she placed the glass of milk and the sweet bread. It was warm outside but not unnecessarily hot since it was the beginning of December. Or perhaps I had grown used to the heat, as I had grown so used to other things, the brown people, the language, the food, the life, and just hadn't recognized my comfort with it until now.

I refused to look at Tia Juanita. Looking at her would remind me of the journal, and the journal would remind me of the fact that I wasn't any closer to finding out why my mother had left or where she was. And I wanted so badly to ask Tia Juanita what she had known, why my mother left. But she wouldn't tell me, and even if she did tell me, she'd run and tell Abuela and then Abuela would do everything to keep me from searching.

“When your mother and I were little, we used to run away sometimes.”

Oh, good. My mother learned to run away early. That would have been a nice warning.

She continued. “She would wake me up in the middle of the night with a bag full of clothes and snacks and tell me to be quiet as we snuck out the house. But we never got farther than down the street before we became too scared and we’d run back and sit in the backyard, pretending we were somewhere we were not.”

“Why did you want to run away?”

“C’mon, Martha. You can’t imagine why? ”

“Let me guess, the big bad I-want-to-control-everything wolf?”

“Of course.” She grabbed one of the *panes de dulce*, tore a piece off, and threw it in her mouth. I took the other one and did the same, except I dipped my piece into the glass of milk before eating the sugary deliciousness.

“Why is she like that?” I said, “It’s so hard to live with someone like her.”

Tia Juanita chuckled. “You think it was easy for me and Rosa? You have it much easier, trust me.”

“I doubt it. She expects so much from me! *Curandera* work. Good grades. Stay out of trouble. I didn’t ask for all of this. When I came here, all I wanted—”

“Wanted what?”

Was to be invisible. But I couldn’t say that. “Nothing. It’s just so much.”

Tia Juanita put her hand on my shoulder. “Martha, do you want to be a *curandera*? Do you even like learning those things?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I mean I did. I do. I don’t know right now. It’s a lot of work, and sometimes I don’t even know if I’m doing it right or doing anything at all. If it’s even real.”

She nodded her head. “I understand. But look, you don’t have to do it if you don’t want to. You can be a normal kid. I can ask Mamá to stop teaching you. Whatever you want.”

Is that what I wanted? Although I wish I could say it was, it wasn’t. I did like learning this stuff. Even if healing from a distance or seeing someone’s *don* seemed impossible, I knew the physical cures worked. I had seen it myself. The teas, the pastes, the massages, they were the real deal. And I enjoyed that. If I didn’t have *curandera* work, what would I have? Who would I be without it? Who would I become?

“No, don’t do that. Maybe just get Abuela off my back a little.”

Tia Juanita took another bite. “Look Martha, your abuela, she doesn’t understand some things. She was brought up in a different time with different ideals. And she is a stubborn, strong woman. She won’t ever admit that she is wrong.”

“Well, she should! She can’t use her upbringing as an excuse. I don’t.”

“Don’t you?”

I started to flick my wrist at Juanita but caught myself. I stared at my hand in horror. Oh shit...no, that didn’t mean anything! I was nothing like Abuela. *Nothing* like her.

Juanita waited, so I quickly said, “Whatever.”

We sat there and let a few passing moments go by, finishing our sweet bread.

“Martha, I really am proud of you. I know no one has said it, but you’ve carried yourself well, especially with everything that’s happened. Your mother and all. I just want you to know that people do notice.”

“So why did you and my mom run away? The first time, I mean.”

Tia Juanita screwed her face up in thought. “You know, I don’t even remember.” She laughed. “We tend to forget those things that we found so important at the time they happen.”

I looked at Tia Juanita. She was different from the girl of the journal. She wasn’t hyper-excited, pitying herself or obsessive about material things any longer. Actually, Juanita wasn’t too bad. Sort of wise.

Something else bothered me. “Will you be honest with me?”

She nodded yes.

“Do you know where my mother is?”

She leaned back in her seat and looked across the front yard. “Martha, I wish I did.”

“If you did know where she was, would you tell me?”

She opened her mouth then closed it quickly. She brushed a strand of hair from her forehead and shook her head no. “I don’t think I would.”

“Why?”

“Martha, you have to understand that Rosa was never good at...relationships. Not even with me. Once, she got so pissed at me for not agreeing with her that she left me in Mexico, so I had to find my way home, alone. I was only thirteen.”

“But, that doesn’t mean...”

Juanita interrupted me. “I see it this way. She wanted to leave, Martha. And sometimes we are better off if some things are never found. Even if those things are people.”

Abuela and I didn't speak that night when she picked me up from Juanita's. We didn't speak on the car ride home, nor did we speak when Gloria greeted us in the kitchen with dinner. We didn't even speak during the meal. When Gloria finally figured out that no one would converse with her, she got up, stomped to the cupboard and pulled the mini television out, switched it to a *telenovela* and ignored us.

I didn't find out where Abuela had gone during the day, and it didn't concern me much at all, except when I woke up the next morning to find that Abuela had burned three candles for protection throughout the night and had left an amulet beside the candles. I stared at the flickering flames while I picked up the amulet. It still surprised me that the candles had not melted throughout the night just like the candles did on the first night I had stayed here. For some reason, the idea of healing with my hands was more realistic than a candle not burning low.

The amulet, a leather pouch, smelled strongly of garlic, which was confirmed by the clove I found inside. There were also a few gold coins, a red ribbon, and a piece of lodestone. Wherever Abuela went yesterday, whatever she encountered made her believe that I was in serious trouble because the amulet was the strongest protective amulet that Abuela knew. Still, what could this little knick knack do against Marcella? I hated to admit it, but my faith was shaken when it came to some of the *curandera* stuff. I just didn't know what to believe.

The next day was Saturday. Abuela still wasn't speaking to me, but we had patients to take care of at their houses. Even though I still was an apprentice to Abuela, I was pretty skilled in a lot of things by this time and a bit more independent. I knew hundreds of cures for basic illnesses and how to make those cures, how to set a broken bone, how to assist in giving birth, and I was pretty skilled at healing with my *don* through massage. Or at least, I thought I was. I had also been practicing healing without touching patients as well. It took a lot of concentration, but I could do it; at least I thought I could. Sometimes I just wasn't sure if what I was doing was real, if what I was feeling wasn't some ludicrous self-fulfilling prophecy bullshit that I created, thanks to a little push from Abuela.

But then when I healed... I felt my *don* and I was sort of convinced that it was real. That build-up of power at the center of my chest. A ball of energy pushing outward into what felt like an empty cavity. It pushed with so much force that I thought I might throw up and then suddenly, I breathed and the energy spread out and everything inside me vibrated with *something*. Something that made my head woozy and my body loose, kind of like how I felt when I smoked a joint that one time in junior high—but better. From there, my *don* found the sickness in the patient and I healed the sickness away somehow. I mean, one moment it was there, all dark and blotchy like a blind spot in my vision, and the next it was gone. And when I was done, my *don* returned to the center of my chest, almost cutting off my breath, until as quickly as it came, it disappeared and I was left wondering if it had ever happened at all.

As we were leaving the house, Abuela said, "Here," and shoved a paper bag at me. "Go to Juan Pedrito's and give him the *alcanfor* for his rheumatism. Then go see

Señora Gallos and give her the herbs. I'll meet you at Doña Lugos." She turned and walked in the opposite direction down the street, leaving me with the bag and nothing else.

That was it? Looked like I would mostly be administering physical cures. And not really even that. This lady was killing me.

Juan Pedrito was an old widower whose rheumatism was so bad that his left hand had curled into a claw. When I arrived at his house, I went inside and made him a tea with the herbs Abuela had placed in the bag for him. Then I massaged both his right hand and his left hand claw with a paste I had made the day before. It smelled minty and slightly stung the skin of my palms. Nothing I couldn't handle. Thirty minutes later, I was finished, he thanked me, and I left.

Señora Gallos' house was a different story. She needed more herbs to prevent pregnancy. She had seven children already, and her husband couldn't keep his hands off her. They could barely afford the ones they already had. Most of the children I had seen on these visits ran around without shoes, and their clothes were either too big or too tight on their skinny bodies.

When I arrived at the house, she greeted me, "*Buena* Martha, *ven*, come in, quickly now."

Even though everyone in her neighborhood had come to see Abuela many times, Señora Gallos was nervous that if anyone saw her with the *curanderas* they'd gossip about her, just as she gossiped about them. Sometimes I didn't understand the people of Laredo. They respected the *curandera* and *curandero* but whispered lies or rumors of

witchcraft. They begged the *curandera* for cures but then denied their association with her. God forbid anyone just admit the truth in this town!

Then again the people that had opened *yerberias* around the neighborhoods weren't helping the *curandera* name, either. They promised healings for a small price. Many people with hope had flocked to the stores for convenience or in desperation, only to have their gold or their money stolen and left with no cure. Because of those *putos* there were a lot of people who didn't believe that *curanderas* had gifts and who thought that we were only out to make money off of people's hopes and wishes. Abuela was one of the last few honest *curanderas* in Laredo. It was fake *curanderas* and Señora Gallos' fear that were making things difficult for Abuela and annoying as hell for me.

After I stepped into her living room, I gave Señora Gallos the bag with the remaining herbs to make the birth control tea.

"*Muchas gracias*, these save my life." She held on tightly to the bag and closed her eyes for a moment. She looked relieved. "Men. Stay away from them; they just want to give you children and then no money to feed those children, *verdad?*" she said.

I nodded and said, "*Verdad*," as if I really knew what she meant.

"I have a bag of plantains for your abuela, fresh from Mexico. I'll go get them." I told her thank you, but Abuela would decline if she were here.

"Nonsense!" she said, "I insist!" When patients offered to give Abuela something in payment, whether it was fruit, food, or money, Abuela always refused and had told me to do the same. However, it was rude to not accept the gift if the patient insisted—a cultural thing I had only learned when I continually said "no" to a customer one day and was berated by Abuela after the patient left the house. She told me Mexicans are proud,

and we must not hurt their pride by refusing their gift. Couldn't they just be like normal people? Then maybe we wouldn't have to go through the traditional "no thank you," "I insist" two step. However, I couldn't complain too much. It was how we got most of our groceries.

As I stood waiting, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned, almost called out, because I was not expecting someone to approach me from behind, but I caught myself when I saw the girl's expression in front of me. It was Señora Gallos' oldest daughter. She was a freshman at my school, but I had never spoken to her. I didn't even know her name.

"I have to ask you something before my mother returns," she whispered, her eyes darting to the doorway where her mother had disappeared. "I moved the plantains, so it'll take her a few minutes to find them. Can I ask you a question?"

"Yeah, what is it? Are you okay?"

She looked on the verge of crying. Her hands nervously jumped around her. Pushing her hair back. Grabbing her arm. Cracking her knuckles. "You're not a *bruja* are you? Everyone whispers. Do you know anything really? I don't know if I should talk to you."

Most likely it was her mom who whispered stuff about us, and she had overheard. Or kids at school saying stupid shit.

"No, I'm learning to be a *curandera*. Not a *bruja*. Totally different. Do you need something or not?" I could have been nicer, but I was only sixteen and little things like this annoyed me.

She nodded but didn't appear to want to say. "If I tell, you must keep it a secret, yes? Not tell anyone? That is your job? Not even to your abuela, right?" It was the first time someone had asked me to keep a secret as a *curandera*.

"Yes," I said, fearing Señora Gallos would return before I was given this chance to keep my own *curandera*-patient secret. I momentarily forgot my loss of faith in *curanderismo* and was once again excited.

"Okay, I haven't, you know," she paused, cringing, then said, "bled in two months and sometimes I get dizzy and I am always hungry. And the last few days, I've been throwing up every morning. Am I," she leaned forward and whispered, "pregnant?"

I first thought, yeah, of course, if those are your symptoms then you're probably pregnant, but I would need to check to make sure. I was about to give her my answer, when something else occurred to me. Journal...*thought she was going to throw up or faint...moody all day...Rosa and Jorge arguing. I hope Mamá finds...out?*

No...it couldn't...but it made sense...I mean—Holy shit. It was there in the diary...It had been in the words of the diary. Holy hell...

"Martha? Hurry, am I or am I not?"

I swallowed, feeling the small amount of spit coat my throat as it made its way down. "I—uh—yeah, I think so. But I would have to check to make sure." I couldn't breathe. This wasn't happening. My thoughts shifted back and forth from the present reality to a disturbing realization.

She was on the verge of crying. "I will let you know." She ran off through a different doorway taking fast, deep gulps of air. As soon as she disappeared, her mother walked into the room.

“I found them! I thought I had put them in the pantry, but they were under the table. I—” She stopped when she saw me. “Martha? ¿*Todo bien?*” I wanted to shake my head no. No, everything was *not* okay.

But I didn’t do that. I nodded and then said, “Yes, I’m fine. Thank you, but I need to go.”

I turned and walked out the front door and didn’t stop, even when Señora Gallos yelled, “Wait, the plantains! You forgot them!”

I didn’t care about the plantains. I walked and walked. Not sure where I walking to but just away.

Diez

I walked past Doña Lugo's house. I didn't know if Abuela was in there or not, but I couldn't look at her yet. I couldn't look at anyone. My tennis shoes slapped hard against the concrete as I walked by colored house after tacky colored house after tackier colored house. The noise of my shoes was the only thing I could focus on, had to focus on.

I kept walking faster and faster, until finally I started to jog and then ran at a full sprint. I kept running and running until finally I saw the pink house. I ran up the stairs onto the porch and stopped. My breath was coming hard as I stood there panting for air, my shirt sticking to my back and chest.

