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Apartment Number Six:
A Collection of Essays About Home, Family,
and Growing Up in East 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

Maricela Ponce

August 2011

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No Escape

I've been thinking about death lately. I always have but now the thoughts are coming with more frequency. I think the sight of my aging parents is causing me to jump ahead twenty or thirty years, assuming no freak accident or illness takes them first. The biceps my dad acquired from hauling hundred-pound sacks of flour at his job are shrinking and becoming enveloped in wrinkling skin. My mother's eyes are developing crow's feet which, to her relief, aren't visible in pictures yet. Perhaps my closeness to the age of thirty is causing me to visualize my inevitable path. I'm not married and I don't have kids. I said something the other day about my future grandchildren and I paused. I realized that at this rate I don't know if I'll have any. I might end up sitting by a fire on a chair with a couple of cats curled up on my lap. Envisioning the world without me is nothing new, though. I've been scaring myself silly this way since I was seven or eight. I wonder to what extent it's considered normal.

My parents, my sister, and I lived in a one-bedroom apartment in East L.A until I was eleven. Our residence was the last one in the building of six. It stood before a staircase. My parents fit their queen bed and our bunk beds between the wall with the closet and the one with the window. The nightstand my dad kept his alarm clock on sat snugly between them. I slept on top because I was the oldest. My sister Jackie fell off the bottom bunk even though the ladder I climbed was strapped vertically to the side in the center.

My father, a truck driver, rose at three-thirty in the morning to be at work at five. I hardly ever heard the radio go off because my dad set the volume just above a whisper.

It was his departure that sometimes woke me. I heard him lock the brown wooden door followed by a controlled slam of the screen. I pictured him descending the stairs in his work attire—faded blue jeans, a brown belt probably as old as me, and probably a light blue tee shirt with a pocket on the left breast to carry a pen and small bills in. At least that's what he had been wearing one time when I peeked out the window as he was leaving. Then I would hear his burgundy 1973 Ford Galaxy come to life in the garage directly below us. The car was so long that it almost took up the entire garage. It always started with a roar followed by the sound of air being released. Then it would sputter as if threatening to shut off.

While the car warmed up, I imagined my dad taking off the black sandals that he always wore with grey socks and change into the yellow work boots he carried in the trunk. He did the opposite when he got home, so I assumed he put the shoes on in the morning. After I heard two doors slam, the trunk and the driver's, the gears shifted and I knew my dad was going in reverse. He always stopped a foot short from backing up into the staircase. Whenever I rode in the car, I always got up on my knees and looked out the back window because I worried that the metal bumper would hit the black railing. But it never did. A second shift declared my dad's departure. I imagined the Galaxy heading through the driveway towards the street and I prayed to the Virgen de Guadalupe that she take care of my father and bring him home safely at the end of the day.

If I didn't fall asleep quickly, I peered out the window. I slept on the edge of the bed, either by the bar that kept me from taking a tumble or the window. I used to bang my head regularly on the wall when I rolled from one side to the other, especially during

the summer when I sought the coolness of the window. On the mornings that I heard my dad leave, I stuck my index and middle fingers between the horizontal blinds, separated them, and watched his red car drive away. When he was out of sight, I turned my attention to the life that existed beyond the mulberry tree behind the staircase in the garden. The lights that flickered in the distance reminded me that there was an entire world out there that I wasn't always aware of. I didn't like that.

We lived between the 60 and 5 freeways but I could only see the 5 from my vantage point. Tiny white and red lights sparkled far-off in straight lines. Similar lighting rose above the freeway that, when I connected the dots, took on the shape of buildings. It was then, focused on the man-made shimmer and the hum of traffic, that I fell into a trance and entered another dimension.

The four o' clock panorama made me think of all the people in the world. I was one bitty ant amongst them all, just passing through. The thought frightened me even though I thought I was important. I knew I would be insignificant in the history books of the world. I was only going to be on Earth for a while and then be sent back to oblivion where I used to be before I was born. The thought of returning to such non-existence frightened me.

Although no one knew for sure what death consisted of, I believed it would be a lot like sleeping. I had seen several dead relatives in my short lifespan. They lay peacefully in their coffins. If they were really dead, which I measured by their non-rising chests, their brains didn't function anymore. If their brains didn't function, they couldn't think or feel or dream. My mom taught me that my deceased family members would

become my guardian angels. I doubted whether my great-grandfather's unconsciousness would do me any good.

I wanted to be spared. I didn't want the world to continue without me. I wanted to see flying cars and use gadgets I couldn't even conceive of. But I knew I was going to eventually fall into an infinite slumber where fears and nightmares were nonexistent. This understanding should have soothed my dread but it didn't. Instead, I entered panic mode.

An image of Earth's blue sky replaced by death's black one engrossed my mind. I stood atop a mountain, facing the setting sun, overlooking a sea of living people. The ocean of inhabitants flowed away from me, heading towards the rest of their lives disguised as the horizon. They were going to exist until their time expired. As much as I wanted, the people weren't going to turn back to retrieve me. Ninety-nine percent of them didn't know me. Even if they did, they couldn't help me. The living couldn't help the deceased come back to life no matter how close or distant the relationship had been. When I learned that my ex-vice principal had lost her battle to cancer, I felt helpless. My thoughts automatically went to her daughter, also a teacher who had worked at the site, her other children, and husband. No hug, no card, no fruit basket would have healed their pain at that moment. Only time would let them mend and teach them how to use the memories of their mother and wife in a positive way instead of clinging to her passing.

It was Tuesday afternoon when the principal announced the tragic news. It was also Zumba day at Curves where I worked out. I had liked the vice principal but hadn't been close to her. I admired her strength and faith when she battled the illness. I

considered skipping Curves because it didn't seem fair that in an hour I would be dancing while her family grieved. My dad never allowed us to play loud music for days or weeks after a relative's death. He said it was disrespectful. His customs stuck with me but I knew that sitting at home would do nothing to comfort the vice principal's family. So I went to Curves and made sure I attended her funeral service the following week to pay her the respect she deserved.

If my mother was right, the vice principal had become an angel looking after her family. Her husband and children would have to take comfort in that and continue living. I couldn't expect anything different after my death. My friends would make me the topic of conversation during dinner and then move on to something else. Their actions wouldn't be a reflection of the impact I had made on them or the world. Jobs needed to be tended to and bills had to get paid. I couldn't expect anything more after I hadn't made a bigger fuss about the passing of my coworker. It was the cycle of life.

I wondered how many people lost sleep contemplating their death as I lay with my head propped on my gray teddy bear on the windowsill. I was egocentric and naïve enough to hope that by the time I was older, science would have developed the formula to stay alive forever. I didn't really believe it, though. I was panicking and needed to calm my nerves. My heart was racing. I had begun to sweat. A hollow feeling took over my chest. I wasn't more special than the next person. My parents and my teachers taught me that I was smart and beautiful but those qualities weren't going to save me. My death would only bring sorrow to them because the rest of the world was unaware of my existence. I was nobody, just another human being among millions. I was going to

follow the same path dinosaurs had taken. I would depart this life at one point in time like everyone else. Realizing this should have comforted me but it didn't. All I knew was that I never wanted to die, even if my parents and sister were gone.

I was mad that God, Mother Nature or whatever force that created Life had developed us with a timer. Everything eventually died. Televisions blew up. Houses crumbled. Chairs fell apart. Leaves dried and decomposed in the ground where most of us would end up. Why had this mighty Power generated us to expire? I understood that the world wasn't big enough for all of the people that had been created and were still to come. In order to make room, we had to die and pass the experience on. It had to do with sharing, something I was never good at because despite having a sister, I seldom had to lend her anything. Instead of dealing with our fighting, my parents bought Jackie and me our own stuff. We each had a bed, a bike, a Barbie's doll house, and an electronic Dear Diary. The only item we shared was the Nintendo. If we argued over that, my mom came between us and took over the game. She passed each level of Super Mario Bros. 1, 2, and 3 as Jackie and I watched her accomplish the undoable. Her talent made me wonder if she could outlive us too.

To keep me from freaking out, I started coming up with ideas that could extend our lives. We could live in other planets instead of expiring. We would utilize them like classrooms. Kids went to a new class every school year. All the second graders couldn't fit into one so they were divided. Why couldn't humans graduate to a new planet as we reached milestone ages? Earth didn't have to house all of the people between the ages of zero and one hundred. Parents with small children and families could stay on Earth while

adults moved to Venus or Mars, being the closest neighboring planets. It would take a gazillion years to fill all nine of them. By the time we did, we'd be so bored of living thousands of years that we would choose to die. This brought temporary comfort to me during my panic attacks until I freaked out again, contemplating living for one thousand years.

I calmed down a little after I considered the repercussions of living forever. There would probably be new gadgets to play with or be of use, like a robotic maid similar to Rosie the robot from *The Jetsons*. But did I really want to work, eat, sleep, and do it all over again day after day after day? Yes, there were the occasional fun times to balance out school, six hours a day, five days a week. There were trips to the park and family gatherings where my uncles played instruments and forgot the lyrics in their drunkenness. But wouldn't this get boring? Wouldn't I get tired of seeing wars, natural disasters, and crazy people going on killing sprees? Did I even want to know the same people forever? Maybe I could live in different parts of the world so I could meet new individuals and take on other careers. But how many times would I relocate before I got tired, before I saw and did everything I ever wanted because, being able to live for-ever, I could cross off all of my to-do items. Would I stay married to the same person my entire lifetime? Could that be possible after meeting hundreds and hundreds of people throughout the centuries? Suddenly, living for eternity didn't seem as much fun as I had thought. Having dreams and goals was more exciting. It gave me something to look forward to. Maybe God or Mother Nature knew we would feel this way, hence the timer.

