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Smart: Growing up Gifted and Brown in Southeast Los Angeles

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

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June 2015

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Prologue: The Last Seminar, 1998

> "But it was fitting like a tight chemise. I could not see it for wearing it. It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment."
> Zora Neale Hurston, From *Mules and Men*

When I was 17, all I wanted was to get out—out of my mother's crowded house, out of Bell Gardens, and out of California. At 21, I'd clawed my way into best liberal arts college in the country, but no one told me it wouldn't be enough. No one told me that no matter how fine my hand-made leather loafers were and how many degrees I accumulated, that I'd always have to go back home to a house that my family shared with an unending stream of cockroaches.

*

On the last day of my senior seminar in political science, we had class in the living room of the former Williams Inn. Dodd House was a beautiful old dorm, with white clapboard siding and hunter green trim that never faded or chipped. That building, nestled in perfect spring grass, was idyllic, and an icon of Williams, my liberal arts New England college. We even had a Gothic-style church along the main road, and our administrative buildings featured cherry wood dens with portraits of donors, all of them colonial white men, looking out at students across vaulted ceilings built for reading about democracy, justice, and progress.

My classmates had assembled themselves and sat with ease in the Dodd House living room. Under the monogrammed backpacks were light wood floors that got refinished every summer. The ceiling was all hand-crafted crown molding. Big enough for fifty people, the room held pink couches, with a fireplace and pool table in the adjoining den. My seat faced a window overlooking the purple Berkshire Mountains. Dodd House was originally used to entertain alumni, stockholders, the president, and trustees of the college and their guests. As a student, I was not on that list. But Williams ranked as the best liberal arts school in the country. Being there validated my education, my life, and affirmed that I was smart enough to be with the best and the brightest students. What's more, sitting on those couches with their armrests soft and spotless, I felt at home. Dodd House was where I truly lived. I was no longer sharing a bedroom with my entire family. I was no longer smashing cockroaches with house slippers.

However, graduation was looming and I had no job offers. I had to give back that comfortable home on June 7, 1998. Sitting on those couches, I was actually sinking.

My dorm room was a single, but it was the size of my mother's living room and kitchen. Since it was on the second floor of Dodd House, my school-issued furniture and the things I had scavenged from the depths of basement storage were just upstairs from me as I sat in class. Like many other dorm rooms, it had its own bathroom, which I never had to clean. Someone did that for me. She was an older white woman in a faded polo shirt. I had said hello and thank you a number of times when I walked in before she'd finished. My mother, Amá, believed that women who couldn't clean their own homes

were not women. As a child, she not only cleaned her mother's house, she also helped to raise and cook for ten siblings. Later, as an adult, she scrubbed grime from sports socks and scraped scum from our tub. But no one thanked her.

I wanted to be nothing like her. I thought I was the opposite: well educated, thin, unable to cook a decent meal for anyone except for myself. I couldn't see value in her talents: sewing, raising and feeding three children, building a garden out of scraps where previously nothing could grow. I was mostly ashamed of her lack of education and how she said my Spanish was better than hers.

As our class of ten students got started, I nervously tapped my penny loafer on the wood floor. I wondered if I'd gotten any new messages from the organizations where I'd applied for internships in San Francisco or Washington D.C. In, those last few months of school, I got in the habit of alternating between checking my messages frequently and turning off the volume on my answering machine. I didn't want the cleaning lady (or anyone else) to hear my messages from home. Sure, janitors at Williams didn't speak Spanish, but some things weren't meant to be shared.

Professor Crane's hair and beard were gray, and he wore gold-rimmed glasses. For that last class, he brought us champagne and strawberries and brie. As much as we wanted.

I didn't drink much. I thought it was tacky to be tipsy in class. I'd watched so many students—especially Beto, my ex-boyfriend—stumble around campus every weekend. I could not take them seriously the following Monday morning. I was fucking

serious. I was at Williams to work my ass off, because if I didn't, leaving my family and my activism would have been for nothing. If I didn't land a well-paying job by graduation that would allow me to get my family a bigger house, I would be a failure.

So there was no way I was drinking in class. I sipped the champagne from a red plastic cup; at least the professor didn't bring champagne flutes. That would have been too much. While the school was incredibly wealthy, its culture was not flashy. They didn't have to show their wealth—everybody had it: the legacy of alumni in their family, the trust fund if they wanted to travel, the investment banking job once they graduated, or an unsurprising entrance to law school. Except for students like me.

Our class sat in the afternoon light looking out at the mountains and talked about the responsibilities of the democratic state. I had traveled to central Mexico with my mother and two brothers the past winter on a grant from the college. With five hundred dollars, I bought four round-trip bus tickets, traveling the same route that Amá had taken when she first immigrated to the U.S. On that trip, I noticed that there was always plenty of soda—Coke, and the Mexican brands, too—in every town where the bus stopped, no matter how small. Where were the water faucets to drink potable, nontoxic water? Nowhere. We had the same kinds of problems in Los Angeles.

The water from our faucets was cloudy, but if you waited a few seconds, it cleared up. At least we had water and toilets that flushed with force: plumbing, American style. But in Mexico, it made me especially angry. Shouldn't water, a basic need, be met by the government? Didn't democracy promise to take care of all its people equally? I didn't

know this at the time, but the Mexican Constitution guarantees the right, in Article Four states to the “access, provision and sanitation of water for personal and domestic consumption as sufficient, safe, acceptable and affordable.” My gut told me this should be the government practice. I was invested in the idea that resources should be available for those who worked for them, like my parents. All it had gotten them was a rental house next to the most dangerous freeway in the country.

These things, which I had personally witnessed, were what I offered to the seminar's conversation. I still had trouble valuing them as a legitimate contribution because I didn’t sound like my classmates, who sounded like they already knew everything.

Although my public school education had taught me how to keep up in class, it led me to believe that my minimal effort was good enough. When I got to Williams, I was just getting by.

As my parents’ oldest child and only living daughter, I was the one who translated for them all the time. I didn’t believe I was allowed to ask for help. I was just supposed to understand Foucault or instinctively write beautiful book reviews like the ones my classmates seemed to churn out with little problem. Once the discussion got going in our seminar, I got the guts to speak.

“It’s not right that Coke is everywhere in rural Mexico,” I said, “but that people don't have free and clean drinking water.” It was a critique about the privatization of water distribution, about the lack of the government’s care for its people, about free trade.

At the time, however, I was not sure what I was trying to say. What I could offer my peers was my insight: that something was unjust and needed to be pointed out. I was trying to correct something by making other people see it.

“What does that have to do with anything?” replied a white male classmate. He peered at me under a filthy green baseball hat, low over his eyes, the brim a tunnel that made him turn his head everywhere he looked. The other students didn't understand me either, and looked at me blankly.

My face burned from saying something I couldn't explain. It was hard enough to muster the authority to speak up. The last two years of college I had taken courses where I contributed frequently. They were classes about Los Angeles, Latino history in the U.S., Chicano literature taught by Latino professors. The presence of these professors, and the material itself, gave me greater confidence in my ideas, and I'd finally begun to speak up. When I first arrived, I didn’t think what I had to say was important.

“I think what you’re pointing out is a failure of the state,” said Professor Crane. I was grateful that he tried to help. I'd always felt that teachers just expected us to know everything, and those of us who could guess correctly were deemed the smart ones. Those of us who didn't speak up got left behind. At least I had an ally in him.

“The government should make sure everybody has what they need,” I agreed, “not just let companies do whatever they want.”

A conversation probably followed my comments—something about the free market and how government shouldn't interfere—but I don't recall it. I was embarrassed

that I could not support my argument with anything other than a feeling. I finished my last strawberry and put it in the empty cup. It was strangely bitter more than sweet. The professor called a break.

My penny loafers moved softly across the maroon carpet as I headed upstairs to check my answering machine. The hall was empty. My friend Carla, was probably in the sculpture studio finishing her last statues of shapely women. My other friend Kendra was likely in history class. I passed Kendra's door and laughed at the magazine ad she had taped to it. A young, blonde model wore a white cotton dress. The woman was lying on a field of crisp grass, which made me wonder if Martha's Vineyard looked like that, since it was where some students “summered” (that word was a verb in New England). The caption above the model read, “White is right.”

The cleaning lady was not in my room, thank God. Weak sunlight came in through two long windows that looked out onto the circular turn-around in front of the dorm. Three more white dorms with wood siding lined the road, surrounded by a perfect lawn.

My room came with standard furnishings: twin bed, dark wood desk, chair, short bookcase, and dresser. In the basement of the dorm, I had found furniture abandoned by the school’s alumnae. I salvaged the corner of a sectional couch and a long mirror framed in cherry wood. My bathroom was as long as the room, with a window of the same size, and had a bathtub I wanted to use like the women in bath salt commercials. But I didn't. It felt luxurious enough simply to have so much space to myself.

A black and white poster of Frida Kahlo stared down at my answering machine. What was left of my high school activism was pinned next to it: a cartoon of Mickey Mouse dressed up as Migra Mouse, an immigration officer grinning and pointing viewers to Mexico. Disney had given money to anti-immigrant political campaigns in Orange County. A rotten thing for a mouse to do.

The red light on the answering machine was blinking.

“Hi, chata!” Amá sounded congested. “Your papi says hello. He's doing okay. I talked to him yesterday. Don't worry about us, we're okay. Call me when you're not *ocupada*.”

I made myself very *ocupada*—so busy I could only call home once a week. The answering machine picked up our neighbor’s generator, a noise more fitting at a factory or a circus tent, but that was what our front yard in Bell Gardens, California, sometimes seemed like. Neighbor kids zipped around on razor scooters. Men perpetually fixed cars in the courtyard between our homes. Dogs barked and roosters crowed at all hours of the day—you could hear them over the televisions in every room tuned to a different channel. The silence of my room in the middle of the day was a welcomed sound.

I knew what Mom wanted to talk about: Dad might be going to jail. He was going to court soon, accused of stealing from the factory where he worked. It was a union job where he fixed machines that pumped out sheets of glass as tall as a house. I didn't know how long he'd be away if he was convicted, he would surely miss my graduation. For that reason, I'd asked the financial aid office to only buy two tickets—one for Amá and one

for my younger brother, Jesus, to fly in for commencement. That was the kind of access I had to money at Williams: just a phone call away.

Sometimes I hated Bell Gardens, the city in Los Angeles County where I was raised. Everyone lived so close to each other that you couldn’t turn around without someone in your face. When I was growing up, I walked around with the feeling that many worlds existed beyond and above us, all of them out of reach if I stayed there.

My stomach tightened whenever I talked to Amá about Dad going to jail. It made me sick that I couldn't help her with money. I was barely scraping by as a student. I thought college would be like winning the lottery, and that a pot of gold would appear at the end. While I frequently ate the champagne and brie at receptions after lectures at school, and those things implied wealth, they were bitter on my tongue. They were real because I could touch and eat them, but they were not mine.

I deleted the message. I would call Amá later. My friends didn't know Dad could go to jail for stealing and that my family was just getting by. What made the situation worse was that I had no job prospects or fellowships lined up. I was going to graduate and end up right where I’d started: a one-bedroom house off an alley in Bell Gardens, where the bathroom was the best place for privacy.

I'd received several rejections from fellowships in Washington D.C. advocacy offices of national Latino organizations. Whereas I had been a star organizer in high school, I had become an average student at an amazing college, where I turned into a paper pusher. Instead of going to marches, I took great notes at meetings with the college

president when students needed to press him on the school's promises for Latino studies.

I walked back downstairs to finish up my last class and sit with peers who didn’t understand me. And like every other day at Williams, at dinner time, I found the friends who saw me. They had shown me how to thrive in a place that was not meant for me.

In class, I talked about all kinds of failures: governmental, societal, and political. But I never talked about my own. The fantasy of hard work and merit that got me into college was a lie. My family was still poor, trapped in a tiny house, and I had nothing to offer them. My education was supposed to fix everything, but it hadn't changed a thing.

Chapter 1: Going Places, 1980

I was the only one who survived.

A brown girl in pigtails, I was meant to walk my town's cracked sidewalks and past neon beer signs in liquor store windows. I was meant to look over the edge of the iron bridge and see adventure instead of car exhaust, to smell the lemon blossoms instead of the flattened cat in the street. Because I was the one who survived, I was the only one who held Amá's hand on the Gage Avenue Bridge on former floodplains, looking for my future along a cemented river and eight lanes of traffic.

My oldest sister, Victoria, never moved her head or limbs on her own and died from pneumonia. Three of Amá's pregnancies after that did not make it to full term. I had a feeling that those babies didn't want to stay because they had been afraid of Los Angeles—our tiny house, our little money, and of the future when Amá and Dad would snap at each other like rabid dogs. But I wasn't scared—not of our house, so small that my whole family slept in the same bed, stacked like tortillas in a plastic bag. I wanted to make a house big enough for all of us. I wasn't scared of the millions of cars that clogged the freeways and gave Amá asthma and my future teacher a brain tumor—I wanted to drive, honk the horn, and put my foot on the gas and go.

The Los Angeles River was thirty steps from the overpass. We didn't want to stand over the river—there was nothing to see. It was just a trickle of water down the middle of concrete, lazy graffiti sprayed on some parts of the walls, a stray sea gull crying overhead.

We stood where the City of Bell Gardens began and the City of Bell ended. If it had been a clear day, we could have admired the San Gabriel Mountains north of where we stood.

The city was surrounded by train tracks on all sides. Car and tire factories had become food distributors, swimsuit sweat shops, and paint manufacturers along Randolph Avenue.

Amá smiled when I counted the Volkswagen bugs. She called them *pulgas* and I repeated after her, "*Pulgas*." Although I didn't speak English yet, it made sense that the cars were called this, after all, a *pulga* was a kind of bug. Amá's brother Juan had a *pulga* back home in Hidalgo. Her ten brothers and sisters had stayed there and never left. Dad and I were her only family in California. My hand tightened around hers.

Big rigs puffed diesel smoke from their silver pipes. As they passed, the blasts dissipated and turned into regular air. I wondered where people were going: to work at an office, or off to a park with trees perfect for hanging piñatas. At the horizon, the sky was a pale gray, but if you looked up higher like I did, the sky was a baby blue like the inside of churches. No matter how I thought about it, each car was always in the middle of going somewhere else. Amá and I breathed it all in—exhaust will always remind me of leaving.

I barely touched the short metal railing because it was gray with soot. The Long Beach Freeway was the busiest and most dangerous in California, logging dozens of big rig accidents each week. We never saw any wrecks. If we had, maybe I would have

stopped asking to go. Maybe cars crushing into each other like aluminum cans would have made me want to stay home.

Even though I was only four years old, something in me thought that where we lived was nowhere and, therefore, I needed to go somewhere. Bell Gardens was known for its cheap rents and its tough-as-nails residents—from Dust Bowl migrants to the Native Americans who had also left their homes for opportunities in the big cities. My family was just as scrappy and ambitious.

When I started school later that year, learning would become a vehicle, a real car to take me to places where I'd rather be. There was nothing to do in Bell Gardens. We were in the part of Los Angeles that was still becoming Mexican and Central American. We had no murals or mariachis, unlike Boyle Heights or East Los Angeles, which is where everyone thinks Latinos live. That is the opposite of reality. Unlike its East L.A. neighbor, Bell Gardens did not have a Whittier Boulevard replete with *hierberias*, clothing stores, Mexican shoe stores, or taco spots crowding the boulevard.

Amá and I would walk south two blocks to Eastern Avenue's handful of storefronts built in the 1950s. In the spring, I'd step on the blossoms that would drop from the half-dozen orchid trees on Specht Street just a few steps from the alley where our house was located. Both the trees and our homes were three blocks from recently-closed foundries and automotive companies in Commerce. The houses were sweet bungalows, with up to six houses stuffed into the long lots like ill-fitting shoes. Sometimes owners crammed apartment buildings into the same size lots, about five cars long. All of the

buildings had stucco facades in fading pastels: pink, blue, or yellow. On the corner of Florence and Eastern, there were two gas stations and a burger joint with sticky blue vinyl seats. Our two supermarkets, McCoy's and Foodland, had linoleum so worn, that no amount of Pine Sol cleaned the floors. Some stores had closed down and the only things left inside were spider webs and broken washing machines. The few stores that were open had dirt-covered windows and sold electronics, knock-off toys from China, and swap-meet luggage.

Ours was a town whose Bethlehem Steel and Firestone Tire jobs were going away. We never had the chance to call ourselves middle class because we were too busy working in factories. The American flag on Firestone Avenue in South Gate looked like an old postage stamp. Dad was lucky to have a job at all when so many were moving away to find work elsewhere in the county or out in Orange County, the home of Disneyland.

From our spot on the Gage Avenue Bridge I could see the overpass on Florence, the main exit to Bell Gardens from the Long Beach Freeway. Down that street were the middle school and a Pioneer Chicken, City Hall, and our squat library off of Garfield.

Amá would get sick of breathing in the fumes and would nudge me toward home.

"*Ya vamonos*, chata." While I might have been special because I was the one child who lived, when Amá was done, she meant business. I knew better than to fight her. She could be a bull, a real *tauro* like her birth sign. I didn't like it when she used her horns; she'd yell at Dad and glare at me if we did not obey her.

"Besides," she said, "your dad will be home any minute and I need to warm up the *fideo*."

The passing cars made a small wind that picked up the hem of my orange dress and the ends of Amá's red blouse. That spot in the middle of the bridge was our way to travel; it was hard to leave.

A cherry red convertible was approaching on the freeway, heading north, probably a Karmann Ghia that always looked like a toy to me. I leaned in to the railing to get a better look at the creamy beige interior. Amá tugged me back so hard that she could have left a bruise on my collar bone. I could smell the garlic on her fingers.

Her grip was so tight, I knew she wouldn't let go.

Chapter 2: Glass, 1981

Dad drove Amá and I on the Long Beach Freeway in his glitter blue El Camino. We headed to his job at the Downey Glass Company in the City of Commerce. He needed to pick up some glass that was supposed to get thrown out that day, but he had other plans for it. He wanted to show us his “*oficina*,” he'd said.

Even though the factory was on Eastern and Ferguson, just three miles north on Eastern Avenue, we hopped on the Long Beach Freeway to get there. Many of us in Bell Gardens thought Commerce was for rich Mexicans and white people. It seemed like such a long way to get to Commerce, one of the towns next to Bell Gardens. Commerce, the town next door with only 13,000 people, had free summer camps, a free bus, a huge indoor pool, and a spotless library. Seeing that Dad worked right across from Commerce made me feel like I almost lived there.

When he'd first met Amá, Dad had driven cars whose names belonged in the sky: a Galaxy, a Sunliner, and a Comet. By the time I started school, Dad was constantly changing cars, mostly station wagons in varying shades of mud. Buying and fixing cars was Dad's hobby, keeping him busy and sharp in the ways of mechanics and bargaining.

The Sante Fe Railroad Yards passed underneath us—a dozen rows of parked train cars like streams of rusty metal. The train noses pointed at downtown threatening to drive there if they wanted. That would have been nice—to take a train into downtown from where we lived instead of having to drive everywhere.

Dad gripped the steering wheel lightly. He could have driven to work with his eyes closed. My father's hands were calloused and perpetually stained with motor oil. The skin was so thick that even when he accidentally cut his fingers to the bone, it looked like a little paper cut.

Even though it was his day off, he was still wearing his work clothes like different parts of the sky: a dark blue baseball cap, a light blue shirt with our last name in red thread, and dark gray pants smudged with marks that Amá couldn't get out.

Amá had dyed her short hair dark brown and had on one of her favorite polyester blouses, the fabric grainy and almost sheer. Her blouse strained a little—she was five months pregnant with a new baby of whom I was already jealous.

"Here we are!" Dad announced, "*el* Downey Glass." We pulled in to a parking lot with cracked asphalt. Dandelion bulbs poked through the pebbles.

The main building was tall like a tower in which to hide a princess, but instead of a castle with turrets, the building was a flat cement rectangle. It leaned on two white tubes that held it up because it couldn't stand on its own. It was surrounded by three warehouses half its size and that's where Dad spent his days walking around with the noise of glass cutting and men shouting instructions at each other. Dad walked us up to a huge square opening on the side of a wall. Dad said that trailers pulled up to that hole and loaded the glass to take away. From there, Amá and I gazed at the dozen or so machines, metal cubes as big as our house.

“They cut the flat sheets of glass into smaller pieces,” said Dad. “Sometimes,” he went on, “guys punch in the wrong number into the keypad, like a zero instead of an O. No, well that just makes the machine break the sheets of glass, just like that.” No one ratted them out, Dad said, because the guys would have been fired. “Everyone needs their job,” he said.

“What's going on, Jerry?” Dad said to his boss. He introduced Amá and me. He told Jerry that we didn't speak English, but I could speak cartoon English and could tell when a character was saying things he should not say. Amá's face got red, which was normally her favorite color. I was surprised at Dad's great English. His skills were good enough to point other people’s lack of fluency. Amá shook the bosses hand and so did I. Maybe we couldn't speak, but we had manners.

Dad went inside and came back out with a stack of imperfect mirrors. They were the size of record albums while others were longer, but the same width. Some pieces were scratched and some were nicked so that the shattered corners looked like small sea shells.

Dad drove us home and took me outside to help him, but with what, I didn't know. I couldn't wait to smell the hand cleaner Dad used, which was a pastel blue and smelled like clay soap. I liked to use it even though my hands never got half as dirty as Dad's hands.

We stood out by his car in the cement part of our yard. At his table, which was a flat wooden plank on top of several tire rims, he uncapped a yellow liquid that reeked like rotten eggs. “*Mira,* chata,” he said and dabbed the rag on the mercury coating. A

rectangle was taped in the center of the mirror and Dad wiped around it. He wiped the back of the mirror so much that the mirror started to look like glass. He and Amá probably talked about what the mirror would become. She claims it was her idea in the first place to do such a thing. I didn't know what they'd decided. Some things were just between them.

By the time Dad was done, he'd turned the mirror into a frame where a photo could be placed.

Amá picked out one of the many pictures she'd taken of me at the Kmart in Cudahy and taped it the beveled mirror. Dad screwed the heavy mirror on the wall using clear plastic brackets to hold it up. Once my brother Jesse was born later that year, Dad was so happy with a baby boy that he started to cover the living room wall with photos of us: Baby Jesse in his bassinet, Dad holding baby girl Vickie in a yellow dress, he and Amá with confetti in their hair.

Dad got more experimental and started cutting the mirrors from rectangles into diamonds and ovals. He'd take a tiny thing like a pizza cutter and the extra mirror would just crack off clean where he rolled the small blade. I thought Dad knew how to do everything.

There was no car, garbage disposal, or lawn mower that he couldn't fix. Dad had two offices, one at home on any surface where he could work, and another at the glass factory, anywhere he was needed. He held up his latest oval mirror. "See, chata," he said, "*no todo se tira*." You can't throw everything away.

Chapter 3: Beds, 1981

"Amá," I asked one afternoon, "when can I have my own room?"

"I don't know, chata," Amá chimed. "Ask me later after I finish making these pork chops."

The year before my fifth birthday in 1981, Jesus arrived—a baby brother. He was a wiggly baby with wild hair like a new paint brush. His bassinet, which had been mine and Victoria's too, made for even closer quarters in our one-bedroom home. The bedroom was nearly filled by a king-size bed where I slept with Amá and Dad. The bed we shared was in the left corner of the room taking up most of the wall space. The headboard was upholstered in textured plastic. As I would fall asleep, I ran my fingers over it like faint raised veins. Watching American television exposed me to this thing called "my own room," and I wanted to know when mine was coming.

The room we all shared had one long window that opened sideways facing the west side of the room. Our view was of a corrugated metal fence and the back side of another set of houses. An off-white vanity trimmed in pistachio green sat beneath the window, against one closet door. Everything, including the furniture, was shoulder-to-shoulder in our house.

The vanity's glass countertop protected photos of Amá's family in Hidalgo sometimes on horseback or standing next to crumbling farm walls. The photos kept Amá's side of the family near us, even if they were a five-day drive away. Dad's family

we didn't really know; they were the kind of folks who were always busy hustling people out of money, green cards, and houses. The only photo of Dad's side was one of his grandmother who had raised him as a son. Her name was Genoveva and she wore a long, vanilla sweater, her long white hair braided back into a ponytail. I could tell it was taken in Mexico because nobody painted in the same pistachio green colored wall behind her.

I would run my hands long the glass and stare at yellow-tinged photos of my sister Victoria. She died before she could have a birthday in 1974. Most of those photos showed her in a baby carrier or in someone's arms, her head stuck looking in the direction of the sky. My sister, a *tocaya* I'm named after, was always there with us too, growing in age. In image, she was forever a baby for whom I had to make up another life.

When I'd finish my homework, I would climb on top of the vanity and reach above the closet to get my paper dolls. There were two built-in cabinets there that fit my parents' suitcases: a green cardboard suitcase from when Amá first arrived; her light blue and white *morral* with my sister's dried umbilical cord and hospital tags sitting at its bottom; and Dad's suitcase, a black and red plaid one that he took when Genoveva died, the woman he thought was his real mother until was 12.

“This bed is smaller than the one I shared with my brothers and sisters,” Amá told me once. We were eating a lunch of sunny side up eggs, *huevos estrellados,* scooping them up with tortillas.

“Our bed was like two king-sized beds put together,” Amá went on. “Your grandmother Nico's family made it for us. They were woodworkers.”

I listened and ate the *huevitos* like a good girl. When Amá got to telling stories, I knew not to interrupt.

"When we got older, there were more kids." Amá talked as she warmed *tortillas* on the *comal*. "Pretty soon there were ten of us in that bed, but it was so big that we fit just fine. We never complained." Maybe I shouldn't complain, I though. Maybe I'm lucky not to share it with nine other people and three is not so bad.

She served me a small mound of beans on my plate. "My father stuffed the mattress with sheep's wool from our little farm down the dirt road."

"Did your parents sleep there, too?" I asked.

"They had their own room," Amá said.

If the only room thing wasn't going to work out, then I asked for the next best thing.

"Maybe I can have my own bed like that?"

"Haber," Amá said.

When I asked Dad about a bed he said that, when he was a kid, he said he slept on a cot, a *camita*, next to his brother, Rafael. Their father woke them up at four in the morning to herd the goats. "I've been working since I was your age, chata. You're lucky you get to sleep in until school starts. And that we don't have goats."

We might have been broke, but Amá found ways to spoil me. When I turned six, they bought a twin size bed for me from the neighbors. The bed had a simple dark wood headboard and we managed to shove it into the room. There were only six inches of space

between the beds, enough for me to squeeze by. I didn’t care that the room was more crowded than before. My heart jumped at the chance to have my own little space, even if it was just a few inches from my family.

The first night I slept on that new bed, I had so much room to roll around on it. I tried lying diagonally and still had lots of room. My bed was slightly lower to the ground than my parents' bed. When I played house by myself, I pretended it was a split-level mansion, the kind that I'd seen on TV, dressed up in Amá's sheer blouses that were like dresses on me.

When I'd be ready to sleep, I'd say good night to the crucifix with a pale Christ hanging over Amá's bed. And next to him, I'd also wish goodnight to the oval black and white portrait of my late godfather Porfirio. Amá had lost her parents, my sister, and her brother since she'd been in California. The way she talked to her sisters on the phone once a month, with sighs in between *carcajadas*, those big belly laughs, I knew she wanted to go home. But she couldn't. She didn't have her papers. Amá would have to settle for cooking liver *guisados* and *fideo* soup just for us and not her entire family. Four to a house was definitely an improvement.

Chapter 4: Stickers, 1984

Being smart made some kids hate my guts. By third grade, I already knew that as long as I was smarter than they were, I didn't care what they thought.

I walked to school at Colmar Elementary with Amá up Loveland Street, past blooming Jacarandas. She took amazing care of me and Jesse who she carried in a *rebozo* tied to her torso. She made us sparkle when we left the house—we were cleaner than the soap. Having lost Victoria, her first child to a degenerative spinal disease, she cared for us as if we were as fragile as her first floppy baby.

Although it was a cloudy Los Angeles morning, beads of sweat formed along her temples. As we walked, we breathed in the rank air coming from Farmer John's slaughterhouse. Kids joked that it smelled like dog food, but none of us had dogs to confirm it.

The streets were dotted with sweet bungalows with chipping paint, triplexes, and apartments buildings crammed into lots of the same size. I had been absent from school the day before because of a small fever that had quickly come and gone. I felt guilty being at home if I felt better. I was eager to get back to my desk, where a precious collection of stickers lived on the front cover of my work folder, tucked safely inside my desk. They were earned for completing homework perfectly and on time—badges of affirmation that came in scratch ’n sniff chocolate scents or fuzzy teddy bears with bow ties.

Amá took my presence and performance at school very seriously. My second-grade teacher had showered me with certificates of completion, from perfect attendance to perfect homework. I sharpened my English skills by listening to Michael Jackson 45s. “Yew wanna be startin’ sometin',” I sang along.

My mother, who had a fourth-grade education, revered my teachers. Amá had crowned me her special child because I was the first of her four pregnancies to live. I was a miracle, one she'd prayed for, and school was a place for me to shine.

My kindergarten teacher was educated far beyond Amá. For that reason, Amá treated teachers and school with the utmost respect. One day out of school was enough if I felt fine.

Once inside the class, Ms. Diaz greeted us. The dark bags under her eyes were magnified under her thick, tinted glasses. The window ledges of the room were dusty and rough with chipping paint.

Ms. Diaz smiled for a moment. She had a way of turning her glasses away when I raised my hand. Amá walked over and gave her a note excusing my absence. After waving goodbye, I thought I could see Amá lingering near one of the windows. I’d told Amá that Ms. Diaz shined me on a lot, so maybe she wanted to see it for herself.

My metal desk top was cold to the touch. Each desk had cubbies where we kept our pencils and assignment folders. Rosa said hello—my friend with crooked bangs who played dress up with me sometimes. A boy sat across from us and chewed his pencil along the edges.

There was another girl with a lot of stickers in class: Aida. She sat across the room from me. Her broad forehead was so slick that I was sure her mom used a tub of cream every week. Aida also had a cluster of stickers at the bottom of her folder.

When Ms. Diaz asked us to take out our work, I reached inside the desk. The folder had a different shape. Out came bits and pieces of cut-up paper, like broken teeth. Disemboweled teddies were slashed in half. The chocolate-scented stickers were cut out in sloppy circles. My name had been scribbled out, as if whoever had done it had leaned in with their full weight.

“Oh no,” said Rosa. She covered her mouth and looked around for guilty faces.

My classmates stared at the shreds in my hands. The sight of the ravaged folder had made a tight knot in my chest, right next to where I pledged allegiance.

I cried quietly onto what was left of my accomplishments.

“Stop being a crybaby,” said the boy at our table.

Ms. Diaz walked over from her desk. I was sure that she would find the culprit. I sat up in my chair and wiped my face. Her face was stern. I knew a punishment was coming for the kid who had messed with my work.

“Class,” she said, “it's not nice to take other people's things.”

She snatched the folder out of my hands and handed me another one from her desk. It was a dull brown, with a water-stained cover in the shape of a mug bottom.

“You'll get more stickers,” she said. “You can stop crying now.”

There was no witch hunt, no after school punishment, no nothing. My other

teachers had adored me. They sat me next to the boys who wouldn't listen and I would get them to do their work. I had been a gem in other classes, but it seemed that I was just a pebble in Ms. Diaz's shoe.

If Amá was still there, perhaps I ran out to her. Ms. Diaz would not have interrupted because parents had the power of complaint. Amá would not have told her off. "You're going to win the lottery someday, *mija*," she might have said. "Keep working hard and you'll see."

She convinced me that I was special and the stickers proved it. I had more certificates than I knew what to do with: perfect math, perfect spelling, and perfect attendance. My awards, and the fact that I was Amá's only living daughter, made me think that my education was a gift. More than that, it was a responsibility. I was meant for something special, and I wasn't going to let jealous kids or my tears get in the way.

I sat up in my seat and found my pencil, ready to work again.

If the kids in my class hated me for being smart, then I would show them. I would get every sticker left in Ms. Diaz's desk.

We got started on our multiplications. When Ms. Diaz wasn't looking, I think Rosa tugged at my shirt. She must have picked up a chocolate-scented sticker from under my chair. It was a double ice cream bar, drawn with skinny legs and blue eyes. "It still works," she said. I thanked her.

Though the stink of the dog food wafted into the classroom, the chocolate scent lingered in the air between us.

Chapter 5: Division, 1985

Amá had been cooking since she was nine and didn't measure a thing. She poured three yogurt cups of flour (more or less) into a plastic bowl for her *torciditos* recipe, mixing in a little less milk and half a stick or so of Imperial butter. Her muscles knew what a pinch was, and her eyes knew what a cup looked like. There were some things Amá just knew, not book smart, but wise.

However much I loved cutting pancakes with my fork when I was nine and in the fourth grade, I did not understand the principles of division. Fractions can be explained with food: cutting cake or oranges into different sizes, some as big as Pac-Man. I knew what half meant, but after that I was lost.

Sitting at the table with Amá, multiplication tables were fun to follow with a ruler. Adding up skinny numbers to make fat ones was thrilling and fast. Dividing things into eighteenths and ninths took twice as long and seemed to hold a secret that everyone understood but me. I never lagged behind in elementary school. My talents at memorizing were my best, but they did not help me with long division. That jig was up.

Amá tried to help me out, since Dad was in Tecate, Baja California, hanging out with a lady that Amá was always cursing. I multiplied that idea just fine: one dad times two women equaled three kids in our house and one in Mexico. The paycheck was ending up in tiny slivers.

When Amá tried to help me with fractions, she drew a division equation the exact opposite of the way I was being taught, like this: 24∟4

“Asi no,” I corrected. *“*That’s not how you do it.” I spoke with an air of authority on school matters, because I was quickly gaining on (and surpassing) Amá's four years of school. In the 1940s, when Amá grew up in the sierra schools of Hidalgo, Mexico, her teachers had barely graduated high school.

“Sometimes they would come to teach and were still a little drunk from the night before,” Amá would say. Despite that fact, Amá had better math preparation than I did, because she worked in her parents' general store. And savings? She managed to save a little chunk in her sock drawer, even with the tiny amount that Dad gave her when he cashed his checks.

“Give me that pencil,” I said. Amá took the pencil from me and got the right answer. “*¿No qué no*?” she taunted. Amá was strong enough to break a chicken's neck and could never be wrong. Her long nose was meant for looking down on the dummies around her. I still thought she was doing it wrong.

She might have said, “Then you're on your own,” and left me to cry on my homework problems. Most likely, though, she had pressed her lips together in worry and raised her eyebrows, trying to think of another way to explain it to me. Perhaps she tried flipping the equation to look more like what was in my math book: 4∟24, but I thought the division sign was still “wrong.” She even tried 4/24, and that really confused me.

It was almost time to go to school. The fake maple syrup was a few dangerous

inches from my paper. My pancakes were getting cold. My baby brother, Jesse, got his things ready for kindergarten. His hair was always straight, and no amount of water could tame his spiky cowlicks.

With hardly any pencil left, and filled with fear that I would do poorly, I let Amá finish my math homework. Her numbers were thick lines. My thin and uncertain marks were squarer than her loopy threes. Amá sharpened her fat blue pencil by hand, with a skinny knife. If my fourth-grade teacher noticed the difference, she never said anything. And I squeaked by until we got into long multiplication, and the dreaded fractions were over. Amá understood math in a way that I never would. She was a magician who sometimes made numbers turn into real objects—like a small black toy truck.

One Saturday late afternoon on Pacific Avenue in Huntington Park, a formerly white suburb with a fancy Newberry's and two theaters, Amá, Jesse, and I were waiting for the bus. Jesse was squirmy, his straight hair wiry and electric. Amá had our bus fare in her small leather coin purse, but a young woman sitting next to her did not.

"*Señora*," she asked Amá, "What if I sell you this toy for bus fare?"

Amá was street-smart and friendly with anyone who was kind to her. She agreed to help her because the young woman had clean nails and her hair was in a neat bun.

When Jesse dragged the truck on the floor and pushed a yellow button on its roof, the truck raced off for ten feet. "Cool!" Jesse said, sold on the truck. Since I liked cars, too, I ran over to get it before another kid thought they'd found something.

"You'll have to share," Amá said. She knew a lot about splitting things.