I turned around and hit the house with the side of my fist. When I pulled my hand back a few pieces of pink paint flakes had come off. I wiped my hand on my shorts and sat down on the porch with my knees bent and my forearms on the tops of my knees.

My mother had been pregnant. That was it. That was the secret all along. It made perfect sense.

She had been hiding her pregnancy from Abuela. Even worse, though, was that she hadn't been pregnant with me. The journal hadn't had dates or anything, but it had been clear that this was my mother's senior year. Unless my mother had been pregnant for almost two years, then it couldn't have been me. I wouldn't have been born until about a year and a half later, depending on how far along my mother had been in the particular passage I had read.

Did she have the baby? Did Abuela find out, or did my mother get rid of the baby with an herbal remedy? If she had the baby, where was it? Somehow I had a feeling that Abuela had found out about it. That had to be why my mother left. And Jorge had to be

the father. He had known! That's why he had refused to speak to me; that had to be it. And he didn't even tell me...Or did my mother keep the baby a secret from him? And he was just mad at her for leaving him?

Oh God. I had a freaking sibling. My mother had been pregnant. How the hell was this kept from me?

I put my head into my hands.

"Martha!"

I looked up. Abuela was wobbling toward the house and she didn't look too happy.

"Why didn't you meet me at Doña Lugos? What happened? Are you okay?"

I pushed myself up so that I was standing when Abuela reached the porch. I opened my mouth to respond but closed it when I couldn't think of something to say.

She finally made it to the top step and looked me over. "What's wrong with you? ¿*Qué ocurrió?* What happened?"

Her eyes searched my face for an answer. What had she done when she had found out?

"I... I just didn't feel good," I finally responded. She squinted and I knew she was looking me over with her *don*, but she wouldn't find anything. Had she done the same thing to my mother? Looked her over one day with her *don* and realized?

"Get inside." She walked inside the house holding the door open for me. All of a sudden, I did feel sick. Sick at the thought of what I had discovered. Sick at the thought of what I would find, because I couldn't just stop now. I had to know what happened to the baby and to my mother.

After entering the house, I walked straight to my room and lay down on my bed. I heard her in her workroom, rummaging through things. Minutes later, she was in the kitchen throwing things around in there. A little later, when I felt like my whole body was breaking apart and I couldn't breathe, she trudged into my room and forced me to drink something green that smelt like dirt and eggs.

I made a face after the first sip, but before I could push the drink away she put her hand on the bottom of the cup and tilted it upward so that I was literally forced to drink what tasted like a mixture of mayonnaise and rotten fruit. When I had finished, I started coughing as I handed the cup back to her. If anything, I felt worse after drinking it. I wanted to puke, and I didn't know if it was because of the drink or because of the secret.

She took the cup and looked at me, her lips pursed. I ignored her and fell back down onto the bed, turned onto my side, pulled my knees up to my chest, and wrapped my arms around them.

“What—no complaints?”

I shrugged.

She didn't say another word, just left the room and me to myself.

Abuela tortured me for the next few days. She thought she could pull me out of whatever crevice of depression I had fallen into. At first, I was only allowed to eat chicken broth and crackers. I wasn't really hungry, so I didn't care. The following days she made the dishes I disliked most—*mole*, *menudo*, and a lot of meals with *nopales*. She knew I hated the slimy texture of *nopales* and that was what she was counting on—for

me to complain. But I didn't. I didn't have the energy. Didn't care. Why should I? School was a blur too. I didn't speak much those days.

She also made me drink that nasty concoction twice a day, morning and night. And I was only allowed to take cold showers, no hot water; and she even made me watch *novellas* with Gloria when Saturday came around while she went out to do the rounds.

Even Gloria noticed I wasn't my natural self. "Aye, girl! What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

"*Nada?* You with your *trumpas* frowning all the time and walking around as if everyone should ask you what the matter is. *Mira*, when I was your age..." She kept rambling but I stopped listening.

And after a week, when all that didn't work, Abuela did *una limpia*, a cleansing, on me, because she thought I had *susto*, a disease caused by the loss of a soul. For three days in a row, she changed and washed my sheets, replaced them with fresh ones and then placed a cross made of cenizo herbs, a purple colored sage, under my pillow. Before I went to sleep, she made me lie on my stomach while she swept sage over me from head to toe as she recited the Lord's Prayer, and then proceeded to put Holy water on my joints. I had to turn over so she could repeat the process over the front of my body. And to top it all off I had to drink aniseed tea with some honey at the end of each sweeping.

I think Abuela was frustrated after the *limpia* was done because nothing happened. I hadn't lost my soul, it was still there inside of me, dormant perhaps, but then again I wasn't interested in reviving it yet. You have to want to be cured to be cured. And I just wasn't ready yet. The things we do as *curanderas* don't work if the person doesn't

believe and I didn't believe it could work *for me*. And perhaps, Abuela was blinded herself...just like doctors can't treat their own kids, well, Abuela shouldn't have tried to cure me.

I wasn't sure why I was so upset. Perhaps it was because it was yet another thing I hadn't known about my mother. A *big thing* I hadn't known about her. An older brother or sister. Maybe I was a little jealous. My mother had given birth to someone else besides me. I wasn't the only one in her life or I hadn't always been. And that bothered me.

Before Marcella could return to school, it was winter break, and I had been in my depressive state for almost three weeks. Not much of a winter, though. It was still ninety degrees outside. I managed to stay in my slump until Christmas.

Abuela dragged me to midnight Mass in the ugly green velvet dress that I'd been fitted for those weeks before. By Christmas, I still hadn't said a word to anyone about the secret. Part of me wanted to confront Abuela and another part wanted to confront Juanita, and if I could, I would have confronted my mother. But I didn't do anything. I kept it all to myself. It was my secret, the only one I had. And if everyone was going to have their secrets—I was going to have mine too, damn it.

Church was a mix of green, red, gold, and silver poufy dresses and black, blue, white, and brown suits to match. It was always packed, but tonight, the rest of the city who didn't attend Mass regularly was there to get their yearly blessing. And yet, our seats were still waiting for us.

Mass lasted three hours instead of one. There were four baptisms, five catechisms, but communion took the longest. Hundreds and hundreds of people to be given bread and

wine by only three people, while the rest of us knelt on wooden benches waiting for the lines to end. My knees were numb when we finally stood. Guess kneeling on wooden benches for almost an hour was supposed to remind us of the suffering Jesus incurred. I was now able to get communion myself, even though I hadn't gone through catechism and I hadn't been baptized for that matter, either. The whole communion thing happened about the same time I started to apprentice to Abuela. I was shooed into the Laredo Catholic club for helping the good people of the area. Thank you, Jesus.

As we kneeled, waiting for communion to be over, I watched people pass by us on their way back to their seats. I was supposed to be praying, but I can only pray for so long. As I watched the hundreds of people pass, a woman walked by, her head slightly bent. It was the way in which she refused to look our way, barely peeking out from the sides of her eyes, then trying to look anywhere but at us, that made me notice her. Was she scared of the *curanderas*? Another one of Abuela's enemies? Then again something about her looked familiar, I couldn't place it, though. She wasn't a patient. Maybe I had seen her at the market? I couldn't tell because she refused to look at us straight on. Her profile wasn't enough to place her face. She kept walking, and I lost sight of her among the other bodies there for Christ's day of birth.

By the time Mass finished, my eyes hurt from the glare of the hundreds of burning candles and gold decorations, and I was nauseated from smelling the poinsettias and the body odor from a packed hall, and from a lack of eating nothing but a cracker and a sip of wine in the last six hours. Once we left, Gloria dropped us off at Tia Juanita's. I don't know where Gloria went, but she said she had plans and told Abuela to stay out of her business when Abuela asked.

Abuela didn't have Christmas decorations at her house. She said she had them up year round. Statues of Mary, Jesus, Joseph, the manger scene, the three wise men. Very Christmas of her. However, Juanita had the full Christmas set up: fake Christmas tree with lights and ornaments, ribbons hanging on green garland around the doorways, red, white, and green candles lit around the house, a plate of cookies, presents beneath the tree, and stockings hanging around the door frame because there wasn't a mantle or a fireplace to hang them from.

Juanita had a stocking not only for Abuela but had one for me, too. The stocking was green with my name stitched in red. My fingers lingered over the letters of my name.

"I know its plain, but it's something, right?" Tia Juanita said as she came up beside me putting her arm around my shoulder.

I nodded, trying to swallow the tears in my throat. "My first." Her arm stiffened at my response. Then she gave my shoulder a little squeeze.

"Thanks," I said as her arm dropped from my shoulder and she walked off. I kept my eyes from hers, not wanting to see her pity.

I fell asleep on the couch, and in the morning Santa had come. Or that's what my little cousins believed, and I played along. One year, when I was eight, I had woken up in the morning and had run to the living room. We had taped a picture of a Christmas tree I had drawn at school on the wall. I was looking for that one present, because usually my mother could afford one small present from Goodwill or some other charity place, but that year there was nothing. Except for my mother and some old guy crashed out on the couch. When they awoke, she left with him to go to a party and left me at the apartment. She didn't return until a day later.

Most of my Christmases weren't like that, though. Usually, Christmas was boring and we were stuck in the dingy apartment all day because it was too cold to go outside and we had nowhere to go even if we wanted to leave. But this year, I received presents at Tia Juanita's, and more than one at that.

Aunts and uncles had sent gifts. I got a few shirts, a purse, and some makeup from my Tia Judith, even though I probably wouldn't wear it. My Tia Judith was trying to tell me something. Abuela gave me a beautiful gold necklace. It had a cross pendant with tiny gold vines covered in thorns that wrapped around the arms of the cross and came together in the middle where a gold rose bloomed. I fingered the pendant, wondering if she had bought it with my mother in mind. Rosa. Rose.

"Thank you," I said trying to muster the feeling I felt for the gift in my thanks. It was the nicest thing I had ever owned up until then and most definitely the most expensive. It felt odd, considering how numb I had felt the past few weeks. Abuela nodded once, looked like she was going to say something but then turned and told Lilia to open another gift. Abuela was never one for a lot of emotion.

Everyone watched Lilia and Tomas open presents, not really paying attention to me. I opened a box and found a small square baby blue photo album. On the first page was a picture of the entire family that had been taken one Sunday after church for Tia Pearla's birthday. She had insisted she needed an updated picture. I stood to the side of the group between Tia Juanita, who had her arm around me, and Tio Alvino.

I smiled oddly in the photograph, as if I wasn't sure what was happening. Looking at the picture made me smile. I flipped through the pages. The pictures were random ones of me or our family. Many were candid shots, snapped when I didn't know someone was

taking a picture. In one picture I was playing with Lilia. In another I was sitting between a few aunts eating from a plate of food. I flipped through the pages smiling. I loved the photographs of the family caught in various moments of laughter or cooking or talking rapidly to one another with hands held out in some mysterious explanation of an event. There were even a few pictures of Abuela, who, like me, didn't know the camera was there. She didn't like taking pictures and always turned around when a camera was near.

As I was flipping through, Juanita moved from the couch and sat beside me.

"You like?"

I nodded, "Yeah. This is great. Better than the drawing I did for you."

"Martha, are you kidding me?" she held up the framed drawing I had drawn a month before of her, her husband, and her two kids. I had drawn Abuela a picture as well, of Mary and Jesus, and was going to give it to her when we got back to the house. She seemed to like them well enough.

"This is amazing! I didn't know you were so talented," Juanita said.

I shrugged my shoulders. It wasn't too bad.

She smiled. "I'm going to hang it on the wall next to the kitchen so everyone can see it."

"If you want," I said shrugging again.

She smiled. "Thank you again, Martha. Now flip to the back of the book." I did as she said and skipped through some of the photos. I didn't get far enough, so she flipped the pages for me until she got to the place that she wanted me to see.

It was a picture of my mother at the age of seven or eight. She stood awkwardly in a purple Easter dress in front of the church. I flipped to the next. My mother and Juanita

sitting on a couch. Juanita was a baby, and my mother held her. My grandfather had his hands under my mother's arms making sure she didn't drop Juanita. I couldn't see his face; it wasn't in the picture. Abuela must have been the one to have taken the picture because she wasn't in sight. My mother looked down at Juanita with wonder, tiny lips parted and eyes wide.

Each picture was from a different time, a part of my mother that I had not known. I studied the pictures but not for long; I would do that alone in my room for many nights later. Juanita remained silent beside me as I continued through. Finally, I came to my mother's high school years. She was laughing. Posing with her friends. Posing with Juanita. The pictures were now taken by friends most likely. I couldn't imagine Abuela being okay with my mother doing a silly pose, as she kicked her leg in the air like a cheerleader. Abuela would have said *cochina* or some other word that would have meant my mother acted inappropriately.

Suddenly I came to a picture with my mother and Sofia. They wore matching tie-dye shirts and each held a hand up to the camera in peace signs. The camera caught them in mid-laugh. Suddenly, Juanita grabbed the album from me. She looked at Abuela who wasn't paying attention, but rather watching Tomas open his present. Juanita hurriedly turned the page and handed the album back to me as if nothing happened.

All because Sofia helped my mother. With something. Sometimes I thought my family did too much to keep Abuela from being angry. I turned the pages, not really caring to say anything to Juanita about what she had just done. She didn't say anything either, and a few moments later, she pointed out a picture of her and my mother dressed

in matching pink dresses and laughing while she told me how the two of them couldn't stop itching all day.

I came to a picture with my mother and another woman. They sat smiling in a red booth at a restaurant.