It would only be fair to let someone new be subjected to these occurrences. But what if I never reached adulthood? What would happen to my wishes then?

My heart started accelerating again and my hands felt slippery. What if I died that same day? A distracted driver could run me over on my way to school. Better yet, an earthquake could bring the apartment complex down, burying me in the debris. Taking into account how little control I actually had over my life enraged and scared me at the same time. I always thought my life would follow the course I led it through but my middle-of-the-night scare suggested otherwise. I completed my homework assignment every day but those plans could change in an instant if an emergency occurred. I aimed for perfection during math tests but what if the lead in my pencil broke and I ran out of time? Despite having goals, incidents out of my jurisdiction could affect my plans. I considered staying inside the apartment forever to seclude myself from all dangers but I knew I wouldn't be safe there either. Earthquakes could come at any time. Planes and helicopters flew over the complex day and night. Who was to say they would soar one hundred percent of the time? Maybe one of my recurring nightmares would come to life, claiming me, finally.

I used to dream of green UFOs shaped like tiny submarines. They had three round windows on each side and flew slowly past my apartment. When I peeked out the heavy door, about five UFOs had stopped in mid-air. The aliens or extraterrestrials peered out their windows and looked at me directly in the eyes. They scared me so I slammed the door shut. Of course, being a bad dream, the door got stuck. I didn't know if the creatures had climbed the stairs to my apartment or if they had jumped from their

spaceship to the hallway but when I stole a look through the peep hole, they were outside the door pushing to get in. I put my weight against the slab of wood to get it closed and bolted but weathering had caused it to expand. I gave up by running to the bedroom, certain that I would die in a few moments.

The aliens represented another unknown force, a life beyond our own. They weren't the friendly toys represented in modern Toy Story films. As with many nightmares, I woke up before the extraterrestrials stole me away from my family and planet Earth. But my panic attack didn't stay in my dream with the creatures from outer space. It followed me to my conscious state of mind as I distinguished reality from fantasy. My eyelids opened instantly and I gasped for a breath of air like swimmers do after being under water. It took me a few seconds to realize which world I was actually in. I slowly made out my parents' bed and the dresser-mirror in the dark and that's when my heart began to slow down. The fear began to dissipate. My mom used to say that if I wanted a dream to come true I should keep it a secret. I told myself I would have to share my dream with a lot of people in the morning.

I had the infamous alien dream not too long ago. At first, it comforted me. The green Martians took me back to my childhood when I didn't have responsibilities or bills to pay. But I remembered that they reminded me of death and I started worrying the way I used to. My heart started racing only to skip a beat and return to its accelerated pace. This type of side effect made it difficult to distinguish between the real and the fantastical. I once dreamt that I had an awesome Kero Kero Keroppi eraser, a popular Sanrio character of the mid-90s. It was a thick version of a push pencil with individual

leads you pulled out when they were spent and pushed through the top to bring out new heads. I had seen it in the mall but couldn't afford it. I remember waking up cheerful and searching for it on my headboard that doubled as a bookshelf. It was until I found nothing of the sort that I realized I had dreamt the Keroppi eraser. I couldn't believe how real the reverie had been and how depressed it made me feel when I woke up. I settled back into bed, pulled the covers up to my chin, stared at the white ceiling, and laid in disbelief at the abrupt disappearance of the eraser, or at least in my imagination. It depressed me knowing that things could be taken away in an instant. I almost cried, hoping God would plant the object over my head to get rid of my funk. Aliens affected my nervous system in a similar manner. I didn't know they weren't hiding in my room until regular heart beats brought me back to reality.

As I lay on my bed recalling my post-childhood alien visit, I remembered how I used to relieve myself of such horror. I wanted to believe that I was a doll and the world my doll house. I imagined that someone in space dictated my life. This being was going to protect me from death and all things evil. Since I treated my Barbies and dolls well, I dreamt up a girl who treated me with the same respect. I was a very responsible owner. I would carry Superstar Barbie in her fairy-pink and sparkly get-up and pull her up and down the string-operated elevator of my three-story doll house. She had no control over what she did—she couldn't choose to run or walk or jump to the second and third floors. She never took a fall because I protected her. I combed her hair and made sure her shoes were always on her feet. I hardly ever left her leaning over on my bookshelf-headboard. My baby dolls were also dressed for the weather and slept in the blue toy swing at night.

Had my sister been in possession of them, my Barbies would have not only gone barefoot but been ready for a nudist beach. I found tiny heels and outfits that belonged to her dolls under the bunk beds when I was digging for board games. I was Superstar Barbie's puppet master. I wanted a higher being to take care of me too.

A giant girl living inside the Universe was in charge of me, so I imagined. She appeared in my mind wearing a rainbow-striped sweater and straight black hair to her shoulders. She had been a good owner thus far because I hadn't suffered any accidents or deaths within my immediate family. Just like I took care of my dolls, my boss had been good to me. The girl combed my hair, matched my clothes, put several gold rings on my fingers, and helped me achieve perfect attendance awards several years in a row. I didn't fully trust anybody at the time. My mom used to tattle on me to my dad and my sister used to snitch me out to my mother. I felt safe under the imaginary girl's guidance, especially because I had made her out to be responsible like me. That's how I knew she would protect me from becoming extinct.

Not only did I feel protected by the girl in the striped-shirt but the idea took a load off my shoulders. I've always taken myself too seriously. My mom told me to listen to my elders because that's what the Catholic religion had taught her. I needed to be a good girl in order for me to go to heaven when my time came. As a result, I worried about things like death while normal kids chased balls across the street without looking for passing vehicles. My responsibilities lessened when I conceived the girl in the Universe. I didn't have to worry about being scolded if I broke a glass or hit my sister. My boss-

girl would never let me get seriously hurt. I was a doll living in a make-believe world. There were no consequences.

But sometimes the girl in the universe never entered my thoughts and I reverted to thinking about death. Without her to distract me, I become conscious of the realization that, good or bad, we were all going to end in the same place. I would end up in an unconscious sleep just like a person executed for murder. As I reflected on this notion, making plans for my future were suddenly over-rated. Going to college like my teachers had suggested seemed like too much work. I was going to end up in a sealed box in the ground even if I didn't. What was the point of doing my homework? The kids that didn't turn their assignments in had more play time while I wasted mine doing arithmetic and reading and writing. Why couldn't I curse? I knew my mother's only concern was my good-girl façade but not cursing wasn't going to extend my years on Earth. If there weren't any consequences, I could kiss Jose, my first crush, without caring about what the brainless cool-girls thought. I knew I had to marry, have babies, and buy a house one day. Carrying out these societal norms didn't guarantee my place in the afterlife. Did it really matter if I rented forever? My dad rented our apartment. I knew what he paid was a lot less than what a house would cost. A home would end up on the market anyway after my future family would inherit it. I would not continue living in it after I died.

I was just a kid but life began to make more sense after I accepted the girl in the striped shirt into my life and took on my new attitude. I knew I only had this chance to live and time was running out. I had already wasted it following everyone's orders. It was time to live my way. I had to learn to distinguish my personal values from the

Catholic and Mexican ones I had been raised with so I could begin to enjoy my life more. For starters, I did not agree with everything my mother deemed wrong. Hanging out with my friend who lived three houses down the street was not a crime. My mom was just reluctant to admit that she didn't want me and my sister out of sight. She might not forgive herself if something happened to us under another's supervision. And although I realized the dangers of riding a bicycle on the street, the sidewalk wasn't as hazardous. So I started riding my second-hand bike all the way to the sidewalk where I made a U-turn on the street.

As I began to cast off my family's values, I placed the blame for my insecurities on my background. Staring out the bedroom window, I asked myself why I had been born a Mexican Catholic in Southern California and not someone else who lived out there past the lights. Everyone knew that white people had the advantage in this world. They were the only other group I felt I knew because they monopolized my television—Full House, Step by Step, The Brady Bunch. I didn't know who decided to whom we were born but it was entertaining to wonder about such a thing. There were conflicting theories about how the world was created. School had scientific evidence about atoms being the Earth-makers. My parents, although not fully devoted, believed that God created it, for the most part. The God story seemed a little far-fetched since something had to have created Him. I had also heard something about coming back after death. I put my own twist on this concept.

I couldn't accept the idea that I had never been on Earth before 1982. Why would my cells decide to form in the twentieth century after billions of years in existence? I

chose to believe that I could have lived through several eras without remembering any of it. It was the only way anyone could survive the pain, hurt, and suffering of the past. We didn't learn compassion through the history books. We learned it because we lived it through the ages. I trusted I had been an American Indian, a slave, and Asian in my previous lifetimes. I wasn't going to accept that I had randomly appeared in this world for the first time almost thirty years ago as a Mexican-American in Los Angeles. I loved Latin music too much to not have been from South America or the Caribbean in the previous life. My dad used to scream, "Turn that music off," when I played El General, a rapper from Panama with reggae influences, full blast on our Fisher stereo in the living room.

"You're Mexican. You should be listening to Vicente Fernandez," he said. I turned to my mom and made a disgusted face which she returned in agreement.

I knew I'd be back on Earth after I died. It wouldn't hurt to die, just like it hadn't the last hundred times. It made no sense to worry. It was almost exciting wondering what I would come back as next. As I continued to imagine the future after my passing, I saw Earth from the same mountain top I had imagined earlier. It was clear that the world was a ball that stayed afloat. We lived inside of it like a teddy bear in a celebratory balloon. Like the teddy, I was only safe as long as the walls stayed intact. If the balloon popped, the bear would topple over. If Earth exploded, I would begin an endless fall through outer space. I hadn't liked the way Splash Mountain at Disneyland cut off my breathing as the drop maintained a hollow pressure on my chest the lone time I rode it. How would I tolerate an endless ride one-thousand times larger than Space Mountain?