Chapter 6: Receipts, 1985

For my first lesson in paperwork, Dad taught me how to write out rent receipts. He tore off a note from his pad of receipts.

"This is where you write the name of the person," he said. We stood in our crowded kitchen, leaning on the washing machine as he wrote. I could see over the top of the lid just fine. At nine years old, I had recently gotten the hang of English. It no longer sounded like I was pretending to make meaning out of sound.

He was the manager for the fiveplex where we lived. Once a month, since I turned nine, he called me over to his desk, which was wherever he was standing at the moment: next to his used car of the month, a piece of wood resting on a stack of tires, or the kitchen table, everyone's desk for homework, next to letters from Amá's sisters in Mexico.

He used his mildly calm voice, but I knew if I did anything wrong he wouldn't have any patience. He would suck his teeth at the first mistake. But paper, I knew about that, I loved to draw on it, add up solutions. Paper was the place where I could find answers for most things. I was practicing writing receipts so that I could know something. *Para que aprendas algo*, he said.

I wanted my writing to be loopy like the way my fourth grade teacher Mrs. Smith wrote on the chalkboard, yet the letters didn't come out right. I tilted my head at my writing, more square than round.

“Like that?” I asked.

I didn't like disappointing anyone, especially my parents. I was conditioned to please and do my best. I liked it, besides. It confirmed that I was special, and as the oldest and only girl, I believed I was.

Dad curled the ends of his mustache with his fingertips. He nodded.

“Then put in the rent right here.”

He wrote a dollar sign, a four, and two zeroes. I copied him exactly on my paper. He nodded again, closing his eyes a little.

“Let's go collect the rent,” he said.

That made me smile, the brown in my cheeks turned pink. If he didn't correct me, it meant I did it right. His approval was so rare, that his nod was worth more than the certificates for perfect attendance and being a “good kid” that I had racked up in other grades. It would make filling out forms one of my favorite things to do. I would use that skill over and over again at the post office, applying to jobs, and especially applying to college.

We collected the rents in the fiveplex, him smiling and me too; you can't be grumpy if it's not your land. That was my first job as an apprentice.

What Dad lacked in formal education he made up for in charm. He taught me how to make sure bills got paid by always having a job. Dad showed me that you needed to have at least three skills to feed a family and that if I wanted the same thing, I didn’t need

college to do any of that. Just charm. One twist of his neat mustache with a lady boss or a boxing conversation with a *carnal*, a buddy from work or around the way, and Dad had a gig bar-tending at union banquets. He had to be good at being a multi-skilled worker. He had two families to take care of: us and the one he had on the side in Tecate, Baja California.

Right after Chalo was born in June of 1985, Dad was going to Tecate so often that Amá started looking for evidence of another woman in his life: maybe a lipstick stain on a work shirt or a receipt for flowers she never received. What she found was a single pair of yellow panties "only a *puta* would wear."

"You should think about wearing yellow underwear, "Dad told Amá once.

"Can you believe he said that to me?" Amá complained to me, her mute therapist. But Dad had always been the kind of man who would occasionally honk at women crossing the street, even when we were in the car.

"Stop it," I would say, "how embarrassing!" I would slink down into the back seat and cover my face with my hands. Jesse would laugh uncomfortably or look out the window, resolving to never be like Dad. Amá would yell, "Viejo! Watch the road, *rabo verde!"*

On Saturday mornings, Dad would shave and perfume himself with green after shave for his Tecate lady. Amá would get so mad at Dad that sometimes she would throw *chanclas*, sneakers, and oranges at him. He got so wrapped up in the lady with the yellow panties that one day, Amá found diapers in his trunk. Chalo was just a year old.

Dad was really great at multiplying his children, but didn't get past four, whom we knew of. He had to be great at keeping track of his paycheck, too. He became a magician at dividing his income in two.

Chapter 7: Encyclopedia, 1986

"When you don't know the truth, you make up all kinds of situations."
Oscar in a letter from Pelican Bay State prison

When he was little, my cousin Oscar would walk home alone from Bryson Elementary School in South Gate. Two decades before he lived there, the streets would have been full of white children whose parents had middle-class jobs at the Firestone Tire Factory. By the time, Oscar's parents moved in, all of those jobs had been replaced with Latinos who worked in low-wage sweatshops or in service jobs, nowhere near middle-class. But that didn't stop Oscar from dreaming or reading history books.

Oscar walked along Atlantic Avenue for two and a half miles. Lean and brown like rain-soaked earth, with a chest like a small bird, Oscar was a great swimmer even though the water at his apartment pool always had a Band-Aid floating in it.

Oscar was related to us through Dad's uncle Rafael. Rafael was Oscar's stepfather. We had been close to their family because Oscar's mother, my Tía Jay, took care of me when Amá gave birth to my younger brother Jesse. Rafael was eight months older than Dad and they grew up as brothers. They both got switch-stick beatings from their mother's boyfriend like the goats and cattle they herded. Early on, Rafael learned that treating women and children like animals, was the only way to be a man.

There were very few oak trees or any trees at along where Oscar walked, along Atlantic Avenue or Clara Street. The city blocks were full of mini malls with mangy

laundromats, Medi-Cal family clinics, and liquor stores instead of supermarkets. By contrast, Amá walked me to school until I was twelve. I had to beg her to stop. It was embarrassing, but I bet Oscar would not have minded that someone had cared that much about his safety.

Although his family lived in Cudahy, his city didn't have a middle school so he was enrolled at a school in the neighboring town. Cudahy was an even smaller town next to Bell Gardens with even more crowded homes and schools like Park Avenue Elementary where toxic tar and methane gas bubbled under the swings.[i] The tar had been cropping up for twenty years but the Los Angeles Unified School District had not solved the issue.[ii] Oscar had other obstacles to worry about.

The Cudahy gangs, Cudahy 13 or 18th Street South Side, hung out along cinder block walls smoking blunts as kids played on the other side. Half way home, Oscar probably didn't look at those young men sitting in their cars that day. He bee-lined for a yard sale offering a set of old encyclopedias.

Their pages were yellowed at the edges and the set was incomplete. He turned the pages and thought they had been printed in the 1960s—the lettering was stern, the kind of writing produced by a country that had finally landed on the moon. Oscar wanted the truth. The guy selling the books said he wanted five bucks for the incomplete set, so Oscar ran home and asked his mother, my Tía Jay, for the money. She was in the kitchen making seasoned rice out of a box for Oscar's younger brothers. When she hugged Oscar, he smelled a sweet blend of lipstick and tobacco. Tía Jay gave Oscar the money because,

even though Rafael, Oscar's stepfather, kept their money under his thumb, she managed to hide a few dollars for emergencies. She was happy to support Oscar's reading habit since, all Rafael did was discipline him with a leather belt that left red rectangles on his backside.

With a spring in his step, Oscar bolted back to the yard sale. He used an old metal shopping cart he found on the sidewalk to carry home the books. He must have passed the houses with the dying grass, other kids playing in the carports of their duplexes. Once he got home and for months later, he pored over the books, their pages smelling faintly of mold. He stayed up late, ignoring his homework, to read in the S volume of the encyclopedias about samurai and their impenetrable fortresses built to protect royalty. His biological father was Japanese, and because Tia Jay had not married him, Oscar could only imagine himself a history as a samurai from the books he read, invincible and fearless. Oscar read every volume, a real student of history, unlike me.

The World Book Encyclopedias in my home had maroon leather exteriors. Their pages had gold leaf edges that separated with a sound like gift wrap. We didn't have money for brand name shoes, but Amá made sure we had the books we needed to make sense of the world. I was so glad we had them. It meant I didn't have to walk a mile to my closest library when I had homework that required research. I had all the knowledge I needed at home.

I figured we were the only ones in our extended family who had a set, but Oscar had them too. I just didn't know until I was an adult and he wrote to tell me that story from state prison serving 25 to life for a non-violent Third Strike.

Oscar carefully filed away the history and other information in his incomplete set. His teachers would not ask him about what he knew once he was in class. Oscar was street smart and book smart, a great combination that should have put him in college four years ahead of me. Instead, he joined the boys from down the block from whom teachers expected the worst. They smoked in cars and hated their fathers.

Oscar said that all the hardships at home and school made him and his friends into triggers waiting for just a little bit of pressure to go off.

One day, Rafael brought his fist down over and over on Tia Jay who was lying on the carpet in their living room. Rafael had a trim black goatee that marked his chin like a stain, one the devil gave him so people would stay away from him.

The carpet was copper colored, like Tia Jay's short hair; blood would be hard to see on the floor if it started to drip from her lip like it had before. Oscar was probably eleven. His younger brother was eight and their baby brother was four years old. As Rafael punched Jay once more, Oscar jumped on Rafael's back, using his weight to pull him off his mother. Rafael grabbed Oscar's arms and easily slammed him on top of the wooden table in the middle of the room. The glass cracked under the boy's weight, but it did not break.

When Rafael kept hitting Oscar, Tia Jay got up and reached for the boys' little wooden baseball bat. Three ribs cracked under her swing. Rafael finally stopped fighting. Oscar got up and went to his brothers to make sure they were all right. He was bruised, but well enough to stand.

Amá told me this while at her stove. “I told your Tia to leave that *bestia,*” she said.

Even Dad agreed. “That boy is gonna grow up,” he said about Oscar. “I just hope Rafael remembers that.”

Dad must have told Rafael what Amá thought because after that year, we would not hear from their family for another decade.

Chapter 8: What College Is, 1987

In sixth grade, Amá was still combing my hair into tight French braids that tugged my scalp. Even though the other older girls were wearing their hair in bangs with gravity-defying qualities, Amá made pulled-back styles, making my forehead feel shinier and bigger than I liked. Luckily, my two friends were as plain as I was: Judy was a thin reed, darker than me with bone-straight hair and excellent dribbling skills; then there was Cindy, dark brown curly hair and cheeks with a light bit of fuzz on them I could see in most lights. But what we looked like was only second to what our grades were. Their older brothers made sure they knew school was the most important thing, and for me, I already knew good behavior and A's got me what I wanted: Barbies and books.

Sitting between my friends after wrapping up our penguin habitat shoe box presentations, we listened intently to our teacher Ms. Strong talk about college, or as she might have put it, "The school you go to after high school."

Ms. Strong read from a newspaper article about a local student studying architecture at this place called UCLA. When someone asked what an architect did, the teacher said that they built houses.

That was all she had to say. I immediately saw myself in wire-rimmed glasses, drawing lines on pieces of huge white paper, an architect at UCLA (whatever that was).

I never invited friends over to my real house. The entrance was next to an alley. A street sign at the mouth welcomed me home every day: "Not a Through Street."

On top of that, our house shared a kitchen wall and the neighbors' cockroaches. Whenever I opened a cabinet to get a glass, a handful of brown bugs skittered across the shelves. One fell on my arm once, a big mama bug. I felt it on my skin for weeks. I wanted to tear down the whole house with my bare hands just to kill those roaches for good.

"That *vieja* next door is a pig," said Mom.

She still says that today although the *vieja* has changed several times but has managed to stay dirty. The roaches also stayed.

Once I got home that night, I drew my future house in a notebook, thick pencil lines that showed my room bigger than my parents' and brothers'. My room would be all pink with a canopy bed. The house should have a "den," something I'd only seen on TV. I wanted bright green grass in my dream home's front yard, not the cracked, oily cement from Dad working on his cars, always breaking down.

Ms. Strong said UCLA students studied hard and did their homework. If I liked doing homework before because scratch n' sniff stickers made me special, from that day forward, I did long division with the serious belief that our lives depended on it. I still worried about my hair being in the wrong shape, and if my clothes were not what other girls were wearing. But at least we were all a little bit poor. Now I knew that my grades could get us another home. Goodbye roaches and no more dead-ends.

Chapter 9: Fear, 1988-1989

> "For so long you thought the ambition of racist language was to denigrate and erase you as a person. […You] begin to understand yourself as rendered hypervisible in the face of such language acts. Language that feels hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways that you are present. Your alertness, your presence, your looking up, your talking back, and, as insane as it is, saying please."
>
> Claudia Rankine, *Citizen*

Spanish as a Liability

Bell Gardens Intermediate was constructed in 1938 and its fifty years showed. The main buildings were filled with worn wooden desks whose tops were carved with names and years. The rest of the school was starting to look like a beige fort, with bungalows and not enough Live Oaks which is what the street name promised but did not deliver. But the auditorium was a thing of aging beauty: the arm rests were dark green vinyl set on blue metal frames. The classroom I was sitting in didn't have any windows.

Ms. V. wore tan-colored pantyhose with red huaraches. If I had been wearing them, boys would have called me a "wetter." The woven red leather was plugged into crude rubber soles, the edges so ragged they must have been cut with a blunt object. Those kind of shoes could only have been gifted by Mexican relatives or bought by clueless güeros on vacation. The teacher wore those huaraches with no identifiable mortification.

She was my favorite seventh grade teacher since we shared an initial and I had straight As in her class. Despite having to look at the red huaraches, the day was going well. I had successfully avoided George and Hector, our resident seventh grade sexual harassers.

The day before, George and Hector had come out of nowhere. I was walking to class when George, with like a toy monkey came at me from behind. Hector with the crooked boxer's nose walked up to me, pretending not to see me. And before I could knock their teeth in, they each grabbed a breast and a *nalga*. They ran away so fast, not even the track kids could have caught them. I was so pissed at the little punks, but I didn't tell Ms. V. I didn't know if she would blame me—sometimes she'd get in a real bad mood and I didn't want to try my luck.

But the day Ms. V. wore her huaraches, I was safe. I was taking notes quietly, for once instead of talking to Pánfila, my Salvadoran friend with cheeks shaped like apples.

Ms. V. wrote the word "Mexico" on the board. Always happy to raise my hand, I suggested a correction. My whole life I'd seen Mexico spelled another way in Spanish encyclopedias, newspapers, and on official documents my parents had. I raised my hand politely.

"Excuse me, doesn't Mexico have an accent over the 'e'?"

Her huaraches turned to face me. In front of the whole class, she rolled her buggy eyes.

"No, space cadet! There's no accent over the 'e' in English."

My cheeks burned. Ms. V. had never talked to me that way. She didn't bat an eye at the irony of talking like that to me, one of her best students. I was unfamiliar with the corner of *pendejismo* to which she'd kicked me. Other kids, like Hector and George, were practically sitting on the steps outside because she sent them out so much. Ms. V. turned to face her letters and wrote some other shit on the board.

"But I've seen it," I insisted. "Are you sure?"

She let out a huge sigh. "Uh, yeah! I'm sure. I don't know where you saw that, but it was wrong."

Pánfila who always had a comeback, didn't say a thing. Not even stupid George and Hector chimed in to make fun of me for being scolded. They looked at their notebooks and back at the teacher, avoiding my eyes. If Ms. V. could tell me where to go with my ideas, what chance did they have of ever being right?

I wished Pánfila would have made a face as if to say, "Dang! That's messed up," even flipped Ms. V. the finger when she turned back. My friend's cheeks were flushed too. She kept her eyes on the board.

Ms. V.'s huaraches shuffled off to put on a movie, satisfied with proving me wrong.

I shook it off and made a note in my mind: Don't correct the teacher. Even when you know they're wrong.

People to Fear: Frenemies

Pánfila and I got so good at smutty Mad Libs, that we filled several books and started a club called PCA: Perverted Children of America. We found weeks of fun with filling in verbs and nouns: “I went to the zoo and saw a huge _____. Then I licked ___ flavored ice cream.”

We were on a roll: two best friends, swapping little brother complaints (“They're always in our stuff!”) and longing for the boys we loved (actor Fred Savage from “The Wonder Years” was to die for). I even recited Heart songs to her because they were so deep. But the next day, Pánfila had stuck the exact lyrics in her “poem.”

Those lyrics belonged to me because if it weren't for me, Pánfila would have stuck some roses-are-red-shit in her poem. Then Ms. V. read the fucking thing in front of the class. Half the poem was the lyrics to “These Dreams,” a soft rock hit that's remained big in Latin America.

“This is fantastic!” said Ms. V. who pranced over to her desk to tape it up.

Our teacher was so happy to get good writing, although the band played for her demographic, she should have known better, but no. I shot Pánfila a look of “what the fuck?” She was too caught up in the praise to respond. We were thirsty for approval and would do whatever we had to get it.

With so much competition for approval of our intelligence, we wouldn't be best friends for long.

“Ey, I heard you were talking shit about me,” she spit into the phone.

I could hear her mother washing dishes in the background. Pánfila's house was twice as big as mine, but her living room window had a ripped screen dangling from the frame. At least my house was neat.

I broke into a cold sweat. She had me thinking I had slipped and talked shit about her to a mutual friend. I was nursing a secret hate because she was a loud and rude liar. When she introduced me to friends she'd say, “Don't I know so many people? You're lucky you're with me.” Or in the locker room that smelled like musty dungeon, all gray concrete and dim lighting, Pánfila would tell us about her *chola* cousins who would kick our ass if we ever crossed her. I already knew her only cousin was a nerd like us.

I wanted to be the friends who tried on stretchy dresses at Fashion 21 and get soft serve at Foster's Freeze, the one on Eastern Avenue with the tagged-up windows. This created an expectation that the same girl was not out to punk me or say I was ugly behind my back.

The receiver shook in my hand. My seventh grade social life was disappearing before my eyes. No more McDonald's soft serve after school.

“I would never talk shit about you. You're my friend.” I waited for her to speak.

“Psyche!” She snorted, and laughed her ass off so hard. “Just kidding, bitch! Plus, you know best than to talk shit about me.”

I let out a sigh of relief. Although what I wanted to say was, “Go to hell, you mean bitch. You can’t even write a poem.”

But I didn't. If I had, she would have run off with our mutual friends and taken all the soft serve with her. I sucked it up and stopped trusting her, keeping the little friendship we had. I didn’t think I had a choice.

“I gotta go. My mom needs me,” I said. Of course Amá needed me; every mom needs a good little girl.

People to avoid: Cholos

Supposedly, BGI was the school where all the *cholos* hung out. When I transferred there from Suva Intermediate because our bus got cut with the school budget, I was terrified of potential bathroom beatings because I’d looked at someone the wrong way.

The only gang I knew of was the B.G. Locos who left crooked letters in black spray paint on walls facing the train tracks and alleys, but not the one I lived on. Once Pánfila liked me again, we shared chicken nuggets with our other little friends, ne'er a *cholo* in sight. On the corner of Eastern and Florence, right across from the Bicycle Club Casino, developers had torn down biker bars and scrappy apartment buildings where *cholos* and the last of the fighting Oakies had lived. What got put up in their place was a pink stucco mini mall with a Food-4-Less, a Thrifty's with a full ice cream counter, and greasy noodle bowl joint.

Gone with the apartments and its dwellers was the corner pharmacy with older white ladies in curly up-dos. The last of the Anglo people got almost wiped out then. The new store owners were Asian and sold spandex dresses in one store and donuts in the next.

The alley where my house was felt safe because other developers had torn down the old houses, too. I'd dreamed that they would build magnificent houses that my family would move into. But they built a square block of two-story town houses that were so out of place, they looked like they came out of the alien suburbs of *E.T.*

Other alleys closer to Garfield Avenue and Ford Park had their share of gunshots and fist fights I'd only heard of. I just knew the gang situation could be so much worse. Amá had lived in East Los Angeles near the Five Freeway

Besides, I thought: *Cholos* don't go to school.

I knew the basics about budding *cholas* in my PE classes: extra tall and feathered hair, eyeliner that took off the like bird wings, and black suede Nike El Cortez sneakers. Popping a fry in my mouth, I'd seen some of those girls with their much-older boyfriends walk by huddled real close and giggling. I could tell they could mop the floor with me if I ever gave them the wrong look. I would look away and envied their hot boyfriends in secret.

Thing to fear: Being poor

"You guys need to get mad at this!" said Ms. Hicks, our mellow, eighth-grade science teacher. She paced at her desk, elevated at the front of the classroom. Her black hair was especially wispy that morning. The life science class was a combination of seventh and eighth graders about twenty-five of us total. Ms. Hicks was raging. She kept pushing up her cat-eyed glasses as they slipped down her nose. She accidentally wiped newsprint on her forehead when she did that, but we didn't interrupt.

"This newspaper says Bell Gardens is the third poorest suburb in the country, guys." She shook the paper at us accusingly.

"What's she talking about?" I whispered to Pánfila.

"Dude, I don't know," she whispered back. "I thought we were middle class."

I didn't believe what Ms. Hicks was talking about because I thought I knew what poor was: entire families homeless and begging for money on the streets in Mexico City, kids my age and younger working, selling the ubiquitous *chicles* on buses and metros. That wasn't my family. Pánfila's idea that we were middle class also threw me. My house was so much smaller than her family's two-bedroom, albeit shabby, condo with a dirt lawn. Where was my family in that spectrum?

Ms. Hicks shook her head and her earrings jangled like pebbles cupped in a hand.

"Pay attention, guys," she said. She squeezed the tip of her nose and more newsprint left gray marks. We giggled and Ms. Hicks glared at Pánfila and I. "This is your future if you don't stop fooling around."

I shrugged it off and looked at my hands: they were clean. Out of the classroom's grimy windows, kids whispered jokes to each other and chased basketballs. Life was going on and no one was the wiser about how poor we were.

The news lodged next to my insecurities. I was already wondering how much I really mattered in the world. When other kids had name-brand sneakers they called my Pro-Wings cheap. I'd wear them anyway because we couldn't afford any other shoes. There were kids, though, who had just one pair of the cheap shoes that didn't get replaced like mine did. As a kid, I knew it was fucked up to feel bad about things you couldn't control, but it was just the way things worked. This country was built on taking, buying, and selling things and people. The awfulness of being measured and measuring was a lump in my throat that would not go away.

Ms. Hicks was upset that we were on a list of poor people. What her concern also told me was that somehow, being poor was my fault and more than that, that maybe I deserved it. Maybe she thought that we must have been purposefully turning down all kinds of employment and opportunity, never mind the unionized factories that had closed and were closing down around us. Her pacing communicated a Morse code that read: You like being seen by the world as broke and dumb. We didn't see ourselves that way. We didn't write that article. No one interviewed us and asked what we thought or bothered to find out how we actually lived.

At thirteen and in the wake of George Bush senior, being poor was a reality for millions in this country. It just wasn’t true that any of us liked it. The newspaper had left its residue on much more than our teacher's fingers. Newsprint can really stain.

The only jobs we could have as kids were offered through the school district during the summer through the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA). In 1987 and 1988 when I applied, Dad made about twenty thousand a year for a family of five. Each time I applied, the JTPA staff said my dad made too much money. If he did, it never made its way into my mother's hands. That income was being split between food for two families, gas for trips to Tecate, a few pairs of Pro-Wings sneakers for us when school started, and Dad's occasional gambling.

I had looked for the only legal job I could get but it didn't happen. There were kids whose families made less and needed the money way more. That told me maybe I was lucky, which confused me when Ms. Hicks told us we should be angry at living in the third poorest suburb in the state.

Our science teacher likely wanted to motivate us to change our circumstances, but her unfiltered anger went straight to the bin of worthlessness I got from how the world treated me: Ms. V.'s insult in language arts and the boys groping me like I was a chicken in a coop, for instance. Television only gave me Charo’s jiggly *chichis* or Speedy Gonzalez to look up to, both unrealistic options.

We didn’t have the genes for Charo and, though Dad laughed at Speedy, we’d stopped wearing the *manta* uniform of the Mexican Revolutionary in the 1930s. People who still wore them were *indígenas* and not some fucked up cartoon.

From television, the news, film, and our history books I learned, as most children do, that the desirable people in the world were rich, white, and citizens. Ms. Hicks didn't have criticisms of those things about the role models that were supposed to get us out of the “terrible” poverty we were in.

The lecture from Ms. Hicks ended when she folded up the paper and warned us that if we didn't care more about our studies, we'd stay on that list. Sometimes teachers confuse condemnation with encouragement.

We didn’t hear about being poor again from her. Instead she concentrated on telling my then-boyfriend of a thin mustache to keep his hands to himself. She must have thought I would have let him paw me like a stupid cat. Wrong again.

Thing to aspire to: Town & Country

I had money for some things: one cent tapes and magazines.

For being the oldest and most outspoken of my siblings, I'd sometimes get an allowance of five dollars a week on Sunday, my *domingo*. It was also a reward for being a kid whose biggest offense was being cranky. The allowance I got was due to all the certificates I was bringing home: multiplication master, mastery of division, all things worth at least five dollars when Dad could spare it.

With five dollars in quarters, I bought Duran Duran tapes, a giant donut for a dollar that I shared with my friends, and the occasional French fry; normal, teenager-in-the -U.S. cravings. Pop music was for the faceless masses of other kids my age, people who didn't have any kind of discriminating taste. I loved Billy Ocean but not New Kids on the Block. That was where I drew the line. I also loved Exposé, a freestyle trio of women, one from the nearby suburb of Pico Rivera (Mexican-American, even!). My role models were starting to improve!

Our Bell Gardens of closed factories and occasional gray skies resembled the British working-class new wave scene. When Claudia, a cool eighth grader I met through another girl, let me listen to The Cure's *Disintegration* album on her Walkman, the next week I ordered it from BMG Music for one penny (plus shipping and handling). I decided that if the music wasn't British or in English then it wasn't for me. Mexican *rancheras, cumbias,* and even pop songs were already a natural part of who I was. I didn't need to prove it to anyone because everywhere I looked there were other girls like me in stretchy, no-name jeans shopping with their moms at the swap meet.

The Cure's moody organ and mussed lipstick of the lead singer intrigued me and fed my teen ennui. You couldn't pay me to dance a *ranchera* or the *cumbias* I heard on the A.M. Radio. Through that same mail-order "special offer," I got suckered into subscribing to the extraordinarily ridiculous magazine *Town & Country.* Its name conjures up images of town mice dressed in fedoras behind a desk in the big city or their straw-hat cousins, working the land out in the country.

Picture me, locked in my family's bedroom after school, in the hot-ass afternoon, flipping through page after page of debutante and wedding announcements in Connecticut. Me in discount button up blouses and black-frame glasses from price clubs. Other than completing my homework alone and as perfectly as possible, my goals included getting my hands on a pair of wine-colored penny loafers. I'd seen them on Claudia, my brainy hero who listened to the cool music, and who I could with about politics. What the hell was I doing with *T & C*?

I had no idea who the magazine was for—clearly it was for me since it was in my hands. Since it was just for me, the white girls on horseback and their maroon leather riding boots became what I wanted for my life—why not? Amá had ridden horses as a girl, she'd told me many times and when she got a look at the magazine, she reminded me.

"*Como me gustaba ir a caballo*," she said wistfully. She'd ride horses when her family had once owned a little bit of land. I decided it was meant to be, me and that *Town & Country* life.

After looking at a year's worth of pages filled with emeralds necklaces, yachts, and mansions, I was hooked on desiring the lives of the very, very rich and, to quote Elle Woods, "unfortunate looking." This magazine was further motivation to find a way to all those riches, gleaming like the fake jewels on the Pirates of the Caribbean ride at Disneyland: so close but completely fake. I couldn't tell the difference. It was real to me. With riches and houses as my main goal, college became more important, and so did my

grades. Though I didn't get in to the algebra program in eighth grade, where students were bused from BGI to the high school, I was still on track. I just needed to make sure I kept up my grades and that someone would notice I was special (other than Amá).

I took for granted that on my way to school there wasn’t a horse or yacht in sight. Walking to school down Eastern Avenue, I passed television repair shop windows thick with soot, past the mini mall with Toys R Us, kitty corner from the Bicycle Club Casino. If I made it school after that eye-full, I had to fight off additional groping from stupid boys or near fights with Pánfila; it was a veritable gauntlet of real-as-hell harassment. Things were perfect on the pages of *Town & Country*. If places featured in that magazine really existed, then maybe I could go there. Maybe college could be like that: trees I couldn’t name, shiny-mane horses, and massive brick libraries with white columns at the entrance. One day that would be mine.

I still don't understand how that article Ms. Hicks quoted was right about Bell Gardens. Third poorest suburb is not the same as city, region, county, or family. Just because you live in a suburb it doesn't mean you live in a track home you bought with cash. Suburb is a designation that put us in the same category with the middle class suburbs of Los Angeles like Hacienda Heights, which by the way, I couldn't afford to live in today. Suburb is an odd word for Bell Gardens because we're literally across the bridge from the Los Angeles Unified School District.

We were mislabeled, a misunderstanding on my teacher's part to see what we did have: we were in class, with her, listening, not setting fires, and not planning mass

shootings. We sat there and believed her. Ms. Hick's declaration felt like she was crumpling me up like a piece of paper.

I wish we had asked, what’s a suburb? What do you mean by poor? What do they know about how hard we work? Who are they to tell us about who we are?

Chapter 10: Say Something, 1990

In the room she shared with her mom, Claudia and I talked about how the Persian Gulf War was strictly about greed and oil. Two twin beds were neatly made and sat on either side of the small room. My friend's house was closer to the Commerce train tracks and factories than mine, but that only meant two blocks. Her street, however, had dozens of jacaranda trees that dropped their purple flowers for us to step on. Claudia's neighborhood had bigger houses with only one structure on each lot, which I thought mean less people per house. Older people were always outside watering their sparse lawns or sweeping dirt off their driveways. We'd sit on the beige rug and shake our heads at the people we'd hear about going off the Gulf.

Amá's friend, Doña Marta, had a grown son who was already enlisted when the war began. When my family would see Marta and her daughters at Santa Rosa de Lima on Sundays, they smiled and joked, but in the quiet of church, their gazes would wander up at the Stations of the Cross and stay there. They would get letters from her son with photographs of burning oil fields in the far off distance, her son standing in uniform in front of his barracks.

"Fuck that fool," I said about our president. "Why should our families go kill people and then die to make other people rich?"

"Bush should send his own sons," Claudia agreed. We might have known that wouldn't happen even if the George and Jeb were the right ages; capitalism keeps the poor on the front lines.

For weeks we walked home after softball practice in Rosewood Park. The school district would bus us out to Commerce so we could play on our own field because the baseball team was the only one allowed to practice on campus on a field they had paid for. I played so terribly that I began as the scorekeeper and Claudia convinced me to practice with them. Eventually, I wasn't terrible, I just sucked. On the other hand, Claudia was a fantastic catcher, terrorizing the girls from the other team at bat.

Dusty and tired, we'd end up at my house talking more shit about the first President Bush. Claudia was much taller than me, at least five eight, her hair perpetually in a ponytail. She had braces for years even after her teeth were straight. She fancied white shorts from The Gap and gold-colored T-shirts. She would pay for my movie tickets when we'd go out: those were the perks of being an only kid. Claudia's mom felt guilty about never being around and gave her spending money to keep her busy.

We'd sit out in front of my house where Amá had made a four by six foot plot of grass seem bigger with sugar cane and a lemon tree. Planted when I was a girl, by my freshman year in high school, we had a full-blown garden. Dad assembled his own landscape of stacked tires and black rims; he did not help Amá with her flowers up-keep. He was in Tecate on outings with the other woman and their daughter who was about ten at that time. My brothers and I had grown accustomed to Dad being gone on weekends.

Claudia was well-travelled. She went out on the bus every week it seemed, on the long buses with tinted windows, orange and yellow stripes wrapping around their white exteriors. Her mother worked on Saturdays and so Claudia would take the bus to all kinds of places like the airport and far-away malls in exotic suburbs such as Glendale (like going from the Bronx to Long Island). In my mind, her journeys sparkled—I wanted to join her. My family stayed within 15 miles of our home, and even then, just to parks and the cemetery where my sister was buried.

Mr. Bailey, my world history teacher was teaching me to question every piece of material we read on the Gulf War. A Navy man and a Cal Berkeley grad because of the G.I. Bill, Mr. Bailey was six feet tall, his shoulders curved inward when he paced the scratched up wood floors of our class. He was always excited to work with us in "The Oven," as he called our classroom. We had no air conditioning in the late L.A. summer, but we tried to pay attention despite our hormones and best friend dramas. He'd assigned us to look up the history of the political relationship between the U.S. and the Middle-East. Because I did the assignments and the extra credit, it was clear to me that, no matter what came of Bush senior's mouth, the U.S. interests were economic and selfish, not about protecting people from tyrants. Wasn't he the tyrant to a family whose house was being bombed in Iraq?

I raised my hand occasionally in his class, but I had learned to be more quiet in class my first year in high school. I didn't want to put off my classmates by talking too much, making them think I was showing off my intelligence. The year before, our section

of campus had been in the *Los Angeles Times* because some of the classrooms were boarded up. Our bad news would always get a lot of attention.

Most of our classrooms had mid-century ceiling fans, so some worked, some didn't. There was no air conditioning anywhere in the old part of school. That corner used to be an elementary school, and they seemed to keep the tiny chairs and desks, some of us barely fitting into the seats.

Amá had made sure that I was a Catholic girl living in a relatively sheltered, working-class home by keeping us at home as much as possible. Given that Amá did not know what sex was until she was 20 years old, and that she would not have thought to go to a protest at my age, much less kiss a boy, my first act of anti-war declaration was a big fucking deal. A secret one.

Claudia and I got on a bus and went to our first anti-war demonstration at the Federal Building in Westwood in the fall of 1990. This may seem like a small thing, but it was big deal for a girl like to get on a bus wearing a peace sign necklace from the 99 Cent Store. Back then, traveling from the southeast by bus at age fifteen to Westwood, on the west side of Los Angeles, was like sneaking into a foreign country with no idea how to get back.

The only comfort I had was that Claudia's knew her way on the bus. I had no clue what the rest of LA looked like. The world could have ended in a cliff after downtown LA and, as far as I knew, it did.

To add to the sneaking, I'd never gone anywhere without my parents. Bell Gardens may have had its share of gangs and a rag-tag reputation for *trancazos*, but I couldn't' fight anybody. The reputation dated back to the working poor whites who'd lived on makeshift farms when Bell Gardens was utterly rural and broke. Some of our local *cholos* contributed to the rep with occasional drive-by shootings. I only saw that once walking home from school. Claudia and I walked past a cluster of stucco apartments, the kind with a courtyard inside and dozens of little windows looking out on the street like a county jail. A young man in a black sweatshirt came out running from those apartments and shot into a car that passed us, five feet from where we were standing. We ducked and got the fuck out of there. I brushed it off and still do because in other neighborhoods not too far away, it was like that all the time and worse. I always feared the worst and was thankful when it wasn't. Gun shots were not my everyday reality.

For further context, I was as square as my town was crowded, that is to say, very square. I only lied to my parents about little stuff, like the number of quarters Dad had given me to spend on the Ms. Pac-Man arcade game. I lied about being at a friend's house in the afternoons instead of at school doing homework. Going to Westwood, lying to Amá about where I was going, and standing under the Federal building with sharp shooters with pointing at us, it was all a big fucking deal.

Like many places in Los Angeles, other than our young men and women joining the military when the US is at war, you can go days without knowing what was

happening in the world. Parents go to work in factories and sweatshops, hotels and to clean other people's houses. Mothers who worked at home still had to do the laundry, make lunch and dinner, and make sure the kids didn't kill each other. Kids walk to school and come home from school, and so for me and Claudia to have anything to say about war and politics with any kind of critical analysis was a small miracle.

The sun was set to "bake" like any fall day in southern California. Sunlight reflected off the asphalt and the concrete buildings making it hard to see across the field of people. Maybe hundreds were out that afternoon. I still don't know how Claudia had heard about the protest.

I loved how smart she was and how she made me do shit I would not have dreamed of like getting on a bus to go somewhere that wasn't Huntington Park or Whittier Boulevard. Those neighborhoods also had brown color lines, which is not to say that Latinos weren't present on the west side back then. I just hadn't been there to see them.

From the corner of Gage Avenue and Eastern, we took a bus that ended up at the Fox Hills Mall. The bus went from Latino, to Black, to little bit of everyone by the time we got to Westwood. The folks were women going to work to clean houses or to care for kids, older white people with grocery bags tearing at the corners, and us.

It took two and a half hours to get there, and when we did, I thought the Federal building would be more stately, something with white columns. Sure it was tall, white and official-looking. The lawn was also cut nicely, probably by Latino gardeners. It

wasn't the Lincoln Memorial. It was just ordinary, but somehow, still menacing, like it didn't want us there. White people of mostly middle-age were standing on the large front lawn. Claudia and I didn't take signs. The lawn was sunny and crowded.