Pointing at the woman, I asked, "Who is that?"

"Carlita. One of your mother's friends." Carlita looked different from her Homecoming picture and the pictures I had found in the yearbook. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she had blunt cut bangs. But now that Juanita confirmed it, it was Carlita.

I looked at the picture again. Wait a second... I had seen her before. I swear I had. But where? It was the woman from church! The one who refused to look at us. How could I not have realized it was Carlita until now? God, I was a freaking idiot! She had been at church, only ten feet in front of me, and I had lost my chance.

My thoughts were interrupted by Abuela. "*¿Qué esa?*" What is that? She asked. She had stood up and was looking over my shoulder. Her hand was held out for me to give her the album.

I gave it to her without saying a word. So much had happened in a few moments that I didn't know how to respond. She looked at it, at the picture of my mother and Carlita. Abuela's face never changed as her eyes took in the picture. After a few moments she handed the album back to me.

"I have breakfast to make," she said and walked to the kitchen.

En El Presente

The gold cross has tarnished over the years, but it's still just as beautiful and still the most expensive jewelry I own. I was never much for spending money on pretty things. It feels slightly warm in my hand. I hold onto it, feeling the chain bite into my neck with every small tug. Marcella sits next to me, resigned. Maybe she has taken on that numb feeling I had endured so long ago.

Alyssa tells us funny stories of her mother and sad ones, too. After the first few minutes, Alyssa is able to hold in the tears, more so than her father, who wipes his eyes with a black handkerchief with every story.

“...she just picked me up from school one day without telling Dad so she could take me to the zoo. She told me it was girls day out and we deserved to treat ourselves. Dad was furious when he found out that I had missed two important tests that day, but Mom didn't care. She just gave him a kiss and a stuffed gorilla she had bought at the zoo. She had bought me one too, and one for herself. She called them our 'little family.' Mom would always do fun, spontaneous things like that with me. I'll miss that.”

Ten minutes later, Alyssa finishes.

“I wish I had more time with her. There are so many questions I have, now that she's gone. I just want to say thank you for coming today. I'm happy to know that each of you came to show how much you loved and cared for my mom. I invite each of you to come to our home after—” she paused unable to say “the burial.” She began again, “After. I'd love to hear your stories of my mom.” Alyssa looks at the casket, and quietly says, “I love you, mom,” before leaving the microphone and heading back to where her father sits.

I watch Marcella, her eyes follow Alyssa back to her seat. Then surprisingly, she whispers beneath her breath, “Psht. I have a story for you.” She flips her brown wrinkly hand backwards. An action that brings a smile to my face.

I rub the cross once more. She must not be that numb.

The service ends not long after Alyssa leaves the podium. Everyone files in a line to pay their last respects to the deceased and the family. I grab my purse and hand Marcella her purse, which I had kept away from her until then.

Marcella speaks: “We’re not going up there. You have no respects to pay.” She means “we” don’t have any respects to pay.

“*Sí, nosotros amos.*” Yes we are, I reply.

She shakes her head, her lips press into a firm line. “No. I won’t let you do it.”

“Don’t cause a scene. And you’re not trying to do anything for me.” I move forward, in hope she will move toward the aisle also.

“Look. You drag me here knowing that I don’t want to come, have no reason to come. Then you expect us to go up there? No. I won’t do it.”

I want to pound my fists against her hard temple, but I am too tired—tired of her stubbornness.

“Look I know this is a lot for you, and maybe...” I say.

“Pah! You make it sound like I’m afraid.”

I smile. “Okay you have no fear. But this hurts. It has hurt for many years. But you have to let it go. Why’d you come, anyway?”

Marcella opens her mouth to make a smart remark, but closes it. She lets out a long sigh and shakes her head. “*No se*. I don’t know why.” Her shoulders sag. “You called and I came. I didn’t think beyond that.”

I want to hug her, but I know she’d flinch or stiffen, so instead I say: “Well I’m asking you to do this with me. I need to make things right, and I need your help with that.”

She rubs her forehead with her left hand. “Sometimes, I wish you had never come to Laredo.”

I did not mean to laugh too loud, but a few people turn their heads and stare at me. “*Aye, yo tambien. Yo tambien.*”

She shuffles to the end but pauses before she steps into the aisle.

I nudge her shoulder. “Let’s go, *viejita*.”

“Old lady, my ass.”

Once

Abuela wasn't exactly sure why I came back to life. I don't think she really cared why, or even why I had gone into my small, self-pitying depression. I think she was happy to have me back. Or as happy as Abuela could get, which meant ordering me around a little less than usual.

I had a goal once again. Something to work toward. And Carlita was the key. She would know what had happened to the baby, exactly how and why my mother had left, and even might know where she was now. So that was my plan. Find Carlita and ask. It was simple. I already had addresses that could be hers. And I figured it could only be one of the two addresses closest to the church.

We were still on winter break and more people were sick. I didn't have the time to look for Carlita, since Abuela required me to be with her twenty-four hours a day running errands and administering cures at the houses of patients while she took care of patients that came by the house.

By New Years, we were swamped with plastic wares of *frijoles*, *arroz*, *molé*, *pizole*, *tortillas*, *pollo*, *carne guisada*, and plates and plates of *pan de dulce*, Chinese candy, and *cucquietas*. I became so sick of eating all the food everyone brought us as thanks and payment that I stopped eating everything but rice and fruit for a few days.

The day before I had to go back to school, Abuela brought out two large canvas bags and threw them on the table next to me.

"*Apurate*, Martha. We go to Mexico today." I stopped chewing the bread I was eating. Abuela hobbled down the hall and into one of the rooms. She hadn't ever taken

me to Mexico. I had my suspicions that she had gone before but most likely when I was at school.

Soon after, we drove the Cadillac to a parking lot near the border and then got out to walk on foot. I had the two empty canvas bags draped around my neck. We had to walk up some stairs, then down another set of stairs, then up a few more stairs, until we finally walked onto the bridge. Cars waited bumper to bumper to cross into Mexico, whereas on either side were two sidewalks to allow pedestrians to cross the border on foot. There was a large fence on our right, a means by which to protect anyone from jumping over into the meagerly filled Rio Grande.

The sidewalks were crowded with those crossing. On the other side of the car barrier were those returning from Mexico or going to work in the United States. All sorts of people walked beside us on the path to Mexico. A grandmother with her daughter and her daughter's children walked ahead of us at a slow pace, trying to allow the three little ones with them to walk on their own. We passed men with dirt stained work pants and button up plaid shirts who talked with each other of the work they had done overnight on some construction project in Laredo. We even saw a few tourists. The Anglos walked with cameras hanging on straps around their necks and sunglasses over their eyes. They smelled like sunscreen too.

As we walked, I turned to Abuela. "So why are you bringing me with you—to Mexico?"

"You need to know where I get some of my supplies."

"But why?"

“Aye, Martha! *¿Por qué? ¿Por qué?* You just need to know, okay? What if I need to send you to get me something?”

Me? Go to Mexico alone? The thought didn't appeal to me. It wasn't like I knew much about Mexico. The idea of crossing into another country, one that I wouldn't understand, as well as the country I lived in, did not appeal to me.

There was little chatter as we crossed the bridge, except for the Anglos, who didn't care or notice the lack of conversation. Everyone had somewhere to be, and there wasn't any room for anything that would slow them down.

Only one guard stood on our side. Three faced Mexico on the other side of the bridge. They looked closely at each brown face that walked by, stopping people every once in a while. I'm not sure what the border patrol asked those they stopped. Sometimes the person would respond and be allowed to walk on, while other times the person pulled out something or another from their pockets or bags, showed the border men, and then continued walking.

Before we got to the guard that faced us, one of the other guards on the opposite side stopped a young woman with a bright pink scrunchie in her hair, walking toward the United States. Walking ahead of her was an older woman with short graying hair holding the hands of two children, a girl and a boy. The patrolman looked as if he was asking the woman he stopped for papers or identification. She smiled unsurely, and looked haphazardly through her pockets. She looked up at the older woman with the two children. The children were trying to look over their shoulders at the pink scrunchie lady, but the woman who held their hands hurried them away.

Something made me think the pink scrunchie lady was the children's mother.

“Martha, stop staring.”

I tripped over Abuela’s heels. “Sorry,” I said trying to find my balance once again.

“That’s their mother right?”

“Sí.”

“Why won’t they let her pass?”

“No papers probably. Mexican citizen.” Abuela walked faster, as if she was trying to walk away from my questions.

“But why can’t they let her pass? We’re going to Mexico, and we aren’t Mexican citizens.”

“Don’t they teach you this in school?”

“No. Are they supposed to?”

“Mexico likes Americans coming in, buying stuff, because we leave and leave our money behind. Mexicans don’t want to leave America, and America doesn’t want Mexicans in the U.S.”

“But why?”

“Why? Why? Why do you care?”

I wasn’t sure why I kept asking why, I just needed to know how a woman would let her kids walk away with someone else, to another country.

“It’s just that that woman—” I sighed, “Forget I asked.” Abuela kept silent as we walked past the guard and into Mexico.

When we neared the end of the bridge, I spoke again because something had occurred to me. “I don’t have papers. How am I going to get back across?” The idea of

attempting to return to the United States scared me. Would they believe me? Take me to jail?

“I have your birth certificate.”

I stopped, stunned. “Wait—what?” I wanted to ask: Did my mother leave them with you? But instead, I said, “How did you get it?”

“I had to pay a man one hundred dollars to get you a new one. I was surprised you were born in Texas.” A new birth certificate? Did she mean that she had my birth certificate reissued or that she got a fake one with my “new” last name, Gonzalez? Never knew with Abuela.

It felt like a new world in Mexico. Surprisingly, the buildings were older and more run down than those found north of the Rio. As I looked around I was vaguely left with the sense that Mexico was a blur of brown. Brown buildings, brown streets, with hints of bright colors from banners or signs that blew mildly in the slight breeze.

And there were more poor people. Children running up to us with cardboard boxes of *chicle* with yells of “*¡un peso!*” Women and men without teeth or limbs and dressed in raggedy clothing sitting on the street with signs in Spanish begging for money. Abuela stopped every once in a while, pulled something out of the purse she carried—coins, an orange, a wrapped piece of food, a vial of something—and gave it to those we passed.

After about the fifth one, she said, “Too many...just too many.”

The children were extremely skinny and had round bellies. My mother and I never had it that bad, ever. How could this be? We were only a few miles from the border, and the difference was drastic in the level of poverty. For a moment, I felt nauseated and

guilty for the life I had lived for complaining about the dingy apartments and hotel rooms my mother had found us.

Abuela led me through brick streets that were as wide as two people with their arms outstretched. Shops lined either side and were crammed tightly together. Merchants stood on the doorsteps welcoming us in or haggling with a customer or two. Abuela walked past them, sometimes she nodded to someone, but mostly, she kept on straight. I, on the other hand, kept finding myself trailing behind. Each food cart we passed made my mouth water. Mexico smelled like a mixture of dust and spicy food. It was the oddest thing.

I was fascinated by the things being sold. Bright clothes, books, spices, food, statues, liquor; it was a market with everything you needed, for mere *pesos*. When Abuela told me that one dollar equaled almost seven pesos, I freaked out. I could be rich in Mexico.

We finally came to a small alcove of shops down a side street. Our destination was the last shop on the left, squished between a shop full of perfumes and another shop that sold old cassette tapes and played *ranchera* music on an old portable stereo. The kind of stereo that was as tall as your knee caps and as heavy as a bag full of bricks.

The shop we entered was small and compact and smelled like Heaven, if Heaven had a smell. As soon as I entered, I smelled the sweet fragrance of hundreds of dried plants, herbs, and spicy spices. It was an overload of senses, so much that I felt my body go woozy from the experience and my eyes closed for a second. I loved it. Abuela's *curandera* room was only a small taste of the rich perfume that the shop held.

The shop wasn't that cluttered. Thousands of clear jars neatly lined the shelves built into the walls. There were small scoopers and bags that customers could store their different items separately. There were even small weighing stations set up on tables that were pushed up against the walls. My fingers itched to touch everything, open up every jar, and discover how I could use all the hidden treasures. The brightness in the shop made me look up. In the ceiling, an old plastic skylight let in the Mexico sun for natural light.

Abuela left me and went straight to the shelves to get things I assumed we were short on. When I finally got my bearings, I caught up to her. She already had three small bags filled.

"What's that?" I asked pointing to a jar filled to the top with a gooey substance. Inside the gooey substance were objects of some sort. I moved closer. It was a...

"Is that a baby mouse?" I asked. Abuela nodded, with a small smile.

"Please tell me we are not getting that today."

"Well, I wasn't planning on it, but stick your hand in there and get one. Never know when it might be useful?" Abuela said. I looked at her with a look of disgust, and she responded with a laugh.

After collecting some reddish powder, grainy, tan powder, and dried petals from a jar, Abuela finally went to the cash register where a young woman with long dark chestnut hair, smooth caramel skin, and big eyes, stood. She was the most beautiful person I had seen since we had entered Mexico, although, when she smiled at Abuela, I noticed that her right front tooth overlapped the left one.

"*Bueno*, María. How are things?"

“Good, Margerita. This is my granddaughter, Martha. Martha, say hello.”

“*Mucho gusto*,” Nice to meet you, I replied.

“*Igual*.” Margerita put our purchases on a scale.

“How’s your family? That sister, is she still having problems?” Abuela asked Margerita.