How did all the planets stay put, anyway? And more importantly, what was beyond the galaxies? Perhaps that's where the girl in the striped shirt lived. If an astronaut ever crossed the Milky Way to find out, a blast of powerful bright, white light would probably welcome him and kill him instantly. If the planets ever lost their floating capabilities, Earth would get trapped in the whirlwind and life would be doomed. It appeared that dying was inevitable no matter the scenario.

I wouldn't be scared if the entire population died at the same time. There would be no purpose to continue living then. This possibility was still thousands of years away, though. If I was lucky, I would die an old woman of natural causes. This thought jump-started my heart again, racing against the changing color of the early morning sky from dark blue to purple with a hint of yellow in the horizon. I feared being forgotten soon after my funeral. If folks were sensitive, they would pray one Our Father for me every Sunday night before they fell asleep. My mom taught me to pay my respects that way to my uncle, my great-grandmother, and a super star I admired who all died within a week from each other starting in late March in 1995. After my regular prayer to the Virgen de Guadalupe, I thanked deceased family members-turned angels for watching over me. I asked them to continue taking care of me so I could live long lives like they had. Sometimes talking to them took me back to certain memories. Reliving moments and questioning their deaths made me melancholy. It made me sad to know that I would never again see my uncle who had helped me learn to read in English or my great-grandma whom I met once in Mexico. These insights produced tears that fell out the corners of my eyes. Since my mom and my sister were still asleep, I kept silent as much

as my cries allowed me to. Knowing I had to compose myself, I tried taking comfort in the memories. I was uplifted temporarily until I realized that I would only live on as long as there was someone who remembered me to tell my story. If I wanted to live on forever, I would have to become famous like George Washington or Elvis to make a permanent wrinkle in people's brains.

The lights in the city sparkled like the stars in the sky. Still staring out the window, I was taken back to my thoughts of being insignificant as my heart pounded against my ribcage, fighting to get out, trying to escape my thoughts of doom. If I became famous and died, I would only live through memories of others and I didn't want to be just a memory. My raging heart altered my breathing and I almost hyperventilated. It was okay for me to extend the lives of my deceased relatives through reminiscences because there was no other way to keep them with me. But I didn't want stories to tell my life. *I* wanted to live forever and share my own.

I had to leave the death thoughts behind before I started wailing and woke my mother and sister. I needed to abandon the black thoughts that had invaded my mind and come back to my bed. I started my journey home by concentrating on the light blue sky. Then I focused on the lit buildings and the flickering on the 5. I noticed the apartment buildings on the next street, the mulberry tree in the garden, and finally the glass I had been looking through. I knew I was back in my bed when I made out almost invisible dewdrops on the window. My breathing was still deep and my heart palpitated hard but I had successfully broken away from the freak-out.

At that point, I knew I did not want my mind to travel into the tunnel of death again. It wasn't healthy and I hated the way it made me feel. I was yet again wasting time rather than enjoying it, which at that point would've been by sleeping. To keep me from going back, I repeated that dying would be like sleeping forever. I took a deep breath to settle my nerves and pried my fingers away from the blinds. I grabbed my flattened grey teddy bear that doubled as a pillow and nestled my head comfortably on his shoulder. It was almost daylight but I still had a few more hours of sleep ahead of me before my mom woke me for school. I closed my eyes. Since my racing heart had given my body a work out, I easily nodded off.

I occasionally slip back after my prayers but I am most overcome by my fear of death during a movie that threatens life. I don't like watching films such as *The Day After Tomorrow*, *27 Days*, or *2012*. They remind me of the inevitable, take me through a panic-spin, put me in a bad mood, and make me hate the motion picture. I prefer to watch feel-good movies that make me laugh so I can be subjected to one of the joys of life but sometimes even those fail me.

I freaked out after watching *Twilight* for the first time several months ago. When Bella told Edward that she wouldn't mind being part of his world, I physically remained on the bed with my boyfriend but my head travelled at light speed beyond the galaxies. If she left the human world, she would lose her mom, her dad, and her grunge look. She would live forever with the pale guy and the thought made me question infinity again. Would Jacob and Bella prowl for food their entire lives? And even though they'd have each other, wouldn't they say at some point, "Okay, this is boring. Let's die already." I

felt my heart being tugged like the handle of a pinball machine and then slam to the front of my chest as if it had been released. The movie played in front of me but I didn't see a clear picture. I was lost in my own head, again. I would need to kick my legs to swim out of these dreadful thoughts. When my thoughts flattened out, matching my horizontal position on the bed, I noticed that I was about to break out into a sweat. I was back in my boyfriend's room and my heart beat above the speed limit. Without moving, I scanned the room and hoped that my boyfriend hadn't noticed my odd behavior. He didn't mention anything. I was thankful that my fright had been contained in my body.

I also relapsed during a viewing of *Love and Other Drugs*. The illness in the Anne Hathaway film caught me by surprise. I looked forward to watching a movie about a Rico Suave-character who finally met the person that tied him down. Instead, I was confronted with Parkinson's. I started to imagine the protagonist's life beyond the story line. Maggie would eventually lose all control of her nervous system and become reliant on Randall. Although he offered to carry her around at the end of the film, Maggie felt guilty for limiting his own life for her. I sympathized with her. A convalescent person is not the only one in a relationship or family that is confined. Maggie would take away Randall's freedom but his love for her would allow him to care for her. I took it even further by asking, "What will Randall do after Maggie is dead?" and "Why would he choose to be with her if it wouldn't be forever?" I thought about this in relation to my own boyfriend. Leo and I weren't married but had been in a relationship for almost ten years. Would I want another boyfriend if he passed away or would fear of losing one again keep me from getting attached? People said that spouses who have died would

want their husbands and wives to find love again but who really knew what the dead thought? I did know that a look, a smell, or a laugh would bring Leo's face to mind and make me cry. And where would I meet another guy, anyway? Unlike my vivid and animated portrait of death, the canvas for the life-after-Leo picture was as white as they came. I couldn't imagine a thing. It was too scary.

I wonder if my version of death resonates with someone else's and if the time I have spent thinking about it is normal. I wonder how many adults look at their ailing mother or father and think funeral homes, cemeteries, and phone calls. I wonder how many more go into panic mode like me. I think it's safe to say that the older we get the more we get pushed into that direction. Perhaps I just suffer from thanatophobia, the fear of death. I tell myself to let the dark thoughts go, to look forward, and enjoy the time I have with my parents, my sister, and my boyfriend. Despite my attempts to stay alive forever, I will be eliminated from this world. When I am, I hope my reincarnated self will be luckier, oblivious or at peace with the subject of death.

The Elders of My Youth

I wanted to have a relationship with my grandmothers. The problem was that they lived in Jalisco, Mexico. I didn't have what was portrayed on television, a stout older woman in a long, flowery, button-down, cotton dress knitting on a rocking chair living in my house. I wasn't spoiled with homemade cookies when I came home or schooled about the Catholic religion. I especially didn't have a grandmother who, over a cup of oatmeal, told me stories about her youth. Instead, I had an extended family member whom I called Grandma and a really old aunt who lived a few doors down. I expected my pseudo-Grandmother to fulfill the role but I don't think she was wired for it. And because my elderly aunt didn't hold the grandmother title, I never considered her for the position. I had to wait for the few vacations my family took to Mexico to interact with my real grandmothers where I hoped the loving relationships I wished for would automatically develop.

I met my grandmothers for the first time in 1985 when I was three and Jackie, my sister, two years old. I clearly remember standing in a patch of snow in my paternal grandmother's ranch and throwing a snowball at my cousin, making her cry that year. I recall my father's mother well from our subsequent visit five years later. I wasn't scared of the three-hour flight but my ears hurt when the plane gained altitude. We landed in Aguascalientes, Jalisco's neighboring state. The airport there was closer to the town my dad had grown up in than the one in Guadalajara almost four hours away. After driving on a mostly unpaved road for an hour from the airport, our driver pulled up to the big blue house my dad had been raised in. A white security door was the focal point on the

brick wall. A spacious patio spread behind the door where the men gathered later that afternoon drinking beers and catching up. Past the patio area was a kitchen, a small closet, and two or three bedrooms. The corral, which I had been warned would be our toilet, was attached to the outside on the right.

I was happy when I saw my grandmother, my abuelita Eloiza. She seemed to fit the bubbly character I always wanted. Her eyes bestowed honesty about her. Her belly was so swollen that she used it as a hand rest. She wore a typical hair bun and long, two-piece sets with flowers under the lapels for a bit of elegance. People had always commented how much I looked like my dad and it was because we had inherited my grandmother's light skin and small, brown eyes.

My abuelita Eloiza lost her warm appeal after our initial embrace. Her hug was tight but quick. I noticed that her hands were rough and her fingers thicker than mine. They were almost the size of my father's. She clearly hadn't been using lotion like my mother had taught us to rub on our arms and legs before heading to school. Her limbs were also dry and spotty. I assumed that's what happened to people who worked in the fields. As for her rapid release, my grandmother probably didn't want to scare me. She might have thought that I viewed her like a stranger since it had been years since our last encounter. There were other ways in which she was not affectionate. She didn't baby me or coo my face while she held my chin in her hands like I'd seen other grandmothers do with their grandchildren at school before. She also didn't lead me by the hand like my mom did. Soon I realized that this was a style that my father had inherited. He disliked my mother's overbearing attributes. Whenever my dad caught my mom ripping tortillas

into pieces for our chicken soup, he scolded her. Instead of teaching us how to do it ourselves, he told her, she was enabling and treating us like kittens.