We walked through the crowd of people, hundreds of them with the occasional Black folks, Asians, too, more diverse a crowd than I'd seen outside of Disneyland. Claudia and I settled near the stage. Older white communists in black berets kept coming by selling us newspapers ("Isn't selling things the opposite of what they believe in?" Claudia snarked). The protest went on all day, way past when I should have been home after lying to my parents about where I was going (School? The mall? Somewhere with my older friend who knew how to take the bus).

I couldn't stop looking at the sharp shooters. They wore black fatigues and held their rifles with both hands, pacing the edges of the buildings around us. The men were almost faceless, people who could have been my teachers. Their pacing made me shake in my cheap sneakers. "They only shoot if things get crazy," said Claudia. Her calm made me feel slightly better. Besides, I was great at pretending I wasn't scared.

When Ron Kovic went past us on the way to the stage, Claudia and I exchanged wide-eyed looks. The movie based on his life had just come out a year before and walking past him made me feel connected, for the first and only time, to the stories on the big screen.

When he spoke, I didn't chant when the crowd cried, "No blood for oil!" I felt like the peons in Mexican movies: *Me dio pena.* Speaking up gave me a certain kind of

shame that warmed my face and made me hide my hands. Whatever the speakers were saying at the podium in front of hundreds, I also felt on the inside.

Claudia made fun of me. “Don't be so shy, Vickster. Say something.”

I did not. I also said very little when Claudia and I had to hitchhike home—the buses had stopped running. My jaw was tight with anger at that *cabrona* who'd convinced my dumb ass to go that far and then, to have the *cojones* to make me hitchhike. Me, a nerd, a good girl, the most responsible of all, getting in a stranger's car when all along, I was trying NOT to get taken by crazy assholes in the first place.

By some incredible miracle, the sharp shooters decided we’d behaved and didn’t fire like their name implies. By another greater miracle, Claudia flagged down a truck driven by a chubby Latino with a mustache and two kids about our age. Because Claudia didn’t speak Spanish, I had to talk to the stranger danger.

“*Vamos a* South Gate, if that’s close enough,” he said. He could drop us off in a place I knew the name of, just a mile from Bell Gardens. In a place with 10 million strangers, we found the one truck going to our part of town from the West side.

Once in the truck bed, I prayed hard to the *Virgen* that the guy was not an ax murderer. Since Amá had prayed to the *Virgen* for my life after losing so many kids, it was also the deity’s doing that I stayed in the truck bed. It would have been too ironic to die on the freeway I loved so much. She must have wanted me to keep up my end of the deal—why else would a truck take us almost directly home? The man pulled off at the Firestone Boulevard exit of the Long Beach Freeway. The two Arco gasoline storage

tanks off the street were a welcome sight. I'd been looking at them so long, I didn't think about the 5.6 million gallons of gasoline they could hold and war I'd just protested.

My family never found out where I'd been. That next day we went to our regular pizza place packed with baseball teams of all ages, watching the game, any game, on the big screen. As usual I worked my magic hand at the toy claw machine, picking out five tiny teddy bears: pink, baby blue, orange, and a pink bunny with crooked ears. I plopped the toys in front of me and even let my brothers play with them. The tables in the pizza place were as long as the room seating forty people. Waiting for the pizza at our long table, Amá was salty that day, like she was daily back then, Dad being gone so much on the weekends, leaving us behind to twiddle our thumbs. She constantly fought with Dad, even in public.

"*Viejo*, why don't you take the kids with you when you go to Tecate?"

Dad twisted the end of his mustache with his fingers. His eyes were watery, not like he was going to cry but like he was a kid who got caught stealing and was thinking about what to say. It was no secret why he didn't take us with him; he'd told his other woman that he only had two kids. How would he explain our youngest brother Chalo? And his wife?

"You guys don't need to go anywhere, right? Kids don't need to go and see places they've never been. They have what they need."

Dad took a drink from his beer. It left a bit of foam on his mustache. I didn't tell him to wipe it off.

If I had been waiting for him to take me to the protest, I never would have gone. I never got involved in their fights as a kid. When it got really heated and Amá would nail Dad on a lie, he would say, "*Hija de la chingada, a ti que te importa como me gasto mi dinero.*" Why the fuck should you care about how I spend my money? I wished he'd taught me how to box, so I could throw a punch like he could.

He started to talk to Amá like that when he started taking trips to Tecate. After a few sips from his pitcher of cheap beer, he turned to me and said in English, "Maybe you can give one of these to your little sister?" He picked up the pink rabbit. My brothers squirmed in their chairs. Chalo might have punched Jesse in the arm. He had so much energy it exploded out of his little fists sometimes.

I grabbed the bunny out of Dad's hand. "I don't have a little sister. And these...are mine."

Chapter 11: Pork, 1990

“We've been renting here since 1976,” Amá told the man with a mustache bigger than Dad’s. “I think we already paid off the whole plot of land!” My parents had started out paying $91 a month for rent and every year it went up by half. Sometimes it doubled. It had reached $550 in 1990; it could have been our mortgage. Amá kept the door closed because the air outside was putrid-smelling again.

That year our fiveplex had a new set of owners: mustachioed Mexican men who'd pooled their money to collect rent from other Mexicans who had not thought do the same.

“*Si, señora*, you're right,” said the new owner, stopping by to survey the property. “Maybe I'll sell it to you someday.”

Once he'd left, Amá said, “*Como no*,” and closed the front door. “That leach only wants to bleed us dry, maybe worse than the *güeros* who used to own this place.”

In 1990, Bell Gardens land owners and the city council stank as badly as the slaughterhouse a few miles away.

About twice a month, a thick stench blanketed several miles of southeast Los Angeles. The smell was actually burning animal flesh coming from the Farmer John slaughterhouse in Vernon. It traveled down Gage Avenue like a deadly fog that followed us into our classrooms and homes.

The slaughterhouse was a windowless cinder block surrounded by dingy warehouses that semi-trucks circled with unknown loads. The outside was painted with a

mural that covered every brick. The scene was bucolic: white farmers in overalls milked cows on a field of grass. Pigs smiled and ate their feed under a cloudless blue sky. Inside they sliced ham and made sausages, almost as well as city hall.

Our city hall was squat and pink. It could be called modern in the way pastel stucco and a few gold light fixtures really turns a place around. The inside of some rooms retained the look of mid-century décor: faux wood paneling and chambers fit for accountants with graying mustaches.

The happiness found on the mural excluded Mexicans, Black people, Asians, and Native Americans. The all-Anglo city council-members ignored us too. They thought the city was theirs to milk and rule. Not everyone who lived in Bell Gardens agreed.

A handful of Latino homeowners in Bell Gardens were fed up with the council members of a town that no longer existed. Led by Maria Chacón, a feisty *gordita* landlord with bottle-red hair, people like our new mustachioed landlord launched a re-call campaign against four city council members.

“Who's this lady?” Amá wanted to know who the woman was that she'd heard about through word of mouth at the elementary school where she dropped off Chalo. “I hear she's going to change the city council. *Ya veremos*.” We would see.

Chacón owned a few plots of land and with others like her, organized the No Re-zoning committee against an ordinance limiting the number of units allowed per lot. Following the defeat of the ordinance, Chacón emerged as the most memorable figure in the successful recall election that removed four Anglo city council members. They were

replaced with her allies, at the time: Frank Duran, Rudy Garcia, Rosa Hernandez, and Josefina Macias. The change made the national news and sparked waves of political change all over the southeast and California[iii]—Latinos were not going to sit idly by as our representation ignored us.

Adults, like Amá, in Bell Gardens became more involved and more informed about city politics because of the changed face of the council. We began to scrutinize our elected officials more carefully. It was easier to judge people's work when they looked like us and we could understand their language. The former council members had dismissed us because they thought being humble and brown were bad things. That old story was the nail in their coffin.

The new city council didn't change the amount of our rent or the way the dead pig air drifted to our schoolyards. There were some things that would not change so easily, but it was a start.

Chapter 12: Belfry, 1991

"I think you might be some kind of whiz," said Mr. Taylor, the driver's education teacher. "I'll send you to the counseling office to get you tested out of here. Don't waste your time with these clowns." I tossed my hair back, deliberately at those clowns Mr. Taylor was talking about. Take my stickers now, suckers.

The classroom had about thirty of us, kids who wanted to get a permit to drive our parents' cars. Mr. Taylor had a thick red mustache and his lips were sometimes hard to see underneath.

After completing the classwork in no time, I spent most of my time talking to Homer, a tall boy from Commerce who played junior varsity basketball. He had a sweet set of straight white teeth that made frequent appearances during our conversations. Even with a great smile, he wore a lot of black. He bought me mountains of See's chocolates with caramel and walnut insides and a stack of mixtapes whose collective sweetness made me think maybe I would like him for a long time. Eventually, he tended toward British-grade angst. This made him too much like the soft-center chocolates and I broke it off.

Our class was essentially at the edge a parking lot, one of the oldest rooms that once belonged to the old elementary school our school was built around. The green linoleum floors squeaked when sneakers walked across it. The desks were so narrow that the taller boys had to lean sideways just to sit in them. The school had been over crowded

since the 1980s once the Latino, Asian, and Native American families in the city had children old enough to attend. When 1990 came around, we were beyond packed: 3,000 in a school built for 1,500. Even though I was in college prep English, it had been a while since a teacher had recognized my abilities to memorize information, and for a lot of the classes I took, that was how I did well.

I was a little surprised that Mr. Taylor would complement my memorization skills in front of the class. Remembering facts was a trick I confused with greatness and so did some of my teachers, like Mr. Taylor. It felt like a trick because I didn't find it hard to remember facts or things I had read in the homework. It felt natural, to easily recall details and repeat them, filling in bubbles with number two pencils.

Thanks to *Town & Country,* I had also developed a superiority complex. My self-perception was that of an extra from the film *Heathers*, if it had been a Latino and all brunette cast. I was fantastic at parading around my homemade outfits that Amá fashioned on her sewing machine as if it was couture. By then, I knew what that word meant. The industrial air that surrounded my existence didn't put a dent in how fancy I thought I was.

Mr. Taylor sent me out to take IQ tests with the school psychologist who was also in charge of gifted students. The other kids were making faces as if to say, Fuck that girl. I was used to that face. I'd been seeing it since elementary school when I'd remind teachers they forgot to assign homework. It wasn't my fault I wasn't lazy. Teachers expected so little of us. We could do more than any of them thought.

“Mr. Magness's office is next to the principal's office,” said Mr. Taylor. “Just come back tomorrow.”

“Cool, thanks,” I said. I grabbed my fake leather backpack and started for the door. Homer grabbed my arm.

“Where you going, beautiful?”

“To some testing office. Coach thinks I'm smart.”

“It's true. Why do you say it like that?” he said.

I rolled my eyes at him and pulled away. I hated how he talked to me, like I was a newborn with a squishy skull. He pouted.

“I'm kidding,” I said. “Don't get all feelings on me.”

The counseling offices were in the original section of the school that faced Agra Street. The brick building had not been updated since it was built in 1947. The stern exterior was square and about half a block long. The entrance had two tall metal gates that stayed open into a cool atrium that had no trees or flower bushes. Some offices had mid-century desks so big that two people could have shared them. The halls still had the metal lockers along the walls and the sound of them slamming open and closed at lunch time made it hard to hear my friends.

Mr. Magness wore a corduroy sports jacket with brown patches on the elbows. I wanted one for myself but didn't know where older white men shopped. A school newspaper said he'd graduated from our school. Was our school sweeter with less people?

"Define 'belfry'," said Mr. Magness.

His lashes were waiting for me to guess the definition. He gave me a few choices. I guessed wrong.

His office had piles of books on the floor, but not his desk. His desk had no pictures of family. It was weird. If I had a desk, I would have decorated with pictures of Amá and her sisters. It would remind me that I didn't want to end up back on the ranch. Mr. Magness's window looked out on the front lawn of the school. That's where we had stood during the war protest in December. It had been my second one that year. I wondered if Mr. Magness had seen me.

He could see I didn't understand the word. "Let me give you an example of how to use belfry in a sentence. Growing up, my mother used to say that some people had 'bats in their belfry' when they weren't all there. Does that make sense?"

"Perfect sense," I said. I pictured the small room on the rooftop of a church where the bells ring. I don't know when I would ever use that word. Why was it on a test to see how smart I was if an old man's mom used to say it?

My face was hot from defining a long list of other words. I had heard all the other words before, most of them on TV or in books. I could guess pretty closely what each one meant. Standardized tests were nothing new to me, but his questions felt like there was something new behind them, a silent gesture that already knew how smart I was.

Measuring how smart I was should have included how I'd managed to dodge multiple dirty old men on the street during middle school. I wish Mr. Magness had talked

to me about what it was like to be a student in Bell Gardens when he was growing up. Did he take the same test? What was his tester wearing?

He scored my answers in a few days. From then on, I was tracked into honors and advanced placement classes. Intelligence, I thought, should also have involved math and science questions. At least some physics, chemistry, or history, I hoped. At least something more than belfries, and perhaps even more than stickers.

Chapter 13: Encyclopedia, 1992

I was using the *World Book Encyclopedias* one morning to look up a fact about U.S. slavery when Amá reminded me about Oscar, my cousin who had his own set of encyclopedias.

My half-cousin Oscar was two years my senior and should have been getting ready to graduate from high school.

“He was walking down Pacific Boulevard,” Amá said. “And just like that, he rips a gold chain from a man's neck and runs away.”

“Dang,” I said.

Amá took a sip of her coffee. “He's so smart, chata. I don't know why he didn't just stay in school.”

“I guess,” I said, “some people only know how to do one thing.”

“He has a baby boy, too,” Amá continued, “Your Tia Jay said he just got out of jail.” She was slicing off thorns from *nopales* with a bent steak knife, the same one she used to sharpen pencils. I packed up and went to school blaming Oscar's situation on his actions. I added him to the list of people I did not want to be like: Dad, the cheater; Amá the hothead trapped in her miserable marriage; Oscar the jailbird.

I did not see value in their experiences as farmers and gangsters. I thought I was superior because what I valued were my numerous certificates, the “gifted” label a nice white man had given me, and my ability to not land in jail.

What I was proving by dismissing my parents' and Oscar's value was pledging my allegiance to a society that values only one kind of intelligence—the kind that can be measured and controlled.

Last time I had seen Oscar, he was eleven years old. I wondered what made our roads so different. Where I had teachers like Mr. Bailey and Ms. Vargas who believed in me, Oscar had teachers who wanted to get rid of him. One of these people was a science teacher with a Latino surname at Bell High School who assigned Oscar “standards,” a tedious punishment of writing the same sentence 300 times: “I will not talk in class.” Oscar didn't do them because he thought they were waste of time. When the teacher demanded the homework, Oscar had nothing to show.

“Drop and get in push-up position,” said the teacher in front of the entire class.

Oscar would not oblige. They stared at each other for a moment. Without a second thought, the teacher picked up a metal chair and threw it at Oscar.

It didn't show on his face, but Oscar was trembling. He thought he was going to have to fight a grown man. Thankfully, a girl got up and told another teacher in the next class to come and help. All the administration did to solve that problem was move Oscar to another class. As Oscar said to me years later, the teacher “fool kept his job.”

He didn't tell his step-dad about what happened. Rafael was the asshole in the house throwing chairs at people; what would that have accomplished? Not everyone at school refused Oscar's desire to learn or see beauty.

For a photography class assignment as a sophomore, Oscar walked to the Clara Street Bridge in Cudahy. He stood there looking over the Long Beach Freeway traffic like I used to with Amá. He slowed down the shutter speed so that the passing traffic would blur in the final photo. When he developed it, the cars were the same gray of the river water. The road and sky, the freeway walls and floor, those were in crisp and in focus. It turned out my theory about *cholos* not going to school was wrong; I just couldn't see them.

His teacher told him she loved that photo and displayed it at their school's exhibit. She was opposed to another one he took. Three of his homeboys posed in front of a wall in their neighborhood, an idea Oscar took from the cover of the album, *NWA and the Posse*. Oscar's friends stood next to each other wearing loose white T-shirts and dark blue pants. One of them might have been squatting with knee on the floor, and all of them looking right at the lens.

“It's just not a good idea to show this,” the teacher told Oscar.

“But I've seen other photographers do this,” he shot back. “I've see them win acclaim for taking pictures of people in war zones going about their everyday lives. That's what I did. This is my reality.” His teacher disagreed and no one saw his photo. Some people only know how to do one thing.

Neither set of our encyclopedias could have taught us what we would need to survive. They didn't have instructions on how to get past teachers that did not believe in us or parents who would rather beat us than love us. We had to go out into the world and learn some of those things on our own.

Chapter 14: Kissing, 1992

To block out the sounds of kissing, I turned up the volume on the silver boom box. Claudia was lying on the bottom bunk bed, her arms folded behind her head. Her sixteenth birthday had passed a few weeks before but we thought we were grown. I undid my ponytail and hoped I looked as alluring as girls in British new wave videos. Claudia pulled me in for a small kiss. The wall heater's pilot light hummed, quietly warming the house and separating us from Amá roasting red *chiles* in the kitchen. Rodney King's grainy face was probably flashing on the television screen as the police officers' trial got underway. Outside, the clouds were gathering for the biggest storm of our lifetime. The world was flooding with menace, but we could not hear the waters rising.

It started like anything else, playing around. My best friend Claudia and I spent two summers eating Thrifty's pistachio ice cream and watching horror movies starring busty lesbian vampires.

Then one day, alone in her house, Claudia started wrestling with me. This was normal; she was the best player on the softball team by far, could hit a triple like nobody else. I was a reed of a girl, barely five feet tall. Claudia weighed 145 pounds, most of it *chichi*, pale *lonjas* around her middle, and arms that made the softball land at home plate. Her ponytail smelled like the coconut mousse. When I would put my head on her shoulder, I could almost taste it.

She had me in a fake choke hold. I scrambled to get out of it. My only move was to tickle her sides. Because I liked to win, I tickled her until she couldn't stop laughing.

She flipped me over on the beige carpet where we'd watched actresses get chased into windowless rooms. Claudia pushed my hands away, but let go and came down close to my lips. Her ponytail smelled like cookie dough. I laid there panting and smiling from the game.

She kissed me.

I let out an inaudible gasp.

She pulled back fast. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

"It's okay," I said. "I didn't mind."

It was true. Although surprised by and completely unfamiliar with what it felt like to kiss someone I loved, I was totally into what had just happened. My experiences with love at that point had been about saying yes when boys wanted to "go around" with me, which meant that I had been in numerous hand-holding relationships because I didn't want to kiss them. I waited a week to break up with them to spare their feelings.

But Claudia—not only did I like her, I also trusted her completely. She knew all about Dad's other family and I knew about how she only saw her father every other year for her birthday spaghetti. Claudia paid for my Thelma and Louise movie ticket, a burger here and there, and all the ice cream I could eat. Being best friends made kissing all right with my heart. So, I kissed her back.

Her lips were a little chapped. The brackets in her braces were smooth against my teeth; the wire and metal was long overdue for removal. Because as Mexican-American Catholics we were not allowed to be queer, I kissed her harder. Because as a child, I'd delighted at watching sexy Mexican comedies that showed topless women in sheer blue night gowns, I kept my eyes on the girl in front of me. And because, if I thought hard enough, Claudia could be one of those actresses, I made out with my best friend for four weeks.

We made sure no hickies landed on exposed body parts. Claudia was doing all the work, biting my skin into magenta roses. In the afternoons after the honors English homework was done, we'd lock the door to the family bedroom or in the bedroom Claudia shared with her mom. We'd hide under Disney cartoon bed sheets kissing until our faces hurt.

We made out so much that I started getting picky. Since the age of twelve, like many kids, I had been masturbating because I couldn't help it. Not even my Catholic upbringing could stop me. I knew enough to discern that Claudia didn't know shit about what felt good to girls. When her fingers slid around my panties, it felt like when you go somewhere overnight but forgot your toothbrush and have to brush your teeth with your fingers. At least she had short nails.

By the third week of making out, we got brazen. I put my mouth on her C cups with her bedroom door open, her grandparents a few doors down. Claudia's cotton bra fabric cut into her sides, tender where the bra dug into her. When I tried to put my hand

inside her black bikini panties to show her a little something, she pulled away. I didn't try it again because I didn't get the chance.

We thought we were acting normal around our families, but of course we were probably giggling too much and glancing at each other longingly. One night, about two weeks into the affair, Dad saw me hanging close to Claudia as I said goodbye to her. From behind his baby blue '68 Impala, he could have seen Claudia kiss my hand before she rode off on her bike. If he had, I'm sure he would have pried us apart by the hair. He might have been so taken aback, so convinced that a kiss to the hand between friends was innocent that all he could do was give me advice. Once she'd left, he walked up to me.

“Be careful with that girl, mija.” He twisted the end of his black mustache. “She's a bad influence.”

“Whatever, Dad. Don't worry about it.”

I waved him off. With his fourth grade education, what did he know about me? I didn't realize that he sensed what was happening with Claudia. I thought I knew better than someone like him.

That night, my right ear was sore from pressing into the receiver. She was so worried about what it meant for us to be making out that she was thinking about calling “Love Line,” a late-night radio show where a deejay and psychologist gave sex advice to teenagers. She changed her mind at the last second, thankfully. The entire metro LA area did not need to know I was making out with my best friend. Sadly, there seemed to be no one else to talk to.

“What am I going to tell them? That I think I'm in love with my best friend?” Claudia whispered. “I mean, not in love, you know what I mean.”

“Don't worry,” I assured her. “I was reading Sassy magazine and this article said it's totally normal for girls to have feelings for their best friends.” I looked at my clean, squared nails, feeling like an expert at matters of the heart.

“Are you sure?” said Claudia. “It's not weird or anything?”

“No, dude,” I said. “You’re fine.”

She sighed and I knew she felt better, that I could talk her down from anything. I was not concerned like Claudia about possibly being gay because I did not picture going to prom with her or having her babies. I wasn’t thinking about what would happen the following year, if we'd still be “dating” which is not how it felt given that I liked her and enjoyed making out with her. I had zero vision for what the next year would look like for us. That's just how being 15 works. Claudia did not notice my calm. She was too worried about what kissing me said about her.

Then the rain came and wouldn’t stop—it rained so much that the L.A. River was topped off with filthy water. The river had been cemented over to make Bell Gardens and the surrounding areas livable when it rained. Normally, the river's width of ten freeway lanes was completely dried up.

Claudia and I wanted to see the river spectacle. Walking back to her house from mine, we went two blocks up Gage Avenue to watch the waters rage from the bridge. A low concrete railing was the only thing keeping us from the rising froth kissing the edge

of the riverbed. The water was brown and moved so hurriedly that I worried it would overflow. I was afraid that the waters would knock open the front door of my house, pour in through the windows, and come in so fast that my family and belongings could not escape.

I pulled Claudia away from the rail and said, “That's enough.”

Our house had a single wall heater mounted between the living room and the family bedroom. It was as tall as an adult with built-in slits you could see through if you peeked. The view was of the full-size bed where my parents slept with my younger brother and a clean view of my lower bunk bed.

Amá was busy frying minced garlic and dried chiles on the comal. My silver boom box was playing muted electronic keyboards. In the bottom bunk, I was topless and sitting on top of her, Claudia holding me by the waist. I was still wearing my softball sweatpants. Claudia was fully clothed and talking about renting another horror movie that weekend. Claudia loved gory movies; they made her life seem safer in comparison.

Amá finally got curious enough about what the fuck we were doing with the door closed for so many weeks. She peeked through the wall heater grate.

My bare back faced her wrapped in Claudia's arms.

“Open the door!” She yanked the doorknob so hard it almost came off. Claudia sat up, throwing me a green T-shirt to wear. We had no plan. We thought we'd get away with being that free.

I opened the door to a charging bull. Amá slapped me once across the face and shook me, demanding to know what we were doing. Claudia rubbed her hands together and stared at the floor. She did not speak Spanish and could not answer Amá when she addressed her. Amá had not liked that Claudia couldn't speak Spanish. She thought people like her were just liars and ashamed of their roots.

I moved her out to the hallway to plead insanity.

“This is the only time we've done it,” I cried. “We promise never to do it again.” My brothers gathered their toys and went outside to play. They were used to people fighting and the yard was the only other place to go.

The garlic and chile maced the room. Claudia passed me and sat on the living room couch, sensing it would be a bad move to leave. Amá walked in circles in the living room, her chubby brown hands cutting the air.

“You can't hang out alone together anymore! If Claudia comes over, you have to sit out where I can see you.” I translated for Claudia. She nodded. I thought we were making progress.

Amá looked at Claudia. “You need to go home.” Claudia jumped up and left.

I went after her. I said I'd call later. “No, dummy. Go talk to your mom. Don't call me tonight.”

Amá kept lamenting. “You're not supposed to do that.” She wiped her eyes.

I said it didn't mean anything about me. I had convinced myself of that and so convincing Amá felt like it would be easy—she was raised so innocently that she didn’t

know how sex worked until she was more than 20 years old. Even so, she was no dummy. She could spot a liar a mile away. She was married to Dad, after all.

Amá agreed to let Claudia come over sometimes. I thought we were in the clear. Amá and I had been in bad moods with each other ever since Claudia and I started hanging out. On top of that she was used to playing mind games with Dad, accustomed to telling him one thing and doing another to beat him to the punch. I didn't think I was like him at all.

"I have to talk with her mother." I jumped in front of the phone.

"No, Mami," I begged, "Not right now. She's not home anyway."

"*Quítate*," she said. Amá must have been tired of fighting because when I didn't move she backed away. It wouldn't be long before shit went down with Claudia's mom, who frequently beat the shit out of her when they argued. That woman had an over-powdered face with meaty hands as strong as Dad's. Our mothers had met maybe once in passing, and barely spoke the same language. They wouldn't need big words to punish their daughters.

The next day, the rain stopped.

I met Claudia during the nutrition break that morning after second period.

I couldn't look at her and instead kept my gaze on my knees. The other kids passing by looked relaxed and unashamed, the opposite of what I was feeling.

"Your mom called my mom last night." Claudia's eyes were puffy and there was a blue smudge like a bruise on her cheekbone. "Don't call my house for a while."

“I'm not sorry for what we did,” I said. Fuck everyone, I wrote in a letter that I handed her. They're not going to stop us from being friends.

“Well, I'm sorry,” she said. “You’re not the one who has to deal with my mom.”

Maybe it was better that we got caught. That way, I didn't get the chance to break her heart like I had all those boys. “I gotta go, kid.” She walked off in her worn leather jacket, her ponytail unraveling at the end. Claudia didn’t look back. For a couple of days after we got caught, I walked around school alone, seeking refuge in my history teacher's classroom. I still did my homework perfectly, but I wondered if I was cursed to be a loner forever. Worse than that, I was a gay loner who didn't think she was gay at all.

We kept hanging out at school but our bodies would recoil when we were near each other. The making out was gone and I didn't want it back; all it was going to do was get us punished. We snuck around to hang out, dodging her mother's bus stop and lying to our group of friends about why we couldn’t hang out at each other’s houses anymore.

Without me around, Claudia started hanging out with our team's pitcher, Flor with legs like a racehorse. Flor's mom was never home and didn't give a shit about who Flor was with or had over the house. We played softball together for two years, losing game after game, putting up with each other. I stuffed my jealousy away and stuck my head in my books. I pulled a 4.2 that year. I was taking honors biology, English, and advanced placement Spanish.

Trapped in my house and afraid of my desire, I could not compete with the other girls. Instead, I went back to boys.

Chapter 15: Fighting, 1992

I guess it was a little bit true that in Bell Gardens, the fist fights weren't reserved just for the city council chambers. Staving off the handful of girls who wanted a piece of my face was much more exhausting than completing college prep biology homework. I had a 4.4 as a rising junior and did my AP homework easily. The teachers were not exactly demanding more from me than what I was giving; I was at the top of my game in some things, but in relating to the other girls around me, I was failing

One afternoon after softball practice, I was supposed to catch a ride with Lucinda, Claudia's new best friend. Claudia might have been around that day, but because we were no longer best friends or dating, I don't remember if she was there. Either way, I was sweaty and hungry after chasing after lost balls, running drills, and trying not to suck at the basics of the game. Tucked between the small gym, the boy's locker room, and the football bleachers, we waited for 45 minutes in the sun for Lucinda's sister to arrive. I'll call her Cleofilas, because when you punch me in the face, you're going to get a fucked up name in my memoir.

Cleofilas took her sweet time walking over to us. Her long black hair was plastered to her head with gel. She was a short-distance runner, and I would later learn, really fucking fast.

“Hurry up!” I said. I stood up in the truck bed and snapped my fingers at her.

She glared at me through bangs combed to look like a waterfall of hair. That glare

followed me all through my junior year. After that day, Cleofilas incessantly walked past me and did some drive-by shit talking.

"What's up, you stupid cunt," she would say. Or instead of a cunt she'd call me a stupid bitch, a *pendeja*, anytime she wanted, at lunch time, after school, between classes. Any chance she had, she was in my face. Every day.

I was a scholar, not a boxer. My only weapon was my big mouth. I kept it shut the whole time, pretending I didn't hear her, flipping my hair at her and looking the other way. I would turn my entire body and gab to Pánfila about AP History homework when Cleofilas would walk by. Even Pánfila was worried about all the threats. By then, she wasn't my biggest fan either. "I think she's really gonna kick your ass, dude," she said.

Every time Cleofilas waked by my stomach tightened and filled with bile. Of course I was scared, but instead of that fear making me treat my friends with more care, it made me more defensive. I wanted to tell Cleofilas she was a *pendeja* for taking shit so seriously, that there were way more important things to worry about in the world like famine, real drive-bys, rapists, all kinds of shit. Forget it. I was all ulcers and silence.

Cleofilas was pissed off at me for disrespecting her. I got that part. Snapping fingers at just anyone was not okay, fine. The truth was that I was an easy target. Her dad, on the other hand was not. A pudgy guy with a beer belly and red cheeks, he would routinely beat her and her two other siblings with electrical cords and belts, choking one of them to unconsciousness a few times. Talk about disrespect, but she couldn't punch him in the face.

I heard this much later about Lucinda's family from Claudia, yet I ignored it as a cause for how Cleofilas behaved. I just thought I had serious bad luck with girls. I was also fantastic at creating reasons for why I didn't want to fight her: my grades would suffer and I couldn't afford that. I was terrified she would knock my teeth out.

Cleofilas got tired of chasing me and one day she followed me into the girl's locker room calling me a chicken. I laughed and walked my black penny loafers out of there. The hairspray fumes followed us out in front of the boy's locker rooms.

I turned around in front of Pánfila and my friends from softball I declared: “I have too much to lose to get in trouble. I'm going to college and I don't need to get suspended for fighting you.”

In my version of after school specials, this is the part when the bully gets schooled and walks away deflated. Five minutes later, Cleofilas was smashing on my left cheek. One minute she was calling me more names and then lights out, *chula*. That bitch was fast. The only thing I managed to do was grab her by the hair and pull out a few strands. Homer got between us before it could get uglier. A blue-green bruise formed on my cheek and that was when the after school special ended: in *trancazos*.

At home, there was a medal pinned inside a picture frame in our living room that belonged to Dad for being a boxing competition. “I got it for being in a tournament in the *reservas,*” Dad said. “That's where I learned to read. I was 18! You should've seen me, chata.” Every time he told me that story, he sparred with the air in front of him as if it were a real opponent. I wished he’d taught me to box.

Chapter 16: Friends and Jobs, 1993

My new friends all had cars. Claudia got fed up with my boy-chasing and ditched me. The rest of my softball friends followed since they all hated me for one reason or another. I had to find new people to hang out with.

Beto, Homer, Eva, Moses, and Rudy all had their own rides or had access to their mother's cars. I could finally get the fuck out of my house. Because of those new friends, I'd also get my first job.

Because we all took the only honors classes offered at our school, a strange amalgamation of my former and current love interests turned into my new group of friends with the exception of Eva. She was a former cheerleader who was not intimidated by my grades or looks because she had much more game than me. Eva had no trouble attracting boys, unlike my softball frenemies.

Eva was the kind of girl who knew how to curl her eyelashes with the edge of a spoon. She had cut her hair into a short, light brown bob that a modern day flapper would wear. She'd been friends with Beto and Rudy since middle school. The only kids I'd known that long were Doña Marta's daughters and my brothers.

My new friends and I would pile in two cars: Homer's 1976 banana yellow Mustang and Moses's 1981 Caprice Classic. We'd drive east on the industrial back streets of Commerce and Montebello to get to Uptown Whittier. It was the closest tree-lined suburb with a well-stocked record store and 1950s-themed diners. Sometimes, Rudy

drove us all the way to Venice in his 1965 Ford Falcon. It was like a peppermint candy -- a white body and a red stripe all around. Rudy was a boy with short hair curled into a wave and a denim jacket permanently flung over his shoulder. It was as if he'd fallen out of 1965 along with his car. They were the set of friends I'd always wanted: with cars, jobs, and not trying to beat me up.

A sales job had opened up at the clothes store where Eva was working.

"You should apply," she said.

"Yeah," said Moses, "you'd be perfect there, Vickster. Just don't be a mean asshole to the customers."

The mall job was in Downey, the very white and well-off neighbor directly east of Bell Gardens. Downey was just over the San Gabriel River Bridge on Florence Avenue, literally up the street from Beto's house. As soon as you crossed over, the lawns were greener bigger than some of our houses. The schools and libraries in Downey were plentiful and spotless, so much nicer than our humble buildings one town over. Many of us dreamed of moving to Downey—that would have been like winning the lottery. Working in Downey was the next best thing.

The application was a cinch: name, address, but then came the work experience. During lunch at the high school, we all hung out under an oak tree near the Colmar Street entrance to our school. Eva advised me to list my school activities under work experience because the managers liked girls who were accomplished—and cheerful.

“Most of them used to be in pep squad,” she said. ”Drill team, too. Anything that involved cheering.” I had to figure out how to put myself in a permanently peppy mood for the job. When it came time for the interview, I had practiced ending all of my sentences and questions in exclamation points.

Eva sat me down on a round bench and told me how the interview would go and what I should say. It felt like cheating on a test, which I never did, but I needed all the help I could get.

We sat outside the clothes store on one of those hard, round benches next to a fake palm tree. The scent of fried corn dog bread drifted down the mall corridor to where we were sitting. The sweet smell reminded me to be thankful. I could be interviewing for a job with a uniform involving primary colors and what looked like a riding helmet made by circus clowns.

Eva was wearing a jumpsuit that they carried in the store. The fabric was red with tiny white flowers printed on a cotton/rayon blend.

“Your biggest weakness is that you're a perfectionist,” she drilled.

I repeated the line back to her like the great student I was.

“You'll be great,” she said. “I trained you, after all.”

I had a feeling she had more confidence in her ability to teach me than in my retail skills, but I was my father's daughter. I could do anything for work and I had no choice. Who else was going to pay for college but me?

The store manager, was a super peppy woman named Giulie who had an even thicker mustache than me. She had the kind of attitude so many of my white supervisors possessed: unbelievably chipper, until she had to tell me I wasn't spacing the hangers correctly.

It was then that I became a pro at interviews—I asked as many questions about her ambitions as a student and a manager as I had answered about myself. I'd smiled so hard that my face hurt by the end.

There was embellishing too, which Dad definitely had taught me. I said the grunge baby doll dresses were so cute, which was a hard sell (they came in flannel and textured cotton that looked like thermal underwear. They sat in the store for months). Giulie nodded back and wrote loopy favorable letters in her notes. A few days later, I got a job offer: $4.75 an hour! At four to six hours a week, I was making, tops, $30 or so a week. I stretched that paycheck just like Amá had shown me.

Eva had brought me into her retail world where she reigned as co-manager and adorned herself with so many cute outfits she could hardly fit them in her tiny closet. The job that helped pay for her scoop neck shirts and red nail polish was the job that lead to more retail jobs where she built a life that was increasingly more adult.

Moses had wooed her with his humor and excellent taste in indie rock. They had become a serious couple who didn't go anywhere without the other. They had matching brown bobs, his more skater than her pretty girl.

In her tiny bedroom (at least she had one), Eva brushed out her brown bob and addressed my concern over what to wear with the new form-fitting scoop neck top I bought from the store where we both worked.