“Family is good. Healthy and strong. As for my sister, she will be alright. Nothing a few teas, protection, and prayer can’t cure.” Margerita must have been a *curandera* too. Why have all these ingredients if you didn’t know how to use them?

Margerita rang up the prices on a cash register, and Abuela handed her some dollar bills and waved her hand when Margerita took the bills, to indicate that she did not need change.

I moved to the door to leave but stopped when Margerita spoke. “Mar, I wanted to tell you. A young woman from your side came in the other day. Looking for herbs.”

Abuela asked, “What kind?”

“*La bruja* kind.”

“She say what for?”

“I didn’t ask. Who knows if she knows how to use them, but has that ever stopped anyone? ”

“Did you get her name?” Abuela’s white caterpillar eyebrows pulled together, and her lips pursed.

“No. She handed me the money and ran off. Very rude. But if I had to say, she was about your granddaughter’s age. A little shorter. Too much makeup.”

A chill ran beneath my skin and the hairs on my arms stood up.

“I’ll watch out for this girl. Thank you, Margerita,” Abuela walked past me and out the door.

Part of me wanted to ask Abuela if it was Marcella but the other part didn’t. Every time we discussed Marcella, somehow the tables turned and I was the one being scolded for something or another. Regardless, if Marcella had those herbs, it couldn’t be for anything good, right? And how would she even know what to do with them? And what were they exactly?

Too many questions that needed answers. As if I didn’t have enough questions already.

As we walked, I suddenly noticed something. It was quiet outside. There were a few people mingling, but for the most part, the streets were quite empty from how it had been earlier and many shops had closed their doors.

“Where is everyone?”

“*Siesta.*” Abuela replied. ¿*Siesta?* That didn’t make sense.

“It can’t be. That’s around two in the afternoon. It’s only ten in the morning, if that.”

Abuela only responded by pointing her finger to a clock tower up ahead. 2:14 p.m.

“How—” I couldn’t finish the sentence. We had lost at least four hours in the shop when we hadn’t even been in there for more than ten minutes. It was only ten minutes, twenty at most!

Abuela said, “Don’t think about it.” And I didn’t. I couldn’t. How can you think about losing four hours in ten minutes? You couldn’t.

That's *loco*.

En El Presente

As we get closer to Charles and Alyssa, my heart beats faster. This is crazy. What am I doing? What am I going to do—walk up and say...hello? I turn and look at Marcella behind me. Even worse, what will Marcella say? I can't control that damn mouth of hers. Thankfully, I walk ahead of her. Marcella would probably walk by without acknowledging them at all if she had it her way.

I am only a few feet away from Charles and Alyssa, placing me closer to the coffin. I look at it once more. I said my good-byes many years ago. But Marcella stops. For once, I can't read her expression. It's blank. Her facial features are relaxed, an anomaly for a woman who usually has a scowl on her face. A second later, Marcella sighs and looks away from the chestnut box..

I am here now, right in front of Alyssa and Charles. I pause, then move over for Marcella to stand next to me. Alyssa's eyes are rimmed in red and swollen, and her small nose is red. Alyssa is sniffing, and yet she still looks young and beautiful. Forty something, maybe.

Alyssa is looking at me. Waiting for me to say something. And so is Charles. But the words are stuck inside me, and I feel hot, burning up, as if I am standing beneath the Laredo sun in the front yard of the Pepto house. It isn't until Marcella nudges me that the spell is broken.

"I'm very sorry for your loss," I say to Alyssa.

Alyssa uses a tissue to dab at the bottom of her right eye. "Thank you. I'm sorry I don't know you; you knew my mom?"

"I did. Very sorry for your loss." I realize I have just repeated myself.

Alyssa looks at Marcella.

“Yes, very sorry,” she says in a way that doesn’t sound like she is very sorry.

Alyssa notices. She looks at Marcella for a moment longer. Perhaps, Alyssa is noticing something. However, Alyssa doesn’t have a chance to think on it because Charles speaks up.

“You will come by the house? After the burial?” He asks me. I nod yes. Their address is in my wallet. And that is my cue to move on. When we walk out the door and into the hallway, I stop for a moment and lean back against the wall, unable to breathe.

Marcella stops in front of me. “Not so easy, no?”

I wish I could take away her ability to speak. I push off the wall instead and walk to the front of the building to my car. “You will ride with me?”

She waddles at my side. Marcella really should watch her weight more. Not that I’m a model, but I don’t waddle.

“I’m not going to the burial, much less to that house,” she says.

We are nearing the woman sitting at the front desk. “Why do you always argue with me?” I say.

“Why do you ask the impossible? I don’t want to do these things, and yet you keep asking and pushing me. You know this is all your fault.”

The woman at the front desk is looking at us. A little too intently.

“It’s not like I’m asking you to raise the dead. I’m asking you to do this because it’s been over forty years!” I walk to the door. Even though I know the woman cannot understand us, I dislike those that try to eavesdrop. We must look like two characters from a *telenovela*.

“And you wouldn’t understand. You didn’t go through what I did,” Marcella says.

I push open the door, and she follows.

“As if my situation was any better! You don’t know what my life was like before Laredo. You never asked.” I realize how loud I am and that others leaving the funeral home are looking at us two crazy Mexican ladies with either fear or annoyance.

I lower my voice. “What can I do to convince you to see this whole thing through?” I try to change my expression, to look pathetic, as if I am pleading. I’m not the greatest, but it’s worth a shot.

She stands there, her lips pursed, her thinned eyebrows furrow together. “I don’t know what it is about you, but I’m tired of you changing my mind today. It makes me wonder what magic you are using on me.” Marcella squints at me with her left eye, then says, “You owe me. Not today, but don’t worry. You will owe me.”

“Whatever you say. My car is over there.” I point to it. “We might as well ride together.”

“*¡Chingao!* We take my car. I’m not getting into that *thing*.” Her nose scrunches which turns her face into a look of disgust. “Why do you have that still? Sell the cursed beast already.”

I shrug and can’t help but crack a laugh as we walk toward her red Nissan Altima.

It’s a gold Cadillac. Who would buy it?

Doce

I returned to school the second week in January with mixed emotions. Part of me was sad because I had enjoyed working with Abuela over the break and now that I was back at school I would be overloaded once again with school and healing responsibilities. Another part of me was a little apprehensive to say the least. Marcella's suspension was over, and I imagined she would be more pissed at me than she was before. That morning, when the brick building of the school came into sight, I prayed that somehow, someway, I'd be spared Marcella for the entire semester and the rest of my life.

Either I wasn't praying correctly, or God didn't hear me, because the first person I saw as soon as I walked into my homeroom was Marcella sitting in the back row. She sat in the far right corner, looking ahead at the blackboard. No one spoke to her. For that matter, no one sat at the desks in front or beside her. Everyone sat closer to the door and did their best not to look her way.

She looked at me as soon as I walked in and her eyes grew dark. She turned away and looked out the window, but her hands gripped the edges of the desk—she was not happy. And neither was I. I sat in the front row, first seat, closest to the door, as far from Marcella as I possibly could. And still, I felt too close.

What was she doing in my class? This was an advanced English class, and Marcella had never been in anything beyond regular classes. Did she miraculously grow a brain and was hoping to get into college or something? Because I didn't see that happening.

It was the most excruciating hour of my life. I tried to look forward and listen to the teacher, but the entire time I felt Marcella's eyes on me. Burning me with all the ways

she wanted to gut me, and after a while I started to picture all the creative ways Marcella could kill me. Stab me with a sharp pencil in the throat. Knife to the back. Slamming my head into the tiled floor a few times. I wanted so desperately to turn and give her the finger or a mean sneer, but it wouldn't help my situation. It'd probably set Marcella off, and then somehow Abuela would magically hear about it, and—bam—I'd be the one in trouble.

I wanted to bring up Marcella at lunch, but I didn't have a chance. When I sat down, Laura was already gossiping with two of her friends, Bella and Estrella. They were twins, seniors like Laura.

“Can you believe it? I bet her mother had a fit when she found out,” Estrella said.

“Yeah, well, can you imagine? Her favorite *hija prego*? My mom would have hit me, too!” Bella added.

As soon as I heard “prego” my attention was caught. “Who's pregnant?”

Bella and Estrella looked at me as if I was a two-headed alien. They didn't like me much since Laura had included me at lunch. But I didn't like them much, either. They gossiped too much and liked to laugh at other people's misfortunes.

Laura turned to me, “Leta is.”

“Who's that?”

“Sophomore. Leta Gallos.”

Oh shit. Señora Gallos. But I hadn't told anyone. Actually I had sort of forgotten about her. How did it get out?

“Her mother found her trying to take a piss test! What a *tonta*. That's why you do that stuff at school,” Bella said. Poor Leta. Pregnant. Too young. Just like my mother.

Laura and the twins continued to speak about Leta.

A little while later, I interrupted them. “Do you guys know why Marcella is in my advanced English course?”

“I heard no other teacher wanted Marcella in their class,” Bella said.

“Well, I heard her mom’s making her take the class,” Estrella countered. I didn’t continue the conversation and no one else seemed to want to either. The twins moved on to gossiping about who might have gotten Leta pregnant. Laura watched me for a few seconds, chewing at her lip as if she wanted to say something, but she never did.

I ate my food, not really in the mood for the conversation.

At the end of lunch, a short guy walked up to our table.

“Laura Valdez?” He asked. Wait...Valdez. Jorge Valdez.

Laura turned to him. “That’s me.”

“The office sent me. Your mom called and needs you to call her back at the store. It’s important.”

Laura rolled her eyes. “Probably needs me to come to the store after school.” She picked up her Styrofoam tray. “I’ll talk to you guys later,” she said as she followed the boy.

Valdez. Laura’s mother. It stuck in my head and pounded at my temples. The Gallos girl. Pregnant. No, that couldn’t be it. I looked at Laura. She was almost out the cafeteria door. Someone called to her. She looked and waved. No, it couldn’t be Laura—could it?

“Damn, Martha. Looks like you’ve seen a ghost,” Estrella said. “Marcella threatening you again?” I shook my head no.

No. But I think I had figured out how Sofia had helped my mother. Laura. She had raised Laura for her.

I managed to stay out of Marcella's way the first day and even the first week. However, she continued to give me the death stare each morning in homeroom. That wasn't my biggest concern, though. Laura was. Was Laura my sister? Had Sofia taken my mother's baby and raised it herself? Was that why Abuela didn't like Sofia? Didn't really want me to hang out with Laura?

Each day at lunch, I watched Laura, trying to see my mother in her. But each time I looked I just didn't see it. Maybe I didn't want to see it. I didn't look like my mother too much, either. Laura did have Jorge's widow's peak. Then again, Laura didn't look like anyone in the family, not even her own mother or Abuela. Sofia had curly hair and Laura's was straight...like my mothers.

I didn't mention my suspicions to Laura. I mean, how do you do that? "Hey, Laura, I think we are sisters"? No. That would be stupid and premature. I needed more information. Carlita. She was the key. The key to knowing exactly what happened and if Laura was who I thought she was. I just had to keep my mouth shut until then.

And it's not like I didn't have other things to keep me occupied. Like how Marcella stopped coming to school. Well, sort of. It first occurred the second week of school on a Friday. I came into class without looking in Marcella's corner, as had become my habit. It wasn't until class was halfway through that I noticed I hadn't felt the prickly feeling working its way up my shoulders. I turned around and found Marcella wasn't in

her seat. I didn't see her the rest of the day at school, either. The next week she missed two days: Wednesday and Friday. And a few days the next week and the next, and so on.

Eventually, she only showed up two or three days a week. Part of me was relieved. It was as if God had heard my prayer in some way at least. If only I could be satisfied with the silence that greeted our English teacher when she yelled out Marcella's name. But I wasn't. I couldn't stop wondering where Marcella was.

My gut told me that the girl that Margerita had spoken of was Marcella. Who else wanted power? Who else would go looking for it?

I tried to ask around as quietly as possible. There were ears and eyes everywhere in my school, as I had come to find out. And those eyes and ears worked for either Abuela or Marcella, and I didn't want either one to know what I was up to. But everyone I asked had no idea where Marcella was, much less what she was doing. Some said she skipped with her gang to smoke weed. Others said she had a job across the border at a taco stand. And one person had heard she was selling drugs or making them. They were all pretty far-fetched to me, but this was Marcella we were talking about.

The next two months went by in a flurry with healing and school. And yet, two things occurred around the end of February that renewed my interest in my mother. Not that she had left my mind. Every day I ate lunch with Laura was a day of scrutinizing every expression she made, her hair, her eyes, the way she spoke, and what she spoke about to see if it connected back to my mother.

I never did get the clear cut answer I wanted.

On a Thursday night, I had just taken a shower and returned to my room to lie down. I was exhausted. For some reason, my mother had plagued my mind all day. There wasn't anything in particular that had made me think of her. It had begun as soon as I had awoke and it nagged me each hour and through the hour. This feeling of something...I can't explain it. It's like how you can't explain sitting in a room alone and out of nowhere the hairs on your arms stand up and goose bumps trickle down your back. A weird feeling like that. But not like that exactly.

For some reason, before I lay down I got this crazy idea. I grabbed a few candles and put them on the small dresser. I stood in front of the candles and closed my eyes and dug within my memory for a picture of my mother. Finally, I found it. She looked down on me with an actual smile, not one of her Big Fakes, as she sat a plate of pancakes in front of me. This was when she worked at the breakfast diner in Orlando.

I then prayed. Attending church and learning to heal had given me some kind of faith that I wasn't quite sure of, but I found myself believing the prayers I said at random times. Maybe there was a God and a Jesus listening down on me. I prayed mostly because it felt comforting to think that someone listened, knew my troubles, and helped me to heal.