My grandma, on the other hand, made me do things for myself. For instance, I needed to relieve myself after hours of traveling. My mom had told me in the plane and in the car that we'd have to go with the animals in the corral. My grandma read the dread on our faces when my mother explained my situation. Then, very calmly and honestly, without a hint of cynicism like I was used to from my mother, she told me and Jackie that the animals wouldn't hurt us. She pointed at the corral and told us to go ahead. She didn't try to convince us that she was telling the truth or give us tips for staying safe or made the corral to be a fun place.

We followed my mother to the corral where she slowly opened the gate. She knew the chickens would want to get out. She had years of experience with such animals, having grown up in her father's ranch three hours away. After rushing us inside, we let the roosters and hens pace around our feet because we were unfamiliar to them. Although chickens pecked my feet, I was concerned about the cows. Their big black eyes seemed to stare directly at mine. I thought they planned on ramming me. But they were indifferent and continued to munch on grass and take dumps. By the time I realized they weren't thinking about me, the chickens had left us alone too. My mom ordered us to pull our pants down and squat. I peed next to cow feces without harm. My abuelita Eloiza hadn't lied to me. I knew adults to be pushy and sneaky in order to get kids to do things. My grandma had said that I would be fine and I was and so I came to trust her.

We didn't have the relationship I desired yet but it felt like the beginning of one. Within a few days, I was entering the corral without my mother.

My abuelita Eloiza continued winning me over. She ran a candy stand from her house. I couldn't believe that my grandma, an adult, an older one at that, had so much candy in her possession. My father had a sweet tooth so we always had candy in the house but never in such large quantities. I had at my finger tips what was off-limits for most kids. No one in my family had anything like that and I admired her for her interesting entrepreneurial skills. She sold the sweets from the small closet between the kitchen and one of the bedrooms. It was tiny but the candy came in small sizes and she was able to supply many different kinds. Children gave up their big, thick, bronze coins in exchange for gum, *mazapán* (a peanut treat), 7up salt packets, and *Duvalín*, a small rectangular container with chocolate and vanilla pudding you ate with a stick. The kids in line shoved me to get ahead but my grandma didn't notice. She was busy catering to their needs and collecting money. But even when the line had shortened, I stayed in place, still deciding what candy to buy.

When I was ready, my abuelita Eloiza wouldn't let me pay. Initially, I felt special. I finally saw the perks I had been waiting for. I knew I could ask for all the candy I wanted and my grandma would give in. But I didn't want to take advantage of our newly found relationship. I chose two or three pieces since I still had a few more days to sample the entire selection. I pushed the heavy coins my dad had given me in her direction again but she refused. That's when I felt cheated. I wanted to pay like the kids who had left. I was used to buying Jolly Ranchers for ten cents and chips for twenty-five

at the corner store on our way home from school. I wanted to go back to Mr. Carlow's class and say that I had bought junk food in Mexico. Moreover, I didn't know how *not* to pay. My mom didn't like owing anyone anything. I was used to leaving money on counters or in clothes pockets when others resisted being paid. She even made me return twenty-five cents once. I was in second grade when my friend Karina gave me a quarter. I had to return the amount the next day in dimes and a nickel because my mom collected quarters for the laundry machines. Unlike my mother, my grandma understood what it meant to please a child. My sad face defeated my abuelita Eloiza and she extended her arm. I dropped my money in her white, chunky hand and smiled at her like a satisfied customer would.

Opposite of the candy store hung a grinding machine by the kitchen entrance. It was a thick, metal contraption that looked like a bucket with a narrow opening and a turning knob on the outer wall. The handle crushed the corn inside until it was doughy. After I watched my abuelita Eloiza grind, she told me to give it a try. I hesitantly walked up to the machine. My mother never allowed me to do dangerous things. She had always scared me by saying that I could lose or burn a finger doing the littlest things, like picking up a knife or turning on the electric stove. I looked over at my mother sitting in the patio. Her unmoved facial expression told me it was fine to proceed.

There were two obstacles that prevented me from being a competent grinder. One, it was too high. I had to stand on my toes to make the handle turn 180 degrees. Two, the knob got stuck. I pictured yellow kernels preventing the wheel from turning inside. My grandma assisted me by putting all the pressure on the handle but we couldn't

do much about my height. Had I stood on a chair, I would've been too tall. I told her that I couldn't do it and prepared to take a walk. My abuelita Eloiza didn't object. My efforts had satisfied her. I think she was content that I had experienced a small part of her daily routine.

Later, she assured my mother that roaming the rural area would be safe for Jackie and me. I searched for approval from my mom knowing well that she wouldn't contradict my abuelita Eloiza. As soon as she said, "Be careful," Jackie and I took off.

We followed dirt paths to the end of town, avoiding tall grass that looked like wheat so it wouldn't poke our eyes. Thorny leaves and small sticks got stuck in our socks. We also ate the inside of something that resembled green beans. On our way back, we stopped behind my abuelita Eloiza's home. There was a pond my grandpa and uncle had warned could swallow us whole. Of course, Jackie and I trekked as close to it as we would dare, tossing rocks and watching them sink in slow motion. When we returned, my grandma was making dinner. She was glad to see us. My mom, on the other hand, only had eyes for the mosquito bites on our legs and bruised shoes. She was angry that our footwear had taken a beating on the rocky trails. They wouldn't be up to par for her mother whom we were going to visit next.

I didn't develop that sweet relationship I wanted with my abuelita Eloiza during the trip. I never ran to her, wrapping my arms around her torso, inviting her to lift me up. Instead, I gained something I hadn't considered. My grandmother taught me what freedom was in seven days despite my eight years of life. I had fun for the first time without considering consequences like my teachers and mother had always warned me

about. Unlike my mom who walked me to the bus stop until I was in high school, my grandma didn't lead every step of the way to the corral or through the path that led to a crumbling bridge or my great-grandmother's house. She just wanted Jackie and me to have fun. Maybe that way, we could convince my parents to take us back more often.

That is why I cried the day we left. My abuelita Eloiza had given me what I didn't even know I lacked—confidence. She believed in me and made me try things before I had a chance to decline her invitations. I had never been motivated like that by my mother who stayed home to do everything for me. I embraced my grandma tightly before taking a step back, weeping as I waited from my dad, my mom, and Jackie to say their good-byes. I knew that my perception of grandmothers had been false all along. I had felt loved by my abuelita Eloiza without being constantly kissed on my face. I hadn't gotten kicked by the cows or lost in the country. My mother's warnings that ended in "I told you so" had made me doubt myself. I left my grandmother's ranch believing that I had the potential to do more. She may not have physically shown me how much she loved me but in her own way she had because she made me happy.

Going to Mexico meant visiting two cities. My parents had met in Los Angeles and lucked out when they found out that their families only lived three or four hours away from each other in Jalisco. After we spent a few days with my abuelita Eloiza, we stayed with my mother's family. Unfortunately, my memory vault doesn't seem to have retained many recollections of my abuelita Manuela, my mother's mom, from either of our trips. After my mom and uncle became American citizens, they arranged for my grandparents to be issued visas. My grandma and grandpa have been coming to L.A. at

least once a year for over a decade now. My abuelita Manuela's regular appearance in my life since my late teens replaced any tender memories I could have had about her because I've learned that she's anything but.

My abuelita Manuela looks the part of a grandmother, reminding me a little of Aunt Jemima. She is short with a round figure. She has black eyes and brown skin. Her greetings have always been physical, more exaggerated than my abuelita Eloiza's, but not nearly as genuine. Very little about my abuelita Manuela is sincere.

After 1990, I didn't see my mother's parents again until we picked them up at LAX almost ten years later. Everyone showed up at the airport the first time my grandparents arrived. Three uncles, my mom and my aunt, and our families took up a big chunk of the sidewalk outside the international terminal where we welcomed them to our home. My grandmother received me with open arms just like she had in Mexico. Her embrace was tight. As a kid, I remember being lifted off the ground, looking over her shoulder, wanting my feet to touch the ground. As a teen, I had to crouch a little bit to average out our height. When she released me, she stood close by looking at me with a big smile. She performed the same action when I was eight. I thought then that she wanted to commit my image to memory since we were in a trend of only visiting every five years. Standing in embarrassment with my entire family at the airport, I thought my abuelita Manuela was taking in how much I had changed. After a couple of follow-up visits, I discovered that her stares were simply judgments.

Other than my abuelita Manuela's warm reception, there was nothing grandma about her. My grandma stayed in Los Angeles for an average of two months, during

which she caused more tension than pleasure. I would've preferred holding on to loving recollections of her from my 1990 visit to Mexico rather than having to disregard her comments and stares year after year. I didn't believe my mom when I overheard her telling my tía Fina over the phone about my grandma's unkindness and bad intentions at first. My mother had just hosted my grandmother for a week. I thought she was being dramatic after having spent seven days with the person who had given birth to her. I knew what it felt like because I was treated like a child again when I spent weekends with my parents when I was in college

“You're not eating. Get more food. I made a lot. I'm going to serve you more.”

I heard my mother saying that my abuelita Manuela was jealous of her and my tía Fina for having a big house and cars and other material things my grandma could only dream of having in Mexico. It rang sort of true but what mother would hate their child for doing better than she? Isn't that what every parent wanted? For their kids to accomplish more than they had? My mom carried on, agreeing with my aunt on the other end that my grandma only had eyes for her youngest daughters. Sonia and Janet lived with my grandparents in Mexico. They were in their thirties and on their way to becoming spinsters because their high standards would most likely be unmet in their impoverished town.