“You just pair a tight top with baggy jeans. Easy.” She moved on to eye makeup for our outing to Uptown Whittier with our friends. I shook my head at her advice and fixed my eyes on how carefully she applied the eyeliner. I didn't have the patience to draw on my eyelids. I'd probably get them crooked anyway.

In the backseat of Rudy's Falcon, sitting next to Eva and Moses, Beto riding shotgun, I was in heaven. The oaks along Greenleaf Avenue in Whittier looked taller than the weeks past. We drove by Whittier College which I considered as a back-up, sure that I would enroll at a school out east where I belonged. That world seemed far away. I couldn't wait to get there. Eva had one more thing she wanted to teach me: how to cheer.

We were practicing our moves for short flag tryouts in my front yard. It was all cement and could fit three cars. At the time it was empty since Dad was at work and I didn't have a car. We were careful to stay away from the barbed wire on top of the tall fence. I had two left feet and my cheering voice was flimsy, while Eva's guttural chants were fierce. Somehow, Eva was teaching me the ropes so we could strut around campus as two hot, college-bound cheerleaders senior year.

After I explained why Dad was gone every weekend she said, “My dad cheated on my mom too. Except he left us and never came back.” I didn’t know we had so much in common.

“I ran into them once,” she said, “At a market.”

“Did you punch the bitch out?” I said.

“Almost. I went up to them, but my dad got in between us and I ran out of there crying.”

I had only seen a photo of Dad’s other woman and their daughter. Amá had snooped around in his Impala and found a photo of them at the Bufadora, a natural cave at the mouth of the Sea of Cortez. Dad named the girl Genoveva, after his grandmother who raised him. They were all wearing hats in the photo, but the woman didn't look like the husband stealer I thought she was.

“She looked like my mom,” I told Eva. “I don't know why he needed to go so far away to find someone with the same short hair, and just as mean-looking.”

“I was a daddy's girl, though,” said Eva. “He was everything to me.” She put away her flags and started packing up. I'd never seen her sad.

“Not me,” I said. “I specialize in hating my dad. He just makes Amá miserable and she takes it out on us, complaining all the time.” I wished he would leave so Amá could have something else to talk about.

Every single day of my life, Amá was all about bad-mouthing Dad: he's a *cochino* who never showers, he's a liar, he's cheap, he's always changing cars, and he can't win a game of poker to save his life.

“But he's your father,” she would say, “and you have to respect him.” I wasn't sure how she wanted to me to do that, knowing that he was indeed all the things she claimed and more. Instead I stayed away from him unless I needed something, like a ride for work or school.

When it came time for the tryouts, we walked into the girl's locker room where a fog of hair spray hit us in the face.

“Oh my God,” a girl told me, “You're actually pretty! You should wear more make-up.”

“Ignore that *mensa*,” Eva said. “She's an idiot.”

Since we were not allowed to pick our try-out partner, Eva ended up with some other girl. It was a good thing. In the first 30 seconds, my short flag flew out of my hand and across the floor. I made up the rest of the routine in what surely looked like a bad Jazzercise routine.

Eva was in all the same honors and AP classes as me through junior year. When I didn’t make cheer, but she had, she might have put her arm around my shoulder and said, “Fuck it, Vick. It’s too much money anyway.” Eva also supported me by spending her hard-earned retail money on a pair of tickets for a local beauty pageant I had entered. My excuse was that I wanted to get the scholarship money but really, who doesn’t was a crown? She showed up for me in ways that girls, except for Claudia, never had. I gladly put up with whatever she dished to be her friend.

Her college road was interrupted by love. Her relationship with Moses intensified. He'd graduated and had lots of time to have sex with her. Because school didn't shimmer with the same lust as Moses, Eva kind of stopped going to school and started full-time work by the end of our senior year. Our strutting dreams deflated and college was on the brink of separating us.

By the end of senior year, she had moved on to JC Penney and was sneering at the thought of going to prom.

“I already went, remember?” she said. Eva was ringing me up for a black scoop neck top with a huge markdown. “Moses hates shit like that. Plus I have to work. With all these cute clothes at my disposal, who needs parties with teeny boppers?”

I wonder if our teachers had encouraged her to apply to four-year schools the way they did me, if she had come to the college counselor's office with Beto and I more often than ditching with Rudy at Venice Beach, would she have put school before love? It's not likely her ambitions had changed the day her father left her family. Not many things can compete with that kind of love. College didn't have a chance.

Chapter 17: Beto, 1993

At Ford Park after school, Beto and I sat on a felled tree, wide enough for both of us. I don’t know what kind it was, but the orange needles on the patchy grass make me think it was in the pine family. After months of lengthy, ear-numbing phone calls, and years of chasing, Beto and I were finally a couple.

It was eighty degrees and I was wearing a cotton tank dress Amá had sewn for me. Beto was probably wearing a faded green polo and his glasses were sliding down his face. When he'd first told me he liked me two years before, those glasses were part of the reason I did not like him back. He had been too nerdy, even for another nerd.

Back before we dated, he didn't smell special, like Claudia's hair mousse which reminded me of coconuts. He smelled like flowery fabric softener, or exactly like all the other Mexican kids smelled. Beto also had not shown me how much he loved me like Homer had. Beto had bought me a cone of soft serve and thought his charm was going to be gift enough.

One thing about Beto was that he was persistent. He started to call me and talk about college. I hadn't talked with any one I'd dated about college as if we would both go to great schools. My subconscious thought we were a lot alike, and the rest of me thought he was great company. I had stopped competing with him for first place grades because I knew he would come out ahead of me with an extra AP class. He'd conquered me in more than one way.

At Ford Park, we were nervous, knowing we were about to kiss for the first time, a new situation that I had put off for three years.

I want to excuse my feelings for Beto and say that there was no one left to date in my honors classes. I'd rather say that than admit I thought he was cute because I'm still disappointed in how he turned out as an adult. At Ford Park, Beto finally started smelling good to me, like sharp cinnamon and cloves. His lips were small, pursed, and softer than Claudia's. After that, we couldn't do anything together without kissing every five minutes.

Beto was a theater kid who made me laugh and was an excellent academic inspiration. What confused me was Beto's motivation for going to college. His family already had a big place—a four-bedroom house with a fig tree in the front yard. Their street had a cul-de-sac and curved where Beto's house sat the end of the short block. He and his siblings had all the clothes and toys they wanted. What would college get him? Their neighborhood was crowded like mine, with at least two houses on every lot. His parents, however, had bought their home and built their new big house behind the original one-bedroom bungalow. My parents didn't have credit cards and didn't know how they worked.

Other than proving to everyone how smart he was, I wasn't sure why he was so determined to go to Harvard. I got the feeling Beto just didn't like to lose. Neither did I.

Sitting outside my house at a metal table under the small lemon tree, we'd hold hands and write essays, so much more innocent than I expected, but I was glad. I already knew what could happen if we got caught doing things adults thought we should not do.

We sat between Amá's sugar cane and across the kumquat trees that obstructed the view from kitchen window.

Things got more intense as our relationship went on. We had been making out a little after school in his mom's station wagon that was shaped like a beige breadbox. It was such an apt shape because she was the best cake maker in town.

“I've never slept with anyone else before,” Beto said. “Have you?”

I looked out at the high school parking lot next to the football field. If I squinted my eyes I could have seen the girls playing softball in the distant field. Claudia must have been out there fielding pitches and fending off the girls.

“No,” I said. “I haven't slept with any guys.”

It wasn't a lie. There were some things Beto did not need to know.

Chapter 18: The Forum, 1993

No matter the weather, Ms. Vargas always wore an oversize United Farm Workers T-shirt, a black eagle emblazoned on the chest. While the chemistry teacher wore scrubs and a lab coat to class, Ms. Vargas, a high school life science teacher, thought it was more important to let people know that she supported worker's rights. She wore the tomato-red cotton to everything, staff meetings and anti-war marches alike.

Beto, Cristina, and I walked from the quad through the football field parking lot to her classroom. We spotted Ms. Vargas's maroon van.

“It's the only one with the 'No Grapes' bumper stickers,” said Cristina. She was the tall sophomore enrolled in advanced placement calculus, the highest level of math our school had. Her wild curly hair was deceptively innocent; she was the one who cut open my fetal pig so I could finish my biology assignment.

Inside Ms. Vargas's classroom, there were about ten students who plotted ways to better our city: fundraisers for Christmas toys for struggling families, field trips to Culture Clash plays, and planned our attendance at East Los Angeles anti-war marches. The classrooms in that corner of campus were beige, temporary bungalows that stayed forever. One wall of her classroom had a poster of Emiliano Zapata in his big hat, staring down at us and the wobbly desks. I knew who he was because Dad had the same mustache and liked to tell us this whenever he got the chance.

We were getting ready for out next project: election time had arrived for the Bell Gardens city council. Someone pointed out that the council was mostly made up of Maria Chacón's friends.

“All they do is fight anyway,” I said. The people who'd led the No-Rezoning committee with Maria Chacón had filled the vacant city council seats, but had started having shouting matches during public meetings. Civic politics were a staged talk show on a sub-par TV channel with flying chairs and hair pulling.

Reading about the fistfights that were breaking out in city hall made us want to replace our leadership. We decided to sponsor a forum for the new city council candidates in our high school auditorium.

Ms. Vargas thought it was a great idea. “You guys have to know that, even though you're really smart, they're going to associate you with me.”

When the new city council formed after the re-call of the Anglo council-members, other groups formed that challenged the interests of the new officials. One of these groups was part of a larger national group called LULAC, or the League of United Latin American Citizens. It was founded in Texas and had wanted to distinguish themselves from the undocumented workers perceived to represent all Latinos. However, the LULAC group in southeast Los Angeles was semi-radical and acted as the main challengers to new city council that was starting to act like any other group of greedy politicians. Ms. Vargas was a member of the local LULAC group and they had a candidate opposing the Maria Chacón machine.

“We don’t care,” said Beto. “I’m on the planning committee so why can't our interests be on behalf of the residents?”

“This is Youth LULAC,” I said. “If they can't tell the difference, then that's their problem.”

We knew that there was tension between adult LULAC and the council. We hoped it would not trickle down to our humble event. We were really interested in hearing what the council-members had to say for themselves, especially about how they were planning to turn around their sinking ship.

I got busy talking to the principal and vice principal at the high school to get permission for the event. Great at filling out paperwork, I got the forms signed and we were all set with a space. Someone made a flyer and the rest of us started to invite our parents, friends, and other teachers, to the forum. Ms. Vargas got a call at her home from one of the council members.

“You're just brainwashing those kids against us,” one unnamed city council member told Ms. Vargas. “If you think we'll be joining your forum, you're crazy.”

We looked at Ms. Vargas with our mouths open after she told us.

“Like that, we're done?” I asked.

“Sorry, guys,” said Ms. Vargas. “Sometimes adults say that the youth is the future, but when you speak up, they don't listen.”

There was more to it than that. The council-members didn't want anyone taking their jobs, no matter who it was, not LULAC, not anyone. They had interests to secure:

the Bicycle Club Casino had deep pockets and the police department needed new vehicles. Maria Chacón, the city manager, also had to fill the future vacant city jobs with family members and friends.

Ms. Vargas did not give up on us and neither did we. When the council members all stayed in office, we took another approach to visiting city hall.

Beto, Fernando, and I were in the associated student body whose director sponsored a special event called Student Government Day. We shadowed city council members for a day and played “city hall.” Beto was president and I was the parliamentarian. I was matched with Council member Rudy Garcia, one of the original re-callers in his mid-to-late fifties. He had a mustache like a narc. All of the council members had been connected to the Anglo council recall a few years before. They were also the same people who had refused to come to our forum.

“So great to meet you!” I chirped at Council Member Garcia.

“*Igualmente*!” he said. Because I took people at their word, I thought he seemed friendly. I wondered if he was involved in any of the fights that had broken out. His glasses darkened with sunlight but didn't become exactly transparent when indoors. I didn't know what his eyes looked like.

Meanwhile, Beto followed Mayor Frank Duran around the chambers. Beto's friend Susana was Duran's niece, a really friendly and bright student who graduated a year ahead of us. Beto had met him on several occasions and they acted like best friends; the Mayor, a man in his mid-sixties with all gray hair and quick smile, frequently patted

Beto on the back and laughed at every one of his jokes. I watched Beto that day, a fish in his natural waters—jovial because he was chubby, smart because he was gifted, and self-interested because you had to think enough of yourself to want to be a leader. His handshakes were sincere and firm, something I also knew to do—that was how we let people know we were more than just kids from the high school. Ms. Vargas might have said, “Make them think you want their job.”

The dais was made out of real wood, not the particleboard I had anticipated.

“How's it feel to sit here, young lady?” asked Garcia.

I probably told him it was great, or that I appreciated the opportunity, like the polite student I was. What I really wanted to say was that the leather chair was too big, but that I could make it fit. I wanted to tell him he wasn’t going to get his seat back.

I flashed him a smile and thanked him for letting me sit there. A new desire began that day, the one that made me want a seat at The Table, the famous one where people make decisions about the rest of us, about how much we matter or how much we do not. I did not tell Beto this; I am not sure that I would have admitted that I loved how power felt. I might have worried that Beto would have felt threatened. We did not know there was enough for everyone to do what they wanted.

At the end of the day, we were given a commemorative Cross pen engraved: “SGD 1994.” (I still have it and plan to sign my books with it.) That was not the only thing I received.

There were other ways to get to city hall and we had found one. The members may have rejected our invitation to discuss their platforms, but we were free to find a way into their offices, their committees, and their seats. Dad had taught me to remember the debits and credits column and that no matter what, there was always a way to get what I wanted. Ms. Vargas had reinforced that idea a hundred fold.

Ms. Vargas must have come to part of the ceremony, perhaps for the closing remarks. That's what I want to remember: Ms. Vargas standing and clapping in the chambers where she had been shut down by Chacón and the council when LULAC critiqued their economic motivations. I want to find a photo of me and Ms. Vargas in her red T-shirt with the black eagle, both of us smiling in front of city hall, the air clear of slaughterhouse tripe, the clouds spare enough to see the San Gabriel mountains from where we stood.

Chapter 19: Little Piece of Dirt, 1993

> "I feel when they call us illegal, they're calling us like we're not human beings…that we're a little piece of dirt or something…."
> Male student in *Fear and Learning at Hoover Elementary*

I wish I could remember the moment that our youth group decided to organize citizenship drives, to register people to vote, and eventually, to propose a Latino studies program in our high school's curriculum. But I don't remember and I didn't write it down. I was preoccupied with Claudia's leather jacket and with the candy red of Rudy's '65 Falcon. What I do know is that I felt a responsibility to protect my family from harm and from people accusing them of a crime when they came to this country to work. Especially when, as Ms. Vargas had taught us, the land we were on had been Mexico not long ago.

Right at the beginning of our American Government class, Mr. Buddy, clad in a Hawaiian shirt and white tube socks, took one look at Beto's shirt and shook his head like he felt sorry for him. Beto's T-shirt was big, even on him, and it read: "We didn't cross the border. The border crossed us."

"That's not historically accurate, guys," said Mr. Buddy from his metal desk at the front of the class. He scratched his beard, not his head, since he had very little hair.

"Aw, what? Naw, man," said Fernando, our friend from Youth LULAC. "The Mexican-American War ended in 1849, and there were thousands of Mexicans who were living here and stayed."

“That's right,” Beto chimed in. “How's that historically inaccurate?”

I shook my head in agreement and so did at least one other student in the class. I wanted to say more, yet Fernando and Beto were the ones who felt confident enough to speak out. I was afraid Mr. Buddy would embarrass me and prove me wrong. So I crossed my arms and rolled my eyes at Mr. Buddy instead.

“You guys weren't here in 1849,” said the teacher. He spoke calmly while my stomach was churning. The conversation made me notice my hands. There were thin moons of dirt under my nails. I shoved them hard into my pockets, as if I were trying to hide something I’d stolen.

Beto practiced his political skill. “This shirt says that we have a right to be here just like anybody else,” he said, his voice as loud as the teacher's. Ms. Vargas was teaching us about who we really were as Latinos and Mexican-Americans in California. However, in 1993, everyone on television and radio was foaming at the mouth wanting to deport so-called aliens taking over the state.

“For Californians who work hard, pay taxes, and obey the law,” said Pete Wilson speaking at a campaign rally, “I am working to deny state services to illegal immigrants.”

“Forget that fool,” I told the TV. The conversations at Youth LULAC meetings were not much more complicated than my reaction when it came to Proposition 187. Our faces reddened and our hands clenched into fists when we talked about it.

“That's fucked up,” we said. “Why can't kids just go to school?”

“What if my grandma gets sick? If she goes to the hospital, is she going to get

deported?"

Proposition 187 was a California bill that was going to deny a basic education and emergency health services to suspected undocumented immigrants, effectively turning teachers and health care workers into immigration agents. The bill was crafted out of Orange County by rich, Anglo conservatives, including a former federal director of immigration services and Governor Pete Wilson. His campaign for re-election was one big ad for the proposition.

Across the state on every television, grainy images of six people running away from unseen authorities through parked cars lined up at the border. The black and white film made the people look like criminals, people guilty of at least one crime. The location of the border and what year the video was taken did not matter. Every time Wilson's campaign ad came on, I wanted to smash the little man responsible for making it.

Amá had her papers in order, a green-tinted card with the words Resident Alien across the top. Dad had a card too, one that he flashed every weekend to get to Tecate. But the word "suspected" meant everyone who had brown eyes and skin would be denied an education and emergency room care. Those suspected aliens, if they were bleeding to death, even if perhaps they were responsible for raising other people's children, would be turned away to bleed all over the hallway floors. If the Prop. 187 authors had it their way, the patient bleeding to death would also be promptly deported.

Technically I was a citizen, not the target. Technically, my papers did not matter when it came to the outside world's perception of me and my family. Amá never learned

to speak fluent English, and to any monolingual Anglo person, she was not literate. If she had been caught without her green card, she couldn't say that she had papers. The fact that we were documented would never be a guarantee of our safety, and Prop. 187 was a reminder of that fact: a bullet doesn't have to verify identification to kill.

At some point in our meetings, I hope that Ms. Vargas told us about the one other time that a law like 187 existed. “This isn't the first time, folks,” Ms. Vargas probably said. “The government deported trainloads of citizens from East LA in the 1920s.”

Citizenship meant rights, we thought. It meant we could live here without being afraid, but 187 terrified all of us in that classroom. “That time is known as Mexican Repatriation,” she might have said. “About two million people were forced out of the country, and most of them from California.” I hope she mentioned the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, also citizens who became suspects. Maybe she mentioned McCarthyism, and hopefully we started to see a pattern.

Our group got increasingly enraged and Ms. Vargas helped us do something with our hands. Because she was active in local politics, she knew an organizer from NALEO, the National Association of Latino Elected Officials. He trained us to go into our neighborhoods and register voters. We sincerely hoped that those new voters would vote against 187.

In the parking lot of the Food-4-Less supermarket on the corner of Atlantic and Slauson in Maywood, Cristina and I got dropped off to register people to vote. Maywood was two miles west and north from Bell Gardens, another crowded town full of working-

class Mexicanos and their coffee-can gardens. It was the place where I went to church at Santa Rosa de Lima with Doña Marta and her family. Maywood bordered Vernon, the place where a battery recycling plant made kids and adults sick with lead poisoning, asthma, and cancer.[iv] It was where Cristina and I were being good citizens and registering people to vote so that maybe we could close the factories that killed us slowly.

The staff person from NALEO was the kind of skinny you could only be if you worked at a nonprofit—his button-up shirts dangled from his shoulders. The fact that we were 16 and 15 didn't cross his mind—maybe someone should check on us later? Nope. We were on our own. Luckily, Cristina and I had grown up walking through parking lots just like that one. We knew to put on our street faces and to keep our shoulders back.

We stood next to the entrance of the supermarket, occasionally getting a blast of air conditioning. We wore jeans, T-shirts, and determination. Cristina's wild curly hair was tied back but would spring up when she started to sweat. My temples beaded with sweat because the 80-plus degree sunshine was beating down on us and it was embarrassing for me to ask complete strangers to sign state-issued documents. Eventually, the shyness wore off; we didn't have a choice. We wanted more than anything to get people out to vote against Proposition 187.

We were pissed off that Prop. 187 might pass and deny basic services to families like ours: brown, working-class, and suspected of being illegal aliens. There were thousands of other young people like us across California trying to stop Wilson and the proposition. Cristina and I were just doing what we thought we had to do.

On a break from registering people, Cristina told me about a recurring dream.

“So basically Pete Wilson is chasing me with green goop in his hands,” she said, her voice cracking with anger, “I run as fast as I can, but I just know he's trying to kill me.”

“Do you get away?” I asked. I shaded my eyes with my clipboard.

“It doesn't matter,” she said. “He just keeps coming back.”

That fall, President Clinton finally spoke out against the legislation. "If you turn the teacher and other educators into instruments of [the…] state police force,” he said at a televised White House news conference, “it's like bringing a Big Brother into the schools." He also said the ballot measure was “an unconstitutional proposal that if implemented could cause increased crime and the spread of disease.”[v] We are always getting blamed for something.

Hillary Clinton had her hands full with health care at the time, yet in June of 2014, a potential Presidential candidate, she could have been mistaken for Pete Wilson. "They should be sent back as soon as it can be determined who responsible adults in their families are (...),” she said on CNN, referencing the more than 68,000 unaccompanied children who were apprehended at the U.S./Mexico border in 2014.[vi]

These ideas about sending people back to their homelands repeat themselves, usually around an economic downturn or a political campaign. The world will always see the harmful effects of free trade agreements in issues like labor, which is the real heart of

immigration. NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, which created a free-trade zone with Canada and Mexico, made working-class wages stagnate further in the 1990s. It created wide-spread unemployment, helped privatize food production in Mexico, and starved families out of their countries to the U.S. Hillary did not talk about that in her interview.

What could we do in Bell Gardens to stop a proposition like 187? In addition to the drives in neighborhoods, we also organized citizenship drives at our high school. What I remember about them was how great it felt to help someone complete their paperwork. When people would sign their names, I still thought something good would come of it, like a job that paid more, or not having to live in fear of being deported, or the right to vote. Other students were filing into the streets by October and into November, jamming intersections, unafraid. We thought it would be enough.

Prop. 187 passed. I was at Williams during the election struggling with money and doing homework until my eyes hurt. Back at our high school, Cristina and the other students renamed our group Students Empowered for Political Action and organized a several huge walkouts from Bell Gardens. They coordinated on the same day as 75,000 students at schools across Los Angeles County. It was one of the largest walkouts in California history. Cristina told me later that SEPA tried to march onto the Five Freeway. “We could have died!” she said.

What those students did was give birth to an immigration movement that is still going strong today that has seen people come out undocumented and unafraid, so much

braver than some of us ever were. I can only hope that some piece of what Cristina and I were doing in Food-4-Less parking lots and high school cafeterias helped our neighbors and people like my parents feel safer and less isolated.

Sadly, my parents didn't come to those citizenship workshops in our cafeteria. They weren't interested in filing more papers or studying for tests. Amá would earn her citizenship ten years later and voted for Cristina when she ran for city council in 2009. Although she lost, as much as the civic leadership was still out of step, she realized later that she did not see the great deal of knowledge her constituents and neighbors had to offer.

“My neighbor with a third grade education had a lot to teach me,” she told me. “Running and losing for city council helped me see that one thing I still had to learn was humility.”

Cristina would learn a lot to become the current assemblymember for district 58, where we both grew up. She beat Tom Calderon in 2012, which for many of us represented the defeat of fiefdom-style politics in our region. Garcia worked with other local activists to gather the necessary evidence on the City of Bell's civic leaders before the national embezzlement story broke in the *Los Angeles Times*. The movement of families who were fed up with thievery in their city councils rose up and quickly gained momentum, creating an opportunity for new ways to move our communities forward, not just into office. That, I won’t forget.

Chapter 20: Out of the Closet, 1994

On spring break, my friends waited for me by the chain-link gate. They were ready to ride roller coasters all day. Rudy, Beto, Eva and Moses came to get me in Moses's roomy Caprice Classic. Amá thought it was a good time to thank them for being my friends, especially after “that thing that happened.”

“What thing?” Beto asked.

Amá was not talking about those boys in seventh grade who groped me and never got punished. No, Amá was talking about my ex-best friend and girlfriend.

“That girl Claudia molested my chata.” She announced this while I was still inside the house. “I'm so glad you all look out for her. Take care of her for me.”

“Sure we will, señora,” said Moses, covering for me.

Moses was the only one who knew about my relationship with Claudia. He'd been the sole person I talked to about it once Amá caught us making out. Talking to him saved me from feeling completely friend-less.

Once Amá had gone inside to get me, my three friends and Beto must have exchanged some crazy looks. Molested? By another girl our age? When I plopped into Moses' car, Beto barely looked at me.

“Ey, fea,” asked Beto. “What happened with Claudia? Your mom said she molested you.”

I could have packed my one bag and left home right then.

“She didn't molest me,” I said. “Mom caught us making out once. That was it. She's making that other shit up.”

That was all I gave up in the car. I looked out the window at the alley's brick walls.

“It's cool, man,” Rudy said from the front seat. “Don't trip.”

“Yeah,” echoed Moses. “That stuff's in the past.” I was sure he was trying to help me out with Beto who was pouting. Eva stayed silent and didn't look at me.

We drove west over the L.A. River; it was empty, not bursting and dangerous like it had been when I'd kissed Claudia. We headed to Eva's house in Bell where she would change into another outfit for the day trip.

“How could you not tell me?” Eva huffed. I sat on her bedroom floor looking anywhere except for right in her eyes. Her mother's house was a converted garage where she and her brother ended up after her father left them. Eva was opening and slamming dresser drawers. “I've changed in front of you so many times!”

I didn’t have the guts to say, “Relax, sister. You're not my type.” Instead I picked lint off my white ankle socks. I was worried that Eva would remember she could easily punch me if she wanted. I could only survive being punched in the face so many times that year.

All I could muster was a “sorry.” I kept my eyes on the photo collages that wall-papered her room. They were pictures of Eva in cheer uniforms or with Moses, their matching brown bobs made them look slightly related.

I had more explaining to do at the amusement park—with thousands of people to eavesdrop on me. “I thought I was the only one,” Beto complained, all hurt. I'm sure the people in line next to us were listening.

“I’m sorry,” I probably said. “I should have told you, but I didn't know how.”

I may have quoted that *Sassy* magazine article to Beto. I might have defended my heterosexuality by repeating that information to my friends: “It's normal to have feelings for your best friend, even kissing them is okay.”

The thing is, that’s true: I didn't have the words. I couldn't say that sexuality was a huge spectrum of desire. What troubles me is that I likely denied any implications about my sexuality because I'd dated Claudia. In survival mode for most of my time in high school, I found that denial was the easiest way to go. Besides that, there were no role models for me to call myself bisexual or queer. That kind of thing wasn’t in my encyclopedia.

We all got on Colossus, the biggest wooden roller coaster in the park. I thought I'd made progress when I felt Beto lean into me on one of the turns. It might have just been gravity. I hung on to the cold rails on drops and pushed my face into the wind on sharp turns. I would not let myself think about what it meant that my secret was out or what it meant for me. My boyfriend was the student body president and I was headed for college in no time.

The rides twisted my insides but I ate funnel cake to coat the feeling. I took photos with my friends and Beto, just trying to act normal and get through another night. Someone should have given me a degree in faking. It was all I could to get through my life.

When we drove up to my house at the end of the night, there was another surprise waiting for me.

At the far end of the alley, a sound wall had a message scrawled in crooked letters: “Fuck Vicky.”

The strokes were unsure and amateur. Whoever had written them had clearly done it for the first time. With their feet.

“Stupid fuckers can't even spell,” Rudy said.

“And I thought people hated me the most! You win,” said Eva. She sounded relieved. I was glad she was making jokes again.

I knew who was to blame for the *chueco* spray paint.

Pánfila was not part of our group, though she had tried to join it. She had not been invited to come to Magic Mountain because she'd begun a campaign that year to talk shit about me on a school-wide scale. She had a crush on a boy who had a crush on me. She'd tried to get Rudy to be her man, but that had not worked out either.

She once told Rudy, and I quote: “You know, braces make my blow jobs feel hotter.”

“I bet Pánfila got somebody to tag up the wall,” I said.

Moses chimed in. “That tagging fucking sucks. I bet she paid them in blow jobs.”

We laughed hard (except for Rudy who’d had one) and everyone went home.

Pánfila was mad at me because she was looking for a body on which to blame her rejection. Amá's confession about my “molestation” was a way for her to explain my behavior. Both of them were pinning things on me that were of their own making.

Amá had a pot of pinto beans on the stove when I walked in to the house

. “How was it*,* chata?”

“It was fun, Amá.”

Just like that, it was as if nothing had happened. Amá was happy thinking I had been a victim of abuse, forced to remove my T-shirt for a perverted girl, but rescued by a boy and new friends. She preferred to see me as the victim than for me to be any kind of gay.

The message was painted over the next day. It felt good to have someone looking out for me.

Chapter 21: Acceptance, 1994

A letter arrived from Williams in April.

"*Mira*, Amá!" I said. The envelope was the right size and weight for an acceptance package. The fucking thing was heavy.

In addition to admitting me for their incoming class, Williams was also offering to fly me out to their campus for a week of events set up for prospective students. Amá hugged and kissed me. I handed her the brochure.

"So many trees," Amá said. The white church on the cover had spires that reached the sky. When I told Amá how much tuition cost she bit her thumb, something she never did. The sound of twenty five thousand dollars would make anyone worry.

"The school has a lot of money," I said. "They're paying for me to visit, see?"

Amá wasn't convinced. She went in the kitchen and started fussing with the stove. "You don't have to worry about it," I told her, "I'll pay for the things I need with a job and some loans."

My brothers were probably home too and so I had to tell them I'd gotten in to a school 3,000 miles away.

"Are you leaving already?" said Chalo. Jesse told him not yet.

"She still has to pick which school, right Vick?"

I nodded because I couldn't speak. I felt guilty that I had my ticket out of the house but my brothers were stuck there. They were just babies—Jesse was thirteen and

Chalo was eight. I tried to talk more to Amá about the price of college, but she was wiping tears from her face. I went into the bedroom instead. There were some things that my words could not change. Amá was crying at the thought of losing another child.

When Dad heard the news he said, “Don't they have another school that's closer?”

“No, Dad. It doesn't work that way,” I said. “It's just the one school.” That's why Williams was special—it was exclusive. It was the only one.

Dad had gone to school in the fields outside his grandmother's *rancho* and barely could write his name as a kid. It was only when he became an adult that he learned to read in the Mexican Army reserves. He'd gone to a trade school to learn how to be a mechanic, which, really was the equivalent of him becoming an engineer. Yet all I could see was how little he knew about my legitimate college education. Any parent who knew what in the hell Williams was would have lost their mind at my news.

I was already picturing myself in brown riding boots and cardigans galloping on a horse in a meadow on the school's riding team (they didn't have one, but I could dream). My *rancho* lineage would finally come in handy. My parents wouldn't have to pay for anything because I took out loans and filled out everything alone. Without credit cards until I entered grad school, no bank would have made them a loan they could pay off.

I was going to stay on the Williams campus the whole time—even though I also got into Brown—because I was terrified of getting lost. What if I got on the wrong bus and, completely unfamiliar with the region, ended up somewhere crazy far on a mountain with nowhere to go? It was then I admired Amá the most.

Amá had taken a bus into a whole other country—how was it that I couldn't take bus one or two states over from where I would be staying? I was afraid of what I didn't know. There was too much riding on the sure thing.

Once on the East Coast, Beto took a bus to Cornell and said he'd meet me back at Williams later that week. A few of us got picked up at the Albany Airport by a very friendly admissions counselor with a flowing blonde mullet. We were about five students in the van, all students of color from Canada, Texas, and California. As we drove out of Albany, which looked like a real city to me, the building started to become scarcer along the road. The ride was forty five minutes of trees I could not name.

We came through campus on Route Two which cut the school in half. On the right were the row houses that used to be strictly for fraternities, but once they were abolished, they became dorms. On the left were the President's house and the theater where New Yorkers flocked in the summer to watch famous actors do Shakespeare. I had no idea what the counselor was talking about. I was just thrilled that the only smell in the air was of burning firewood and not dead pig.

Williams picked the perfect host for me. Mireya was from Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood. She was Mexican-American and her dark black hair was cut into a bob with shredded ends. So chic and smart, I thought. I hoped she wouldn't hate me.

The school planned dozens of events for the week: a screening of *2001* with alum who worked on the film, museum lectures, and parties at the local pubs. Sitting on the floor in Mireya's her East Hall dorm, I asked for help. There must have been a note of

concern in my voice; I must have thought I was required to attend everything as a repayment for the ticket, the food. I was perfectly willing to oblige. I just needed guidance. "What should I go to?"

"You can do anything you want," she said.

A chill must have coursed through my body—she was right. I *could* go anywhere! I wouldn't have to ask my parents for permission ever again. From there, my imagination really took off. I'd get a fat job, something where I helped people, which I enjoyed most, that also paid me enough to cover my bills.

We went to lunch at Baxter Hall, the student union showboat-looking building where you picked up your mail. We sat at a table of really friendly students who were Black, Latino, and South Asian. As I took my tray through the lunch line, I noticed that the staff was 98 percent white. For a second, it felt nice to have white people clean up after us. Once I sat down and saw how students left breadcrumbs and napkins, orange peels and trash on tables, I was embarrassed. I wanted to help clean.

Among some of the luxuries Williams had to offer were the five dining halls—five for two thousand students. My high school had one cafeteria for three thousand kids. Mireya had given me a tour of a friend's dorm room located next to a ballroom; its vaulted ceilings' white molding looked like frosting from *panaderia* cakes. I had to restrain myself from climbing on her desk to touch the icing. The room's only windows were French doors that opened up to a small field. It was a dorm room fit for Marie Antoinette.

As impressive as the financial aid they were offering, the students of color I met at Williams also blew me away. At a party in a building that looked like a huge wood cabin big enough to fit five parties, I met a mixed-race man, Rahim, with a slender face who was graduating that year. He was standing with other students, mostly Black and Latino, and they each told me a bit about the Hunger Strike for Latino Studies that they had staged the previous year. Wow, I thought, and there I was thinking I'd done something important with the work I was doing back home and here were students who'd put their health on the line to force the hand of the school.

With red cups in their hands, the students told me about how 31 of them had stopped eating for four days to force the college administration to establish a tenure-track appointment in U.S.-Latino studies.[vii] One petite girl, also from Chicago and Mexican-American added that the students involved weren't just Latino. “Supportive student groups included South Asian members, Asian Americans, mixed-race students, and international students, too.”

The students also said that the school counted on them graduating to delay making moves on their promises as incoming students wouldn't know how to follow up.

“I could follow up,” I volunteered. They smiled and said they'd take me up on it. I took a deep breath and started looking forward to the work I would do at Williams on Latino studies.

The room we stood in while we talked smelled like burning fire logs and beer. I was okay with the scent because I'd never smelled fire like that before, intended for more

than just keeping warm, but to keep people together.

The thought that I'd be joining students who were bright, funny, AND radical, who'd put their bodies and well-being on the line for their educations convinced me that Williams was the place for me. I was so thrilled about finally fitting in that I didn't notice the dark circles under the eyes of the students who'd survived the strike. I didn't notice that they hanging on to their educations by a thread. Some of them had almost dropped out so that people like me could come in and feel like I mattered in a place that was not built for us.

Beto had joined me at that point, back from his travels to Brown and Harvard. The night had turned our breath to frost.

"I'm coming here," I told him. I was barely warm enough with my leather jacket and wool sweater from a thrift shop. "It's okay if you go somewhere else. I think I'll be happy here."

Beto's cheeks were pink from how warm he was in his Notre Dame coat. His Dodgers baseball hat was permanently turned backwards and marked his forehead when he'd take it off.

"All right, fea," he said. "That's cool. I still have to visit Cornell, see what's up there."

We were not trying to go to the same school. I was not dreaming of ways to catch a husband in college. I wanted to catch a fat job and house to match and that meant Williams, with or without Beto.

He’d liked Harvard a lot, he said, plus the name recognition was a real thing that meant unbelievable jobs and opportunities. On a visit to Cambridge, Beto had asked someone to photograph him on a set of library stairs. Sitting against the stark contrast of wide steps and the tall columns, he looked so small up there.