But now, I prayed for my mother. Not anything as specific as health or safety, I just prayed with her in my mind. And before I ended, I asked God to let me discover what had happened to her and to find her. When I opened my eyes I saw that the candles were lit. I stepped back in surprise and turned around. Abuela was in her room. I turned back to the candles. Had I done that? I hadn't lit them, but somehow a flame flickered back and

forth on the wick. These candles had a life of their own. I looked once more at the candles suspiciously, then hopped into bed.

When I awoke in the morning, they were still lit.

Two days later, Gloria brought over some *enchiladas verde* that she had bought from some lady at church who was selling them to raise money for her son to go to college. Abuela made *frijoles* and *arroz* to go with them.

I took my first bite and melted. “God, these are so good.”

Gloria snapped her fingers two inches from my nose, “Hey, watch your mouth, *chica!*” I stuck out my tongue when Gloria looked down to take a bite, but Abuela caught me.

“Clean the dishes after dinner and water the plants.” My punishment. I fought not to argue back and nodded. They took the “Don’t say God’s name in vain” commandment way too seriously.

I ate silently as did Abuela while Gloria talked, which was pretty normal. She never shut up. Literally never. She was talking about some scandal in the neighborhood. Señora Ramirez, the one who lived in the orange house, not the white house, had caught her husband cheating on her with her own sister.

“You’ll probably have to go over there in a few days. Calm them down, cure their marriage. *Mas problemas*. I told them that—” The phone rang cutting off Gloria.

We stopped eating and looked at each other. We never got any phone calls. It rang again. Gloria and Abuela looked at me for a few seconds, I looked back confused. Finally, it dawned on me—they wanted me to answer the phone. I got up and walked over to the phone that was mounted on the wall and picked it up.

“Hello?”

No one responded but someone gasped quietly.

“Hello?” I asked again.

No response. I turned and looked at Abuela and Gloria and shrugged. Gloria was looking at me but Abuela was not. Her back stiffened and her head tilted to her plate. The next second, she let out a sigh, her body heaved with a release of tension. A second later, she started eating again.

Something about that movement triggered a memory.

I gripped the phone tighter. “Mom?” I whispered into the phone. No response, only breathing. I whispered, “Can you hear me? Where are you? Mom?”

There was no response. The silence stretched between the lines. I closed my eyes and reached through the phone with my *don*, a desperate attempt. It was all I could think of. I sent it out like I did when I healed. I wasn’t even sure it would work. Through the phone I heard another gasp and then a click.

I slammed the phone against the receiver. The phone fell off the receiver and hung by its cord. Clenching my fists tightly, I fought not to hit the wall. One breath. Two. Three. I picked up the phone and placed it on the receiver a little more softly, even though I wanted to slam it about five more times.

When I returned to the table, I didn’t look at Gloria and I would not look at Abuela. I only looked at their plates. Abuela was almost done eating. I picked up the fork and began eating again, not tasting the cheesy, spicy deliciousness of the enchilada. Gloria picked up her fork and continued eating.

I would have been happy to finish the meal in silence, but of course, Gloria did not allow it.

“Humph,” She paused, “That was pleasant...*Mas problemas*, like I was saying...”
And she continued with the story about the cheating husband.

Later, I realized it was the first time I could remember calling my mother,
“Mom.”

En El Presente

We follow the funeral procession to the cemetery. It is a long hot ride since Marcella refuses to turn on the air conditioner. She smirks when she says it doesn't work, which makes me think she lies and that she wants me to suffer. A little pay back—I can handle it. This isn't Laredo, that's for sure.

When we arrive at the cemetery, Marcella refuses to get out of the car.

“You are making me continue with this ridiculous idea of yours. I will not stand by that grave with all those people.”

“So we are going to sit here in the car and watch? We are grown women,” I say.

“And this *mujer* is staying in this car. You should be happy I'm not out there.”

“¿*Por qué?*”

“Can you imagine what I would do out there?”

I could. She is right, it is probably best we stay in the car.

I tug at my cross. “How do you live with such anger? It seems to pervade all aspects of your life.”

“How do you not have any?”

I shrug, then look out the window at those under the tent in the middle of the cemetery, huddling in grief as the coffin makes its way into the ground. I can't see Alyssa or Charles. Are they crying? Holding each other? Supporting one another?

“Well...how? Tell me your secret, oh powerful *curandera*,” she says.

“Because I refuse to let the secrets, the anger win. To be controlled by them.”

She lets out a harsh huff.

We are silent for a little bit, watching the stillness of the group as everyone stares at the coffin.

“How did your art show go last month?” Marcella asks.

I turn and look at her. “How did you know about that?”

She shrugs, not looking at me. “I still have my connections in Laredo, Martha.”

I roll my eyes. “It went well. More people came than I thought would.”

She nods. “I always admired you for your artistic talent.” I was at a loss for words. I never imagined she would say something like that or even that she was aware that I had any.

Instead of me replying, Marcella quickly changes the subject. “This girl won’t be able to handle the secrets.”

“There are no secrets anymore. Or at least there won’t be any more secrets soon.”

She makes a ‘Pah!’ sound, and memories of that precious action flood my mind.

“And what will we say to this girl?” She flings her hand out at the grave. “She’d be better off not knowing.”

“How can you say such a thing?”

Marcella crosses her arms, and her eyes challenge me. “It is true. Look at what the secrets did to us! She won’t be able to handle it. You might even cause *susto*, and you a healer!” How quickly her mood changes! Only moments before she was commenting on how she admired my artistic ability.

“She can handle it,” I say, “She’s *Mexicana*, no?”

She laughs so loudly that I turn to see if any of the grievors hear. She even slaps the steering wheel twice. No one turns their head.

“The girl doesn’t even know what it means to be *Mexicana*. She’s a *guera*.”

Yes, but at one time, neither did I.

Trece

On a Tuesday in March, I returned home from school later than usual because I had Statistics tutoring. My body dragged itself through the living room and into the kitchen. I hadn't been getting much sleep lately, and the effects were pounding on my body. Every night for the last few weeks, I tossed and turned in bed wondering and wondering. Where was my mother? Where was the baby? What happened?

The aroma of *sopa* met me in the living room and was confirmed when I found Abuela standing in front of the stove, dropping pieces of chicken into the boiling pot.

"Someone sick?" I asked throwing my bag down next to the wall. Abuela sighed in a way that said she was displeased that I had just thrown my bag on the floor. I pretended I didn't see and sat down.

"Why does someone have to be sick? We prevent sickness, just as we heal."

Whatever. I was too tired to ask what she meant. I relaxed into the chair, glad to be home and able to rest for just a moment before Abuela sent me to the healing room to clean something or prepare something or before she made me do my homework, which I dreaded. Statistics and an essay. Kill me now. But for a moment. No thinking, just...

"Martha!" I jumped and almost fell out of the chair. Damn. I had fallen asleep.

A bowl of soup sat in front of me on the table, and Abuela stood next to me with a look of satisfaction on her face.

"See? Prevent!" She turned around and grabbed her own bowl and sat down on the other side of the table. I hated when she was right.

Gloria wasn't eating with us tonight. Not that I minded. I could only handle a certain number of her snide comments. Probably as many as she could handle of my sarcastic ones.

We ate in silence, but spoonfuls away from finishing, Abuela spoke. "I have a cousin that lives in Mexico."

I paused, the spoon and soup halfway to my mouth. "Okay."

She pursed her lips and continued, "My cousin has a daughter who is about to birth twin boys, and they want me there when the children come."

"Okay..." I repeated. What was the problem? Mexico was only a few blocks over.

"Aye, Martha! Enough 'okay' 'okay.' Can I finish already?"

"I thought you wanted me to say something." I couldn't do anything right. I brought the bowl to my mouth to slurp the last bit of soup—loudly.

"If I had—never mind! *Y* stop slurping! They don't live across the border. Your cousin lives about eight hours in. I will be gone two days. And because of school..."

My ears perked. I tried not to show my excitement with a smile or worse...interest in the fact that Abuela would be gone for two days. And the best part: Abuela would never let me miss school. Alone. Two days of paradise in Laredo. Or the closest damn thing to paradise in Laredo. I was never left alone in this burning hole. Abuela or some other family member was always around.

I tried to maintain my cool. "Okay." Simple, sweet, and it didn't divert from my previous responses. I even added a nonchalant shrug for effect. After setting the bowl down, I grabbed a piece of bread from the center of the table and started breaking it apart and eating it.

“I don’t know if I should...”

No, she couldn’t do this to me. “Why not? Don’t *not* go because of me.”

“That’s exactly why I wouldn’t go.”

I pinched my eyebrows together. “What do you think I’m going to do?”

She set her spoon down. “Something. Nothing. Anything could happen.”

I rolled my eyes. “Anything could always happen.” She picked her spoon up and began to eat again. She didn’t speak as she finished her soup, and she didn’t say anything else as she gathered the bowls to wash. I itched with anticipation. What was she going to do? I would have usually left the table but tonight, I stayed the kitchen. I had to hear her decision before I left.

By the time she was done washing the dishes, she still hadn’t said anything, and I was restless. Guess it wasn’t going to happen. I got up from the table and began to walk to the hall. Suddenly, the noise in the kitchen stopped. I paused and turned around. She wasn’t moving and she didn’t turn around when she spoke.

“Okay. I will go. But Gloria will come over every night to cook.”

“I did feed myself before I came here, you know.”

“Gloria comes, or I do not go.”

“Fine, fine. That’ll be fine.” Although I cringed at the thought of a few meals alone with Gloria.

“Make sure nothing happens.”

I didn’t even reply.

Time to find Carlita.

Abuela had not told me the exact day she would leave. Two days passed and nothing. It was excruciating. I looked over all the information I had on Carlita. I had three addresses. I would start with the closest and work my way to the farthest.

Finally on Friday morning, as I was getting ready for school, Abuela came into my room.

“I will leave today and will be back early Sunday morning for Mass.” Of course, Abuela wouldn’t miss Mass. I had been standing on one leg, trying to balance as I put on my last sneaker when she said this. I was so caught off guard by her announcement that I fell back toward the bed.

“Oh...okay,” I said as I laced up my sneaker awkwardly, one leg held up in the air, while lying on my back on the bed. “So when are you leaving?” Shoes tied, I stood up.

“Gloria will pick me up soon and take me to the bus station.” I nodded in response.

Abuela’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t think you won’t work while I’m gone. There are some cures in the work room. Give them to Señora Alvarez, Señor Luna, and Señora Reyes this afternoon. Saturday morning you will make rounds. That is all you are to do. When you finish you return here to this house and stay.” Stay. As if I was a dog. I shook my head like an obedient pup. I wasn’t about to do anything that would make Abuela change her mind.

I grabbed my backpack. “Okay. I have to get to school.” We stood there looking at each other. Abuela looking at me suspiciously, but when did she not?

“Well...safe travels,” I said, hesitated, then walked past her, through the house, and out the door. As I walked down the front porch steps, I paused. Maybe I should have given her a hug or something?

Right. Give Abuela a hug. She would have never left if I had done that, convinced I would do something horrible behind her back. I started walking again. What I had planned wasn't all that horrible. I needed answers and if Abuela wouldn't give me the answers, then I had to find them out myself. So going behind her back to find out about my mother, well, it was partially Abuela's fault.

As I walked to school, I planned out my rendezvous. I couldn't search for Carlita after school. Abuela's patients would be waiting at the house for their cures. If any of them didn't find me there, they'd call Gloria, and Gloria would make it her life goal to see that Abuela tanned my brown hide when she returned. So that left me with two options: to search for Carlita tomorrow, on Saturday, after my rounds or begin today and skip school.

I was taking a big risk if I skipped school. My absence would be immediately noted and someone, actually a lot of someones would probably make it their mission to tell Abuela. Everyone knew her and I knew she'd be checking up on me regardless of the fact that she'd be in another country. She knew things that were impossible to know. Like what I ate for lunch. Or the fact that once I took two bathroom breaks in a class period.

So was it worth it? Was skipping out on school and finding Carlita worth it? The school came into view, as did hundreds of teenagers. Buses and cars were lined the street that surrounded the school to drop kids off. From one of the cars, a woman jumped out and yelled at a boy who walked toward the school. She waved a brown paper sack in the

air at him. I couldn't hear what she said, but it was obvious. The kid had forgotten his lunch.

The son, or I assumed it was her son, ran back to his mother, grabbed the sack, gave her a kiss on the cheek, and turned around to run to the school where a group of boys waited for him. The mother put her hands on her hips and shook her head, then turned and walked back to her car.

That kid knew where his mother was. He knew things about his mother. Didn't I deserve the same thing? I couldn't wait another day. Finding Carlita was worth everything, and if that meant I had to suffer the wrath of Abuela when she returned, just for skipping part of school, it would be worth it. I hoped.

After entering the building, I ran into Laura on the way to class. Her class was just across the hall, so usually we saw each other before entering our homerooms.

"Hey, Martha. What's going on?"

I walked a little faster. "What do you mean?"

She looked at me oddly and walked faster to keep up. "Well, I was just being polite, but now... I can see something is up. What is it?"

I shrugged. "Nothing. Just stuff on my mind."

"Yeah, me too. My mom won't give me a freaking day off from the store these days. I do have a life. Did I tell you I got accepted into Houston? Partial scholarship, though."

We came to our rooms and stopped outside. "That's great. Partial is better than nothing, right? Congratulations," I said. Laura had a future. College next year, and a career would come after that. Was it right to tell her about her past?