“They are her Barbies, after all,” my mom told my tía Fina. “No one is more beautiful in her eyes.”

I believed that my tía Fina and my mom were on to something after having taken part in a strange dialogue with my grandma.

I was home for the summer from college. Although it was still morning, my mom was already busy getting dinner ready. I was sitting at the kitchen table eating cereal while my grandma sat next to me. My mom was stirring something in a pot with her back towards us as my grandma watched me eat. My abuelita Manuela killed the silence by addressing my mom.

“Your girls eat well, don’t they,” she asked in a lively tone. If my mom hadn’t taught me to see the worst in people I wouldn’t have thought much of her statement. She was telling my mother, and me, that I ate too much. Without turning around, my mom replied.

“They don’t starve themselves.”

Although her answer was about my sister and me, she was really referring to her younger sisters. Rumor had it they went hungry in order to stay thin.

My grandmother got the meaning and turned her body to face mine again and said, “The girls do eat.” By “girls” she meant her beloved Sonia and Janet. “They have oatmeal for breakfast with sweet bread,” she explained. “Oatmeal’s good for staying slim. At night, they drink *chocomil*.”

“I guess I’m going to have to start eating oatmeal,” I said sarcastically and continued eating my sugary cereal.

I realized then that the long and hard stares she had been giving me annually were critiques. My grandma had been comparing me and everyone else to what she believed to be her life-sized dolls, her daughters Sonia and Janet. They were her most prized possessions, having had very little growing up poor in a rural Mexican town in the

thirties. She dressed and groomed them as children and as time went by, she counseled them in health and beauty; my abuelita Manuela didn't want them to lose their value in case suitable bidders in red Corvettes came by. My double chin, wide hips, and flat ass weren't worth much in her view of the world.

I would've never won my case had I accused my grandma of calling me fat. Looking at me or stating how much I ate weren't crimes. My abuelita Manuela had a gift for twisting words around and getting the message out without making her the evil person. By the time you realized she had just thrown you under the bus, the moment had passed. There was no point in going back and asking her to explain what she meant. You didn't want to hear the dig she'd just tossed your way again, anyway. Plus, there was a sense of guilt that came from thinking your grandmother wicked. The worst part was that she didn't stop there.

My tía Fina recounted an episode to my mom that occurred when my abuelita Manuela was staying with her. My aunt said that my grandma had stood guard under the doorway that led from the hallway into the kitchen. My aunt had been grabbing ingredients from the refrigerator when my grandma's voice startled her.

"*Estás canastona,*" my abuelita Manuela said to her. *Canasta* is a basket. My grandma had ruthlessly told my aunt that she was big like a basket.

Sharing my mother's feistiness, my tía Fina said, "I have someone I take after," in justified defense.

My grandma seemed to lack any shame. Upon her arrival, her eyes and ears recorded everything she saw and heard. She played it back to Sonia and Janet when she

got back to Mexico. Then, they ambushed one of their sisters, Yolanda, who lives in South L.A. Within a couple of days after my grandma's departure, Sonia and Janet were scolding Yolanda over the phone as if they had seen and heard everything themselves.

Janet: You've let yourself go.

Sonia: Your shoulders are too squared.

Janet: You shouldn't have had that third child. We told you not to have any more babies.

Sonia: And stop yelling at your son.

Janet: You better start treating your kids better.

I hadn't considered this aspect of having a grandmother. I never thought they could be so cruel to their own adult children and great-grandchildren. I believed grandmas were supposed to be sweet and encouraging. I imagined that my abuelita Manuela would be telling me how pretty I was and how proud she was of me for becoming a teacher when she saw me upon her arrivals. Instead of looking forward to her visit every year, we dreaded her like a bad cold. There wasn't a cure for it. You just had to let it run its course. As soon as my mom found out that my grandmother was coming, we found ourselves asking, "When is she leaving?" Everyone knew her criticisms were bursts of jealousy, envy that poured from not being able to bring Sonia and Janet to California with her to stay. My mom, three of her brothers, and my tía Fina had come to the U.S. in the late seventies to make money. They sent a big portion of their paychecks back to Mexico. Because of them, my grandparents were able to build a two-bedroom brick home, in contrast to their one-bedroom adobe shack. Sonia and Janet,

almost twenty years younger than my mom, have always had pretty clothes, make-up, and a vehicle to be driven in thanks to their older siblings in Los Angeles. Instead of expressing gratitude towards them, my abuelita Manuela, Sonia, and Janet made their family feel guilty for their success in America. They have learned that guilt buys them more shoes and dresses, making my abuelita Manuela the star at any given party with such trophy daughters. Even if Sonia and Janet were to make it to California, I believe my grandma would still find something negative to say about the rest of us; her resentment is buried too deep to liberate. Judging others was what she did to feel good about herself, a repulsive trait she probably developed when she was unable to provide for her ten children the way they have done for her. Somewhere along the line, I decided to take some control over what would be said about me.

My grandparents had been in town for a few weeks and I hadn't seen them yet. They were staying with my tía Fina when I tagged along with my parents to pay them my respects. I slacked off on my attire to get a reaction from my abuelita Manuela. I wore a feminine, collared, navy blue blouse that disguised the roll that appeared when I sat down. I paired it with comfortable blue jeans and topped my outfit off with what I knew would be the attention-grabber, my laceless Converse. I had lugged a pair of boots and flats that would have dressed up my garb but I knew my abuelita Manuela would have found something distasteful anyway.

After her usual greeting, I sat across from my grandma and crossed my legs. My mom and my aunt fell into conversation right away. We listened to their yapping when I noticed my grandma tuning out for her inspection. She didn't know that I was looking at

her as her eyes settled on my shoes. My grandma had been smiling, pretending to be a part of the discussion, before she caught sight of my sneakers. I held my laughter in while her grin disappeared, and she continued to scan me. When she made eye contact, she shook her head and erased the disapproving look, replacing it with a delighted one. I returned the fake gesture.

Every move, look, or word that my grandmother uttered was strategically planned to maintain invisible reign. When she asked me while sitting on the porch of my parents' house, "How much do you think that car over there costs," it wasn't because she really wanted to know or have a conversation with me. She was preparing to ask how much my Jeep had cost. By asking how much my vehicle cost, she could dive into a general idea about my wages.

"A couple thousand," I said about the 90s model Honda or Toyota across the street.

"And your car," she asked without losing a beat.

"Thirty," I said without hesitation. I wanted to know how she would turn that number into a negative remark when she got back to Mexico. To my surprise, she didn't flinch.

My grandpa had been sitting next to her on the bench. He didn't say much unless directly spoken to. My mom thought he was hard of hearing. I believed he was trying to avoid being scolded by my grandma; his words were usually followed by her reprimand of "Be quiet." But he interrupted my grandmother's obnoxious behavior by commenting on my car. "It's nice," he muttered.

My abuelita Manuela ignored him. “Do you still have the other little car?” She was referring to my first car, a Ford Focus.

“Yes,” I said.

“The girls want a car. How much was that one?” By “girls” she meant Sonia and Janet. And if she thought that I was crazy enough to sell, or better yet, give them my little blue car, she was crazier than I had thought.

“I think it was four thousand.” She looked ahead trying not to hate me. I was the perfect example of why my grandmother was holding grudges against us all. I had two cars while her daughters dreamt of the luxury of a driver’s license to be able to drive a beat-up white vehicle like the one parked across the street. “My dad put in half of the money. It was used. Used cars are cheaper.”

“That one is also nice,” my grandpa chimed in.

That was as close to a conversation as I’ve gotten with my grandmother. It didn’t reveal anything new about our relationship except prove all the rumors regarding her intentions as true. She was judgmental and nothing would ever be good enough for her. How was I supposed to love a person like that? My abuelita Manuela hasn’t taken joy in other people’s accomplishments because she wasn’t the one benefitting from them. Her behavior would be reasonable had none of her children shared their wealth with her. It’s not like my grandparents have ever been hunger-stricken and homeless. In fact, my grandma has invested the money her six children have been sending her over the years in remodeling her house in Mexico. Her gated entrance with flower pots on top of the posts is envied in her small town. Yet, she has never my thanked my aunts and uncles for the

opportunities they have provided her with. My grandma is consumed with envy, forbidding her from enjoying ten children and countless imperfect grandchildren.

Someone who appreciated hard work and didn't mind sharing her wealth was my abuelita Angie. While my two grandmothers resided in Mexico, my abuelita Angie lived blocks away. Although I called her my grandma, she was technically my aunt. She was married to Nacho, my dad's second cousin. Nacho and my abuelita Angie owned the apartment complex where we lived. They took my parents in when my mom found out that she was pregnant and then hosted their wedding in one of the garages. Despite the location, my parents seemed to have made the best of it. Pictures of the big day displayed a lot of plastic chairs and lots of happy people dancing and having a good time. In another, my mom and dad were dressed in white. The slight bump that was me was already noticeable underneath my mom's long-sleeved wedding dress as they held the knife before cutting the cake.

I don't know why Jackie and I started calling Angie grandma. She was older, in her fifties or sixties, and maybe we believed that all mature folks were automatically given the grandparent title. Perhaps it was Angie herself who asked us to refer to her by that name after being charmed by my pudgy cheeks. Her title fell short, though. I still didn't get the hugs and the kisses and the storytelling that came with the grandmothers portrayed on television. Instead, my abuelita Angie was more like a teacher, my personal, modern day Emily Post. The first thing that I accomplished with her as my tutor was cease biting my nails. She brought my bitten-to-the-core cuticles to my attention and I let them grow instantaneously. Later on, the margarita became my drink

of choice after I saw her preparing some at a party. These traits implied sophistication to me, and my abuelita Angie embodied sophistication. I noted her every move in hopes of reaching that level of classiness.