When we got home, I told people I was going to Williams and shortly after, he started saying he was going, too. I was surprised—hadn't the Ivy Leagues wooed him enough?

“Williams is giving me the most money,” he said.

“Me, too,” I said. “Brown wouldn't match the scholarship. You know they're only going to give me less later on.” Some of the students at Williams told me to negotiate my financial aid award against the schools who'd offered me admission. It was the first lesson that Williams students taught me and that I'd share forever after with anyone who would listen.

I didn't want people to think we were going to Williams together—that wasn't the kind of girl I was, easily swayed by someone else's choices. And so, ever since then, I make sure to tell people that I sent in my acceptance letter to Williams first.

Chapter 22: Graduation, 1994

Dad took a photo of me before we headed out to graduation. In it, my eyes were open wider than normal, and my lips were clenched in a smile. I was standing next to our only bookcase which displayed our leather-bound *World Book Encyclopedias* and my brothers' action figures, each thing accumulating dust that came in through the front door.

Amá had ironed my maroon gown with perfect creases. She was standing in the background of that photo wearing a red pantsuit. Her too-tight perm had already faded. Her face was puffy because menopause made her retain twenty pounds of water. Her head was turned down, not chin up the way she normally faced the world. She was arranging a bouquet of red roses in cellophane; they looked trapped, all bunched together like that. Maybe Amá was trying to protect their petals from getting bruised.

My English teachers gave me two medals, one inscribed with the word “English” and the other said “Literature.” At first, I thought my teachers were giving me the left-over awards once Beto swept many categories. I had grown used to being next in line after him. It was unclear how I got picked for the medals. I stuffed those thoughts away and got psyched. The ones I'd earned included a gold-colored stole for lifetime membership in the California Scholarship Federation and a medal for having a 4.08 grade point average.

If I had worn all of the medals and pins, I would have looked like a five-star general, so I only wore the gold CSF stole. I didn't want to make the other students feel bad. There were enough bad feelings going around.

Rudy was not going to graduate with us because he'd lost interest in school once his girlfriend moved away to Florida. Moses and Eva were in high gear with their plans to move in together and were working full-time retail jobs at the mall. The only other friend from our group going directly to college was Homer, who was headed to the University of Pittsburgh. For the most part, Beto and I were on our own and would hang out at the student body office during lunch. It felt like every time Beto or I received another award or kudos, our friends were happy for us, but it started to feel like bragging. That's not who I wanted to be with these friends. I wanted to keep them, not push them away. Still, I wanted nothing more than to escape my house, which was getting increasingly dangerous.

A month before graduation, Amá had called me out to the yard. Dad was about to hit her.

"*Vickie*, *ven aquí que tu papa me quiere pegar.*"

Dad had picked up a broom handle and was ready to whack Amá with it. Just in time, Beto and I came out to see what was going on. Dad was through with Amá's meddling, her constant shit talking about his *puta* and how she needed more money for bills. His accounting skills were faltering. There were too many debits that he couldn't pay down.

Dad threw the broom handle on the floor; it landed at the foot of the lemon tree, which was starting to rot, but we didn't know it yet. Amá was sitting under the loquat tree outside the kitchen window with her arms crossed.

"*Andale, cabron*," Amá called after Dad as he walked away. "Thought you were a big shot, huh?" Dad stomped across the cement into the parking lot side of the apartments on Gage Avenue. He was probably going to walk off his rage by talking with the guys at their meeting, drinking coffee out of Styrofoam cups.

Dad was pissed off at her for writing a letter to his other woman. Amá had told her that Dad had three kids and a wife. Dad had told her that his wife had died and that he only had two kids, which meant he was leaving one of us out of the picture. The other woman was no *pendeja*, unlike Amá claimed, and broke it off with him when she got the news.

A few days later, things between them got so much worse.

"Look what your Dad did to me," Amá said.

There were bruises on her shoulders and back the size of plums. Doña Marta even came to the house to take photos because Amá was ready to kick him out of the house. Amá was threatening to file a restraining order, to divorce him finally after 19 years of his demeaning comments, his threats, and his other family.

I was relieved that Dad was finally going to be gone and would stop leaving us all the time. My brothers and I wouldn't have to listen to them fight and have Amá take her anger out on us. Finally, it was going to be quiet at home.

A few days later she went to court, and with the help a friend's daughter, who translated the document for her, that girl of twenty helped Amá fill out the order. Gone was the Vickie who would translate for her parents when her teachers could not speak Spanish. Gone was the girl who had registered other people's parents to vote. I thought I could change the world, but I just couldn't help my parents.

I could not, for the life of me, help my own mother. All I could do was cover my eyes to what Dad's hands were doing those last few weeks of school. I did it just so I could finish and give them something to be proud of.

When the judge asked Amá what she planned to do if the order was approved, Amá also had nothing to say. She came home and told us at dinner that she didn't go through with it. I let out a sigh and slammed the bedroom door. My brothers might have been relieved or maybe they also had on blindfolds.

Ever since I could remember, Jesse wanted to be a policeman. I bet he just wanted to protect Amá like I did. I doubt Dad apologized to her. He took off for a few days then came back and had nothing to say. They couldn't be in the same room. Dad had been sleeping on the living room couch for three years by then.

We went on with the business of work and school. To prove it all happened, the photos are somewhere at Amá's house in a box, but not near my graduation pictures. We all wanted things to go back to normal, even if normal was terrible. Better the devil you know than the one you don't.

Chapter 23: Two Letters, summer

A cream-colored envelope with a rough exterior arrived in August with my roommate assignment. Two girls were going to share a suite with me, three adjoining rooms with a common room to share. The sheet included their names and phone numbers, one was from New York City and the other from a town outside of Pennsylvania town I'd never heard of.

I couldn't picture Pennsylvania—what was over there, the Liberty Bell? Cheese steaks? I wouldn't have to wonder for very long. The girl called my house.

The phone was passed to Amá's, then to me. I heard her trying to figure out who could be calling and only speaking English. No one called the house who didn't speak Spanish unless they were the Census or a wrong number.

"*Quien habla*?" Amá asked. She tilted her head and laughed a little; it embarrassed her that she did not understand the caller. But why should she have felt bad? She was in her house. In Los Angeles County with 3.3 million Latinos, not some backwater town in the land of cheese steaks.[viii]

I took the phone and heard: "Your family doesn't know how to speak English very well, do they?"

She giggled because she was joking. She didn't know shit about me or my family, but she was already making jokes about how we spoke English.

"Uh, what do you mean?" I gave the girl a chance to redeem herself.

"Oh, it's just that no one could tell me if I had to the wrong number or if you were home. Funny, huh?"

I bet she also asked me where I was "really from." The way she talked to me made me feel like I was a descendant of Speedy Gonzalez, the cartoon mouse dressed in a peon's clothing and straw hat. He would scurry and hide, outsmarting the cat every episode. Speedy Gonzales was someone else's idea about who I was and what I was worth. He was Dad's favorite cartoon.

Lauren droned on about her summer travels somewhere boring like the Capital to look at monuments. Lame as that was, it was still a completely inaccessible idea for my family. Our last vacation ended in Amá having to cross the border illegally.

She sang in the chamber choir (whatever that was) and she was the oldest girl, too. "Don't we have so much in common?"

"I don't sing," I said. "But we both got into Williams, so we must be alike somehow." To finish the conversation, I had to disbelieve the Speedy Gonzales feeling (*Andale, andale*, Vickie!). I did like I always did with white people making me feel like an idiot for being myself: I stuffed down the heat of shame coursing in my blood and played nice.

No, I was not bringing a microwave. No, thanks, I'd have to skip out on sharing one. No, thanks, but I would see her in the fall. Lauren was not rich; just rich to me. That was all she needed to be to introduce me to the poverty I would drag around on my shoes at Williams.

First, I had to get there. My family's finances, so low that they ensured the financial aid I needed, were standing in the way of me getting on a real plane. The plane ticket from Los Angeles to Albany, New York, the closest airport to Williams cost $450 plus tax. I had received $250 from the local beauty pageant where I was a runner-up. That tiny bit of cash went straight to Williams. Whatever extra money I saved up from my retail job was maybe $300. Where would I get the money for a ticket? The only way I could: Amá.

Amá borrowed money from a sister she cared when she had typhoid. That sister, Tía Maria, lived in Mexico City and had married a man with a *carrera*, a career in education. Amá asked to borrow $500 from them. Always grateful to Amá for taking care of her, Tía Maria helped us, of course. Amá's kind care-giving skills paid off for me, even if she hated it sometimes.

My *tía's* husband was a principal at a small private school in the middle-working class suburbs of Mexico City. He made good money and Amá knew she could count on them without worrying what her extended family thought about her. Another envelope arrived at our house.

My *tíos* mailed a certified letter, a fat blue envelope that arrived a few weeks before I was supposed to move. The hand-made card read "*Felicidades*" in multi-colored crayon, red and orange daisies swirled on the cover. On the inside was a note of congratulations. It looked like that's all that was in it, but my *tíos* had to get clever with the Mexican post office (many envelopes with money never made it to their destinations).

To make it seem as if it was just a regular card of congratulations, my *tía* made a fake lining in the card. In there that she put five, crisp $100 bills.

"*Tía*," I said on the phone. "I don't know how we can repay you."

"Don't worry, *mija*," she replied. "*Ahí cuando puedan*."

Amá was the one who somehow paid them back.

Chapter 24: First Day, 1994

Part I

"*No te preocupes,"* I told Amá. "The college is very safe. There aren't any *cholos* in Massachusetts." Amá smiled and nodded. She was already crying. Whenever she cried and tried to talk, a bubble of air got surfaced in her voice, as if she were drowning.

"Call us when you get to school," Amá said. The jet fuel at the airport terminal smelled like burning plastic. I must have hugged my brothers and father goodbye, but I don't remember.

"*Si, Mami*," I said. "Don't worry. I can take care of myself."

"*Ojo, chata.*" Dad pointed at one of his eyes and showed me how to look alive just in case a group of thugs was about to surround me. "Always keep one eye on the street and the other one watching for *locos*." It was because of him that no *pendejo* ever surprised me with a cat-call. I always saw it coming.

Once on the plane, I could see them from my window seat: Amá wiped at her eyes and blew her long nose into a tissue; Dad twisted the ends of his black mustache; Jesse and Chalo played a little punching game to distract them from Amá's tears. I wondered if when I used to stand over the Long Beach Freeway, I ever felt like each car was abandoning me over and over again. As the plane pulled onto the tarmac, I was the one leaving. Like Amá and me on that bridge when I was a girl, all they could do was watch me go.

Part II

I already knew Albany Airport was tiny, but on my second trip, I noticed that the baggage claim was a stone's throw from the door I'd just walked through from the plane. The single terminal was empty except for me and a white janitor. Then, two young brown men walked in through the sliding glass doors and smiled.

They were so tall, much taller than Beto! One of them was thin with tight curly hair neatly piled in a small pompadour on his head. He was paler than me and when he said Franklin was his name, I noticed a slight Spanish accent. When I asked where he was from he said, “New York City.” He must have noticed I had more questions so he added, “I'm Puerto Rican.” Franklin must have been accustomed to knowing that, when people asked where he was from, they meant “What are you?” I was learning to do the same.

“I'm from Dallas,” said Bobby, who was Black. He was a football player and an education major. His shoulders were as broad as his smile. He carried my huge suitcase like it was a napkin. He easily put away my bags in the school van and off we drove into the night.

“Welcome to beautiful Albany.” We passed dozens of single-family, wood-sided houses on the side of the two-lane road. They were spare and spaced out like bad teeth. Despite the stench of dead pig, Bell Gardens was so much prettier; at least we grew geranium gardens in old tires and coffee cans. Albany's trees were ashy gray and the

broken chairs and oxidized bicycles on their lawns just looked like trash.

“Did you guys borrow the van from school?”

“The school has a fleet of vans it lends to student organizations,” said Bobby. “Since we work for the Windows on Williams program you're here for, they let us come get you.”

“For free?”

“Kind of,” said Franklin. “Someone's account gets charged, but the students aren't the ones paying.” There was gold in the purple mountains.

The WOW program was a kind of Summer Bridge for students of color which let us come to campus early and meet each other before the other students arrived. Since I had nowhere to stay that night and the dorms were still closed, Franklin said I could stay in his room.

He gave me a room key to his single in Morgan Hall, which looked like a modified brick castle. The building faced Route Two, the only main street that traversed Williams. Cars rarely passed by on the road by the time we got in at nine o'clock.

They carried my stuff up two flights of stairs. I had stuffed everything I owned into a baby blue plastic suitcase so big that I could have fit inside it. Packed tightly were: my clothes and shoes, *Woman Hollering Creek* and *Catcher in the Rye*, four diaries, and new blank notebooks. In the front pocket of my red backpack was a copy of *Louder Than Bombs,* a tape Homer had made for me. It was next to my calendar, which was taped over in anti-Prop. 187 political cartoons.

Franklin's room had a Puerto Rican flag draped over an entire wall. I never had to show people that I was Mexican-American in Los Angeles. Living in Bell Gardens was like being the Puerto Rican flag and did not need to be acknowledged in the same way Franklin's flag demanded to be seen. I was swimming in my people. I didn't know I was in water.

“Thank you for everything,” I said. “I don't know where I would have stayed otherwise.”

“No worries,” said Bobby. “We got you.”

“Call me if you need anything, a'ight?” Franklin gave me a number on a little piece of paper. “And read this if you get bored.”

Franklin handed me his copy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. I had arrived in my very own Macondo where I too would discover ice.

Part III

The leaves were starting to turn—a spectacular moment in the Berkshire Mountains. The hills were dotted with reds, yellows, oranges and purples from the changing leaves of the moosewood, red, and sugar maples. There were birch trees in shades from white to black, and oaks and sassafras—trees names that I had to look up in the *New York Times*. My homeland of freeways and jacarandas was three thousand miles away. I was so relieved to be alone.

I had waited most of my teenage life to walk onto the covers of admissions magazines, and there I was, strolling down Spring Street in jeans and a gold wool cardigan the color of the leaves. A strange feeling took over me: I was relaxed. There was nothing that I had to do that day but get my student identification and feed myself. I didn't have to go register surly people to vote in a hot parking lot, or try and ignore my parents' trying to kill each other. I was free.

When I walked out that morning, the floors of Morgan were spotless. I was thrilled not to hear a single car with deafening bass rolling by, or the incessant *rancheras* that played in Amá's kitchen. Those sounds were replaced by chirping birds and a car passing on Route Two every few minutes.

My penny loafers were meant to walk along quiet college streets in the preppy motherland. I thought that the preppy style of dress I'd copied from Claudia and the pages of *Town & Country* distinguished me from all the other kids in Bell Gardens. Of course, there were the ska kids, the punks, and the rebels who favored pompadours and drove Ford Mustangs, but they were the exception. The rest of the kids in Bell Gardens seemed to only listen to top forty music and had a penchant for over-priced sneakers. It only took a few minutes to walk Spring Street in Williamstown to realize what the hell I really looked like.

Downtown Williamstown was two blocks long, three if I wanted to be generous. There was a newsroom that sold embossed, single-subject notebooks with the college insignia for a whopping four dollars apiece. There was an antique shop that was one of

two businesses in a brick, three-story building. On the west side of street there was a pizza place, a sports equipment shop that sold fleece sweaters and all of the college gear I could want. I stopped in to look at a deli that sold knishes the size of hockey pucks, which I had just seen for the first time in the previous store.

It must have been a weekday because I only saw a few other people, mainly older men in their seventies wearing wool cardigans and black shoes, otherwise known as the same fucking thing I was wearing. I did a double-take the next time a *viejito* got out of his Volvo station wagon wearing my outfit. On them, the outfit looked natural, but it was natural on me, too. Or it had been when I was back home. What else would I wear if not conservative button-ups and Dad's old ties?

My fashion doppelgangers must have been way past retirement, leisurely buying the newspaper and not in any kind of hurry. I wanted to believe that the preppy look of leather loafers and polos was timeless, my sweater was starting to feel tight on my shoulders.

When I called Amá I only told her I got in all right. When she asked if it was cold, I told her it was balmy; that my sweater was enough. What I wanted to ask her was: "Did I come all the way from Los Angeles just to look like a *viejito*?" That stroll threw me into an identity crisis. Who was I now that I didn't have to prove I wasn't just a regular Mexican student? How was I going to be special at the best school in the country?

Chapter 25: Hungry, 1994

Freshman year I was starving. My work-study job was at Baxter Dining Hall. The breakfast shift began by getting up in the dark freeze of morning in a dorm with green slate floors and dark wood walls. When Williams was attended mostly by rich white men, our rooms were where the help slept. It was only fitting that was where work-study students lived.

I'd drag myself out of bed to wipe people's spit from forks and scrape egg leftovers into trash bins. That shift made me so nauseous that some days I would feel food rising in my throat before I even walked into the kitchen.

When I called home once a week, sometimes Dad was around. I told him about my job once to which he probably said, “See, chata! Now you know what a real job is like.”

My brothers sounded normal on the phone, but didn't have much to say. Amá on the other hand hardly told me any jokes or gossip about the neighbors. There were no updates on restraining orders or any more fights. It was probably for the best. There was nothing I could do from so far away.

The conveyor belt brought in my peers' food trays: bagels dunked into milk glasses, chunks of oatmeal drowned in tater tots and ketchup slop. The sulfur of the egg remains got all over my hair and would not come off, no matter how much I scrubbed.

Students pushed their trays along the metal shelf in Baxter to collect their meals. They looked at the food and not at me. I wore a cream and purple baseball hat purchased just for that job. It was the opposite effect of the lipstick that transformed me when I tried out for cheerleading. My work hat made me invisible. I don't know why I was worried about serving my peers; I don't think they could see me.

Some of the football players would stack chocolate milk glasses with bits of egg inside, into a pyramid and leave them on the tables. I complained to the shift boss and football God. “Bobby, what's up with your boys making such a big mess?”

“Don't mind them,” he said. “Everybody around here thinks they have servants.”

The combination of burning hot water, industrial soap, and egg dregs made me gag every few minutes. Breakfast had one bright spot—there was an unlimited supply of a sugar-charmed, purple horseshoe cereal I could ever imagine. My family could not afford name-brand cereals, and so, if I did eat breakfast, I headed straight for those Lucky Charms.

Serving my peers started to feel terrible since I had to scoop their potatoes one minute and sit beside them in class the next. Bobby was right—students would leave everything for us to clean up; it was all me and the white folks from North Adams who worked there full time.

Nauseous from the washroom stink all over my clothes, I'd go back to my room in Sage Hall to shower and get ready for my classes for which I had stayed up late completing the readings—two hundred pages a week, sometimes several books at once.

The most I'd had to read was 500 pages over an entire summer in high school.

A girl with a big appetite and ridiculous metabolism, I had my share of the burgers, fries, and soft serve readily available during lunch and dinner. By the time ten o'clock rolled around and I was still working, I got hungry all over again. I was either in Beto's room reading and hanging out with his hall-mates, or in my room reading alone. My single had the charm of a Georgian-style building erected in 1923, with molded window ledges, but the windows were old and drafty. The best thing about that dorm were the common rooms, unlocked on every floor and stocked with snacks like pretzels, chips, licorice, and always, popcorn. My grumbling stomach alerted me to the presence of these snacks when walking by. I was saving up for my plane tickets and for my books for the following semester, so buying snacks was out of the question.

One night, after reading Foucault late into the night, my stomach was growling like crazy. Someone had made popcorn down the hall and ordered pizza in the upstairs suite. I tiptoed out of my room and into the shared living rooms in the suites near mine and kept the lights off. Almost without fail, each room had all kinds of care package contents.

I approached the pretzels carefully, praying to God no one would walk in and ask me who I was and what I wanted with their food. I stuffed a handful of pretzels into my mouth and made my way to another room before anyone showed up. In another room, I pilfered chocolate chip cookies, even taking a couple for the road. I snuck bites in barely-lit stairwells, making sure no one was around. I did that a few times, but felt guilty about

it. Plus, it only satiated my hunger for a while.

"*Te mando tamalitos*," Amá said over the phone. I had told her that all the other kids were getting food and goodies in their mailboxes. Of course Amá wanted to send me tamales from home; that was the kind of care package she could make me, one with several full meals inside.

The first time Amá mailed *tamales de frijol* they arrived spoiled, blue mold forming on the husks. My mother's elegant handwriting smeared where the tamales sweat little bits of condensation. She sent the bean *tamales* after freezing them the next time after that, and with more success: only a few tamales went in the trash. The rest made it in time for me to microwave them at the Multicultural Center, which was where I hung out and watched cable with other students.

Since we didn't have a microwave in my entry at Sage Hall, I defrosted the *tamales* on the radiator of our common for a day. In the morning, the frost on the street was everywhere, but at least I had *tamales* in the Berkshires. I was less hungry that week.

I soon figured out that there was plenty of food at Williams. With the help of other also hungry students, I began attending lectures and talks where—surprise!—they had knishes, strawberries, fancy cheeses I could not name, and crackers for days.

Then there was the guy with the Tupperware. Ray was tall, lean, from the West Indies by way of the Bronx. There were a handful of lovely boys from Manhattan and parts thereabouts with Caribbean parents and who—like Ray—wore Timberland hiking boots. The boys were dreamy but I was too square (and Beto was my boyfriend) to talk to

them like *that*.

At lunch one day, I noticed that Ray had his backpack with him. Most of us would leave our backpacks at the doorway to the Baxter cafeteria. The first time I saw people drop their bags like that I'd had an overwhelming urge to rifle through the bags for cash. That must have been the survivor part of me. I refrained from doing it, but I always thought about it.

Ray had packed his plate with chicken tenders several times, going back for refills. A friend of Beto's, Ozaki from Brooklyn who spoke of himself in third person and played ball with Ray, noticed me watching the tenders on his friend's plate.

"Yo, Vickie, don't stare too long," he whispered. "The lunch ladies might catch on."

"My bad," I said, already sounding like I wasn't from California. "What's he doing with all that chicken?"

"Ozaki will tell you later," he said.

In the safety of the Black Student Union, a gorgeous blue-gray house that the Black alumni helped restore and furnish with several computers, Ozaki told me the deal.

"You ever get hungry at night?" he said. We were sitting upstairs on the couches by the cable television set. I'm positive The Notorious B.I.G. was rapping in a video about reading *Word Up! Magazine*.

"All the time!" I said. "Why?"

"That's what Ray is doing with those chicken tenders," he said. "Ray brings a big

ole Tupperware tub on chicken tender night to freeze them. That way, when he's hungry, he can have something to eat."

It was genius! I should have wised up sooner. I didn't need to be hungry. I just needed to be clever. From then on, I would save a little something in my pocket, cookies, bananas, whatever fit. I got good at knowing when all the food events were happening. When I became a monitor for the Multicultural Center, I could even warm up the canned *gandules* in the cupboards, thanks to other formerly hungry students at Williams. They kept me fed in more ways than that.

Chapter 26: Coats, 1994

The coat Amá had bought me for $40 took up most of the space in my closet. Amá got it off the rack at Big Five Sporting Goods next to the Food-4-Less Market. It was a hunter green with a maroon lining, stuffed with cotton batting. It might have been thick enough for 50-degree foggy mornings back home, but cotton lining was not going to cut the Massachusetts mustard. If it were not for the students in Vista, I might have frozen to death in the Berkshires.

The coat was too bulky to wear during the first snowfall. It also looked like it cost $40, the seams were little crooked along the wrists, and I had thanked Amá for it. Telling her how I really felt about it would have broken her heart. She had washed it before I left and two months later in November, when I opened the closet door, I could smell the purple flower-clean of Amá's fabric softener.

The day before my first Thanksgiving away, Vista, the pan- Latino student group at Williams, took a photo before we went to a conference in New York City. Vista was made up of about fifteen to twenty students, mostly working-class, who organized jam-packed Latino heritage months. Being out in the Berkshire boondocks, I couldn't just rush to the closest Mexican-American student groups because there weren't enough to form one.

Instead, Latinos from across the country flocked to Vista and exchanged preferences for how to best prepare plantains (fried, of course). Between the Texans and Californians, we expressed great shock at the color of each other's *menudo* (red or white? Red of course). There weren't enough of us to be picky.

The photo shows a bit of snow on the ground by Chapin Hall, a brick auditorium with four white columns out front and grand cement steps. The first snow had fallen the day before. When I watched a flurry of flakes from inside my room, I ran out in my brown leather jacket and jeans to the Freshman Quad. Homer had given me the jacket, which was too small on him but enormous on me. I jumped around in the fresh drift. The snowflakes were light and soft to the touch. *It's not so cold*, I thought. *My leather jacket is just fine!* Certainly, a thin leather jacket would suffice for my first trip to New York City in late November.

The school van was parked behind Beto and I, who stood with Fernando, our friend from Youth LULAC and Bell Gardens. Fernando's lips were turned down as if he was going to cry any moment. He was doing an extra year at a prep school before he went to college and was so homesick (he cried into his mashed potatoes at Thanksgiving dinner the next night). The ten other students were all shapes and colors, from El Paso beige to Puerto Rico tawny, from petite Irish-Mexican blondes to Yaqui-tall brunettes. Whatever our natural color, we were a shade paler by then.

The Latino student group at Columbia University hosted the Thanksgiving

conference for the East Coast Chicana/o Student Forum, also known as *Pachanga*. The gathering was for Latinos who could not afford to fly home during the holiday. The gatherings turned into conferences about the state of diversity (or lack thereof) and Latino Studies on our campuses. But they were also parties with students from all over filling the room like a *quinceañera* without the family drama. At Williams, we only had two Latino organizations: the International Club and Vista.

The International Club was for rich Latin Americans who wanted nothing to do with hunger strikes or anything “political” (like mass deportation, but whatever, they had papers). It was also for super rich students from places like Venezuela who got zero financial aid for a school that cost $25,000 a year. Vista was a small, but efficient group that was an integral part of the Hunger Strike two years prior to my arrival. When there were follow-up meetings on Latino studies matters with the college president, the group shrank to five, including Mireya who was part of the leadership.

By the time we entered the Bronx through the Hudson Parkway, the gunmetal color of the buildings, the rushing pace, and the possibilities of the place really sank in. Beto and I couldn't wait to get out and walk around to bookstores and maybe a museum or two. More than anything, I could not wait to see the Macy’s Parade up close.

A mustachioed student, Nestor from Carpinteria near Santa Barbara, drove our van into Manhattan. As soon as we got out of the car, the icy wind snuck into my jacket, which I zipped up immediately. The next morning, after sleeping on someone's couch in a cramped living room (just like home!), Beto, me, and our Vista friends stood on

Amsterdam Avenue, regrouping for the dinner the conference was throwing that night. Beto, Fernando, and I headed to the parade by train. I was ready in my flannel button-up and leather jacket to take on the parade and watch it all morning long. After the brisk warmth from our walk wore off, I was freezing. My jeans felt thin as paper every time the wind picked up. My nose and fingertips were frigid to the touch.

“Do some jumping jacks, fea,” Beto said.

“Dude, she's right,” said Fernando. “Let's get out of here as soon as this shit is over.”

The other parade-watchers standing next to us were thoroughly prepared with the puffiest jackets, the thickest wool beanies, lawn chairs, and army blankets. I hoped that all that warmth was making them sweat and wished one of them would hear my cries and throw me one, but, to no avail.

Not Snoopy, not Superman, not even Garfield, my favorite lazy cat could made a difference. I couldn't feel my toes. The temperature had been in the upper forties that morning and had warmed up to the lower fifties by eleven, near-freezing weather for an Angeleno. Beto tried to heat up my arms and hold me, but it wasn’t enough. We gave up before Santa Claus rolled by and sought refuge inside the biggest department store in the world.

From the outside, Macy's was a gleaming building of glass and concrete molding like cake frosting. Once inside, the hot air hit us in the face. As we walked further in and heard the season's first Christmas music, the inside of Macy's looked just like any other

crappy department store. The white linoleum floors were streaked black in some places. There were candy wrappers on the floor near the dressing rooms, too. "*Bien cochino,"* Amá would have said and would have wanted someone to clean it up. Beto saw the disappointment in my face and got us out of there.

When we got back to the cramped dorm where we stayed, I piled on two sweaters to survive the rest of the night.

Walking to dinner later, Myrna, a Williams student from Miami asked me where my coat was. She was taller and paler than me. Her wavy hair curled around her face even when she brushed it back. Myrna had on a camel-colored wool coat that went down to her calves. She'd wrapped a navy wool scarf around her neck like a knot. When I hugged her hello her coat was enviably soft and I hugged her longer than I should have.

"Dude, in L.A., this jacket used to be enough," I told her, the wind cutting my cheeks.

"Ay, fea," said Beto, "I told you to bring something warmer." He was in a knee-length Notre Dame coat, a hoodie, and two T-shirts layered underneath.

"Your coat is not much better," Myrna told Beto. "When we get back to campus, I'll take you guys to the outlets for real winter coats." Myrna was Nicaraguan and had a Mexican-Anglo boyfriend from L.A., Tomas. He wasn't with us that time. Tomas was from out in the Eagle Rock neighborhood, which might as well have been France it was so far from Bell Gardens.

The next day, Beto and a few of us from Vista went to say hello to an alumni,

Rahim, the tall slim man who first told me about the Hunger Strike at Williams. We went to Brooklyn on the train and it took forever to get there from Columbia. The subway smelled like urine and grime, but the scent of roasting chestnuts and peanuts drifted into the platforms where we stood. Myrna had probably lent me a hat and scarf. With my extra sweaters on I was solid. A rat could have walked up to me and flashed a knife and I would looked it in the eye like, and told it to scram.

The buildings were brick and much shorter in Brooklyn. They were so darling and had so much character and charm, like the three-story walk-ups from *Sesame Street*. Rahim let us inside, and one flight up was a narrow hallway that led to a living room at the end. The bedrooms were off the hallway and the walls were covered with dark wood molding.

"So this is what you get when you graduate from Williams," I told Beto. Rahim worked at a nonprofit but I didn't know what he did day-to-day. Living in a beautiful flat was still a fantasy to me. I had no idea about first and last month's rent, credit checks, moving vans, and how I would ever get my family to do any of it. The job Rahim had sounded like it paid the bills, and so that's the kind of job I'd look for when it was time. I forgot that I was also supposed to help my family get a new house. *That would be later*, I thought. *Once I get on my feet*. Williams had taught me to put myself first. I would become an expert at it.

"Not bad," said Beto, not really impressed. His uncles had bigger houses because they worked in construction and they had great credit. The flat looked comfortable; the

soft blue couch fabric was worn to the touch. The living room smelled like record-store incense and there were a few African masks hanging tastefully here and there. There was a big picture window that looked out at the street.

Mireya had told me about her old roommate's family "apartment" on the upper west side. It had a doorman and the elevator opened up to a whole floor. "There was a fucking Picasso in the living room, Vick." She had shaken her head in disbelief. "I never went back there; it was too weird." My family had a 3D Virgen de Guadalupe clock in our living room. At least Mary could protect us when there were earthquakes. What could poor Picasso do in case of natural disaster?

I didn't want to live in the kind of place that *Town & Country* featured with marble bathtubs and views of The City (I mean I did want a place like that, but not "for reals," as we say). I could live in a place like Rahim's flat, one with bookshelves built into the walls and creaky wooden stairs, nice enough but not too flashy with lots of light and hardwood floors.

Back at Williams after New York, Myrna and Tomas made good on their coat promise. Beto and I bought the cheapest winter coats at an outlet in Burlington, Vermont. I'd saved up some money from my dining hall job and spent a little less than $200 on it.

"This is so expensive!" I complained to Myrna.

"Believe me, you'll be glad you bought it," she said. "It's so cold that your nose hairs and *mocos* freeze when you walk to class."

My new coat had a waterproof, hunter green outer layer, a color I finally accepted

as inevitable at Williams. It had no shape and made me look like a plantain leaf *tamal*. The down-filled coat liner was quilted in a color Myrna called “aubergine.” It looked purple to me.

“And you'll need waterproof hiking boots, too,” added Tomas.

“Your toes will break off if you just wear your little loafers,” said Myrna eyeing mine.

Beto and I exchanged a look, as if to say, “What the hell did we do coming here?” I smiled. Williams was the place the freeway ended for me. There was no looking back. Far from the melting-hot sun of Bell Gardens, the worst Williams had to offer had not yet killed me. My new coat left no room for the old one. I shoved Amá's gift under my bed in a plastic bag. No matter how far I pushed it away, the scent from Amá's flower-scented softener remained in my room.

Chapter 26: Dancing, 1994

Aurora looked at me like I was a freak of nature. “How is it possible no one taught you how to dance *cumbias* in L.A.?”

“My family is small?” It was my best excuse. “Besides, *cumbias* are on the radio all the time, so why learn to do something that’s natural?” The places where I should have learned to dance were *quinceañeras* or big weddings featuring serve-yourself tin pans. It was usually an older sister, girlfriend, or cousin that would teach the basic moves and I had none of those kinds of women for dancing. It's very easy to take who you are for granted, when all you want is to be different.

We were standing with Aurora and Iris in Currier Ballroom, decorating for the big party to end Latino Heritage Month. Aurora was a junior, a Mexican-American from Pilsen's public schools in Chicago who was going to teach me the moves of my people. Currier Ballroom, with its grand white marble staircase, its grand piano and high ceilings, the wood floors and all wood paneling was The Place to have a student-sponsored party. Facing east was a wall of French doors that looked out onto a small green lawn in the fall and fresh white snow the rest of the time. Beto, Aurora, Iris, and I had rolled up the carpets and moved the furniture with the help of other Vista members. Aurora hit play on the boom box to start the lesson.

Aurora was a history major with arms so short that when she turned me, I would bump her shoulder. Her arms made her resemble a Chicana T-Rex: just as angry but not

able to quite reach the books at the top of the shelf. The first sound on the *cumbias* were the trumpets, then the cowbell and conga kept time. The piano kept a melody with the singing about a *cadenita*, a chain Carmen had given the singer that he'd lost.

"*Carmen*," the singer crooned, "*se me perdió la cadenita*." When the song would come on the radio back home, Amá would sigh really loudly and say, "*Puto nombrecito.*" Dad's other woman was named Carmen, too. From the photo Amá had found of her, I didn't see anything she should be jealous of: she was plump where she wasn't square. She had short hair the color of a dirty penny.

"This one's easy," said Aurora, "Just side to side."

Beto got it right away. His uncles were big dancers and would play *cumbias* at their holiday parties. I watched Aurora's feet and copied what she was doing. It was my natural instinct to mimic and that's how I learned how to do everything, after all.

"That's it, girl!" said Aurora.

Iris, the exceptionally tall aspiring lawyer from Puerto Rico was there to roll up the carpets. She had stayed for the show. She'd helped me get a job at library instead of the dining hall. Everywhere I turned at Vista meetings there was someone who had helped me adjust and fit in, even if it was just with each other.

"Not too bad," said Iris grinning, "but can you *boogaloo*?"

"Ay, that's too advanced!" said Aurora. "Don't confuse them!"

The lesson was going well. If I combined the side to side move and listened to the beat, I got the basic *cumbia* step. That and following the lead of the other dancer is what

makes for good moves. All I had to do was try it out at that night at the party. In that same lesson she taught me the basic salsa steps.

I had to go three thousand plus miles away, a two-day trip on multiple modes of transit, and enroll at an elite private college to learn to dance the humble *bailes* of my people.

I practiced in Beto's room. We even had a little rhythm going. That night at the party, we'd hired a deejay from North Adams, the mill town down Route Two with high rates of teen pregnancy and high school drop-outs. That town had a bad reputation for being poor, and knowing that rep so well, I forgave them. Plus the deejay was on fire! He had swirling lights, a fog machine, the works. It seemed like every Latino student in the region was there, the bodies huddled close and frenzied.

When the Oscar de Leon songs came on, I grabbed Beto's hand and we wiggled our way onto the dance floor. We stuck to the basics, the simple salsa moves, like a *cumbia* but with a hop in the middle of the step. Beto even spun me around a couple times. Iris spotted us and gave a wink. I'd shimmied into a stretchy lace dress I'd bought at the swap meet. The way the spandex fit around me gave me confidence. It made me feel like I had a lot more dancing to do.