She smiled then said, “Thanks. Hey, you sure you’re okay?”

I readjusted my backpack. “Yeah, I’m good. But—”

“But what?”

This was probably a bad idea. “Look, there’s something I have to tell you soon. Just not now.”

“Is it bad?”

How to answer that? “I don’t think so.” My gut said otherwise. “Look, I’ll tell you later, okay? Got to get to class.”

Laura waved awkwardly, pursing her lips to the side and pinching her eyebrows in confusion. I couldn’t think about her right now. Leave it for later.

When I sat at my desk, I had decided. I would leave after lunch to find Carlita. I was going to do this. For me. And for Laura. When class started, I looked over my shoulder.

Marcella was absent that morning. Again.

En El Presente

We follow the funeral party to Alyssa and Charles' house. I know we are getting close when we enter a neighborhood and the caravan slows down. The neighborhood is wealthy beyond my imagination. The houses are two storied with manicured green lawns, nicely painted or with new siding, with Porsches and Lexus' sprinkling the driveways. I don't think Laredo has anything close to such wealth. If it does, I've never been there

As we drive, Marcella mutters little things beneath her breath. "No surprise," "*Hijole*, such waste." I let her mutter on. If it keeps her from blowing up or throwing me out of the car and high tailing it south...well, it is the lesser of two evils.

When we pull up to the house, though, she swears. "Ay! *¡Chingao!* Tell me this does not make your blood burn!"

It's the most perfect house I have ever seen. Two stories, red brick, blue siding, large white bay windows, and a green lawn prettied with purple and pink colored tulips. This is the kind of house I expected to see when I first arrived in Laredo. This is the kind of house I never had, always wanted, and would never be able to call mine.

"Charles has worked hard."

Marcella curls her fist and shakes it at the house. "*Pinche*, worked hard. He was the only one doing hard work, while she lived off his money. *¡Put a madre!*"

"We can't do anything about it now." I take my seatbelt off.

"That's what you think. I'd make a pact with *Diablo* himself just so I could get my hands on her."

"All smoke, no fire," I say.

"Aye! Watch your mouth, *chica!* I'll show you some fire."

I ignore her and walk toward the house where the rest of the mourners are entering. The house is just as grand inside as it is outside. A large staircase with a curved banner. Gold framed pictures lining the wall, Victorian styled furniture in soft whites and light tans. Even pristine wooden floors. It smells like lemon and Clorox and a faint hit of apple cinnamon. A far cry from the spicy aroma of peppers, earthy smell of herbs, and the mouth-watering aroma of cooking meat that stained the walls of Abuela's.

We follow everyone to the backyard, where there is a table with food and drinks for the guests. Behind the table, two young *Mexicanas* stand, wearing black. They scoop food onto plates and hands one to each person in line.

“You see? *Mexicanas* as help. That woman.”

I take a bite from a skewer of meat so as not to respond. I mean, she's dead. It's not like she chose who served the food. After we receive our plates of food, we make our way to a little bench beneath a white awning in the corner of the backyard. Other such awnings have been set up around the yard with benches, chairs, and tables and others congregate beneath them.

There is another bench across from us, but no one joins us. We have the entire awning to ourselves. After a while, Charles and Alyssa appear outside. They move around the yard speaking with the groups of people that have migrated together. One lady presses Alyssa to sit down in her own seat and then runs to make Alyssa a plate. Alyssa looks exhausted and on the verge of crying. Charles does not show much emotion, but rather gives small smiles and shakes hands firmly when people come to speak to him.

“Do you think this is right?” I ask.

Marcella takes a drink from her sweet tea and then answers, “Nothing has ever been right.”

“Seriously. Is it right, that we are here? What will this woman think?” I point to Alyssa.

“Who cares what she thinks? She has had everything perfect her entire life! She’ll live through a bit of chaos. Stop worrying.”

I sigh and sit back. Still not convinced.

“*Mira*, Martha. You decided to come here and you are here. And I am here. And you will do what you came here to do. There is no right or wrong. Just doing, yes?”

“I think that is the nicest thing you have said in a long time.”

She laughs. “To you, maybe.”

Catorce

My excitement about skipping school and finding Carlita spilled into my legs, and I practically ran to the first house on the list. Yet when I came to the house, I stopped. There must be a mistake. There were two houses on either side of where the house should have been, but nothing in between except a dirt lot with patches of dry grass. I ran back and forth between the two houses looking at the numbers. 1606 and 1610. Where the hell was 1608? I kicked at the ground and stubbed my toe.

“Damn it!” I pulled out the map and the next address from my jean short pocket. No time to waste. The next house was seven miles away. What I wouldn’t give for a car. I looked at my watch. It was 1:00. That meant I had less than a few hours to get to the next house and back to Abuela’s. I took off at a jog. This was not starting out well.

It took me an hour to get to the next house. As soon as I hit the street I slowed down. Cameron Street. The house number was 1414. Unlike most of the colorful houses that surrounded it, this house was grey with white shutters.

I stood in the street looking up at the house. At least, there was a house which meant there might be a person there. Hopefully... That’s if Carlita didn’t have a job and was actually at home. I should have thought about that before. Great.

I walked up to the house with a swarm of bees in my stomach and a sweat drenched shirt.

Someone yelled inside, but I couldn’t hear what they said. I didn’t have time to wonder what was said because the door swung open, leaving only the screen door between me and what looked like a woman on the other side. Her features were

indiscernible due to the darkness from inside the house and the screen door that obscured her face.

“She is to have no visitors. She is done with you.”

“What?” I said.

“You can’t hear? I said, leave. She’s not going to hang around you or your friends anymore.”

“I’m sorry—I don’t know what you are talking about.” I patted my hair down.

Who did she think I was?

The woman stepped closer, and still I could not distinguish her face. “You are not here for my daughter? Not one of those gang members?”

I shook my head. “No. I’m just looking for a Carlita Juarez.”

“Oh,” She opened the screen door. “That’s me. Well, it was me. I’m married now.” And it was her. It was her—Carlita. The woman from church. She recognized me too. Her eyes shifted, looking behind me, like a mouse fearing a nearby hawk, ready to snatch it from the ground.

Carlita regained her composure, stepped out of the house, and closed the door behind her.

“Why are you here?” she whispered harshly.

I wasn’t sure why she whispered, but I responded normally. This was it. “I, um...I wanted to ask you about my mother.”

She crossed her arms. “I don’t know where she is. You need to leave. Your abuela wouldn’t want you here.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know anything. Sorry, but you must go.”

I shook my head. I wasn’t going anywhere until I got some answers. “No. Maybe you don’t know where she is, but I want...” I paused. You can say this. Just say it... “to know about the baby.”

Carlita’s body tensed and her face lost its color. “You know about that?”

I nodded.

“How?”

“Does it matter? I just want to know what happened. Did my mother have it or...give it to someone maybe?”

“Why would you say that?” Her words were sharp and she had stopped whispering now.

Something told me not to say anything about Laura. “It’s a logical explanation. Adoption, maybe?”

She shook her head, not wanting to meet my eyes. “I can’t say. Now you must leave please. Those things are secrets for reasons.”

“I could just ask Sofia.”

Carlita’s head whipped up. “Don’t you dare! Even if you do, you think she’ll tell you? And suffer your abuela’s wrath? Go for it. Sofia isn’t as stupid as she may look.”

I didn’t know how to respond but I didn’t have to. Behind me sounded the roaring motor of a truck coming near and the lyrics of “Thunderstruck” by AC/DC. Carlita’s eyes widened. I turned around. The motor died down and a man stepped out of the white truck. No fucking way. It was Jorge Valdez.

“Why is he here?”

She opened her mouth but no sound came out. I felt and then saw Jorge walk up beside me a moment later.

His forehead wrinkled and then hardened. “Why are you here? No, I don’t care. You must leave.”

“Leave?” My neck became hot and my fists clenched. What the hell was going on? “Not yet. Why are you here?” The question hung in the air and was answered when he looked away. “Are you two?” Jorge did not respond.

I looked at Carlita. “You’re married?”

She might have answered if it wasn’t for someone coming to the door from inside the house.

“Mom, is that Dad? I—what the fuck are you doing here?” The screen door opened and out stepped Marcella from the dark depths of the house. When did I step into the twilight zone? My mother’s best friend and ex-boyfriend were married, and Marcella was their kid?

I looked at Marcella and then at Carlita. No. How could that be? They didn’t even look alike.

“Cella!” Carlita said, but Marcella ignored her.

“I said, why are you here?” Marcella’s eyes grew black and she stepped forward.

Marcella. Carlita. Marcella. Carlita. Marcella was eighteen. My mother was pregnant eighteen years ago with Jorge’s child. Jorge was married to Carlita now. Oh, shit...

“No. No. Are you kidding me?” My body was tensed so tightly that my arms began to shake.

“Don’t—” Jorge began to say and reached out to me. I stepped out of his reach.

“Don’t what? Are you fucking kidding me?” I pointed at Marcella, who now looked more confused than angry.

“What’s she talking about?” Marcella asked her parents without looking away from me.

Carlita pleaded with her eyes, to not spill the secret that had haunted me for the past few months. The secret that was tearing me from the inside out. Anger flushed across my chest, directly beneath my skin. I was burning up. This went beyond the scorching heat of Laredo.

“So this—she’s it? The truth?” I asked.

Carlita did not nod. Carlita did not say yes or no, but the lines of her face, even the smallest movement of her eyes spoke volumes. *Sí*, yes. It didn’t matter what language it was. It was the truth.

I turned, ran off the porch, and down the street from whence I came. Neither Carlita nor Jorge tried to stop me. They wanted me to run, away from them, away from Marcella so I wouldn’t continue speaking.

Yet, footsteps sounded behind me.

“Hey! Where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

Couldn’t she just leave it alone?

I stopped running at the corner and turned to look at Marcella. Her hands were balled in fists, her legs tensed in a fighting position. Suddenly, there was a flash and a hard push on my chest. I stumbled a few steps and looked up. Marcella was still standing

ten feet away from me—so how did she? Something had changed with my vision and I saw a purplish haze surrounding her. Was that a *don*?

The haze pushed out from her and came right at me. I felt another push. I stumbled back again. What the hell?

Without a second thought, I found the place deep within my chest and opened the gate. I was going to let the waters run, if that's what the bitch wanted. Lost were all reservations. If I could see her *don* and feel it, it was real enough. At that moment, I didn't care if what I was doing sounded crazy, if it was unbelievable. Because, there was no way I was going to let her shove me again. I sent my *don* out in a hard shove. She faltered in her balance.

She sent another shove, harder.

Forgotten were Abuela's words, "never use our *don* to harm." I threw my power at her. It was no different from healing a patient—direct my *don* at the disease—and Marcella was a hell of a lot worse than a disease.

She wavered when my *don* hit her but regained her balance quickly.

"Leave it alone, Marcella," I said through gritted teeth.

Carlita and Jorge jogged toward us. What they hoped to stop was already well beyond their control.

"You think you can speak to my mom that way, bitch?"

Marcella shoved me, but ready, I braced myself for it and sent another hit back.

I was trying to save her, save her from the truth. But if this was how she wanted it, well, then, that's how it would be. I didn't give a damn anymore about the right or wrong thing to do. I wanted Marcella to hurt just as badly as I did in that moment.

I pointed at Carlita who was only a few yards behind Marcella and coming closer by the second. “That woman? That’s your mom? Think again. She’s a liar.”

Another shove from Marcella. I stepped forward, feeling the hard shove deep in my chest, but I didn’t care. I welcomed the pain. If anyone watched us, they might have laughed. Two girls stumbling for no reason and taking small steps toward one another. This was an invisible battle only for those that believed, for only those with the gift.

Marcella didn’t respond, but she didn’t have to.

“That woman isn’t your mother,” I said.

“Shut up. You’re lying.” She threw a metaphysical punch. I fought from doubling over and responded with a punch of my own.

“Ask her.” This was not who I was—an inconsiderate person who wished pain on others. But my hate and anger consumed me beyond the point of caring.

Marcella faltered and for a moment, her power relaxed and drew into her body. We stared at each other for a few moments and then Marcella turned around and looked at Carlita. I couldn’t see Marcella’s face but I could see Carlita’s and there was no way that Marcella could deny the truth now.

“Carlita is just the lady that *my* mother dumped you with.” There. I had said it. She got what she wanted.

If I couldn’t see her power, I might not have caught it in time. Marcella’s *don* pulsed all the way into her body until the purple haze disappeared. She was about to throw every last bit of power at me. This wasn’t the school yard fight we had been engaging in a few moments ago. No, this was Marcella’s arm, pulling back to drive the metaphysical knife deep into my gut.

I braced for the hit, closing my eyes as soon as I saw her power push out. And then...nothing. I opened my eyes. Where did her power go? I searched the air, as if I could see it like a bird flying overhead.

“Hope your old bitch of a grandmother is as strong as you are,” Marcella said before spitting at the ground. It took a moment for her words to hit me and when they did, I turned and ran for the Pepto Bismol casa. I don’t know what happened when I left. I don’t know what Carlita or Jorge did. Or even Marcella for that matter. I didn’t care.

I was running for Abuela and away from the news that Marcella was the baby.
That she was my sister.

En El Presente

While Alyssa is being made to eat by a seventy-year-old woman with a bad blonde-dye-job, Charles makes his way to Marcella and me underneath the canopy of the white awning. I stand up as he comes toward us but Marcella remains sitting. Always disrespectful.