I admired my abuelita Angie for other reasons too. For instance, she knew English. By design, this ability put her at a level above me, along with my bilingual teachers at Rowan Avenue Elementary who wore knee-length skirts and pumps. On a regular day, my abuelita Angie wore polyester pants. But on special occasions, she dressed as formally as my schoolteachers in dresses that fell below the knees and one-inch heel shoes. One needed to know the language in order to advance in this world, my parents said to me, and my abuelita was a prime example. She owned a two story house. Her silver car was shiny and had four doors. She sold Avon and got her hair done every week. She bowled every Tuesday and Thursday and went on cruises. She also vacationed in Laughlin.

My world revolved around a more traditional household where the main objective was to make ends meet. My mother was a housewife and my father a truck driver. They had a fourth grade education and attended school in Los Angeles to learn English but didn't speak it well. When my sister was born, our living conditions tightened because we were now four human beings inside a one-bedroom apartment. Our method of transportation was my father's 1973 rust-colored Ford Galaxy coupe with hairy orange seat covers and a cracked dashboard. Since he was saving to buy our own house someday, my parents cut their hair at the mom and pop hair salons for five dollars every

other month. The weekends were our vacations where we got to stroll through swap meets, Kmart, and Johnson's Market.

Because she owned the apartment complex, my abuelita Angie spent a lot of time there and I watched her. I saw how she tended to her garden; she was very meticulous. She cut dead rose buds by snapping them off and throwing them in a bucket. When she had to get down to pull weeds or plant new flowers, my abuelita Angie wore gardening gloves and used something to kneel on, whether it be a piece of cardboard or a mat. I sat next to her while she wrote rent receipts at the table in my dad's garage. Her signature was always written flawlessly. Her loops were so polished that I knew letters as beautiful as hers would only come with age and experience.

Although I followed her around a lot, we never developed a warm and mushy relationship like I still desired. My abuelita Angie didn't shower me with kisses when she saw me or share her past with me when I followed her around. Her well-mannered ways kept her at a distance. She always spoke plainly and carried herself in a refined way

I spent an entire day with her when I was four. It happened after she and Nacho had picked Jackie and me up from Tijuana, Mexico following my family's 1985 trip to Jalisco. My parents hadn't been granted amnesty so we landed in the south-of-the-border airport. They planned to cross to the U.S. with a *coyote*, a person who illegally smuggles undocumented people into the country. Having been born in East L.A., my sister and I could return home but we needed a ride. My abuelita Angie took on the task. The exchange was done at night, most likely in a gas station because I remember the dark

background but a lit scene. My abuelita Angie must've rented or borrowed a van because I didn't recognize it as hers or Nacho's. She probably didn't want to tack on the extra miles to her shiny vehicle or risk having an accident.

I remember waiting impatiently inside the van as my mother spoke to my abuelita Angie. I wanted to leave and spend the day with her already. My mom was giving her last minute instructions on the other side of the van's sliding door. As I continued to wait, I studied the inside of the unfamiliar van, noticing its red lining. When I took a look outside the door again, my mom was standing by in tears. I felt bad to see her upset but I didn't understand why she was crying if she had told me that I would see her the next day. I was excited for my first-ever sleep over and worried that her tears would change the plans. But they didn't because my abuelita Angie shut the sliding door as I waved bye to my parents. My grandma assured them that we'd see each other soon.

I wasn't scared to be separated from my parents on our dark drive home. I was excited to spend more than the occasional hour with my abuelita Angie. I couldn't wait to climb the stairs to the second floor of her house like DJ, Stephanie, and Michelle did on Full House. I would be a privileged person like the people I saw in the *novelas*. While I was filled with giddy emotions, I knew that where ever my mother was, she was mortified to leave my sister and me behind.

I experienced the same fear of my mother's five years later when we were almost separated from my father. Our second trip to Jalisco had ended and we were waiting at the counter for our boarding passes inside the airport in Guadalajara. After having shown ID's and birth certificates, my dad was the only one who, according to the attendant,

didn't have valid documents to travel into the U.S. Jackie and I were clueless about the situation, happily playing with Mexican knick-knacks below the counter. My dad argued with the employee and after a few minutes, my mom told us that he might not be coming home with us. It was a ploy to seek pity from the staff member and it worked. Jackie and I started crying. We straightened our bodies and leaned over the desk so the worker could see our despair. My dad was embarrassed by our behavior and the attendant looked uneasy. For an extra fee, he said, he would allow my dad to board the plane but not before making a stopover in another Mexican state. My dad went from feeling relieved to being on edge at the next terminal, wondering if he would have to go through the same thing again. But he didn't. We boarded without any questions, making my father believe that the airport employees were scam artists. While he cursed the government, Jackie and I forgot about losing our dad as soon as we were in the plane.

But it hadn't been that easy for my mother the day she saw my abuelita Angie drive off with us in Tijuana. She had voluntarily put her girls in my grandma's hands. I'm sure she asked herself if she would ever see us again. I bet she wondered what would happen if she didn't make it to L.A. soon. I'm certain she considered being sent back to Jalisco if the border patrol caught her. I think my mom pondered the thought of becoming unrecognizable to Jackie and me if months or years passed before we saw her again. She must've trusted my abuelita Angie above everyone else. She knew that my grandma had the means to care for us if anything dire happened to her or my dad. It surprises me now that it wasn't my tía Fina who completed the task. She was my mom's best friend and my uncle made a good income as well. Looking back, though, she might

not have been able to go near the border either. My mother wouldn't have risked my aunt getting deported when she had two children at home. Neither my tía Fina nor my mom would have wanted four orphaned children roaming the streets of Tijuana begging for money by selling Chiclets.

Jackie and I woke up on my abuelita Angie's large blue bed in the bright bedroom upstairs in the morning. She must've sent Nacho to his man-cave at the end of the hall. Even though I lived in an upstairs apartment, I felt like a queen standing on the landing outside her room. Rich people like the fictional morning show host Danny Tanner and The Brady Bunch's Mike Brady lived in two-story homes. Their homes were so big that they had staircases and sliding doors that led to large, green backyards. All I had at the time was a cemented driveway with a huge blue trash bin in the middle.

Soon after we woke up, my abuelita Angie was standing in front of the television that reached her midsection, mimicking everything she saw. She was following a Jane Fonda type of routine without the leotard, in a plain tee shirt and shorts. My attention was drawn to her feet. I was leaning against the bed on the floor when I caught sight of the blue veins that enveloped them. They were three dimensional, like blue yarn, and I wasn't wearing special glasses. Also, the bone closest to her big toe stuck out at a ninety degree angle. I wondered how her feet fit into her shoes.

After her workout, my abuelita Angie started a bath for Jackie and me. I was used to bathing with my sister. My mom filled the tub three-fourths of the way. When she drained the water, we spun in circles following the direction of the flow and avoiding a strike against the faucet. In the summer, we even wore our bathing suits. But when my

abuelita Angie told us to hop in, the bathtub had only been filled one-quarter. I supposed she was conserving water. It hadn't been the first time I had observed such behavior. It was well known around the apartment complex that we had to limit our water usage because Nacho and my abuelita Angie paid for it. I never thought that they would be so direct about our individual consumption, though. During the annual cleaning fest that took place in apartment number one where her mother-in-law lived, my abuelita Angie had once asked me a question that took me off guard. We were running an assembly line of washing, rinsing, and drying plates and cups for my tía, Nacho's ninety-year-old mother, when my abuelita Angie asked me, "Does your mom let the water run when she's doing the dishes?"

I knew wasting water was bad. They had taught me so at school and my dad reiterated the message when it came to electricity as well. I felt like I would be betraying my mom no matter what I said. The truth was that she didn't misuse water even though my dad didn't pay for it. Nacho reminded us every day that we shouldn't. To demonstrate, he hung the mouth of the snake pipe that drained water from the washing machine to a thirty-two gallon trash can. He recycled it by irrigating the garden. Watching him push the trash bin on a rolling base was statement enough. My abuelita Angie made me nervous. It felt like a trick question.

"Only when she's rinsing," I told her. I thought that was the safest response. You couldn't rinse the dishes without running the tap.

My abuelita Angie didn't say anything.

I was staring at the water in the bathtub in my abuelita Angie's bathroom and I knew my feet would be the only appendages fully covered with water, in a standing position. I worried about this, looking over at Jackie who was stripping to her underwear. My abuelita Angie kept a grip on us when we stepped into the tub and then left the room—she didn't have to worry about us drowning. Jackie and I usually entertained ourselves with the water and a small beach bucket. Before we shivered up, my mom scrubbed us clean until she left washcloth burns on our skin. We found ourselves deprived of our splashing ritual that morning with my abuelita Angie. I got cold fast because I was nearly naked and had no warm water to sink into. When she came back, my abuelita Angie told us to wash ourselves with a white bar of soap. She rinsed us, wrapped us in towels, and pulled us out of the tub. The experience had been very mechanical. She hadn't tried to make it an eventful one. My abuelita Angie had been fulfilling a favor, and that was all.

Being the owner of a six-apartment complex had made my abuelita Angie a conservationist, hence the quarter-of-the-way filled bathtub. This idea contradicted my image of people who were well-off. But maybe that trait contributed to her wealth. I didn't like my abuelita Angie any less after the bath episode. I knew that everyone had a different way of raising children and that had been hers. Despite being a grandmother to her children's children, she might have been one of those that never developed affectionate or babying characteristics we often saw in grandmas. Like any child, I moved on quickly and waited for the next abuelita Angie adventure.