"Who taught you those moves?" Aurora joked, passing us with her dance partner. Beto and I pointed at her and bowed down. We blended in, like the other students. That was one time I didn't need to stand out and be special. I was happy being good enough.

Chapter 27: Assed Out, 1994

I thought a toga party would be fun, so I borrowed navy blue sheets off a bed and off I went with a friends to see what it was like.

It was my first exotic outing: a toga party sponsored by god-knows-who at Dodd House, the old Williams Inn. My friend and I tied sheets at the shoulder and left our pants and shirts underneath. My date was another Mexican-American girl who looked South Asian, her skin much darker than mine. We walked over to the party on a crisp fall night.

Because we were in the middle of some pretty mountains, I felt safe walking alone at night. If there was no place to buy tortillas, then there weren't enough people in the world that I should worry about. It's a funny kind of math, but one that made sense at the time. I'd walked to school my whole life and had been harassed by countless old and young men and for precisely this reason, I did not wear tight-fitting clothing. I was a linear thinker: tight clothes equal dirty old men, but I was unaware of the insidiousness of patriarchy and how it lurks regardless of the clothing worn.

Once inside the party, the first thing to let me know it would suck was Hootie and the Blowfish playing in the nearly empty living room. Everyone was crowded into the keg area, holding red plastics cups the room smelling of gamey white boys. The music wandered from of the Dave Matthews Band to Pink Floyd.

My friend and I walked through the party looking for people we might know, but didn't see anyone. I took a sip from the cup my friend handed me; at least the Tecate beers Dad had me taste had lemon and salt on them. The beer in my cup tasted like metal and had too much head on it. I held it in my hand like the accessory it was.

The party had been going on for an hour or so, but the beefy white boys and their leaner compatriots were already drunk. Baseball hats, tipsy blondes and brunettes yelled over all of it and drank themselves to happiness. After not seeing friends and zero dancing, we decided to go home early. So much for the raging fun college parties from TV.

We walked out of the inn/dorm into the brisk night. Little did we know most parties at school would be that way. After a while, we figured that much and stopped going to any parties sponsored by any kind of team, or white people, the regular ones. The queer, brown, or international parties, those were still good.

As we crossed Route Two, just a block from our dorm, my friend noticed a group of five guys standing around on the other side of the street, whispering loudly.

I wasn't listening to them, but she was. "Watch, they're gonna try to scare us," she said. "They're so stupid." Right as one boy broke away from the pack and lunged toward us, my friend looked at him and said, "Boo!"

He gave us a mopey looks, disappointed that we were not scared and what's more, we were not impressed. We walked away laughing.

“Hey!” one of them said, a short black guy breaking off from the group of white boys. “Aren’t you supposed to be at home, in some kitchen right now?”

They were first year football players. I had to scoop mounds of egg and potato on their plates in the cafeteria. They were always together and some were wearing matching jerseys.

“Go away, jerk,” I said. The temperature dropped and I was sorry I didn't have a bigger jacket. I think my friend stayed quiet. She might have talked back to them, too, I’m not sure.

“Yeah,” said a different boy than the first. “Go make me a sandwich.”

He was a tall guy, six feet and built like a linebacker which he likely was. He wore gold-rimmed glasses that slid to the tip of his nose making him look like a bookish mole.

The mole laughed at his joke with his friends. We were a hundred feet from our front door, but it felt miles away.

My friend sped her pace. “Whatever, man,” I said. “Go away.”

I wanted to kick their teeth in. I had not left my family behind for the most expensive college in the country, allegedly number one, to be harassed by my peers. They were approaching Cleofilas threat levels. I had higher expectations for my Williams classmates, but it turns out, they did not. They were following us up a path to our dorm, trailing right behind us.

Both of the guys talking shit were Black, which was extra disappointing. Here we were, just a sprinkle of color in the middle of snowy campus and they were showing zero solidarity. The mole with glasses said something else that pissed me off, probably something about my cleaning abilities, maybe about my ass. If I had been a boxer like Dad, I would have laid his mole self out on the lawn. Instead I did the only thing I could: stopped walking and turned around to face him.

“Why don’t you just shut the fuck up?” I yelled.

He took a step and got in my face. He craned his neck and stooped down a bit to say this: “Why don’t you make me, bitch?”

He couldn’t just accept that their failed joke had gone too far. He had to hit me up like I was going to fight him. He didn't look as scary as the girl who punched me in high school. I called his bluff.

“Go to hell,” I said and turned away. Lo and behold there was no sucker punch, no shoving match. My friend and I slid our IDs through the building security lock and got inside. The mole stayed where he was and watched us walk away, his friends more than a few steps behind. I sensed that they knew this fool had gone too far and didn't need to back him up. I'm sure they thought it was a buzz kill.

My friend and I sat in her entry's common room, just a couple of gray couches and a poster of Jimi Hendrix. I paced back and forth trying to figure out what to do. My friend was pissed but not as much as I was. I wanted to go to the dean; she was not convinced exactly, but saw my point. In the end, I looked up their faces in the first year

phone book and went to the dean of students, who happened to be Latina. I'd heard mixed things about her support for students of color on campus. Sometimes she was an ally, sometimes she just followed protocol. I thought she might sympathize a little bit with us, yet she was all business in her gray suit and white blouse.

I wasn't expecting that she would believe me because I was Latina, but I did expect to have some sort of protection from having to face the guys again, like you see on TV when someone accuses someone else and you don't have to personally confront them, to re-live the whole thing all over again, and that's exactly what happened. This happens to so many other young women harassed or raped in college that it's no wonder rape goes severely unreported. In many cases, the men go unpunished while the women are humiliated publicly, forced to put up with questions about their character to the point transferring schools or committing suicide.

I should not have been surprised that those football guys were barely punished. I thought that, once I was admitted, Williams would provide me with certain guarantees, like physical safety, that my home in Los Angeles could not. I did not yet fully understand, but felt on an emotional level, that the school was not built with me in mind. Nor was it built for white women, Jews, people of color, or working-class people. It had just started admitting women in 1970 while the Jewish and Black students were not allowed in fraternities before that.

Sure, I deserved to not be insulted and threatened as I walked home from a party, but in L.A., when this and worse happened countless times, there was no building to

which I could complain. Oh, did a man drive by me in an alley and show me some limp dick in his lap? There was no school office for that. At Williams, there was an office. However, what happened in the dean's office was bad sketch comedy about diversity training.

It was a Williams fancy office, which meant expensive, but not too obvious: the chairs and tables a bit rough around the edges. The dean had a Spanish surname and her office was in Hopkins Hall, where financial aid was also located, an orange-red brick building with stone steps.

Her office had zero decorations that indicated her heritage. I wasn't expecting that it would, but I had the slightest hope that her being a Latina might help the meeting go well. What she did have was pictures of her with a mixed Weimaraner. The two guys who had hassled my friend and I sat in front of a long window. The view overlooked the lawn between Hopkins and the First Congregational Church, its white-washed wooden exterior was one of my favorite things when I'd arrived. It was just like the admissions brochure. I bought my first set of nesting dolls in that church's garage sale earlier that year. The doll was missing its tiniest self; somehow that small wooden doll made its way to my throat that day.

The more we talked across the table, the more it sounded like my friend and I had been confused, that our communication with those guys had just been unclear. The table was light-colored, blonde or tan, it might have been fake wood. The dean sat at the head of the table, the boys across from my friend and I. Unable to look at the guys directly, I

kept looking out the window at students walking past with their monogrammed L.L. Bean backpacks in all the shades of lame: poppy red, hunter green, and eggplant.

I was probably wearing a white, collared shirt, jeans, and penny loafers—my uniform that year. It made me think I was still my formidable self, the big 4.08 fish, but I was in an ocean with unknowable creatures at its bottom.

“Vickie, why don’t you tell us what happened that night?” The dean leaned back in her wing chair. I recounted the walk from the toga party and the chance meeting with those jerks as best I could.

I didn’t see the boys in the room at the toga party. With the tons of events happening on campus any given weekend (because there was nowhere else to go), plus all the drinking that happened regardless, the boys could have been anywhere before they saw us crossing Route Two.

Rob said, “I was just playing around. I don't hit girls.”

People liked to play around with me. I was an easy target: rule-loving, invested in what’s “right,” pranksters and haters alike lined up for a turn at knocking me off my post. A teacher I kept in touch with from elementary school told me, once I’d graduated from college that she used to sit me with the hyper-active boys in class because they listened to me. Maybe it was because I had a younger brother, or because I was the oldest living child of Mexican immigrants, but I didn’t notice that I was doing the teacher’s work for her. It’s too bad my magical powers over boys didn’t work when I told my college peers to shut the fuck up.

My friend answered the dean's questions, maybe made a joke or two. There was more discussion, which took an oddly funny tone.

"Terry, can you explain what 'assed out' means?" said the dean with a straight face.

"You know, 'assed out' means, 'too bad'," said Terry. "'Tough,' something like that."

"Well, I didn't know what it meant," I replied. "It sounded offensive."

Defending what I felt made it seem like I was uptight and making shit up, a pouting and demanding princess who made trouble when she felt the tiniest bit slighted. There was some truth to that, yet I put up with a lot more sexual harassment than that in L.A. on the daily. I just expected things would be different in college, that I would have recourse against *pendejos*. The "conflict resolution" in the room also didn't help. It was more of an effort to diffuse real fear and anger, a process that devalued the gravity of the situation.

Unfortunately, I don't have to imagine what other women have gone through with violations graver than ours. The meeting could have been used to discuss sexism, drinking too much, peer pressure, even what actually counted as a joke. Instead the guys were explaining slang while we felt like whiny girls.

Terry was wearing one of those insufferable fleece sweaters in a dark blue color. He lived in that thing and also worked at Baxter. He was probably as broke as I was. According to the yearbook Williams put out for first years, he had gone to a prep school somewhere in the northeast. Rob had too.

Everyone, it seemed to me, including the assholes across from me at the dean's office, had some prep school experience, weekends of leisure drinking with white girls I'd only seen in my magazines or on the beach, smelling of sunblock. I had no choice to quit or transfer. I made the choice to go to this school in the middle of nowhere, and it was the best, and I earned my way there, and no *pendejo* peer or administrator was going to take that away from me.

I knew who I was and had to believe I was more important than how I felt. I knew enough not to take the small pox blanket that was being handed to me.

The meeting ended in reluctant handshakes. Everyone was relieved that it was over. Either way, it was unsatisfying. The conversation had turned harassment into a somewhat culturally-based misunderstanding. I felt nauseous. It's true that the Dean made them apologize, but her method had defused my substantial rage. I had to recount, composed and articulate, any fear I felt at being told I didn't belong there, that I should have been in some kitchen where surely their mothers had been, too. I would have to serve those fuckers chicken nuggets and mashed potatoes for the rest of the year.

I doubt the event went on their records.

My friend from El Paso and I stopped hanging out. No more toga parties for me

or any of my forebears, I promise you that. From then on, I had to remember that college was not safe. I put my street face on for the remaining time when I walked anywhere at night; I should have kept that face on all the time.

One tough part of the situation I didn't see at the time was that both guys might have been experiencing the same kind of culture shock as mine at Williams. Sure, they played football and likely they had gone to schools that made them familiar to the athletic and party culture. As an adult, I want to give them the benefit of the doubt. Sitting in all of my classes that first year, I was frequently the only working class Latina. It felt like everyone was speaking from their colonial mansion of ideas and I was mute from the dead-end alley, staring at my name spray painted on the freeway wall. If they were also feeling this way, it would have affected their ability to make good choices, acting out in a misogynist fashion to make themselves feel better.

It's not an excuse for how they treated us, for how they acted, but often men of color had a sealed fate at Williams. Terry left Williams as a sophomore, and I have a feeling it was related to adjustment issues, maybe academic or economic. I don't know because I never talked to him after that meeting at the dean's office. Many other men of color didn't finish school there. A lot of them were working-class young men from large urban areas. They took time off, were asked to leave, or had some kind of adjustment they had to make to their graduation time line.

Williams was too cold, too white, too small, and too different from where they

and I had grown up to be survivable. Some of them had responsibilities I did not, like my friend Nestor from Carpinteria, who literally helped pay his mom's rent. He took a year off to work and came back only when his family was stable again.

The other football player, Rob, stayed at Williams and even turned up in a history seminar. I had to sit with him in a classroom and talk about my family tree for a whole semester with his mug across from mine. I sent him death stares on occasion but I let him talk. I didn't tell him to shut the fuck up.

My friend Kendra was in that class too and befriended him. At one point she even vouched for his character.

“He seems like he's got some stuff he's dealing with, Vértiz,” she told me. “Maybe you should give him a chance.”

I didn't. Couldn't, actually. My curiosity finding out what a new experience at Williams would be like died with that toga party. I only knew how to hold a grudge. I bet my grudge didn't affect his grade. I bet he got an A.

Chapter 28: Back Home

I was never happier to see my family than when they picked me up from the airport at Christmas time. I was so glad to be home where I didn't need a triple down coat just to go outside. I couldn't wait to see my friends who had sent me Hollywood sign postcards and birthday cards.

The first thing Amá said was, “You're so pale, mija. You're practically green!” She had lost all the water weight and her cheeks sagged. She didn't look as tough as I remembered.

“You're still butt-ugly,” said my youngest brother Chalo. Jesse had grown a faint mustache while I was gone. They had both grown about three inches taller with sass to match. Jesse's hair was finally tamed down by so much gel, I was positive it would crunch on contact. I hugged them anyway.

“*Que hubole*, chata?” Dad said. He shook my hand the way some *cholos* or Chicano activists shake hands: with pounds at the end. His hair was grayer along the temples and he seemed shorter, too.

Bell Gardens was also changing. When we exited the freeway on Florence Avenue, there were new skinny palm trees planted across from the casino on the median strip. There was a new cement sign with blue lettering in the old McCoy's Market parking lot. The plastic sign announced: “Bell Gardens: The Hub of Progress.”

There were more cars getting off the freeway that day, streaming into the Toys R Us parking lot and jamming the left turn lane on Eastern Avenue. Amá's house was different too.

With Doña Marta's help, she'd put up a chicken wire fence in the front yard. They had tied a black tarp between the fence and roof of our house. The sugar cane was still in the corner of the small yard, its sharp leave yellowing in places. The lemon tree next to the cane was hiding behind a dozen pots of pink and red flowering geraniums.

“It's like a little room,” I told Amá.

“*Verdad*?” She smiled.

To show off her crafting skills, Amá had created up a Barbie-sized *nacimiento* complete with ceramic Mary, Joseph, the three Wise Men, goats, and plastic cows. Dad nodded his head at the tiny town. “*Está bonito*, huh?”

“*Precioso*,” I said. While I was home, Dad was around and told me jokes *carnales* told him at the junkyard. Somehow, this kept him from fighting with Amá, mostly until she picked a fight. Either she had resigned herself to Dad's other family or he was just behaving with me around. I was relieved, either way.

Because we only had a couple of weeks, Beto and I saw our friends as soon as we could. We went out with Moses and Eva to the Jack-In-the-Box in Commerce that next night. Beto and I were eating fried *taquitos* with them, squeezing fake hot sauce on our food. Seemingly out of nowhere, Eva made a declaration.

“All the people I know who go to college are stupid,” she said.

She put down her half-eaten curly fry and looked right at Beto then me. Moses kept eating his fried *taquitos*, not sure who to look at. He went to Cal State Long Beach that year, but quit school to help pay their bills. By her definition, he was also stupid.

As Beto and I settled into college life, Eva and Moses were in the middle of finding a location for their wedding in the coming summer. They were working their asses off in retail to pay for vanilla-scented candles, a new bed and couch, while Eva specialized in wearing the cute clothes she sold.

Undeterred by my wide-open mouth, Eva continued talking. “I mean, everyone in my office who goes to school is dumb. It's such a waste of time. You don’t need a college degree to be smart.”

Maybe she was high, drunk, or tired. It was late, maybe midnight, and most likely, they had been drinking or smoking weed. Beto looked right at her and asked what kind of schools her coworkers went to. He didn't snap at Eva. He never had, not one time since they met in sixth grade. She said they went to Cal State something and finished her fry.

“That must be why,” I snapped back. “Those schools suck compared to where we go.”

I was livid. Eva was as smart as we were. It wasn't our fault she didn't go directly to college out of high school. She kept chewing and looked up at me. She didn't take it back; she just kept affirming her idea. “Maybe, but I still think it's a waste of time.”

The plastic table felt like it was widening. I scoot back in my chair and scraped the cheap tile floor loudly, interrupting the silence between us. It would not be long after

that Eva would start calling me "too sensitive" and complaining about why I always had to make every issue about race.

I had been thankful for Eva's friendship when it came. I thought Moses would always be on my side even if he didn't say it out loud. Like Pánfila and Claudia in high school, Eva's attitude started to fit me like a shirt I didn't want to wear anymore.

We packed back in our cars later that night and I complained to Beto.

"She has a right to think what she wants, Vickie." He was right, but at the time, I wondered why he wouldn't tell her off like I tried to. What I see now was that she was right: you don't need college to be smart or successful, a fact for which my parents were living proof. A large part of me, however, was all about how much smarter I was than everyone else.

My smarts and college were my tickets to riches, out of my fighting parents' house, and out of a town that was looking at me with major side eye. At that moment, all I could think about Eva was, "Who does this bitch think she is?"

Eva wasn't the only one fading out of the school picture. Rudy thought about going to a trade school for sound engineering, but no teacher had encouraged him to go there or to college. Me and Beto, all we heard in high school was about *where* we would go, not *if* we should go.

My other friends all had jobs to pay their bills. None of them were in jail or selling drugs. Homer had come back from the University of Pittsburgh because it was too cold and expensive. Rudy was working as a temp in various offices in Commerce.

They were sweet, funny, thoughtful men and fucking smart. Any college would have been lucky to have them.

By the time Christmas break was over, we'd played pool five times, had beers at Eva's place at least as many times, and I was getting tired of having to wait for Beto to sober up for us to go home.

I wish that I could have taken Eva aside after the *taquito* incident and told her that I knew what she meant; that school wasn't for everyone and that she didn't have to be mad at us for going away. I should have said that her accounting and managing skills were her ticket to get what she wanted. I wish I could have seen that what she was saying was not about me, but it kept me from seeing her and my other friends as my equals. I called her less after that winter. Nobody likes talking to someone who doesn't really respect them.

That summer, Eva and Moses got married at a tiny garden near the airport, a place I was comfortable frequenting. During the ceremony, planes kept flying overhead and drowned out the minister. Eva's white wedding dress had a full skirt and veil. Moses was in a tux, but the most the rest of us managed were casual Friday looks in sports coats and flower dresses. I was never happier to see my friends get what they'd always wanted. The reception was short and all of us were there. We drank champagne out of the plastic flutes. Eva and I took a photo: my hair is pulled all the way back and I got some color back in my cheeks. I'm wearing a blue flowered dress from Eva's closet. I may have held her bouquet in that photo, yet each summer, Eva liked me a little bit less than the last.

Chapter 29: Skiing, 1995

Amá had taught me that there was a link between dressing up and my intelligence: "*Vístete bien*, get pretty, and pay attention because you're no *mensa*." This theory fell on its face at Williams.

In the dorms of Mission Hall, Beto's next door neighbor invited us to come out with her friends. Judy and three other girls were in their recreational outfits; head to toe in polar fleece sweaters and warm-up pants, clothes you'd think were cheap but were incredibly expensive for how they looked: unkempt and sloppy.

"Come skiing with us!" Judy said. She was a Korean-American biology major from New Jersey with straight black hair and rosy cheeks. Judy and her suite mates generously shared their kimchee and sticky rice bounty with Beto and me. The hungry study nights of the previous year were no more. The four girls in her suite next door had parents who drove up every semester to drop off buckets of the garlicky, chile-covered cabbage, twenty-pound bags of white rice, and boxes of salted seaweed.

I didn't know how it was possible that Judy thought I had any money: my pea coat was from the thrift shop on Water Street, a place where older women donated things they hadn't worn in decades. I must have known how to carry myself in it, as if it was from a vintage volume of *Town & Country* because somehow, Judy thought I had extra cash for outdoor recreation in the freezing cold.

“I wish I could go,” I joked. “But I left my ski equipment in L.A.”

“Oh, that's okay! You can rent the stuff there.”

I smiled to myself. “No, thanks,” I said. “Maybe next time.”

She didn't mean any harm, of course; people rarely did when they made classist comments. People with money at Williams assumed we all had the same access to cash and that we all loved the outdoors. People rowed, played lacrosse and hackey sack, things that required gear: hiking boots, walking sticks, skis, ski pants, and so on. Weren't we all in the mountains and didn't that mean that we should be skiing? I was on those mountains so that I would not be in a home so tiny that I could hear my thoughts.

She probably just wanted me to go, but I had no idea what skiing entailed. It was like Williams was a country vacation for the students, a place tucked away inside a two hundred year-old college that occasionally gave out tests.

I was serious when I said I'd left what I needed back home. My confidence had waned since my grades took a huge dip, earning Bs in political science, dropping my GPA to a whopping 3.0. Students may have had the vocabulary of a Rhodes Scholar and yet they couldn’t brush their hair, just confused me. Plus I didn't have money for hot chocolate much less fucking ski equipment.

It's not that Williams students were models fallen off the pages of my *Town & Country* map of rich society. No, it was more like the L.L. Bean catalog up there, which I first discovered when Lauren would leave it in the common room. Everyone except me, it seemed, also wore filthy baseball caps embroidered with college and prep school names

I'd never heard of. They all sounded like conservatories with swans swimming their lakes: Spence School, Seton Hall, and Andover.

There was one exception to casually dressed rule: the son of the Aga Khan, who was a year ahead of me. For class he wore black leather pants and long sleeve silk Versace shirts with the latest patterns: gold lion medallions, red kerchiefs. He probably also wore an expensive, whale-oil perfume, something with opium in it, but now I'm just making things up. He was part of the International Club (which played lots of techno at their parties).

Every other "regular" student had the fleece and hat outfit. I thought it had been given out during an orientation that I missed. Kids would mold the cap's bill into a tunnel, walking around like ducks, turning the whole way around when someone said their name.

And then there were the pants.

Swish-swish, s*wish-swish,* they said, passing me at the library on their way to get a drink of water. *Swish-swish, swish-swish* going back to their seats. It was hard enough reading the biology for "nonmajors" textbook, which read like Greek to me. I had to concentrate extra hard to block out the s*wish-swish* of people's *pinche* pants.

Someone eventually told me they were called warm-ups, denoting some form of sport to warm up for, but the people who wore them weren't even jocks! People claimed to like them because they were "comfortable." I needed to know if that was true. I had not come that far to never know what was going on in rich people's pants.

Our generous campus frequently had clothing drives. Each time, I kept an eye on the contents of those huge boxes so that I could rescue a cashmere sweater, perhaps. The swishy pants were $80 on sale at the sports store on Spring Street. That's so expensive, that I wouldn't buy them now! One lucky night, once everyone had gone to sleep, I peeked inside a donation box at the student union. Peeking out from the bottom of the pile was a purple pant leg, the kind I'd come to see every single day of my time at Williams. It was a tell-tale sign that swishy pants might soon be mine.

No one was around. I acted like I was putting something in the box, you know, because we're all rich, right? I folded the pants up into a tight little package, shoved them in my bag and ran.

I was slightly embarrassed at picking through the bin, but not so much that it made me un-learn Amá's rule of taking an opportunity if it presented itself, so there was no one to share my spoils with. My roommates were two sweet white girls who I'd met my first year. I didn't want them to know I was taking from the poor pile. Besides, I had cultivated a very public hate for those stupid pants during many a lunch and dinner.

I tried them on without washing (who had time for that?). There I was in the long bathroom mirror standing on a cold floor. Would they make the same annoying sound if I wore them? What if I waddled, refusing to brush my legs together? I walked across the bathroom and back a few times to check.

Swish-swish, went the pants.

There was more. Lo and behold: they were lined in soft gray fleece. They felt like a blanket was on my legs, making me more than warm, but sweaty. No wonder people, jocks and not, wore these pants all the time. Winter in the Berkshires started in November and went till May. The pants were LINED, it was genius! Turns out they also sold fleece-lined jeans. Why hadn't my Vista friends told me that before? They probably didn't know either.

How could I show my face at brunch wearing them? I'd turned my nose up at those damn things for years. I didn't have the polar fleece or hat to match; there would never be a time or place these pants would work on me.

It also did not help that they looked like shit: baggy in the butt and a too long, like I had taken them out of a free pile somewhere. The other downside is that the lining was too warm for my liking. That might have been the guilty feeling making its way into my pants, the pants of the working class trying on the leisure pants of the rich in secret.

The guilt got to me. Somewhere there would be a taller, poorer person who could use them, maybe who owned a baseball cap and a fleece. After a few days, I put them back in the box. Maybe someone needed the pants for their ski trip, or just to be warm in place that refused to melt its ice until May. That time, I was actually giving something away.

Chapter 30: Parties, 1996

A lot of college students drink until they're sick, but Beto had a special taste for drunkenness. He'd joined an improv comedy troupe at Williams and proceeded to get wasted with them after every time they had a show. Really, any time there was beer he would get trashed. And every time, I was there to walk him home.

Beto was 6'2", about 180 pounds, and drunk, he probably weighed closer to 200 of dead weight. One night, I had gone to a Black Student Union party with Kendra. She walked with me to a party to meet up with Beto, who when we found him, was slumped on a dingy yellow couch at a row house, and very, very drunk.

I shook him. He recognized me and slurred some apology about his state. His T-shirt was stained with grease, probably pizza. I pretended I didn't think anything about how much of a mess he looked. He'd looked that way many times before; why would that night be different? The drunk I was taking care of grinned with no cares in the world. The difference that night was that Kendra and I had been reading the same books, the ones where Black women and Latinas wrote about their families' addictions, how patriarchy reared its head in kitchens and boyfriends.

We were both in a class when my voice cracked when I tried to relate the violence between my parents and the readings from *This Bridge Called My Back*. Though I was great at hiding what shamed me from others, I was becoming less able to hide it from myself.

I looked ahead as we walked to our dorms. When Kendra said goodnight, I made sure we waited until she was safe inside. Beto could walk all the way to his room where I would sleep too. Once he got himself undressed and in bed, the smell of beer on his skin made my stomach turn.

We probably kissed but I made it quick. Beto fell asleep and snored his *pedo* away. I would stay awake a while until the feeling in my gut was quiet.

> "I am the very well-educated daughter of a woman who, by the standards in this country, would be considered largely illiterate."
> From "La Güera," Cherríe Moraga, in *This Bridge Called My Back*

Monday nights, spring semester, fifteen women from different years and across the country got together in Hardy House and took an independent study called, "Women of Color in the U.S." My friend Marisa organized the class and syllabus with the help of a women's studies professor. If it were not for this class, I would not be writing this book today.

Reading Cherríe Moraga's essay, "La Güera," I found the language for so many things I could not name in my home: Dad's other family was connected to male privilege and patriarchy, for instance. Still, I couldn't quite say that out loud. We read about alcoholism in Latino families in one essay, I don't recall which. I had a visceral reaction to the way the parents in the text fought and how the writer left home.

The shame of watching Amá a take care of Dad one too many times, rushed to my throat. My life was in a book: constant fighting about his *cualquiera* and how he never spent time with us.

During the class where the readings had touched upon domestic violence, I tried to talk about the connections I saw with my family, but I lost my speech.

I was going to comment a text that read: “at forty-five/ her mouth bleeding/ into her stomach/ the hole gaping.” When I read it from my book in class, my subconscious remembered the bruises on Amá's shoulders. I had done so little to help her. Moraga's poem, “For the Color of my Mother” goes on to name her, “Vera/ Elvira,” which was my mother's name. The connections were too much.

The class sat in a circle and I raised my hand. “In my house…” My voice trailed off. The other women waited for me to finish. I had put up with a lifetime of Dad insulting Amá, a lifetime of pretending he didn't have another family, and the final insult of treating her like the punching bag he had in the shed. I had never questioned Dad’s daily beer in a paper bag, and the way he kept money from Amá even though she had to pay the bills, how he punched her and threatened her with worse, all the while the five of us living in that house that got smaller and smaller.

Marisa crossed the room and came to sit next to me and held my hand. “It's okay,” she said. And I stayed silent. Her hand was warm. She kept her eyes on mine until I stopped crying.

Other women started to comment on the readings. They too saw themselves in the material. We were all at a college that felt like summer camp for rich kids, a place not built for us. Nonetheless we persevered. We had each other. We had Cherríe and Audre. They were writing to us and that meant we mattered.

What compounded the awfulness of the whole thing was that Amá loved Dad very much. Once, when he first started to go to Tecate, she had begged him not to leave us. There had been a big earthquake and she was terrified to be left alone if the Big One came and leveled our home. Dad just said he had to go. I thought Dad was just an asshole when he said shit like that. It turned out that was patriarchy.

When my parents weren't calling each other *cabrones* or *hija de la chingada* in the kitchen, Amá made jokes only Dad would get. Their relationship was so much more complex than I could understand. What I could decide were my own choices. Sadly, I couldn't see that Beto was the kind of man I had grown up with, someone who fulfilled his needs first, someone I wanted to be, not just love.

"*Mija*," Amá yelled, "come see how these kids do this dance!"

At a party in West Covina, a suburb with neat lawns and pools twenty minutes outside Los Angeles, I was eleven years old and rolling my eyes at Amá. Her best friend, Doña Marta and her family, had invited us out to their cousin's house. Dad was gone for the weekend with his *vieja* in Tecate and we had nowhere to go. Amá did not drive, so we

only attended what we got rides to. When I got to the living room, I was not impressed.

There were two teenagers in baggy black pants and matching polka dot shirts freaking on each other. Amá was sitting right next to them with other drunken moms at a folding table. I had been happy watching the other kids swim in the pool and hit each other with Styrofoam noodles.

"Ay, Mom, I already know that dance," I said. I ignored her for the rest of the night; her plastic cup was refilled over and over by a chirpy hostess with *yucca frita* at the ready.

At the end of the night we piled into Doña Marta's Volkswagen minivan, a 1967 with an original interior. Every seat in the car was taken by a child or adult. Doña Marta's husband did not drink so much that he couldn't' drive. Amá, however, was so drunk she couldn't sit up straight. My brothers, seven and three years old, watched as she couldn't keep her body from swinging around at turns, their eyes trying to do the math of the situation.

I stayed quiet and looked out the window. I'd only seen Dad that way a couple of times. He would drink on the regular, every Sunday a pitcher at our favorite pizza place in Monterey Park, then drive us home like it was no thing. He could handle his drinks, I guess. Amá did not drink more than a glass of wine at a time, the pink kind from huge bottles they served with the pizza. She was not a sloppy drinker and kept the cleanest house I'd ever see. Everything has exceptions.

We pulled up to our gate and Amá threw up in the VW. Doña Marta and her two daughters got out of the car. Don Moreno, her husband, convinced Amá it was all right.

"*Discúlpeme, Doña Marta. Me da mucha pena.*" Amá was so sorry for wrecking the floor. Her head was lolling around and her speech was slurred, but she knew what was happening. Don Moreno walked her inside while Doña Marta got us ready for bed. Her girls were standing out in the front yard. They said good night to us very quietly.

He talked to Amá, who might have started crying because she was so embarrassed. When I walked into the bedroom, the smell of sweat hit me, Jovan dime-store perfume, and a tinge of pink wine. Putting on my pajamas, I fought off my own nausea, my stomach doing loops because of something I could not name.

While I could not name the relationship between alcohol, my parents, and Beto. Amá was no alcoholic, but her father was—he drank himself into stupors where he'd drag grandma across the kitchen floor by her pigtails.

Dad drank almost every day, only occasionally getting trashed, coming into our house singing a *ranchera*—a happy drunk, at least. The welling shame in my gut transformed into responsibility. Even though Amá was the one taking care of him, I was the one who heard all about it the next day and the day after that.

I was taking care of the drunken boyfriend. Or perhaps I wanted to make sure Beto wouldn't choke on his vomit and ruin a perfectly great Chicano mind. With Amá that one time, I let Don Moreno take care of her because I was too little to know what to do. But with Beto, I was all over it. He was mine and I loved him.

"Fea," he asked. "What do you want for Christmas?"

"A copy of *This Bridge Called My Back*," I said. "And a shirt from Forever 21."

On Christmas Eve at Amá's house, Dad was probably in Tecate, and I was glad because that meant they weren't fighting. My brothers were so much taller than when I had left, and squirrely; at least we fought less.

Beto arrived at Amá's house on Christmas Eve with one box. Though Amá had made *ponche*, the boiling cinnamon and clove steaming up the windows, she had omitted the alcohol. Beto had a cup anyway. The holidays at our house were quite, more like a dinner you dressed up for at home than a real party. The great thing was that our friends, me and Jesse's, would stop by and say hello before going to their homes. Rudy probably came by in his Falcon to drop off a CD for me.

Beto was a broke student too. How could he get me those two things I wanted? I probably bought him another Jimi Hendrix accessory, maybe a shirt from the record store in Downey. I always found a way to get people what they wanted.

When I tore open the gift his mom had surely wrapped, the brown shirt was folded around a book, a maroon cover with the outline a naked woman whose body was bent like a bridge. He wasn't perfect but he was mine.

Chapter 31: Cruising, 1996

My father's '68 baby blue Impala cruised down Rosecrans Avenue at seven forty-five in the morning. I was headed to my internship with the United Farm Workers. I thought the headquarters would be covered in posters and photos of Chavez and Huerta from the early years, the Filipino and Japanese workers alongside them. I was hoping for a seat near a window overlooking the factories they had unionized.

It had been two years since I'd done any grassroots organizing. I gripped the steering wheel wondering what I'd be doing with the union: perhaps cursing out big bosses or walking in fields collecting signatures.

My political work at Williams had made my hands more delicate than I liked. It was limited to on-campus, administrative activism around Latino Studies. Many students of color organizations across the country did that work following the radical gestures of our predecessors, like sit-ins and occupying buildings. I had organized meetings, Latino heritage events, and fundraised. I wasn't staging hunger strikes, alumni had done that already, so mostly I talked a lot of shit and posted political cartoons in the Vista bulletin board. I was ready for some real organizing: the UFW, or bust.

I double-checked the address once I pulled up in the parking lot. I thought it was weird that the street was Rosecrans and not Wilshire or Grand or anything near downtown. The office was in Paramount, down the street from the swap meet I grew up with. The Paramount Swap meet had been around for thirty years by then. It was located

off the Rosecrans exit from the Long Beach Freeway, right before it merged with the 105 or the Century Freeway. Paramount bordered Lynwood, Compton, Bellflower, Lakewood, and Downey, mostly at the industrial ends of each of those places. Aerospace and automotive plants were still closing down in that area at the time. It was literally eight minutes from our freeway exit so the sky there was the same shade of gray. The big view was the stacked freeway intersection, a cat's cradle of traffic.

Like other swap meets, the Paramount used to be a drive-in movie theater complete with a snack shack that was still in operation offering hot dogs and *churros*. The UFW office was right next to the swap meet. I got Dad's maps out to make sure I wasn't on the wrong end of Rosecrans. Surely the UFW was not located right next to the swap meet. The Thomas Guide map said I was in the right place.

The UFW was not paying me nor were they paying much rent at the teamster building where they were located. It was not technically an internship. I was a glorified volunteer. It was my high school dream to work with them, to organize around national labor strategies, to really contribute to The Movement, which as far as I knew was still underway. Every young person who becomes politicized discovers it for the first time; civil rights movements are still happening for them, and really, for everyone.

The building was once white, but made dingy with soot and exhaust from the trucks. The parking lot was half-empty, except for the big rigs without loads parked inside a tall chain-linked fence. I grabbed the sandwiches Amá had made and went in.

“Good morning.” A couple of older Latinos greeted me as they sipped coffee out of Styrofoam cups. The place looked like only men were ever in it—the floors just barely clean, motor oil fingerprints on the white door frames—nothing new for me since I tagged along with Dad to his job and to auto part stores. Those places smelled like a soapy cleaning solution. That building I was in smelled slightly rancid, like old ham and cheese sandwiches. The suite was on the second floor. Inside the office were two people at metal desks, furniture that had been there since the 1960s. The desktops were covered in papers, coffee cups and flyers, the UFW black eagle printed on almost everything. The office was a window-less beige box with four desks and one door.