He holds his hand out to me to shake. "Hello, Martha, nice to actually meet you." My hands are rough against his smooth palm.

His voice is soft and kind, far more appealing than his looks. His face is long and thin, and the skin beneath his chin stretches down. His eyelids droop, too, so much that I can see red just below his eyeball. His long, crooked nose somehow goes with his thin, chapped lips. I really do hope my mother liked him for his personality and not for his money.

"Nice to meet you, too, Charles. It was a nice service."

"Thank you. Yes, I thought so, too." Then he turns to Marcella. "You must be Marcella." He holds out his hand to shake, but Marcella doesn't put hers out, and at that moment I want to strangle her. Can she be ruder?

However she does speak. "Hello." It is a clipped hello that shows her contempt for the man and his family. Jealousy is all it is, but still. Charles awkwardly pulls his hand back and gives her a nod as Texans do to be polite, even when someone is not being polite to them.

"Sit, sit," I say, and Charles and I both sit. He leans forward and puts his forearms on his knees. I make it a point to nudge Marcella in her beefy arm when I sit down, a little hint for her to behave.

“¿*Qué?*” She says innocently beneath her breathe. I turn and give her a pointed stare and she rolls her eyes and says “Pah!” beneath her breathe. A true Gonzalez woman, even if she doesn’t wish to acknowledge it.

I look at the grieving man before me. A father. A husband. He loved my mother. Walking around the yard he appeared to be calm and collected, but I am nervous he is about to break down in front of us two strangers. I really don’t think I can take a grown man, especially Alyssa’s father, breaking down at this moment. The knots in my stomach are twisted so tightly because of what I am about to do. I cannot give this man comfort, and Marcella surely will not.

I have to steer this to Alyssa. “How is she?” Charles already knows who I am speaking about.

He looks at Alyssa across the yard. “She—well, she’s hurting. Trying to be strong like her mother would have wanted, but I can tell this really hurt her. They were really close, you know.”

“No, we don’t know,” Marcella says.

He says, “I’m sorry; I know this must be difficult. I mean it’s difficult for me to find out—”

“Difficult?”

I try to shush Marcella, but my efforts are useless. She continues, “First she abandons me, then she abandons her,” Marcella points to me, “then we have to find out she has a whole new family with the perfect little daughter, rich husband, and a mansion in Dallas, Texas.”

Charles struggles for words. “My wife wasn’t perfect, but I didn’t know. If I had I—”

“What would you have done?” Marcella asks.

He rubs his head. “Honestly, I don’t know. I never knew much about her. I was just so in love with her I never asked. I took her vague answers as proof she had a rough past and didn’t want to discuss it or couldn’t talk about it. It was cowardly. But I’m truly sorry. When she told me about y’all before she passed, I—”

Marcella interrupts him again. “What did she say about us? What did she tell you?” Yes, what did she say? I was curious, too. Charles hadn’t really discussed what she had said; only that she had told him about us.

He sat up straight. “She said she had two daughters in Laredo.”

“That’s it?” Marcella says, “What else? She had to say something else.”

“No, she wouldn’t even tell me your names or where you lived. She refused to tell me anything.”

“She didn’t tell you to tell us anything, nothing at all?” Marcella’s voice is quieter. Pleading even.

He shakes his head no. “I’m sorry.” And that is it. Two words. That is what Marcella wants to hear. Hell, what I want to hear. Just those two words. Not from Charles though. From the mother that abandoned us.

It is my cue to step in. This is not about me, not about Marcella, Charles, or about my mother. “We need to get back to Alyssa. Now, Charles...” The poor man looks worn out. I feel a twinge of guilt, but I can’t afford to. “How do you think Alyssa is going to react?”

His shoulders slump and he holds his chin with his right hand, massaging it with his index finger and thumb. “I honestly have no idea. This is going to change her entire perception of her mother.” He looks up at both of us. “Am I doing the right thing?”

The same question I had asked earlier. I smile and think how wise Marcella is. Funny how a girl like her sort of turned out okay.

“Right or wrong. It doesn’t matter. You made a decision and now we will go through with it,” I say.

Marcella is smirking.

“*No digas ni una palabra,*” I tell Marcella.

Don’t say a word.

Charles returns to Alyssa, so he can save her from all the condolences that she is receiving from my mother’s friends and acquaintances.

Marcella says to me, “Can you believe it?”

“Believe what?”

“Rosa! She said nothing, nothing at all,” she says.

I am thinking the same thing. All I had ever wanted was some sort of explanation, but I could have forgotten the explanation with just one apology. And now I have neither.

“What did you expect?” I say.

“These Gonzalez women, I swear. Your family—”

I interrupt her, “*Our* family. You are a Gonzalez, that’s for sure.”

“I have never been a Gonzalez, thanks to your *abuela*. She—”

And that was all I needed to start the fight that we had never had.

“Are you even sorry Marcella? Granted Abuela didn’t make great decisions, but she was the only thing I had after Rosa left. I’ve apologized to you a million times for her actions, for my actions to you. But from you—nothing!”

Marcella squeezes her plastic cup until it crumples in her hand and then throws it down onto the ground.

“Of course, I’m not...proud of what I did. She was the great María! My own grandmother, how could I not?”

Suddenly, I realize what I am doing. I was looking for a fight. I lean back into my chair. “Let’s just forget about it. It isn’t even the right time to talk about that.”

“It is the right time!” She slaps her leg.

“But you didn’t even want to talk about it—”

Marcella points at me. “Don’t tell me what I wanted to do or not do. I don’t like to acknowledge what I did, but I did it. It haunts me every day. *Hijole*, she haunts me every other night.”

“What?” What was she talking about?

Marcella looks up at the awning and releases a breath. “Sometimes María speaks to me in my dreams.” It wasn’t uncommon for some *curanderas* and *brujas* to claim they could speak to spirits, whether it was during their dreams or while they were awake. But I couldn’t.

“What does she say?”

Marcella crosses her arms. “Many things. I’ve already apologized to her...for what I did. It was between me and her...and you, well...”

“Well what?”

“I’m not comfortable...” She seems to push herself to say the next words:

“...expressing myself.”

I laugh. And keep laughing. Remembering where I am at, I hurriedly place my hands over mouth to muffle my laughter. “So you are a Gonzalez woman.”

She rolls her eyes and shakes her head, but she is smiling.

“So,” I say, “what does Abuela say about me these days?”

Marcella flicks her wrist at me, just as Abuela used to do. “Aye, *chiflauda*, always about Martha.”

I look at her and she knows I’m serious. I want to know what Abuela has said.

She shrugs. “She told me to come here with you.”

I sit back on the bench and smile. “I would have loved to have seen that argument.”

“*Pinche madre*,” Marcella says with a laugh.

Quince

When I arrived at the front door of the Pepto Bismol Casa, out of breathe I was hit with the overwhelming pressure of Marcella's *malo*. It pulsed out from the house. I paused before I opened the door, feeling throughout the house with my *don*. Oh, no. I ran inside.

Abuela laid passed out cold on the kitchen floor, on her side.

"Abuela!" I turned her onto her back. "Wake up!" I slapped her cheeks a few times. Her skin moved but her eyes did not. I placed my hands above her body and swept them over every part searching for whatever Marcella had sent. Abuela never got sick. Ever. She shouldn't be like this.

Everywhere my hands swept over, I felt a dark power, a curse—it had to be. I pushed my power into her. Warm green light spilled from my hands and into the darkness that weaved between the crevices of Abuela's insides. The darkness had spread throughout her body, and it was hurting her. I felt it burrowing deep into her organs and bones. My power pulsed into the darkness, and, bit by bit, the green light consumed the bruised-colored darkness. But it wasn't enough. My hands shook and a frustrated lump of tears pushed up my throat.

"Martha?" It was weak and low.

"Abuela!" Tears ran down my cheeks now. "I'm so sorry, I'm sorry. This is my fault."

"Marcella?" she said. I put my hands beneath her head and tried to sit her up but she was too heavy, so I held her awkwardly against my knees.

“Yes, I’m sorry. I found out about Marcella and I told her and she did this. It’s my fault.”

Abuela reached for my hand. “No. Not yours.” Her words trailed off and her eyes closed. As we had been speaking my *don* had stopped pushing through Abuela’s body and the curse was spreading out once again.

“No! No!” I pushed more power into her, but the curse was stronger. What do I do? I didn’t know how to fight a curse. Abuela had never shown me. She was going to die if I didn’t do something. I jumped up, grabbed the phone, and did the one thing that Abuela probably wouldn’t want me to do. I called 9-11.

The ambulance took forever to arrive. The entire time that I pushed my power into Abuela, I cried. I prayed to *Dios* and *los Santos* and Mary and Jesus, anyone that would listen. I told them I was sorry. That it had been wrong to tell Marcella that way. It was wrong for me to go looking for my mother and her past, when I had so many good things in my life now. Sorry I had betrayed Abuela’s trust. Sorry that I couldn’t save Abuela on my own. Sorry for everything, if only it would save Abuela.

When the EMT’s arrived, I passed out. I remembered waking briefly when they lifted me into the ambulance on a stretcher. I did not know where Abuela was or why I was being put into the ambulance myself. But my body was so drained, so tired that I did not care. I fell asleep and woke up later in a hospital bed.

The next few weeks were hell. Abuela lived, and so did I. The doctors said I had suffered from shock and had fainted when the ambulance arrived. I was released a few hours after I awoke. The tests they had done on me while I was asleep verified that

nothing was wrong. They made me drink a lot of fluids and gave me something to eat before I was allowed to leave the room. Gloria had been called and was waiting for me to wake up.

“This is no good, Martha. No good. We don’t come to hospitals.” By “we,” she meant Abuela. Abuela refused to go to doctors, much less to a hospital. Gloria knew it was bad if it had come to this. When I told her about the curse, I didn’t say it was Marcella; she crossed herself and started saying the Lord’s Prayer. Tia Juanita was there, too. She cried every few seconds and could barely speak, much less breathe through her sobs. Gloria had to threaten to slap her, if she didn’t stop.

Abuela was in intensive care in a coma, the doctors said. I tried to enter, to give her some of my *don*, but the doctors would not allow it. All of Laredo had heard about Abuela’s plight. For soon after I awoke, her patients and the entire family came to the hospital, bringing flowers and plants, presents for Abuela when she awoke, for me, Juanita, and Gloria. They even brought paper plates of food covered in aluminum foil and jugs of Kool-Aid for Gloria, Juanita, and me who had not left the hospital since we had arrived. The staff at the hospital had become increasingly annoyed with the large and long presence of the family. I couldn’t blame the staff, though. The family filled the waiting rooms on the floor of Abuela’s room, holding vigils and rosaries throughout the day.

By the fourth day, the doctors said she would wake soon, so they put her in an extra-large room, to fit all the gifts and people. She still hadn’t awoken by the time everyone had to leave in the evening. That night, I couldn’t sleep. I just kept looking at Abuela. Gloria could, though. She snored in one of the chairs, her head leaning back

against it, and her mouth opened slightly. Juanita had gone home for the first time that night to be with her children and husband who was going crazy having to watch the kids by himself. I told her I would call if anything happened.

Sometime during the night I must have dozed, but I awoke when I heard Abuela calling my name.

“Martha?” I jumped up from my chair and rushed over.

“Water, please?” I nodded and grabbed a cup, ran to the bathroom sink, and filled the glass.

I ran back and helped her take a drink. When she was done, she let her head fall back to the pillow. Her dark brown skin was two shades lighter than usual and deep purple shadows had settled beneath her eyes.

“Stop staring,” she said.

“Sorry.” I smiled for a moment. Then repeated myself, “I’m sorry, Abuela. This is my fault. I-Marcella-she just, when I...” I couldn’t get the words out, but that was fine because Abuela lifted her hand for me to hush.

“I know,” she said. “That’s why I came back from Mexico. I knew something was going to happen to you, so I returned.”

“I ran back to the house and I tried to push the curse out, but...”

“There was nothing you could do. I have not taught you to battle darkness like that. You did well, but you shouldn’t have done so much. Your *don* is weak.”

“What was I supposed to do? You were going to die!”

Gloria stopped snoring for a moment. I waited to see if Gloria would awaken but she didn’t and continued to snore.

“It’s fine,” Abuela said. “It’s not your fault. This was going to happen. I have known it.”

“What are you talking about? You could not have known,” I said. Or could she? Did she see into the future?

“Listen, Martha. When your mother became—” She paused.

“Pregnant?”

She gave me a stern look. “Yes, when she became pregnant. I was furious. That was not my plan for my daughter. Rosa had a bright future. A doctor, a lawyer, something. And with her gift for healing, she could have done so much for Laredo.”

She paused again. “I became pregnant with Rosa when I was young and it was not easy to raise my daughters with a husband. How would Rosa do it without being married? It was not right. And Rosa had a future.

“I could not let her have the baby, but she would not get rid of it. So I made her give it to the father. He had caused it, he could raise it. That’s what I thought. My daughter would understand. See it my way. She was forbidden to see the father. But she did not see it like I did.

“She left a week after she had the baby. Disappeared, until she showed up with you.”

Wow. What was I to say? Yell at Abuela? Say it was her fault that I had to live with my mother in the way that I did? That it was her fault my mother was fake and had abandoned me? Maybe it was. I wasn’t sure at the moment. Yes, Abuela had pushed my mother to leave, but my mother had decided to leave—twice. Whether it was right or wrong was beside the point. Abuela was awake and alive. She was the only person that I

really had, and I couldn't be mad right now. The anger might come later, and if it did, I would deal with it then.