I probably don't recall much after the bath episode because it wasn't as much fun as I had anticipated. My abuelita Angie must have sat us down for a quiet activity, like coloring a book or drawing, or sent us to her daughter's who lived in the front house. My Nina Diane, her daughter, had converted a family room into a play room with toys out of an FAO Schwarz movie scene. I most likely spent the afternoon with my Nina Diane's children until my abuelita Angie called Jackie and me for lunch and dinner. That summed up her personality. She didn't take on special duties to please people but to help them, just like she had done with my parents when they found themselves in a baby predicament. She was more of a natural born teacher than a grandmother. She was a real-life example of the person I could become if I listened to my parents and my teachers. My abuelita Angie never said I should be like her but her choices appeared to have led her to a good life. So I continued to watch her, noting what I had to do to get there.

An elegant lady like my abuelita Angie looked good and smelled good all of the time. She made herself presentable with Avon products. For birthdays and Christmas, Jackie and I received strawberry lip glosses, perfumes with ballerina stickers on them, and costume jewelry from various catalogues. She might have even been the one to introduce me to Mickey and Minnie Mouse after she gave me a necklace and earring set with Minnie's face. I also had a comb whose handle was shaped like Minnie in her infamous blue dress. The part with the toothcombs was formed like a heart and when you turned it around it doubled as a mirror. I also still have a yellow triangular jewelry box with a statue of Mickey and Minnie holding each other on the cover.

My abuelita Angie wasn't trying to buy my love with gifts. She wasn't like my tía Fina who bought her granddaughters' affection with weekly doses of Play Dough and expensive toys. My abuelita Angie wasn't concerned about being liked or not. She gave me gifts on special dates because that's what folks in her class rank had been taught to do. She made it easy for herself by ordering girly accessories from the Avon catalogue at her fingertips knowing any girl would love them. Her presents were nothing like the things my dad bought for Jackie and me at the swapmeet. While I gravitated towards the pencils and pens and diaries, my abuelita Angie opened up my eyes to coordinating my jewelry with my outfits. I was one of the most stylish girls in my classroom with my matching Minnie Mouse earrings and necklace, my colorful bracelets, and sweet scent. My mother was like my abuelita Angie in a similar way. She wouldn't collect the mail if she wasn't fully showered, fully dressed, and fully made-up. She dressed us well but my grandma helped us complete our look.

That's why when my abuelita Angie told me to stop biting my nails, I did. Looking back, my abuelita Angie probably got a manicure every two weeks. Her fingernails were always polished and oval and long. I had always wanted long nails too but I chewed them to the core. It was probably a side effect resulting from my introverted ways. Maybe the bad habit helped me focus in school. Or maybe I was just nervous. Whatever the reason, it was a serious problem. I bit my nails until I couldn't chew any further and then I moved on to picking at the hangnails. I only stopped temporarily when a ring of dry specks of blood adorned my fingertips. That's what my abuelita Angie noticed when we were sitting at the table in the garage where she wrote

out rent receipts. It was the same table where she taught me to play crazy eights and dominoes. My abuelita Angie asked me, “Don’t you want nails like mine?” She was smoking. It was the only habit I knew I would not pick up, the same one she was trying to fight. I stared at the beautiful nails on her index and middle fingers holding the cigarette in the air.

“Yeah,” I replied sitting next to her. I felt like she had just scolded me and my body coiled with embarrassment. I was ashamed for not living up to the standards I imagined she secretly held for me.

“Then you need to stop biting them,” she said. “Or I’m going to put chili on those fingers.”

She made me smile then. I knew she was kidding. My abuelita Angie had never disciplined me. She had heard about the chili bit from my mother who had grown upset with my other antics, like chewing my hair and pulling my socks until they lost their elasticity. My abuelita Angie wanted to take a stand on the issue but she didn’t have to. All she had to do was ask. The day she asked me to stop biting my nails, I did. And then they grew. I stopped buying fake nails that fit like thimbles that fell when I put my hands down. I also ceased peeling stickers off mangoes at the grocery store and pasting them on my cuticles to pretend I had lengthy, round nails like my abuelita Angie. I had natural long nails for the first time and I could paint them with my mother’s extensive collection of nail polish. I finally had feminine hands like my abuelita Angie’s. My delight was short-lived when, in fourth grade, the teacher’s assistant, Mr. Griego, didn’t allow the girls to paint our nails. I despised him for enforcing such a rule. I felt that my parents

were the only ones who could tell me what I could and could not do with my appearance. My mom agreed that Mr. Griego was crazy but said that I had to respect him nonetheless. I removed any leftover weekend polish on Sunday nights. It was the longest school year of my life. The first thing I did when I entered fifth grade was find Mr. Griego and fan my fingers in front of his face, displaying my polished nails. My abuelita Angie wouldn't have approved of my unladylike behavior, but at least I had stopped biting them forever.

Since my nails had reached perfection, we could work on my attire next. I had no interest in wearing polyester pants or those old lady black shoes with a thick sole and a little bow like my abuelita Angie used to wear. I did want to present myself in the respectable manner she always carried herself in, though. I liked her costume jewelry and perfume. But her best accessory was the margarita, which she carried with poise. Because of her, I would later lick the salt off the rim of my mother's glass and take several sips of her drink.

Most Mexican families that I know offer their kids tastes of beer at a young age. My dad recorded an episode at our apartment in 1990 before our second trip to Mexico where my tío Jose fed his one year-old beer. Junior, my cousin, had been happily drinking milk out of his bottle. My bad-ass uncle thought it was time for Junior to take his first sip of the alcoholic beverage. My cousin accepted it with a disgusted face that made him run into his mother's arms. My dad played the video before my uncle left and Junior went berserk at the site of us on the TV screen. He shrieked as if a dog had bitten

him. The movie seemed to have frightened him. We wondered if Junior could've gotten drunk off of one sip and caused him to freak out.

At around the age of six or seven, Jackie and I started taking mouthfuls of my dad's beer regularly. He usually had a can with his dinner. All we had to do was ask for a taste, "*¿La puedo probar?*" and he granted us permission. Sometimes our gulps went on too long and my dad was forced to pull the can away from us. The same thing happened with my mom's blend, a *chelada*. After having squeezed the juice of an entire lemon into the base of a glass, she added salt directly from the Morton Salt container. Holding the cup at an angle with one hand, she slowly poured a can of beer with the other to prevent an excessive amount of spume from forming. We had to wait a few seconds for the froth to die before we dived in. It tasted more like lemonade than beer.

To this day, beer is flavorless to me without lime and salt. I also believe that my early introduction to alcohol deterred me from getting wasted when I turned twenty-one. The act of drinking hadn't been something forbidden to me so it wasn't a curiosity I had to fathom when my twenty-first birthday came around. My parents had taught me that drinking was acceptable in moderation. My abuelita Angie taught me to drink with a little more class.

Quite simply, she was above beer. Her classy cocktail was the margarita. She served it every time she hosted the occasional party in the patio area behind the apartment building. We were always present because we were family. Whenever she handed a cup of something that looked like a yellow ICEE to my mother, I headed straight towards it. I knew beer was bad because it contained a chemical that could get me drunk like my

uncles. I had no idea the slushy that my mom held contained a related substance. The first thing I noticed was the salted rim and craved it right away. When I asked my mom for a sip, she conceded like my father except she kept her grip on the plastic cup the entire time. She might have even tilted it just enough for a spoonful to enter my mouth. It was delicious. And my abuelita Angie had made it. I referred to the slurpy as my abuelita Angie's drink for years until I learned its real name.

When I was in second grade, I had to choose a godparent to represent me at my first communion. I chose my abuelita Angie because she had been showing me how to live an American kind of life. However, in true American style, she showed up at the church without my candle, bible, or rosary that we were asked to bring to be blessed by the priest. My abuelita Angie didn't know that I needed any of these items. She attended American masses where godparents were called sponsors and bibles, rosaries, and candles unnecessary during first communions. But my mom was at fault. My abuelita Angie had asked her various times if she had to bring anything that day and my mom had said no, assuming that my grandma already knew that a candle, a rosary, and a bible were required at all communions and was referring to something else. We didn't know that our church was one of the few trying to hold on to traditional Mexican Catholic ceremonies. So my dad ran to the store a block away where he bought the candle that would later burn in my hands, dripping wax onto my white gloves, a Bible that I never read, and a rosary that I never prayed with.

After the wafer dissolved in my mouth, my mom told me that I could now call my abuelita Angie Nina. I was old enough to know that she wasn't really my grandmother.

It had become awkward calling her by that name after I had figured it out. So I took up my mother's suggestion and began referring to Angie as my Nina immediately. It was appropriate and politically correct. The following year my sister followed suit. My Nina Angie arrived prepared at the church with a white box in her hands.

Having my Nina Angie as my godparent made me feel like I had graduated from her private etiquette school. She prepared me for life the way a teacher or my mother would have never thought necessary. The grandmother title was never fit for her. She wasn't meant to be a permanent fixture like a grandma usually is for a child. She was the kind of person that came into your life, made you see the world from a different angle, and then continued her journey to change someone else's. My Nina Angie made me aware of the two distinct worlds I was living in. Because of her, I'm able to socialize with my family and outside my home. My Nina Angie knew it was important to stand out in a crowd, bejeweled, perfumed, with a signature drink in my hand. My introduction to such a life helped me move in a foreign world. Without her, I would have started drawing eyebrow arches on my face.

Although I had three grandmas, none of them complimented me like the old lady who lived in apartment number one. Perhaps if my grandmas lived closer to me, they would have had more opportunities to be traditional grandmothers. Even Angie, who lived blocks away, wasn't especially affectionate. I kept company with the woman in apartment number one.