The two people were on calls. The person I'd spoken to over the phone, Roberto, put down the receiver and welcomed me in. He was the lead organizer, a slightly nervous man, much paler than me. His glasses did not conceal the dark circles under his eyes. He cleared off a few things from a desk and said I could share it with Anna, his co-organizer, a cinnamon-skinned woman with dark hair tucked behind her ears. They were both in T-shirts and jeans; I had on a button up white shirt like I was going to an office—but I was in an office!

The summer work was this: fundraising calls for the strawberry worker's campaign, four direct actions at supermarkets and a non-union hotel, and more phone calls to headquarters.

I drove Dad to work in Commerce every morning at five so I could have the car the rest of the day. He’d get home on the bus or get a ride with a coworker. We always

found a way to make things work, but not without Dad grumbling loudly about the arrangement: "*Chingao, chata*, can't you get a job closer to the house?" He'd scratch his mustache and walk away muttering to himself.

In my new uniform of T-shirts and jeans for work, I showed up for my internship and with all my guts gripping, I made cold calls for the union. It was the least I could do, sitting pretty in an office instead of out in the sun near Bakersfield where I thought I'd end up. I had a rap sheet, but I only raised about $40 that summer. Too shy to really convince people over the phone like telemarketers, I'd hang up and move down the list.

Later in the summer, we had a teach-in at a high-end supermarket on the west side. We brought a handful of people and stood in the fruit and vegetables section, probably by the berries. My cheeks would flush every time I had to chant, "*Si Se Puede*," which luckily was only a few times. All those shoppers' eyes on us made my face turn red—people going about their business, maybe I went to school with some of their kids, and us with homemade red and black flags with maybe ten other people, a few trying to reach many. I wanted to pack up the Impala and take Amá home, who I'd dragged there because we needed bodies. Still, it was great that Amá was down to go.

I was great at paperwork, a born paper-pusher like Dad had taught me. I was fantastic at helping people fill out citizenship applications, but not as great at walking up to strangers and interrupting their shopping.

I hid in the back so that when the store manager came to kick us out, I didn't have to talk to him. Roberto and Anna did, confidently with even-tempered voices, calmly leading us outside where we waved flags near the parking lot until it was time to go.

The union had been excited for me to work with them because I'd talked to the New York *Times* about how the AFL-CIO was recruiting students through their Union Summer Program.

"I really want to be part of this," I told the paper. "I'm interested in grass-roots work. I've decided that my life's focus is really going to be to change things."[ix]

The UFW job kicked my ass. The big rigs I parked next to over-shadowed Dad's Impala and my hopes for being useful in the world. The swap meet was so close but so far from the tiny office. The UFW was a monolith in my mind. Dolores and Cesar, Philip Vera Cruz, and the workers themselves were giants to me, and where the hell was the building to reflect their importance? I was stuck in the meritocracy, invested in the idea that when you work hard you are rewarded with a mansion. If that were true, then farm workers would live in penthouses.

At the end of that summer, I returned to the root of my ideas about education and reward: Colmar Elementary. There's a photo of me and Anna sitting in too-small chairs in front of 30 children. I'm smiling but inside I was terrified. Kids scared me. I thought they would behave like my brothers at their worst: uninterested, fussy, with the tendency to throw things. It wasn't like that at all.

The children listened and asked questions about fairness and about where healthy strawberries came from. When I told them I'd gone to school there, they gasped. Some were so excited that they had to come up and ask me who my teachers were. I finally felt useful.

Most unpaid interns are not working class students or people of color. The way I could have a UFW internship and not get paid was because of the Mellon Minority Undergraduate Fellowship. It paid three thousand dollars each summer for the completion of research projects with a faculty supervisor. It also paid me the same amount over the school year, which made me financially independent from my parents, finally.

Before the Mellon, I was working little jobs at Williams, though I'd left the cafeteria, I was still scraping by. The fellowship was awarded to prepare students of color with research skills to pursue PhDs in the humanities. Although I wanted to get a master's degree in public policy, the lure of the fellowship's significant honorarium drew me in. My education had taught me that there was always going to be a certain level of reshaping myself or my work to get what I needed. If I had to become interested in a PhD in the humanities to get the award, I was in.

You had to apply of course, be interviewed, and compete against other students. Williams was a small college: 2,000 undergrads, and out of that, only a small percentage was students of color, and even fewer than that knew the Mellon existed and wanted a PhD. Beto and I were both awarded Mellon Fellowships. That was the second out of three times we'd be accepted to the same opportunity. The third would be the last.

My Mellon research that summer was about examining the role of women in the UFW. It was a short paper, no earth-shattering data emerged that had never been collected, but it didn't have to be. It just had to fulfill the requirement so that I could still get the policy experience I wanted. The paper was ten pages at the most. I had to write it at Beto's house. I still couldn't afford a computer.

Mireya was also having money trouble. She would not be coming back for her senior year because the school would not give her more financial aid; her parents made just this much over the limits for additional help. She would stay in Chicago and work for several years before going back and graduating. Mireya wrote me letters from her temp job desks and told me she dreamed of working for a politician she believed in, or becoming a social critic like bell hooks who we'd read in our women's studies class. Although she completed her degree two years after I did and three years after she was scheduled to, she would later become the District Director for U.S. Representative Luis Gutierrez of Chicago. Working full-time as the Director of the Office of Hispanic/Latino Affairs at the Illinois Department of Human Services, she passed the bar and earned her law degree to work on immigration issues. Williams attracts students who dream big, even if some us didn't finish on the perfect timeline.

My summer consisted of watching friends drink Coronas and shooting pool. The hot wind at night came in through Rudy's car windows. We cruised in his Falcon and headed to the record store in Uptown Whittier. The brutal summer heat seared our lungs when we breathed, but we'd long stopped noticing the things that could hurt us.

By September, it was back on a plane headed east. From there I'd take a bus and head over the Taconic to brie and strawberries.

Chapter 32: Don't Be Stupid, 1996

Home on winter break in 1996, Jesse, my younger brother, sat on his bunk bed across from me. He was about to ask me for life advice. We were watching *Rocky IV*, which we'd watched four times. The television was on top of the metal green dresser. The closets and dressers were filled with everyone's clothes but mine. All my clothes were in suitcase near the bedroom door. Dad had been sleeping in the living room since I'd left for college. Our house had gotten smaller as we got older.

When Jesse decided to ask me about his future, Rocky was working out old school style: pulling a sled full with his wife and trainers in the snow. I was lying on our parents' bed, which was where I slept with Amá when I visited.

"Hey, Vick," he said. "I think when I graduate, I'm going to join the Air Force."

I was on my belly staring at the screen. A current ran up my arms. I didn't hear what branch of the military Jesse had said. All I heard was "join the..." and I sat up.

"Don't be stupid," I said. "The government doesn't care about you. You need to go to college so you can get a real job and not end up dead."

"What do you mean? I thought it would be cool."

"They just want to send you out to die," I said. "Don't even try it, I swear."

"Even the Air Force?"

"Especially them," I said, like I knew what I was talking about. What I did know was that Doña Marta's son came back from the Persian Gulf with photos of smoke stacks

and dead bodies in his head. That’s not what I wanted for my brother. The soldiers who were really sick and traumatized ended up homeless, I said. The government doesn’t care for them.

Jesse looked from my face to the screen. His eyes were fixed on Rocky punching a side of beef, gritting his teeth with every swing. Jesse sucked his teeth like he didn't believe me.

“I guess,” he said.

What he meant was, “I guess you're right even though I don't like your answer.”

The TV light on his Jesse's face was pale gray. My gut twinged for a second, but I didn't know what that feeling meant. I had talked at my brother for most of our lives, speaking to him as if I always knew better, frequently knocking him on his head. He was getting too big for that, so verbally shaming him was all I had left. Calling him stupid for thinking about life after high school was the fastest way I had to convince him it wasn't a good idea.

I hope that I also said: “Just apply to a college. You'll find one that you like and that gives you money. Don't give up on school.” Jesse walked out of the room and left me to watch the next part of the movie alone.

If Amá was around, she probably would have agreed with me. Her fourth grade education had eaten away at her authority over me in school matters. What was more important was that Jesse respected me. He cared what I thought and would listen.

I wish I had thought more about how I had spoken to him. I wielded my seemingly superior knowledge when it suited me and to prevent my family from making stupid mistakes.

Jesse was a great illustrator. Above where I was lying in bed that night, hung a poster he had drawn for class. The poster was divided into sections; one had a drawing of him fixing a race car, one of him on a motor cycle as a cop, and one of him playing chess. When he got into Woodbury University to study illustration, the school didn't give him any scholarship aid. Instead, he enrolled at Los Angeles City College and diligently took three buses to school for four years until he transferred to San Francisco State. He made the right educational and career choices, they were just in different forms than my own.

My family couldn't always ensure I would make great choices.

That same winter break, Doña Marta, Amá, and I sat in our kitchen one night. The window, which took up about a quarter of the east-facing wall, was fogged up from the *torciditos* baking. There were *dozens* of braided butter cookies on two sheets in the oven. Although I wasn't asking for advice like Jesse, I still got an earful before the cookies were finished.

I was going to Oaxaca the following semester and Beto and I had been dating for three years. When Doña Marta was a young woman in El Salvador, three years was a serious courtship. In ANY country that could be a serious courtship. Doña Marta's gravelly voice was curious. “What are your plans with Beto, huh?”

My cheeks flushed. I was in love with Beto, but I'd had to discuss it with Eva first. While I’d grown accustomed to the happy routine of his family’s *carne asadas*, shooting pool with friends at home, and spending a lot of our time together at Williams, I wasn’t sold that it meant we would get married.

“*No te creas*,” said Doña Marta with a smoker's laugh, “I'm just picking on you.” She lightly elbowed me in the ribs. “Maybe you won't mind some fortune-telling?”

Amá busied herself with putting away dishes and said nothing. Marta got up and took an egg out of the fridge. “If you’re wondering about your future, you can read an egg yolk in a glass of water. Watch.”

I'd had *limpias* done on me as a kid involving eggs that would absorb the illness or disease, but prediction was a new way to use *huevos*.

She quickly filled a glass with water from the tap and set it on the edge of the over-worked washing machine. We were wedged around our dine-in table. The egg yolk slid into the water and we huddled around to see what it did.

Transparent tentacles spread thinly over the yolk, arching in four directions.

“Vickie, mirá! Those are arches, like the ones at church!” Marta squealed. Amá made a face. She got up to check on the cookies.

“*Si, mire*, these two are getting married!” said Marta. She leaned in and clapped.

“Who knows?” I said smiling. “Maybe.” I wasn't into stuff like that, fluffy dresses and big parties. We'd never had the money for a *quinceañera* and getting married was so permanent, like crazy gluing Beto to my side for life.

"We'll decorate a horse-drawn carriage," Marta went on. "We'll string lights around it, like Cinderella, *pero mas bonita*!"

She went on and I got a little excited—a party, a poufy dress maybe, with the only boy who had managed to be good enough for me: brown and smart, from a great family who bought me my class ring because mine could not afford it.

"The *recuerdos* should be something useful," I said, "not like those chalky candies people get at some weddings." I didn't have suggestions for a better option.

Amá finally spoke. "*Ay, Marta, usted con sus cosas*." She was not a fan of Beto, though she was glad I was not with a woman.

As much as I would like to think I didn't want to get married, part of me did. Part of me thought Beto was my equal and that being connected to his family forever would be a blessing. Part of me thought he was a good enough kisser to keep kissing my whole life. Marta said, "*Ya veremos, muchachita*. Don't worry."

Amá checked the cookies and took out a sheet that looked ready, browned on the surface. Marta winked at me and said not to worry, that God was the only one who could make these things happen. My shoulders relaxed; what she said let me dream a little about what could happen with Beto, but I didn't know what to do with her advice. I helped Amá wash our dishes. The pastry crumbs soaked up the soapy water. I wiped the sugar crumbs off our small plates. The water was warm and the suds wiped my worries away for a moment.

Chapter 33: Cooking, 1997

The teacher probably picked the tortillas right off the *comal* with her bare fingers. The edges of the tortilla had burnt slightly, letting off a familiar smoke around us. There were five of us in the outdoor kitchen of a small school in the city of Oaxaca. I was one of two Mexican-Americans in a sea of blonde foreigners studying abroad. Andi, a new friend, was probably next to me as we lined a tin pan for *entomatadas*. We were standing at the long wooden table in the middle of the room, waiting for a turn to cook our tortillas.

"Layer them like this," said the teacher. "Use pieces of the cheese in between." Andi's placement of the tortillas was likely perfect. Andi was a Mexican-American girl from the San Gabriel Valley, a suburb with trim lawns and zero gangs, twenty minutes east of Los Angeles. Her body spray made her smell like a garden of red berries. As she put up her hair into a ponytail, I also smelled cigarette smoke, which made for a combination that was hard to resist. Any one of us in the program would have given up all our tortillas for her. And like them, we were in that class for fun, but I really just wanted to be around Andi.

I picked up my crumbly tortilla and dangled it in front of her. She laughed and swatted it out of the way. "You're such a dork," she joked. "They don't have Tortillas 101 at Williams?"

Constantly trying to make her laugh with my *pendejadas,* I had no idea that I actually had a crush on her. I was frequently in her proximity, sniffing her body spray while we sliced plantains and wrote emails to our boyfriends.

Williams's tuition was so expensive and my financial aid so good that studying abroad put money in my pocket, all of which stretched really far in pesos. Two or three nights out of the week, Andi and I would go out to the *zócalo* downtown with a bunch of other students to get creamy *paletas* covered in chocolate and shredded coconut. I'd walk next to or behind Andi on the cobblestone streets. The buildings all had long windows like doors that faced the street. The inside of homes was protected by heavy wooden doors and wrought iron gates. Colonial left overs could be so beautiful.

I was always making sure the guys cat-calling her from their cars didn't get too fresh. One *cabron* had driven by and instead of whistling like a normal pervert, stuck out his hand and smacked Andi right in the ass. Not on my watch, I told her. She threw her head back and laughed into the ring of cigarette smoke around her.

We went to loud discos blaring Spanish rock. I toasted Andi's Negra Modelo beer with my Midori sour. My drink was the kind of green you should only see on grass. I finally started to drink socially. My parents' drinking had shamed me into avoiding alcohol altogether. I didn't want to look like them or like Beto in their drunken states: way too happy or way too sad. Beto had drunk all the fun out of partying. None of them were around so I let Andi drag me out to dance to a song about how you only live once. *Solo se vive una vez*.

The beat was like a ball against a wall: ponchis-ponchis-ponchis-ponchis. It went on like this for four months. Unlike Claudia, no one was pulling any moves, no one was hinting at making out. I was happy being like the puff of smoke that constantly trailed Andi.

Then, near the end of the program, maybe I was being too chummy, taking care of Andi and her ass when she had not asked. Maybe I was dancing too close to her at the clubs. For whatever reason, Andi stopped taking me out to the dance floor.

We were supposed to share a hotel room in Mexico City during a trip our program had arranged for our group. When I go to the room, though, it was empty. The air smelled like Mexican floor cleaner, which was so over-the-top clean, the fumes stung my eyes. I sat on my bed and waited for her to come in so we could get dressed and go out. She never did. I went to bed instead, but I couldn't sleep.

The lights of the office buildings across the way were turned off, but the orange burn of streetlights made the room glow. I was probably only on the fifth floor, and when I got up to look out at the city, the whole city lay before me, much too big to explore alone.

The next morning at the buffet breakfast, Andi didn't have any make-up on. Her face looked bare without eyeliner. She was sitting with the two *fuchi*-faced girls from our program. Their noses and mouths were frozen into grimaces, as if they could continually smell shit. They got up when I approached their table. I asked Andi where she had spent the night.

“I was worried about you,” I said. My sandals felt like they were tightening around my toes.

“Oh, I stayed with the girls,” she said. Andi picked at her papaya and yogurt breakfast. “It just made more sense since we went out last night to sleep over in their room. I'll probably stay with them for the trip.”

“The whole trip?”

“Yeah,” she said, “Listen, I think we need to spend some time apart. We hang out a lot, and I need some space, you know?”

My stomach grumbled loudly. “Oh,” I said. “I guess.”

“Have fun, though,” she added. “You can hang out with the other people in the program, right?”

“Totally,” I said. “I understand.” I turned around and went to eat alone near a window. She got up too and took her unfinished yogurt.

Even though I was still dating Beto and had missed him dearly while I was away, I was heartbroken that Andi was ditching me. My brain could not connect the dots between my feelings for Andi and Claudia, how they were both girls I loved who smelled like *gloria* to me: one like cookie dough and the other like raspberries in a fresh bowl of milk. I stuffed down my feelings with each bite of my breakfast of toast and jam. Rejection was inconvenient. Being queer was not in my vocabulary. Both ideas and feelings got shelved. They were located where everything I avoided also lived: next to where I pledged allegiance.

When I'd see Andi at school, I'd smile and say hello, but I wasn't on security detail for her butt anymore. Instead I walked to the *zócalo* with the other students. I went to movies alone when the spring rain would come every day at three o'clock. The cobblestone streets would flood with rainwater and people hopscotched around the sidewalk.

I even started talking back to cat-callers. "Leave me alone, *grocero*!" I yelled across passing cars and people going to work one morning.

"I'm not rude!" said the guy from across the street. He started to walk after me to prove his point. "Why am I *grocero*? I'm only trying to compliment you!"

I sped my pace and didn't answer. He got tired after one block and I was relieved. I was sick of being away, of the dirt in my sandals, of Oaxaca's black beans, and of being ignored. I wanted pinto beans so badly but I couldn't find any. I tried having fun with the other students in my program but none of them wanted to drag me to the dance floor for a few *cumbias*.

At the house where I was living with the two *fuchi*-faced girls, I made *fideo*, a tomato-base soup with pasts in the shape of the tiny letters. Sometimes the soup came out too salty, sometimes, not salty enough. Either way, I had to eat what was in front of me.

It was the same with Andi. I had to sit with the situation and swallow my feelings. I didn't know how to hang out and act normal around a friend I was attracted to, mostly because I had built a wall between what my physical relationships and my emotional relationships. I thought friends were supposed to want to hang with one another all the

time, like Claudia and I had done. Claudia had been so independent, taking the bus across L.A. I followed her example and started to go places alone.

I went on field trips to the *pueblitos* on the city's outskirts, like the big *mercado*. The *mercado* was a great warehouse, like the ones in Bell Gardens, but this one wasn't empty. *Mercado* had stalls offered herbs in piles like pyramids, stacks of hand-woven wool carpets in every size, and Spanish rock compact discs next to songs of the Juchitan isthmus. The silver shine of hand-tooled aluminum was blinding. The entire place smelled like *epazote* and every few steps a woman would cry, “Tlayudas!” I bought a few things with a bit of extra change and took home gifts for my family. Being alone had its perks. No one was there to tell me that I was being a bad friend.

Once May came around, I packed my one suitcase and couldn't wait to leave. But on the last day of our cooking class, Andi grabbed a seat next to me in the kitchen. She smiled weakly. I was so surprised that she wanted to sit next to me, that at first, I didn't scoot over. I was busy adding my washed lentils into the garlic broth. The air was thick with corn oil and sweet steam.

“I'm sorry I’ve been acting weird with you,” Andi said. She folded and refolded a cloth napkin on her lap. “I was just going through some stuff and I took it out on you.”

The food would not be ready for another 35 minutes. We sat there in awkward silence. I didn't know if I should ask what she was going through because it might seem nosy and I feared it would push her away. I'd never had a make-up conversation with a

friend who had been mad at me. I looked at her hands. Her nails were chipped and chewed down to the quick.

“It's all right,” I lied, unsure what else to say. I tried to articulate the tangle in my brain. “Okay, actually, it did hurt my feelings a little. Did I do something wrong?”

“No, Vick, I'm sorry,” she said. “I just needed to do my own thing, but never again, I swear.”

Whatever it was, she didn't want to talk about it. I was past trying to convince girls that they could tell me anything. I just wanted to keep as many friends as I could.

I nudged Andi with my arm and made her smile. Changing the subject was all I could do. I was terrible at working out my feelings. I had just started expressing them and that was enough of a revolution at the time. I didn't admit to my crush because I didn't think I had one.

I had learned that even if I did run out of friends, I could finally feed myself. “I can make *fideo* now,” I said.

“Oh, I want some!”

“Nah,” I said. “I'll make *entomatadas*. My tortillas come out whole and flat now.”

“Deal,” she said. Andi took out her pack of cigarettes from her purse on the floor and pounded them on her palm a few times. “Wanna go out later? They're having a *cumbia* party near the *zócalo*.”

I jumped at the chance of course. It was our last night of wobbling around on platform shoes so unfit for stones and dirt streets.

Chapter 34: Berkeley, 1997

In the sweltering summer before my senior year, I sat in Amá's garden on the phone with Beto. The patio and my brothers had grown so much. Amá had bought a couch from Doña Marta and put it under the tarp on the front porch. That was where I sat coiling the phone cord around my finger. Jesse was a freshman at the high school and he was playing football (light years cooler than me at that age). I would not be home long to enjoy the couch or my brothers. I was Berkeley bound. I was ready for a successful and lucrative summer that would kick off my last year in college.

Beto and I had been accepted into the Woodrow Wilson Public Policy summer program. It was a twenty-year initiative to increase the numbers of people of color with master's degrees in the field. Vista students had told Beto and me about the fellowship, probably over lunch and we'd looked into it. If we successfully completed the eight-week courses in statistics and public administration, up to $15,000 in matching funds could be offered by a foundation if we were admitted to Princeton, Syracuse, Cal, or the University of Texas, Austin.

I reminded Beto of this. “That could pay for our expenses if we get full rides somewhere.”

“I wonder if Harvard gives good scholarships,” he said as he packed his suitcase. Beto still had his eyes set on the Ivy League.

“Well, have fun at Harvard, because there's no way I'm staying on the east coast for grad school,” I told him. “No more icy winters.”

“Suit yourself, fea,” he said. “I'll pick you up tomorrow morning?”

I went inside the house to pack my one brown sweater and a few pairs of jeans and shorts for the summer weather in the Bay Area. Of course the Bay would be just as warm; it was California, right?

“You almost ready, chata?” Amá asked. I nodded and smiled back. She seemed shorter and less tough then, favoring her left side a little when she walked. Her eyes had deeper crow's feet when she smiled, which she did often when I visited. She went back to the kitchen to make Beto and me a stack of ham and jalapeno *tortas* for the drive up to Berkeley.

Something was bothering me. As I folded my clothes into a green duffel bag, I remembered what Beto had told me about studying public policy: “You know you have to take math, right? And statistics? You hate math. You might want to re-think that idea.”

He had said this our first year of college with a straight face. He was convinced I couldn't hang. I wish I would have reminded him we were both at Williams. I expected detractors to look like hateful teachers like Ms. V. from seventh grade or Ms. Diaz, bitter little people who were never on my side. The thought that he was jealous or didn't want me to study the same field had not entered my mind. I just thought he was being mean, but those weren't grounds to dump him.

He probably had forgotten he'd ever said that to me, but I couldn't forget that the only other person from Bell Gardens who was also at Williams was also the one who didn't completely believe in me, and what was worse, he was trying to dissuade me from politics, which I cared about before he had ever come in the picture. I folded away the thought and went to Cal.

Before the program began, we had a day to hang out on Telegraph Avenue where our dorm was located. In a scruffy cafe off Telegraph and Dwight in Berkeley, Beto and I sat with a friend of ours from Williams who lived in Oakland, a Chinese-American woman who I'd taken two classes with at school. Coffee cups clattered as they dropped into metal sinks as I made a confession.

“Of course I love the guy,” I said. “How could you not love him?” Beto smiled. He really knew how to accept and sit with a compliment.

“Aw!” Our friend took a sip of her mocha. Her cheeks flushed red, inspired by the true love she was witnessing.

It wasn't news that I was a fan of Beto's—I'd seen every Shakespearean play he was in at school and went to every improv show when I should have been re-reading Foucault. He'd been told he was a great guy his whole life, from being a precocious five year-old telling his laughing uncles lewd jokes, to being a twenty-year old man whose all-white and Jewish friends loved his chubby cheeks and enunciation. Yes, I loved him and we'd been talking about getting married one day, so why not? I put down whatever misgivings I had about his sassy comments about my math skills.

New people were walking in to the café, letting sun into the dark room. A moment had passed since I'd said I loved Beto and he had not said the same for me. I was okay with him not saying it in return. He'd told me once before on a drunk dial in Oaxaca. He called from a party where his friends poked at him until he confessed that yes, he did love me and had to call to tell me. Three years after we first started dating. Seven years after he'd sworn I was the best girl for him. I must have told him I loved him too. I was not one to leave him hanging.

For some reason, we had decided not to tell people we were dating during the summer program. It was clearly time to go our separate ways, but the compromise made it seem like we were in the program on our own account. If we had to introduce ourselves as being together since high school, the same college, AND the same summer program, we thought it would look clingy. It might have been my idea.

Beto and I played out our charade when classes started the next day. I walked into the double I'd share with one of the other Latinas in the program who was not in the room. In her stead was a fuzzy San Marcos blanket on her bed, illustrated with a black and turquoise colt in mid gallop. Two pairs of shoes sat next to the door: baby blue patent leather clogs and a pair of Doc Marten ankle boots dotted with pastel roses; that girl was a best friend-to-be.

I put my own San Marcos blanket on the other bed, a brown and beige trio of cubs flanked by the proud mother, resting in a savanna imagined by someone in Mexico. I introduced myself in the common room.

Rocio had a long curly ponytail, reeled in tightly by a black hair band. She was talking to Mauricio in that resounding voice of hers, filling the entire room with her laugh. Mauricio had a broad and perfect smile, one he had 90 percent of the time. He was wearing a T-shirt with a fraternity name on it and running shorts. He must have been out jogging, which I thought was a cute habit for Mexicans. I thought only white people went for runs.

When I interrupted, they were happy to shake my hand. In college, the universe blessed me with meeting other Chicanos who were not mad at me because I was smart. These two were smarter than me, and I was grateful that I didn't have to compete.

I quickly made myself a trio with them, giving the boyfriend plenty of room to make friends on his own.

"Ey, nice San Marcos," said Rocio back in our room. "That thing looks like some pride of lions type-shit."

I was never more proud of that blanket.

Our classes were made up of 30 students of color and students with disabilities, everyone interested in public policy as a career. There was a white boy, red-faced and pimply, who claimed to be Latino: his parents were doctors from Argentina, though he'd admitted to "checking the box" to get in to the program. We never hung out with him.

People were friendly, but I kept close to Rocio and Mauricio. Everyone kept to themselves, the Asians, the disabled kids, the Black kids, and then us. Some of the other

students, mostly the Black ones, had more money than the rest; I could tell by their sparkling white, shell-toe Adidas and cashmere sweaters.

Like me, Rocio was also from L.A., from the Estrada Courts housing projects to be specific. She was at Occidental College after finishing prep school out at Phillips Exeter. She said New England made her love Neil Young but it was too far from her mom who was a breast cancer survivor and too damn different to go back to.

While my family lived in our own version of Estrada Courts, minus the murals and the gangs, we had just as many gardens growing from coffee cans. Education was how I was going to get my family out of there for good. She had the same plans and so did Mauricio. We were there to get our scholarship money and not waste our or anyone else's time.

We all hung out with Beto and the one other Latina girl in the program. She was a bottle blonde Mexican-American girl whose parents lived in a pricey and gated suburb of San Diego. She went to Yale and we chummed around in class. Her name was Vivian and she had these biggish, extra white teeth the size of Chiclet gum, which she was always flashing. The Chiclet dragged me into body lotion stores on Telegraph to sniff around after classes ended. The too-rich scent of artificial pink flower stayed on my hands all day, reminding me of Andi's raspberry body spray.

The math class was challenging, but it wasn’t rocket science like Beto had warned. I was getting high scores on the quizzes and problem sets in statistics. We worked in groups and this proved to combine our super powers.

One day after stats class, I walked in to the common room and saw Beto giving the Chiclet a shoulder rub. She had her head down so when I walked in she hadn't seen me.

Noticing how much they were both enjoying themselves, I quietly pulled Beto into the hallway.

“Listen,” I said calmly, “she's my friend. Don't go there.”

“Fea, we weren't doing anything,” he assured me. “It's cool.”

I had statistics in my eyes, the public policy cash blurring my vision. I thought the odds were on my side if I addressed the mild indiscretion early. I was trying to be logical, unlike Amá. She just mad-dogged Dad around the house for having a daughter as old as Chalo. I didn’t see passive-aggression making a difference for them. Might as well be upfront, right?

At dinnertime, I broke down and told my friends our secret. “We're dating. We’ve been dating for four years.”

“Oh shit!”" said Mauricio “That fool fucked up.”

“What a dog,” Rocio said and put down her pizza slice. “What does he think he's doing rubbing on her like that? And why haven't you guys told people?”

I didn't have a good answer. I couldn't finish my dinner of white rice and soy sauce.

A week later, I couldn’t find Beto anywhere. I could feel in my gut something was up, but I didn’t know what. Guess who else was missing? The Chiclet.

Walking around every floor of the building and the perimeter, I thought about the four years of hanging out with his family of chubby entrepreneurs and truck drivers. Four years when you're 19 is two lifetimes. That's how long I had wasted on someone who was still rubbing in his AP scores every time he had the chance. I stopped looking for him.

A few hours later he came in with his head down. "We need to talk" He had kissed the Chiclet.

Once in his room, he cried that he was sorry. His tortoise shell glasses kept sliding down his nose. I didn't want to hear it. No one cheated on me; it was my only bottom line. No one dumped me. I was the one who said yes or no, not some nerd who thought he was smarter than me and then had the gall to dump me for some wanna-be white girl.

I was silent for a few moments. "I can't believe you. All this time and *this* is how you want things to end? Fuck that. "

I couldn't cry. There would be plenty of time for that later.

In class the next morning, the Chiclet and Beto sat directly across from me. They kept their faces down and didn't make eye contact. I bore holes in their foreheads with my eyes. Their shame wore off as the summer continued. They traipsed around campus holding hands and eating gelato.

Some days later, after the shame wore off, the Chiclet wanted to talk. We were in my room. Rocio had left us alone, but not before she mad-dogged the Chiclet on her way out.

“I really wish things would have happened in a more optimal way,” she began. I could smell her thick freesia lotion from my bed.

“Optimal?” I interrupted. ”You've got to be fucking kidding me.” I really wished Dad had taught me how to punch people out. “We're done, girl. You can have that chubby fucker. Get the hell out of my room.”

I buried myself in homework and in my Mellon research paper. It had to be written before the summer ended. I hoped the ice cream Beto was eating would make him sick. I wondered when he'd possibly have time to write his paper.

The lovebirds were everywhere. My cold, dead eyes cursed them when I turned corners and ran into them, which was often—we lived on the same floor, had the same classes. It was like being an open wound, constantly exposed to raining lime juice.

About two weeks into the fiasco, my friends stepped in to interrupt my moping. “Let’s go for a jog,” said Mauricio.

“Yeah,” said Rocio. “It’ll cheer you up and you can give that Erykah Badu CD a rest.”

I put on some tennis shoes and borrowed workout clothes from Rocio. Off we went to jog at the small track on Bancroft Avenue. I struggled behind them, my skinny legs wobbling out a trot. Running with them saved my life. The endorphins kicked in just in the nick of time.

The next week, I got a call from Amá.

Jesse was fifteen, right before legal driving age. He'd crashed my uninsured Toyota. Amá said that the insurance company for the other car was after him for damages, but they were actually after me since my name was on the title.

I wiped my face and got it together to study statistical analysis with Rocio. Suck it up and keep going. Just a few days later, the insurance company called our dorm room. How they got my number, I have no idea. I avoided them, deleted messages, but Rocio wouldn't let me hide.

"Vick, just call them and tell them the truth," she said at lunch time, picking at the congealed white rice. "What are they gonna do to you? Take something you don't have?"

"You're right," I said. I doused the rice with soy sauce. Cal sure could fuck up white rice.

The next time the insurance people called I leveled with them.

"Listen," I told the agent. "I'm sorry my brother crashed into your client's car, but I don't have any money." My voice cracked and I stopped talking for a second. I had to keep going. Rocio was right, what were they going to do?

"All the money I have to my name is three thousand dollars. I know you want five thousand but I don't have it. I'm not going to have it. I don't know what else to tell you."

"Let me see what I can do," said the man.

I had no idea how I was supposed to stretch the little money from this other job into the entire next semester. I needed three plane tickets, plus I needed to eat, buy books, and socks, all kinds of shit. A few days later, they called me back.

They would take the three thousand.

“Vick,” said Rocio. “You should have told them you had less!”

Tonta. She was right.

At the end of August, we received certificates for completing the summer program. I planned to apply to grad school and for the fellowship funding in the coming school year. I felt like I'd really accomplished an important goal, a real way to get that house I'd always wanted for my family. Then I had to go home to face down the last worst thing.

I returned to Bell Gardens with less, but the corner of Florence and Eastern had more. The Bicycle Club Casino was open 24 hours a day, offering poker and table games that allowed it to operate without a Native nation running it. The final ugly corner where an abandoned gas station once stood was being torn down.

Amá waited a day before telling me why Dad was being so quiet. “He got caught stealing from his job at the glass company.”

“They had video,” Amá said. “They had private investigators follow him to Tecate where he sold the things he stole.”

I pictured Dad hocking hammers and sand paper to *camaradas*, some dudes at junk yards on the streets of Tecate. I bet the items were reflected on the mirrors in his fake Ray Ban sunglasses. He stole little shit like sandpaper, hammers, screwdrivers, all because he needed to make more money to support his two families: the one in Tecate, a

girl about twelve years old and her mother, Carmen, a *cualquiera's* name, Amá had said. He needed to feed us, too. He measured his time and love and made sure we had just enough.

Dad worked on his Impala outside, keeping himself occupied since he'd been fired. He was waiting for a judge to decide what would happen to him.

Sitting in Amá's crowded house and broken hearted, Dad almost a jailbird, it felt like I couldn't have a success without taking two steps back. When I moved away for college, I gave up seeing them every day at a time when Amá was sick with menopause and beatings. When I got the Mellon, it was enough to pay for my bills but not to send money home. When I got the Woodrow Wilson money, I had given it away to a car insurance company.

My gut told me the right thing to do if Dad went to jail was to stay home, work, and take care of my family. I was sliding back into our tiny house as fast as I had left it. I told Amá and she threw her kitchen towel on the table.

"Don't worry. Your father will always find a job. He may be a lot of things, a *cabron bien hecho*, but that's one thing I never worried about."

"Finish school, *mija*," she said. "We'll be okay."

With the remaining money from the summer program check, I had enough money for my needs: a round trip ticket to JFK Airport, a bus ride to Williams, and cash for books. It hurt like hell to get back on that plane and put me first, but I was getting great at leaving.

Chapter 35: The Fall, 1997

A month into the school year, I was only crying into my pillow every other night about being dumped. I was rabid at the thought of being dumped by a chubby drunkard who would steal my French Fries. I wished Beto had left me sooner. What killed me was that, if Beto had been in my place (his dad going to jail, his bank account empty), I would have waited to dump him until things got better. I was done putting his best interest before mine. I just wanted Beto to disappear so I could finish my senior year in peace.

Then one day at lunch, one of Beto's friends from the improv comedy group told me some news at Baxter.

"He's getting kicked out of school, you know," said Adam, a nice enough guy with flat feet who'd grown up in Greenwich Village. His family lived in a flat as small as Amá's house, which for New York was normal.

"He lied about his Mellon research this summer," Adam said in a low voice. "He's pretty shook up about it. I think it'd be great if you talked to him."

"You can't be serious," I said. "He probably deserves what's happening to him, don't you think?"

Adam didn't think so but didn't try to convince me. I left to find Kendra and tell her what happened. As Amá would say, *parece que volaba.* I ran to Dodd House so fast you would think I had wings.

“Apparently,” Kendra said, “he made up a fake project with a prof in chemistry who he’d never met.” We sat on her dorm room floor, our city hall for the year.

“He lied because he was too busy fucking that *cabrona*,” I said.

“Wait, girl. So, then, the Mellon director asked the prof about the project and when he said he didn't know Beto, she called him in right away.”

“Serves him right,” I said. *Que si chingue*. I sounded like Amá.

“Vértiz, he looks pretty down,” Kendra insisted. “I saw him at Baxter and we talked for a bit. Maybe you should talk to him.”