We didn't say anything else after that. I didn't know what to say to her. And Abuela did not have any more confessions to make or the strength to do so. Before she fell asleep that night, I swore I heard her say *Lo siento*, sorry, but I could have hallucinated.

The following week the doctors told us that Abuela had not only had a massive heart attack, but that she also had cancer and it had spread to almost about every organ in her body. It was the curse, it had to be. After she awoke, Abuela returned to her regular self. She did not want to be at the hospital and she said, 'Pah!' at every new diagnosis the doctor gave. The doctors were glad to see her go, even though they advised her to see an oncologist and a cardiologist, but she refused and walked out the hospital on a cane. When I tried to help her, she turned to me and gave me the nastiest look so that I jumped back. Oh, she was back, all right.

Things changed after that. The doctors had been right, Abuela was sick. For a woman who had never been sick her entire life, this was something new for Abuela. Gloria basically moved in with us to help my grandmother, who needed constant care throughout the day with moving around, cooking, bathing, and cleaning. Abuela insisted I return to school and let Gloria do all the heavy lifting. Juanita came over as much as she could to give Gloria a break and to be with her mother. A few times Abuela had to threaten Juanita to not come back if she didn't give her some space and stop her tears.

Gloria blanched at that thought. She had been smoking more often now and if she didn't get breaks from Abuela, Gloria might be the next to leave Laredo.

Marcella did not appear the rest of the school year. Some said she had dropped out, others said she was missing, and even others said she was in Mexico working with gangs and drug dealers as their personal *bruja*. It was probably the last one, since Carlita had mentioned something of that nature. Whatever it was, I was glad. I couldn't have faced her. Didn't want to face her. The thought of Marcella made me sick, angry, and sad, all at the same time. I didn't know what box to place her in. Enemy? Sister? Bitch from hell? Most of the time, I tried to just not think of her. Although part of me felt bad for Carlita and Jorge. They had lost their daughter, too, and I was too coward to apologize.

I never told Laura about my adventures or that I had thought she was my sister. It was sort of forgotten due to Abuela's sickness. Sofia and Laura had even come to the hospital with an offering of trinkets from Sofia's store. I later discovered that the reason Abuela had been angry with Sofia was because Sofia had helped my mother to leave Laredo the first time. She had assisted my mother in the purchase of the beat up Pinto, her escape vehicle, and had given my mother a lump sum of cash to get her started on her new life. Abuela and Sofia talked alone in Abuela's hospital room for thirty minutes, and when Sofia and Laura left, things were on the mend in our family.

And as for my mother...well, I knew her secret. Yet, I wasn't particularly happy with knowing. Discovering her secret was a two-sided knife that cut pretty deep. Abuela was sick—was it my fault? Yes, partly. Had I done the right thing by pursuing the secret? I wasn't sure. Marcella and I both knew, but did that help us in any way? It was too early

to tell. My mother had made her decisions, and as her daughter, I had too. Regardless, I took responsibility and I lived with the knowledge of the repercussions of my actions. That was my burden to bear and maybe Marcella's as well, but she wasn't around to see if she was bearing them. Especially those that had been trying to keep the secret from me. Although everyone had been telling the truth about one thing: they really didn't know where my mother was.

Abuela could not heal much anymore. She needed what was left of her *don* to keep herself alive. So the responsibilities went to me. I was busy throughout the scorching summer running between houses, seeing patients daily at the Pepto Bismol Casa, or running across the border to Margerita's shop for supplies. Abuela was beside me as much as she could be, teaching me new techniques, new recipes for cures. We never spoke about my mother or Marcella for that matter. Not even when Abuela showed me how to combat curses from *brujas* and *brujos*.

“You don't know anything we can do to get rid of your curse? Something?”

She replied, “No. Now stop asking stupid questions. You have more to learn.” I didn't believe her. There must have been a way. Perhaps Abuela wanted to pass on, to choose the way in which she died. Or maybe she saw it as her punishment for all the secrets she hid, for her behavior toward her daughter, Sofia, and Marcella. I would never know since Abuela was not the sharing type.

Abuela passed away over a year later, two weeks exactly after I had graduated from high school. By then, the cancer had eaten away at her entire body so that she had no hair, had lost over a hundred pounds, constantly shook, and threw up every day. No

amount of salves, massages, or teas could help her in the final days. She was in such intense pain that she didn't even have the strength to scold me.

I started drawing a lot around that time. More specifically, I tried to draw Abuela's portrait, not as she was sick, but before. It seemed important. I wasn't sure why, but I needed to do it. However, the drawings never came out right. I didn't know if I should draw her with a frown, a smile, from the front, or the side. I guess it really didn't matter because there was something always missing in the lines, something missing in her expressions. To this day, I still have a few. I never showed Abuela or anyone else the drawings but kept them hidden away in a notebook.

I wish I could say we had a tearful good-bye or she had said something significant to me before she passed. But she didn't. The night that she passed in her sleep she had looked at me and said, "Go to sleep, you're bothering me." I hadn't replied, but closed my eyes and settled into the chair next to her bed, so as to make her happy.

She was gone when I woke in the morning.

Her funeral was just as she would have wanted. Very big and very Catholic. I'm not sure how it was even paid for. Probably from the entire network of people that had ever known her, because I never got a bill. People said, "It's taken care of." And it was. Even if it hadn't been, I found out a few weeks after the funeral that Abuela had left me a small sum of \$10,000 and the Pepto house. How she had that money or when she deposited it in the bank was a mystery to me. It was stipulated in her will that I had to use it for college. And I did.

The entire *barrio* showed up for the funeral. I'm not exaggerating. A lot of patients and family from Mexico showed up, too. Margerita. Señora Flores. Señora Diaz.

Sofia and Laura. It was a big thing. I don't remember sleeping the entire time or being able to even process a thought as I was herded between those coming to offer their condolences and family members who hugged me every two seconds. Juanita cried constantly and tried to keep me in her embraces every chance she got. After a while, I made it a point to steer clear of her.

The night before the funeral she said to me, "Oh God, Martha! What about Rosa? She doesn't even know about Mamá!"

I held her as she cried. What about Rosa? She didn't care that much about her mother when she disappeared all those years. I couldn't imagine my mother would have come running home even if we could find her. And we didn't have time to.

I don't remember crying the entire process of the funeral. The tears just weren't there. By the end, Abuela was suffering and for the toughest woman I had ever known, that was saying something. She was better off, in peace, with God.

There was one moment, though, that I felt something. As I stood over Abuela's coffin and watched it slowly descend into the ground, an anger rose within me. How could she die on me like this? What was I supposed to do? Alone again in Laredo. The anger was not allowed to grow because, suddenly, I felt the power from a *don* nearby. I turned and looked to the right, where the cars were parked on the road next to the cemetery.

I saw a flash of a red shirt and brown skin disappearing behind the cars. Someone with a *don* was there, had been there, watching the funeral. My heart skipped. Marcella? Or my mother?

I didn't have time to send out my power, to feel it out because someone tapped me on the shoulder. They had lowered Abuela in the ground. Gloria, Juanita, and I were to throw the first clumps of dirt on the coffin as I read Abuela's favorite prayer.

“Lord, grant me serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.”

En El Presente

We are the last guests that Alyssa approaches. Whether it is Charles who steered her clear of us earlier or if it is just fate, it works out for the best. By the time she makes her way beneath the awning it is about five in the afternoon, and most of the others have left. I see a few helping to put away plates and trash that the mourners have left scattered about on small tables and in chairs.

I cannot read Alyssa's face as she draws near, do not know what she thinks of us two old Mexican ladies that have melted into brown puddles in the shade.

"Alyssa this is Martha and Marcella." Charles gestures toward us with the introduction of our names.

She gives a small smile, probably the only thing she can manage on this day. "Hi, nice to meet you. Thank you for coming." She doesn't mean the words she says. More than anything she probably wants to curl into a ball and never see another person. I felt the same way at one time.

"Thank you," I say, "How are you doing?" I can't help it. I must ask. Even though I know the answer. It's out of habit, really. I have been saying those words for so many years, whether it is in my office at the clinic in Laredo where I see patients that called me "Dr." or in my abuela's house where patients called me "Doña." It's in my soul to help others.

She sighs. "Good. Just fine."

Marcella gives a light chuckle. "Fine? That's what you say now." Alyssa's eyebrows pinch together.

Charles jumps in. "Marcella and Martha drove all the way from Laredo."

“Oh. I didn’t know Mom knew anyone from Laredo. But thank you, I’m sure she would have been happy that y’all were here.”

Marcella laughs again. “She would have died at the sight of us.” Alyssa looks as if she doesn’t know whether to be insulted or not, and Charles’ cheeks are red in embarrassment. Died? Really, Marcella?

I turn to Marcella and switch to Spanish. “What are you doing? It’s fine to be rude to me, but to her?”

“*Ándale* already. We came here to tell her, yes? There’s nothing rude about the truth. Get on with it already.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “I don’t know why I put up with you.”

“The quicker you tell her the quicker I can leave.” Leave. Always trying to run away from me. Fifteen years ago, I found her working in a neighborhood in Mexico that bordered the cartels, the rich and famous, and the poor shacks of the common people. The locals had told me she dabbled in everything. She might do good, she might do bad, depending on the day, her mood, and sometimes the pay.

That first meeting had been hell. I thought I was going to have to chase her down the street. There was a lot of yelling and cursing at first, threats, too. The poor neighbors were terrified. But each year, it has gotten a little better. Very, very slowly, though.

I give Marcella one last look before I turn away, back to Charles and Alyssa, who look lost at our conversation in Spanish.

“Sorry. That was rude of us.” Now that the moment has arrived, I don’t know how to begin.

I can see that Alyssa is on the edge. The weariness beneath her eyes changes to agitation. “Who are you?”

There it is. The question. The leap. Charles’ mouth opens but nothing comes out. I look at Marcella and she nods at me and then at Alyssa.

I take a breath and think of a door. All I have to do is walk through. Take one step.

So I do.

Alyssa takes it better than I had expected. Well sort of. She stands up when we first tell her who we are, her sisters, her mother’s daughters, but Charles pulls her back down and makes her listen.

“This can’t be true,” she says.

“It is,” Marcella says, “Trust me, we,” I give her a look and she changes her words, “or at least, I, am not happy about this.”

“Are you sure this is true?” She asks me, her eyes pleading to take back the truth. She looks just like Marcella did all those years ago as we stood on the streets of Laredo facing off.

Both Charles and I say, “Yes.”

Marcella crosses her arms and gives her a look that says “try to argue with me.”

Alyssa leans back. “How? How...I feel like I don’t know anything. How?”

And this is the moment. The moment where we share our secrets, once again.

“Well, I guess the story begins—” I am interrupted by Marcella.

“Wait a minute! My story starts before yours. I will begin. Rosa, the woman you call ‘Mom’...”

And so Marcella begins her story. I sit back and listen to the words that flow from Marcella's mouth. Her truth, her story about our mother. It is not like mine. It is not nice or pretty like the backyard of the house that we sit in. Not pruned like the bushes that line the house. It is more like Laredo. Hot, scorching, and relentless.

At one point, Marcella speaks of Abuela, "María never gave me a chance—"

Alyssa interrupts, "María? That's my middle name."

Marcella and I look at one another. Rosa. I don't think I will ever truly know my mother's story.

I listen closely to her tell Alyssa about the years after she'd left Laredo. She had disappeared into Mexico, searching for a *bruja* or a *curandera*. She'd found a *curandero*, a seedy man who dealt in back-handed or dangerous things like the cartels and the mafias. But it worked out for her—free room, free lessons. She soon discovered her gifts were far beyond his, so she left and started her own business, with half his clients.

As I was studying for med school, Marcella was healing *la gente*. While I was working night shifts at the hospital straight out of med school, Marcella was curing drug dealers, soldiers, poor people, rich people, and even high-up government people. While I was starting my own clinic, trying to convince the people of Laredo to come, to convince them that it was a new type of clinic, *curanderismo* and Western medicine combined, Marcella was going through her second divorce.

When Marcella finishes her story, she looks at me and waits.

I look at Alyssa. "Can you take more?"

She shrugs. "Do I have a choice...I really don't want to hear this, but we can't stop now."

I started the wheels of this story, so it only seems fitting that I finish it.

“My first impression of Laredo, Texas, in 1997, wasn’t too high, especially the neighborhood in which my grandmother lived in...” I pause and think for a moment.

“Wait, let me start over,” I pause, “You’re not going to like my story...”

When the story is finished, the sun has set, the heat has gone. When I return to the Pepto Bismol casa days later, I sit on a wooden bench amidst the green, healthy plants on the creaking, wooden front porch. My husband will return home from his job at the Post Office soon. Gloria will probably show up for dinner, ready to gossip about her newly-discovered great-niece. She’s well into her nineties, still won’t stop talking to take a breath, and comes by unannounced to watch *novelas* in our kitchen while I see patients, just like in the old days.

My daughter and Laura’s youngest daughter are inside, preparing salves for the morning rounds. Two apprentices—we are not dying out.

Marcella is visiting Carlita and Jorge. Before we left for Laredo, she said she had had enough of me for a while. I’m sure we will see each other before she returns to Mexico.

As I sit on the porch, I watch the children of my neighborhood run down the street kicking a ball, while their mothers sit and watch from their chairs on their lawns. Alyssa and Charles will be arriving in a week, to see, to learn, to heal.

I smile and allow myself to be wrapped in the fiery embrace of Laredo, glad for the warmth. Closing my eyes, I smile. *Abuela, we are cured.*