I did not understand what was with everyone feeling sorry for him. He’d brought the whole problem on himself. So many students would have killed for his spot at Williams. So many boys who were in the army or serving time in jail would have done anything for the privileges he had, but he blew them. The noose around my heart was starting to loosen—maybe he would disappear, for good.

Because I trusted Kendra much more than Adam, I caved and called Beto. My fingers could barely press down the buttons. Somehow I set up a time to meet at Hardy House the next night.

When I arrived he was already perched on the red couch where I had sat during my women's studies class two years before. He had bags under his eyes but he hadn’t changed otherwise. When I asked was “How are you?” he delivered a five-minute monologue while I fidgeted in my seat, speechless at the dribble coming out of his face.

“It’s been so hard on me and Vivian,” he said, meaning the Chiclet. (The girl and I had the same initials, ironically.) “I just don't know if we're going to make it.”

I wanted to rip off my wool sweater. *I just don't know if we're going to make it.* My hands were so twitchy that I had to stuff them in my jean pockets to keep them from tearing at Beto's face. I had not gone to talk to him about his relationship problems.

“You know,” I interrupted and picked up my backpack, “I’ve had enough updates. If you're not going to tell me what the fuck you did and how you plan to fix this mess, I have to go.”

“I’m sorry, fea,” he said. “I've let you down a lot lately.”

I should have accepted that apology, sat with it, and said nothing. That wasn’t me then. I wanted to ask him what happened to the person who wanted to make things better back home. You can’t do that being a liar *and* a cheater. What I probably said was, “Yes, you have. But just because I'm not your girlfriend, it doesn't mean I want to hear about your girl issues. I have to go.”

Maybe he nodded or wiped a tear from his face. He was, after all, breaking-up with me again. We'd been tethered to each other and it had helped us survive the wilderness of Williams. Lying and cheating, however, had cut the cord between us.

We wouldn’t return to Bell Gardens and run for those city council offices we'd sat in. Though we’d walked in the 25th anniversary of the Chicano Moratorium against the Vietnam War, Beto joined the U.S. Army to “protect his country” after 9-11. After the break up, I saw him for whom he really was: a politician, an actor, and not my friend.

I picked up my backpack and walked out. I didn’t want to believe his tears of regret because if I had, I’d have to admit he was a person who made mistakes and deserved forgiveness. To me that was like taking care of him again. I didn’t want to clean up after him anymore. When Amá heard what happened she said, “I'm glad you two broke up. Better now, than later.”

The night air was crisp but it was not yet winter. Tried as I might have to stop myself, the weeks that followed were early experiments in cyber stalking. Email was new in the world and you could type in an equation into the login prompt that let you see where someone had last logged in.

In the computer lab, I typed in the equation to see where Beto was staying. The process was called (unfortunately for the gesture), “fingering.” When I fingered Beto's email account and each time, the line on the screen said “Yale.” I pounded my fist down on the desk. My guts twisted into knots. “That fool is still holed up in the Chiclet's dorm room.”

“*Mujer*, stop checking up on him,” Carla would tell me. “It only makes you feel worse!” Only once the login showed he'd left Yale did I stop checking.

I forget who told me that the Williams administrators asked Beto to willingly take the year off. This meant he had not been suspended or expelled. What bothered me most was that his academic record would not show the reason for the time off. He could choose any story to explain to graduate schools why he'd been gone that year. Williams was really great a giving people second chances. Beto was really great at taking them.

Chapter 36: Acceptance, 1998

"Medicaid got me my first pair of glasses," said Professor Alvarez in her Stetson Hall office. "That's how I found out that the government could help me." The light from the window behind her was faint and gray, the opposite of how I felt sitting with there with her. Hearing that her family had been too poor to buy glasses was like hearing myself talk about how college was going to get my family a bigger house. Her confidence made me feel less alone and important. She was proof that I belonged at Williams, real life proof that Chicanos were smart. I hoped to be like her one day.

As a visiting professor, Professor Alvarez taught three classes in my major: Latino Politics, Urban and Ethnic Policies and Politics, and Los Angeles: a Post-Industrial City. On her desk was a copy of *City of Quartz* by Mike Davis, which we were going to read next. Her classes finally explained to me how the L.A. River I lived next to was once wild and flooded the miles of plains around it. When the county cemented it over, the public train system had been ripped out, and our water, like the land, was stolen to build our great cities. I went 3,000 miles to learn basic things about my home and the history of its land.

Professor Alvarez was born and raised in East Los Angeles and her heart-shaped face perfectly framed her personality: sarcastic and sincere. It made the atmosphere welcoming, a rare feeling for me at Williams. It felt like I was in Ms. Castro's second

grade class again, my hand shooting into the air whenever I had something to contribute. She had dark brown hair like mine and researched immigration policies. She knew everything I wanted to know. After hearing about my Woodrow Wilson fellowship at Berkeley, Professor Alvarez encouraged me to apply to her graduate school in Claremont in political science. I agreed, eager to please her. She wrote letters of recommendation on my behalf when I applied to the Claremont Graduate University and to U.T. Austin. She also helped me apply to internships and jobs at progressive and Latino nonprofits such as: the National Council of La Raza, NALEO, and Greenlining.

When I wrote my cover letters, I relied heavily on my attendance at Williams to signal an academic and professional magnificence. Our college was so exclusive that no one had heard of it. As much as I felt out of place at Williams because I was poor, the entitlement of being a student there had seeped into my self-perception. I was already "gifted" and the college's prestige clouded my view of the competition. I'd forgotten that, for that handful of internships and entry-level jobs, I was competing with a national pool of students who were student body presidents, actual labor activists, interns for senators, earning 4.0s, and whose parents were farm workers. What was my excuse for a 3.0?

At Williams, I'd stopped organizing and instead planned events. While Williams had taught me that networking was about introducing myself to strangers in hopes of an opportunity, I didn't know how to do it. The art of hustling was what I'd inherited from my parents, but I hadn't noticed. I was praying one of those gigs I applied to would work out.

Chapter 37: The Last Seminar, 1998

I thought college was supposed to make me a millionaire. That's how the free champagne and brie made me feel. My last senior seminar was ending. We said goodbye to Professor Crane and got up from our seats overlooking the Berkshire Mountains.

My answering machine was upstairs hiding jail bird secrets from my friends and myself. How could I go home without a job? Dad out of work and no one would hire a fifty-plus year old man with a record.

Then the rejection letters started coming in. Week after week, not a single internship accepted me.

“You'll figure it out, Vértiz,” Kendra said. “Stop worrying so much.” But I had not told her why my Dad was unemployed. Kendra had plans to attend Union Theological Seminary in the fall.

All was not lost. One week later, my mailbox had great news: I'd received admission to CGU and to U.T. Austin. The Texas school offered me a full ride. The policy summer institute I completed at Berkeley would kick in another $15,000 of funding per year at that school, but not CGU.

“So that means you’ll go to UT, then,” said Prof. Alvarez. “That’s too bad for CGU. Great for you, though!” I was so glad that I got into her alma mater, even if I

couldn’t attend. It was my way of paying her back for her inspiration.

When I called Rocio, she yelled into the phone: “I got in too, Vick! Are you going or what?”

I could have moved to Austin and lived with Rocio, my roommate from Berkeley. However, the program had a summer math “camp” that began in July, just one month after graduation. The admissions letter had encouraged me to attend the camp because my math grades were weak. I knew how to estimate. The bank account statement on my desk told me there wasn’t enough money to move to Texas.

“I'm going to defer,” I said. I told Prof. Alvarez on a different day. “I don't want to burn out and start school only a month after school ends. The office said I'd have a great chance of getting the same offer next year.”

“All right,” said Prof. Alvarez. “But schools can't always keep their word. Make sure you have a back-up plan.”

Rocio was also disappointed to not attend UT the same year, but she would scope out who I should study with and who I should avoid. Rocio was my canary spy in grad school. And like that, I'd wiped away my one chance at solid plans after graduation. I was jobless, just like Dad.

Chapter 38: Cash Money

I needed funding. First, for a magazine and then for my family. By senior year, I'd caught on that if I dug a little bit, I would hit gold at Williams. I wasn't a gold digger. I'd just figured out the way rich people lived. They never worried about where the money would come from because it was all around them.

Carla, Kendra, and I wanted to publish *People's Native Tongues*, a mixed-media magazine that had been defunct for lack of student interest. The magazine featured visual art and creative writing in all genres by students of color. Carla had changed her major to studio art and drew the cover and other illustrations of Botero-shaped women. Kendra probably contributed a personal essay about race and gender. My job was to find funding.

I called the college President's office and asked to speak with him. I didn't blink at the fact of personally calling up his office; "Williams" was synonymous with "access." I'd hoped he would remember me from our Latino studies meetings, but his administrative assistant said he wasn't in. Instead, I told her my art collective needed $500 to print a very important magazine that affirmed the experiences of students of color on campus. I was prepared to sell her on the importance of our voices and on the value of a literary art publication to campus.

However, without as much as a stutter she said, "What's your account number?" I read it to her wondering why she wanted to know. "The funds will be in the account on Monday. Anything else I can do for you?"

My mouth dropped open. *Tonta*. Once again, I should have asked for more money. Maybe we should have budgeted a launch party, or invited Toni Morrison to write the foreword, she was only at Princeton after all. Any more ideas would have been welcome! I was too shocked to say anything other than, “Thank you.”

With graduation just a few months away, and my bank account steadily shrinking, I had to figure out a way for my family to attend the ceremony. They'd never been on a plane, so I really wanted to make the trip happen. Luckily, there was a way.

That fellow student, Nestor from Carpinteria, had told me a few years back that his family could not afford the trip for graduation. He’d asked the financial aid office if they would consider buying two tickets for his mom and sister to attend. “That's crazy,” I said. “Did they do it?”

“They sure did,” he had said. “Always ask because you never know.”

I never would have thought of that, but after the phone call to the President’s office, I bet that shit was true. Nestor had worked in warehouses over the summer to help his family, farm workers out by Santa Barbara with no Dad to help out. Whenever I thought I had it bad, there was my friend to remind me it could be worse.

With his story in mind, I told the bursar my situation. His office was in the same building as the Dean who'd proceeded over the football player fiasco apology. The bursar was an older Anglo man who dressed in gray suits and light blue dress shirts. He was nice enough if you could get past his admin staff that closely guarded his door. He'd get back to me after looking at my parent's assets, which were still at zero.

A few days later, I got a call from his office. They would buy two tickets, just like my friend said he had asked for two, and so I did, too: one for Jesse and one for Amá. I should have asked for four, of course, to bring Chalo and my father, but I didn't want Dad to come. He might blurt out what he'd done and then I'd have to show my real self.

Chapter 39: Graduation

I picked Amá and Jesse up at the airport in Connecticut in a friend’s new Tahoe SUV. Scott was a tall, blonde Native American, kind enough to help me out when he'd heard my family needed a ride. In my last year, I was starting to make friends with people who had resources and were happy to share them instead of just being hateful because I was broke. Being Mexicans who love cars, Amá and Jesse were really impressed by the truck. I hoped they would be impressed so much that they would forget to ask me about my plans.

Jesse asked, “Is this yours, Vick?”

“My friend lent it to me. Sweet, huh?”

“Dang.” Jesse sat lightly in the passenger's seat, like he didn't want to dent the seats. The car smelled as if Scott had just taken off the wrapper.

Amá nodded in approval. She was wearing her glasses all the time then, and not just to read. Jesse had to help her into the truck because she'd fallen while working at my old elementary school. Without insurance or a union, she never filed worker's compensation claim.

“*Que bonitas las montañas*,” Amá said. She looked out at the green hills dotted with moosewood and sugar maples. Their leaves were finally back from a long winter.

“This place is covered in trees,” I told them. “All the way to campus.”

I parked on the gravel in front of Dodd to take out their bags. The tires felt uneasy on the dirt. I was nervous to show them my big room and private bath.

"*Aquí vives*, chata?" Amá said. "Is it a hotel?"

"It used to be," I said. When we got up to my room, Amá looked around. She was so proud she'd raised such a great cleaner.

"Your bathroom is spotless, *mija*."

"Somebody comes to clean it, Amá."

It embarrassed me to admit it, but I didn't want to lie. Jesse looked out the window. My comment made him turn around.

"You have a maid?" he said. "Dude, this school is still a hotel."

"Not a maid," I said. "Though someone does clean the bathrooms and the rest of the building." My time at the hotel Williams was over. Soon we'd be packed tight in our old house like sweaty tortillas again.

Baxter Hall was covered in ivy. Its brick facade peeked through in many places. The lawn in front of Chapin Hall had a purple and gold tent in the center. Inside there were four tables with chocolate, strawberries, crackers, and expensive cheeses, maybe wine too. The facilities and cafeteria workers had worked really hard to make that day beautiful for our families.

Mostly white parents walked around with bouquets of sunflowers and irises in their arms, walking to the stands in the science quad for graduation. For once, the casual

dress style of the school didn't bother me. Parents weren't wearing suits and ties; they were also wearing crooked leather sandals and sun dresses.

Amá and Jesse were slightly more overdressed in heels and khaki pants. They fit in just fine with my group of friends and their families.

It was time to walk. Kendra was with her mom and brother chatting in her room about driving back to Maryland where they lived. I could hear Carla laughing with her sister; our rooms shared a bathroom. Amá ironed my graduation gown on my bed. Jesse had the video camera ready; Doña Marta had lent it to us so they could see me get my diploma.

Kendra and Carla were both going to New York City in the fall where most students went after Williams. They would live near each other along with a dozen other Williams alumni. I was heading back to the West Coast without my classmates.

I got in line with the rest of my class, wobbling around in a pair of black platform Mary Jane heels. I'd bought them on Fordham Road in the Bronx, which was just like Pacific Avenue in Huntington Park back home in Los Angeles. They were both crowded streets with Spanish and music blaring from speakers in the shops. Like in L.A., Bronx parents and kids also dragged pink plastic shopping bags and frowned while waiting for the bus. The biggest difference was that the radio played *bachata* instead of *quebraditas*. Williams had made me worldly.

Long gone were the penny loafers and wool sweater of my first days at Williams. It was a small miracle that I did not trip over my platforms while walking on the stage to

get my diploma. Like half the graduating class, after the ceremony, I wandered over to Hopkins Gate to take pictures. Behind us in every one of those photos is the stone gate with this inscription: Climb high, climb far. Your goal the sky, your aim the star. Beto must have been standing around waiting to take the same photos with his friends.

Beto had been sitting alone on the hill looking over the commencement ceremony. I didn't see him up there; we had our backs to the audience. Jesse told me once the ceremony was over. Beto walked by us at some point on the lawn in front of Baxter Hall, where years before I'd scraped eggs off plates. I think he nodded at me, as if to say, "What's up, fea?" He didn't come up to congratulate me or my friends. Seeing him dredged up all the bile in my gut so I ignored him. I turned and joked with Amá about what she thought of the cheese they were serving. She probably said it tasted like penicillin and didn't get a second helping of brie.

When Amá saw Beto walking around, she sucked her teeth. "*Ese muchacho no tiene vergüenza.*" Of course he's not embarrassed, I said. He doesn't think he did anything wrong.

At a small party after the ceremony, I told Kendra and her brother about Beto.

"It's all right, don't worry about that guy," said Dedrick, Kendra's brother. "He's a turkey." We were all just happy to have finished college in one piece.

Vista had been blessed with a god mother of sorts, Marcela, a woman married to a chemistry professor, both from Mexico City—*chilangos* who, once you talked to long enough, let out their no-nonsense accents particular to that region. I never saw Marcela

without a camera around her neck, documenting all the Multicultural Center-sponsored events.

Vista was housed at the MCC and Marcela had helped us organize every heritage month, panels, parties, and dozens of events. Marcela and Amá took a couple of tequila shots in my honor. I gave Amá a look and she said, “Just a couple, don’t worry.” When the tequila was all gone, it was time to head out. I told Kendra I'd call her the coming week to see how she'd gotten in. We said our goodbyes and I only cried a little bit; a great triumph since I was heading into the unknown.

“Thank you for everything,” Amá told Marcela. “For taking care of my *chata*.” Marcela and her husband dropped us off at Bradley Airport. Even though we weren’t in the luxury Tahoe, we were grateful for the ride.

“It was easy, *señora*,” said Marcela. “La Vickie can take of herself.”

Back home in L.A., Bell Gardens had a new sign on Florence Avenue at the Eastern Avenue corner. *Downtown Bell Gardens*, it read. There were skinny palm trees on the corner and Mercedes Benz driven by older Asian men were making constant right turns toward the Bicycle Club Casino.

“We’re fancy now, huh?” I told Jesse.

“The police department has nicer trucks and cars, I guess.” The casino money had not made its way into our schools, still crowded and aging.

Dad had picked us up in his Impala with Chalo. The floor had been recently

vacuumed. I hoped he'd done it for my arrival, though you could never tell.

When we pulled into the alley, the wall that had cursed me was covered in ivy. I got ready for bed, which I had to share with Amá again like I did on my college vacations. The bedroom was packed. A coat rack cascaded over with women's fleece sweaters, T-shirts of every color stuffed between Amá's double bed and the boy's bunks. Extra blankets and faded P.E. T-shirts from BGI were folded neatly on Chalo's bed on the top bunk. Jesse's worn down running shoes were on the floor sticking out from under the bed, though the beds were always made. A TV we got from a neighbor sat on top of a green metal dresser that my brothers' socks and jeans shared.

When I was little, it felt reassuring to have her a few inches away to protect me from earthquakes. However, I was already 21 and when Amá made the sign of the cross over my face before I fell asleep, my body stiffened up. I didn't go to church anymore and was only letting her do that to show respect. It was her house, after all.

Amá had a surprise: a graduation party thrown by her and Doña Marta. Beto's mom, the baker, brought the cake. A single graduate cake topper, a girl with brown skin and black hair, decorated the middle of the chocolate and banana cake. I thanked her over the phone the following week. It was still too weird to see her in person.

"We just want to tell you that we love you," read the card she left with the cake. "Our family hopes you will keep in touch." Amá had become friends with Beto's mother and Nana, his grandmother. Amá would be there when his Nana passed away. Beto would

be back at Williams in the fall, like nothing had happened.

Marisa and Tomas came to the party. Even Rudy and Fernando came, too. Eva and Moses were busy going on double dates with Beto. Eva had framed photos of the four of them at an amusement park. When I asked why, she said, “We all have to move on.” She was right again. I stopped calling.

Tomas joked about our group photo. You could see the alley and barbed wire from our gate in the background.

“If you send in a picture of us to the Alumni Review, the caption should read: Ghetto graduation party!” That magazine always has photos of alumni at the top of some impossible mountain trek. Actually, that’s exactly what the three of us had done. I should have sent in the photograph.

The party was a combined effort: it took three women, the neighbors, my brothers, and Dad’s *carnales* who’d hooked him up with side jobs to throw the celebration. They really knew how to help each other out. They also knew to always find the money they needed, no matter what was in their bank accounts.

In the meantime, my bank account was shrinking by the day. Jesse was a senior in high school so he was busy with summer school. Chalo, the youngest one was in eighth grade, so we watched stupid movies about stupid men who drove a van that looked like a dog.

How many more rejections did I get? Every single thing I applied to was a No. I didn't even get unpaid internships.

After two months of having no job and driving around in Rudy's car, waiting for a miracle, I called Marisa to see what she was up to. The last time we'd talked, she was excited about a job organizing a comprehensive program for Latina survivors of domestic violence.

She lived forty minutes away in Claremont and I had no car to see her. She might as well have been in Spain.

“Sorry I haven't emailed,” I told her. “I don't have a computer at home. No more computer labs, right? How's your new job?”

“Don't worry,” she said. “I was unemployed for months. It got so bad, I had to charge Q-Tips.”

Her job at the nonprofit had worked out beautifully. It was a dangerous profession. Batterers frequently threatened their lives or those of anyone who was helping the women who escaped their side, but Marisa did not want any other work. The organization also had a shelter and a legal aspect to their work. I had thought I wanted to work at a domestic violence agency, and even wrote a paper for it in our Women of Color in the U.S. class. I'd called Marisa to feel connected to my old life. I wanted to remember I still had friends from Williams even if I couldn't see them.

“There's a job here you'd be great at,” she said. “It's as a legal advocate. You'd be completing temporary restraining orders at the Pomona courthouse.”

"You think I can?"

"I know you can. You're a bandit with financial aid forms," said Marisa.

It was true. No one could fill forms out faster than me.

"That sounds amazing," I said, stepping up. "What do I have to do?"

She said to mail in a resume and cover letter saying she referred me. At Williams, they taught us about networking, yet it always seemed fake, the kind of thing Beto was good at because he was an actor. My face couldn't hide my feelings and couldn't sustain a fake smile for long. The kind of networking that meant talking to people I went to school with, also known as friendship? That I could do.

After we hung up, I grabbed my floppy disks and walked to the library a mile away. I emailed my materials to Marisa, just in case. Because email was new in the world, I didn't want to depend on a file being lost in the nothingness of the Internet.

As a result of all the rejections, I had learned to keep my hopes down. When I got an interview, Marisa called me to talk before the meeting. She sat me down somewhere, maybe a cafe and told me exactly what the director would ask and what I should say.

It was the same gesture as when Eva sat me down years before. I had not realized how generous Eva had been, sticking her neck out for a girl she had hated just a year before. I was not going to blow my new chance. I listened as if my life depended on it. I memorized and wrote down everything Marisa said. She wasn't wearing a business suit, just a cardigan set and gray pants, black flats, so I knew I was over-dressed, though I would have rather have too much on than too little.

She said I’d have to understand the cycle of violence. She ran it down for me: honeymoon, escalation/tension building, incident/climax, calm, and honeymoon again. Domestic violence wasn't just about bruises, she said. There was also economic and emotional abuse where men would control their wife’s ability to work or pay bills. It sounded familiar but my brain would not compute the parallel to what went on at home. I had to disassociate. If I'd made the connections, how could I have lived at home, an anti-domestic violence worker with a father who was still calling his wife a *pendeja*? Beto might have been a lot of things, but he never insulted me like that. He just insinuated that I was less intelligent than him.

“There is never a catch-all solution to abuse,” Marisa said. “When clients are talking to me about how her husband is threatening her life for the millionth time, I don't say things like, 'Why don't you just leave him?' It's not simple at all.”

The purpose of the temporary restraining orders I would complete would help families feel safe, even if just for the time at the courthouse. I would be great at my job, even when I couldn't help my own mother.

Filling out documents was what had helped me graduate from college, high school, and get through all the years before that. Dad had shown me first how to keep a paper trail and hide it if I had to. Working with Marisa and the dozens of women at the center would the accomplishment I’d have to show for having left my family.

“I want to help women towards their goals in the world,” I might have told the director in the final interview. “Help them get out of dangerous situations.”

The director might have said, “Some women never leave their batterer. You'll have to accept that, too.”

I would have replied, “I understand how complex it is to leave.” It would have been the truth. Marisa vouched for my abilities and with my polished interview skills, two weeks later, I got a call. The director offered me my first, full-time job at a nonprofit as the Legal Advocate for $25,000 a year. The salary was not enough to move my entire family to a Downey ranch-style home, but it was a start.

Things were looking up.

Amá still had a part-time job as a lunch lady at my old elementary school. Jesse was enrolled at Los Angeles Community College and Chalo was just entering high school. Dad was the last one in the house without a daily obligation.

Strangely, Jesse and I both remember driving Dad to hear the decision on his case at an East Los Angeles courthouse, an early eighties civic center with a man-made lake. We both could not have taken him. Jesse doesn’t remember where he left Dad, just that he had a small duffle bag and that he left his Ray Bans safe at home in their case.

Dad must have wiped sweat from his dyed-black mustache with gusto when the judge decided against jail time. Instead he was assigned to 1,000 hours of community service to be completed through the county. He came home on the bus and started looking for permanent work.

My job was staring the next week. While helping Amá hang clothes out on the line, she said, “Your dad talked to a guy who said he'd help him get out of his community service.”

We moved along and pinned wet jeans to the ropes that hung across our yard. We stepped over the oil stains carefully so we wouldn’t slip and fall.

When I asked what she meant by “get out” she said a county worker had chatted up Dad. “You know how he is,” she said. “Your dad started talking about boxing and work, and then the worker starts to tell him that, if your dad pays him $300, he'll give the community service to some other person.”

“How is that even possible?!” I shook out a pair of my jeans.

“*Es bien vivo, tu papá*,” Amá said. “Your dad said he'll do it. And as soon as he gets a job, no more picking up trash in an orange jumpsuit for him.”

“Amá!” I protested, “That's not okay!” My entire sense of internal justice, the little girl came out of me who had wanted Ms. Diaz to punish the sticker thief. I shook my head “No” so much that I gave myself a headache.

“Don't yell at me! He's the one who's thinking like a rich man.” She was right. Hadn't Williams taught me anything? There was always another way.

Dad came home that day and said he’d found a job as a handy man in the City of Industry (where else?). How had a Mexican man in his late fifties, with only a fourth grade education get a job after being fired for stealing?

Dad had his Ray Bans on when he walked into the house, their lenses clean and without a scratch. He twisted his mustache and said, "Oh, you know, chata. I talked to a few *carnales*, some guys around the neighborhood told me where to go."

He didn't need email, or a resume, or a networking seminar; he already had everything he needed.

Still wanting to change the world, I applied to graduate school again in the fall. I still needed to earn more money. If I couldn't give my family a bigger house, then I would try and find a way to get one for myself. At our kitchen table, next to Amá's permanent candle and photo of my sister Victoria, I wrote my graduate school essays for Columbia's international policy program (for which I was grossly under-prepared) and the LBJ School (for which I was heavily recruited by a Latino alumni).

Marisa was also applying to public policy schools, Harvard in particular. She was brave enough to consider the ice of the East Coast again. My Berkeley friend Mauricio also applied to the same program. There was one other person who applied to that program: Beto.

He'd finished Williams while I was at my first job. We got our letters around the same time and the phone rang for me almost every day. Marisa and Mauricio were also admitted.

Amá was ready when I got into the LBJ School.

“*Que bueno, mija*,” she said and did not cry. “Just make sure you don't get so pale.” That would be impossible in central Texas, and that's exactly how I set it up. I’d given away my down coat to another Latina friend at Williams when I graduated. No more icy fingers and toes for me.

UT Austin offered me a full-ride again. The Woodrow Wilson Fellowship would therefore pay me the $15,000 in increments over two years. I would not have to work and could focus on statistics and public administration. For once, something at home wasn't burning down and forcing me out of my house.

In the small community of “over-educated Latinos” (as another friend of mine says), you can't throw a rock without hitting an ex or someone you're connected to. We all know each other.

In their statistics classes, Marisa would occasionally mad-dog Beto, a wrath I didn't ask her to unleash. Mauricio took me aside after they’d competed the program and told me that Beto was afraid of Marisa. Mauricio said, “Beto would shit his pants when Marisa looked at him. He said he could ‘feel Vickie's eyes boring a hole through him.’”

The best revenge for a broken heart was friends who loved me. And to whom I owed the world.

Epilogue

All As

Eighteen years after graduating from college, I visited my family's house in Bell Gardens. The Bicycle Club was beginning construction on their seven-story hotel. Gray dust lifted every time a car flew down the Florence Avenue exit. That summer, I had a white streak in my hair; Amá's side of the family goes gray early. I was back because I needed a backpack for school.

My fantasies about big houses with dens and quiet neighbors had not faded. I still thought we'd have a bigger house one day, I no longer thought that it was the point of life. Bigger was not always better, or worth more. What my parents had invested in our house was 35 years of acquaintances and friendships that got them jobs, babysitting, and sweat equity. When I thought about the pros and cons of moving my retired parents out of their neighborhood, the cons won. If I moved them, there wouldn't be anyone to check on them once a day like our neighbor Paola did. They were half a block from a mini-market, two blocks from a major supermarket and two bus lines. Besides, who was I to decide what was best for my family?

I needed help looking for a fake leather backpack from high school. It was in style again and I wanted to use it in my second year as a master of fine arts student in the fall. It would be my second master's degree after the master in public affairs I earned at UT Austin.

Jesse helped me rummage through the contents of our shed, the one that sits slightly across from our house. The room smells like the grease from Dad's tools and mouse droppings, a dark and musty scent. Jesse was around because he had just moved out of his ex's house, having racked up a bit of debt on appliances and an engagement ring for a girl who thought the gem was too small. He'd almost become the cop he always wanted to be. Two weeks before he became a sheriff's deputy because it was giving him severe anxiety attacks. In his words, "All those guys are alpha dog assholes." He was staying with our parents and was back in school because he wanted to start his own auto body shop. Cars are in our blood.

"Hurry before I change my mind," Jesse groaned. It was noon and hot as hell out, but there we went looking for treasure. The shed was a narrow room with a slanting roof. Jesse and I found everything except for my backpack: Legos, Hot Wheels, Barbies, the forgotten awesome of our childhood toys.

"I guess we had it good, huh?" I said. We moved box upon box of dolls and toys, not the knock-offs, the real shit. It was hard to tell where we were on the class scale as kids, though it felt painfully clear. We were not *jodidos* like so many others who don't have jobs or people to help them. We at least had friends and neighbors. Mutual assistance is the retirement plan of the working class.

Our youngest brother Chalo was either working at the Starbucks in downtown L.A., or at the local city college on his fifth year of trying to transfer. The classes he needed to go to a four-year school got cut every year, slowing him down exponentially.

By the time I was his age, I already had a master's degree in public policy.

There was no backpack. We found more valuable things. Behind an old wooden TV, we found a record player case. Its light gray plastic cover was somehow free of spider webs. Even the chrome was still shiny.

When Jesse opened it, out came dozens of folded white sheets of paper with red markings on them. I picked one up and read questions, typed in Spanish, all of them about car parts. Dad's name was at the top of each paper.

“It's Dad's homework,” I said.

Jesse picked one up, then another. “Dude, he got all A's on these.” Jesse kept picking up crisp, almost ironed papers from the bottom of the case. They were all perfect scores from the Hemphill School, a distance learning college.

“What do you know,” I said surprised. “This fool is smart.”

“No shit, he's smart,” said Jesse with attitude. “He can fix a car by himself. He taught me everything he knows.”

No, shit. Did I still think that because he only went to third grade in rural Mexico that he wasn't smart? Yes. My education had trained me to believe that if it wasn't from the academy, it wasn't worth anything. I’d dismissed most of his choices, like his absences, too. Dad was home more and more, however. Carmen from Tecate died from ovarian cancer and he’d stopped going so often. Amá urged him to go back and “visit his daughter,” but he’d only go every few months.

He may not have gone to college, but he'd learned how to have two families, imperfectly, but forever. That made me think I could change how I behaved toward him, too. Noticing is about as good as can be done some days.

"Did you know that he learned to read in the army when he was eighteen?" I told Jesse. He nodded and stretched his arms out. He'd heard the story a million times from Amá, too.

We packed up the letters and put them back where we found them. We didn't think Dad needed to see them. He already knew they were there.

Once back inside Amá's kitchen, Jesse asked me more questions. We were both still excited about the discovery.

"Have you seen the photograph of Dad in an Army uniform?" His chest was puffed out.

"Yeah," I said. "He looks a lot like Chalo."

Jesse looked at Amá, who was warming pinto beans with big slices of softened onion. The pieces sizzled in the hot oil, letting their fragrance fill the room. She wiped sweat from her forehead with a towel she kept on her shoulder, favoring her left side when she moved. Then he looked back at me. "We look a lot like both of them."

Do it yourself

Amá added a new roof to her front yard in 2013. "I just asked the neighbors for a little help," she said. I wanted to know if she had paid them; who works for free anymore?

"I took them some food," Amá said then listed the food she made in exchange for *mano de obra* to get her new roof. Our fiveplex neighbors worked on the roof and ate: "...beef neck bone *en chile rojo,* butter cookies*, pollo asado*." Smokey red chile, sugar and butter, and roasted meat will tempt anyone who's hungry.

Amá had instructed the neighbor's teenage son as he nailed turquoise plastic to the roof's awning in front of our living room window. Her plants had taken over that outdoor room, another smaller roof installed over her kitchen window. The shades provide privacy only celebrities know the joy of.

Chayote vines and bougainvillea enclosed the spaces between our house and the neighbor's comings and goings, between our house and the short brick wall and the alley.

Amá was the real architect of the family. She built a den over two decades, collecting furniture from our elementary school that threw good things away. When we sat down to eat at the table she got from my old school, I wondered if I ever sat at it as a child, sticking my hands in the cubbies looking for lost stickers.

Letters

Amá's yard was a botanical garden: aloes, ferns, palms, plumeria trees, sugar cane, and corn stalks behind the house. On another visit to have lunch with her, she said, "Oscar's so happy you're writing to him." Amá warmed more tortillas. The purslane bubbled in *chile verde* and spiced steam rose from the pan. "He asked in a letter if he could write to you here. *Yo le dije que sí.*"

A letter from Oscar came to Amá's house that summer. Through Tia Jay who'd long divorced Rafael and began talking to Amá again. She told her that a group of sheriffs had busted into her house to find Oscar. They tied her and her youngest son with plastic cuffs and held them in their kitchen. They found a gun on Oscar—a violation of his parole—and his third strike. Former Governor Pete Wilson's Three Strikes Law, required that a person convicted of any new felony, with a prior conviction of a serious felony, if they broke the law again, would to be sentenced to state prison for twice the term that crime normally earned. In Oscar's case, he was convicted of a felony and already had two or more prior "strikes" which mandated a state prison term of at least 25 years to life.

For possession of a firearm at Pelican Bay State Prison, Oscar sits in a solitary housing unit. Oscar is special too, so special that no one should be allowed his company.

We correspond monthly and together we're piecing parts of our missing lives and families. We're trying to make relating a real thing of value—a game of tag where we connect the dots between mass incarceration and schools just by talking about our lives.

Oscar had a history teacher who had asked him to write down his future life when he was 25. He'd wanted to be a photographer and keep documenting his life and that of his neighborhood.

"None of my dreams came true," wrote Oscar. "But thank you for asking me these questions, *prima*. It reminds me that I am loved."

He has the most beautiful penmanship I've ever seen. We write about the World Cup, about how schools sometimes look a lot like prisons and vice-versa. I send him

poems I've published and print out memes about President Putin's uncanny likeness to hairless cats.

There's some hope that Oscar can appeal his case under Proposition 36, which made changes to the Three Strikes law. People who were serving life terms under it whose last conviction was for a nonviolent crime could petition the court for a reduced sentence.[x] I wrote a letter on his behalf saying he'd have many resources in me and his family when he's released. He's not the boy he used to be.

Oscar is reading this book as I go, sending me details about Cudahy and the photos he took of his friends. I went to the Clara Street Bridge over the Long Beach Freeway to take photos. I'd rained the day before so the sky was that rare cerulean that hides behind so much smog. The clouds were friendly and low. I'm going to send him the pictures, my amateur imitations of his original work so he can see what I see.

Without him, my education would be limited, compartmentalized, and have me rejecting parts of myself I can't live without. With Oscar's help, my sight has greatly improved.

*

It turns out I didn't have to build my family another house. Amá built a garden and an outdoor den. Next to the *Virgen de Guadalupe* altar is a television a neighbor gave Amá. It sits on top of a mini fridge she bought from a man she met at the physical therapy sessions she goes to for her arthritis. There is a couch that once belonged to Doña Marta, mom's best friend who moved to Georgia to be closer to her son who'd fought in Iraq.

On that TV, my family watches dating shows in Spanish, soccer players who take ballet-inspired dives, immigrants arriving in buses to hostile red-tinged faces. Some things changed, and others stayed the same.

So many years later and it turns out our house was always the right size. And what's more, Amá was the one to make it bigger, with her own hands and by trading her food for manual labor.

Her education is what made it happen.

[i] "Dead Cities and Other Stories," in *Dead Cities* by Mike Davis, pg. 198.

[ii] "Crew Begins Sealing Goo at Playground," Tina Griego, *Los Angeles Times*, July 26, 1990.

[iii] "Mayor Gets Physical: She Hears Enough, Hurls a Chair at Bell Gardens City Council Colleague," Jill Gottesman, January 13, 1993, *Los Angeles Times*, downloaded on February 17, 2015, from http://articles.latimes.com/1993-01-13/local/me-1206_1_council-members

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