Mi tía. My aunt. That's all I called her. This special woman was always there when I needed her. I never considered substituting my grandmothers for her because her

title as my aunt had been long engraved. If I could've gotten past her name and the small role I thought she played in my life, I would have cherished her instead of having taken her for granted. But children don't know which people will make a difference in their lives until they grow up. I was an adult when I realized that this particular aunt was much more than that. Her name was Vicenta, having been born on St. Vincent's day in April. She was Nacho's mom, my Nina Angie's mother-in-law. She and my grandfather, my dad's dad, were cousins. That made her my father's aunt so I was told that she was mine too. Technically, that made her my great-great aunt, give or take a great. But to me she was just my tía.

My tía took my parents in when I was born. Apartments one and two had two bedrooms each so my mom and dad and I lived in my tía's spare. I'm not sure how my dad came to asking her to allow us to live with her. I know he lived with his brother and his dad in another part of East L.A. before he formed a family. Perhaps he was waiting for an apartment to vacate. It seemed that my tía had always been old. She appeared not to age. When she passed away in 1997 she was ninety-three years old. Ten years earlier, when I was five, I would have guessed her to be just as old. Her white skin had always been wrinkly. The wrinkles on her face were thick and folded in layers like ruffles. She had large, brown age spots on her face, arms, and legs accompanied by tiny red specks. Blue veins like the ones that enveloped my Nina Angie's feet also covered my tía's limbs. Her hands were bony and her knuckles thick. My tía wore large greenish-gray glasses from the seventies and her salt-and-peppered hair in a braided bun. My dad joked with her that her hair was darker than his—he had inherited his father's

white head at an early age. My tía also wore a hearing aid. But her most noticeable feature was her toothless smile. It's true what they say about the elderly reverting back to childhood. She had lost all of her teeth and like a baby, a smooth pink gum line appeared when she smiled or laughed, which she did a lot in my presence.

My shyness disappeared when I was with my tía. I only felt comfortable with a handful of people and she happened to be one of them. But it wasn't just that I was at ease with her. I looked at her as if she were a mom or dad. I walked into her apartment without knocking. I stood outside her kitchen window and chatted for hours. I accompanied her while she smoked on her armchair in the living room or had dinner in the kitchen. I did not hold back on who I was like I did with my Nina Angie. My mom had led me to believe that I could be a bother to my Nina who was always busy. But my tía lived all alone in apartment number one, with the exception of Nacho's daily visits. My mom encouraged me to keep her company and I did. To some, it may seem odd that a child would spend a lot of time with a very old person but we had a lot in common. We lived in an apartment. We ate beans and *pan dulce* with *avena*. We both shared stories about Mexico. She wasn't a person that I could bother like my Nina Angie. My tía didn't have to submit Avon orders or arrive on time to hair appointments. If I was bored or mad or lonely I found refuge with her. I don't know if it was her helplessness or her life experiences that drew me. Whatever it was, I never had to tell my mom where I was going. I was not allowed to visit friends who lived three houses away, but with my tía, I could be gone for hours at a time.

I found my way to her apartment along different paths. The most common route was my regular trip to the mailbox. Six vertical mailboxes that opened as one stood a few feet from my tía's kitchen window. It was a given that she'd be sitting by the curtained opening. She usually stood there when we arrived with my mother from school. The building was shaped like an L, the base of the letter facing the street. I walked the straight corridor from my apartment at the end to number two where it changed direction. Then I descended the stairs and made a quick left. Other times I came down the stairs in front of my apartment and crossed the parking lot. As I walked towards the street I searched for my tía through her living room window. She usually sat there watching what took place so she could report it to Nacho the next morning. If she caught sight of me, my tía invited me in. If she didn't and I wanted to spend time with her, I walked into her apartment without knocking. It worried me, though, that I walked in without any trouble. That meant that anyone could. It was terrifying to envision a man breaking in, searching for expensive jewelry or money hidden in a coffee jar. The only thing a thief would find would be a rosary.

My nose found the stench of cigarettes when I walked into apartment number one. My tía was a smoker. We worried that she would burn the building down, but luckily her accidents were confined to a few spots on the carpet. If I didn't see my tía in the front part of the house, I walked past the couch to her bedroom at the end of the apartment. She had an altar underneath the window draped in a crocheted mantle she had most likely made herself. During my youngest years, my mom would be amazed at my tía's talent; with her fading eyesight she was doing double-needle work by the light

coming through the living room window. Adorning the altar were statues of saints she had collected over the years.

My tía was very religious. She might have inherited it from her own mother since she was named Vicenta after the Catholic saint associated with April 5. She attended mass every Sunday at the Virgen de Guadalupe sanctuary on top of the hill on Third Street where my parents were married and my sister baptized. Nacho drove her and I would catch their arrival sometimes if I happened to be playing outside with Jackie. With a black, embroidered shawl over her head, my tía looked like she had just gotten back from a funeral. When she had grown too fragile to make her way from the car to the church, a faithful neighbor, Don Roberto, brought communion to her. I never witnessed this interaction because he arrived too early on Sunday mornings. I knew it took place because my mom would ask my tía if Don Roberto had come by.

If she wasn't in the kitchen or the living room it meant that my tía was praying the rosary. I never wanted to startle her so I walked in slowly. I walked past the bathroom where a kitchen chair sat inside the tub. Nacho bathed her a few days out of the week because he was afraid that she would fall on her own. Then I walked by the spare bedroom where my parents and I lived for a couple of months after I was born. It had since become Nacho's room, as he was spending all day with my tía. His twin bed rested below the window with a tall, dark chest at its feet. I would catch sight of my tía from the hallway, kneeling before the altar with the black wrap over her head. There were usually candles burning too, which was another cause for concern. Unlocked doors, cigarettes, and candles. My tía needed my companionship more than I needed hers.

I don't remember how she noticed me. I might have tapped her shoulder or she might have sensed me. Most likely I interrupted her by asking the obvious.

“Are you praying?”

She was never upset that I disturbed her. A pink smile always broke through her face. She loved people. Nacho was there most of the day but she spent her evenings and nights alone. She knew me perfectly well, since I had been a baby living in her house. I was the one with the pronounceable name.

“¿Y tú hermana?” she would ask about my sister. She admitted to being unable to retain Jackie's name due to its English phonemes.

After I disrupted her praying, I either helped her stand up or watched her do it on her own; my actions varied each time. My tía left the rosary on the altar, placed her shawl on a chair or her bed and we walked together to the kitchen. It was our gathering place. The yellow lighting made the pale green walls dark, casting shadows on our faces. My tía always had refried beans in a skillet on the stove and oatmeal in a pot. Being a typical Mexican mother, she always wanted to feed me. I always declined because I ate when I arrived home from school. I only accepted some oatmeal to keep her company. As she heated tortillas, she poured me a cup of oatmeal. My mom made the stuff regularly but I ate it in a bowl so I could dunk sandwich bread and spoon it out. Drinking the stuff grossed me out. It didn't go down smoothly like water or juice. But she was nice enough to let me intrude so I took her cup happily. Sometimes she paired it with sweet bread that looked like a UFO called a *cemita*. My tía sat across from me scooping

her beans with a piece of corn tortilla. I watched as she chewed without teeth wondering if and how much it hurt.

It was sitting at that round kitchen table that our routine took place. My tía took on the storyteller role and I the listener even though I knew her stories by heart. Her grandmother instinct kicked in by recounting tales of her childhood. The only story I still remember is the one about her introduction to smoking. She was just a child when she took up the habit. Time and again, I sat and listened to my tía describe how, because of her father, she began to smoke.

“My dad used to send me to light up his cigarette,” she commenced. Her eyes lit up at the memory of her father. She stared at a spot on the table, just above her plate, where the nearly ninety-year old image played in her head exactly as it had happened.

“I was a little girl, smaller than you are now, maybe five or six,” she continued. Then she ate some.

I took tiny sips of my oatmeal, pretending to drink the thick substance. I wanted the level to fall some because I was embarrassed for wasting my tía’s food. I always listened to her as if it were the first time. I sat with fascination in front of her just like I did during the telecasts of Mary Poppins on KTLA during the holidays. Mary Poppins hooked me with her Spit Spot and magic while my tía caught my interest with stories that had taken place during the times of silent films and steam engines. My tía was sweet and innocent. Anything out of the norm shocked me. All one-hundred times that she told me the story.

Her dad asked her to light his cigarette outside, she continued. It was okay for him to smoke indoors but my tía was a child and she could accidentally light the house on fire. It was safer to carry a lit cigarette into the house. My mom wouldn't let me grab a big knife, let alone a match. What had my tía's father been thinking?

"At first, I only took one puff," she said. I think she choked and coughed so she tried again.

"The next time, I took two." She returned to the house and handed over the cigarette.

"He didn't know," my tía said referring to her father. "And he continued asking me to light up his cigarette. The next time I took three puffs."

I pictured a little, skinny, light-skinned girl in a ruffled blue dress with white socks and black dress shoes hiding behind her house, holding a cigarette between her thumb and index finger. I imagined my tía's cheeks hollowing out as she put it in her mouth, a braided pony tail running down her back.

"When he didn't tell me to do something, I asked him, 'Daddy, would you like me to light your cigarette for you?' and he would say, 'Yes, *mi'ja*.'"

It was adorable how my tía changed her voice to impersonate herself as a five-year old. She bobbed her head to show me how she walked to and from and raised her arm to demonstrate how she smoked. Acting like a child made her appear even smaller than her shrunken five-foot frame.

“Can you believe that?” my tía asked me. I shook my head. “I was addicted right away. Soon I was taking so many puffs that all that was left was the stump,” she said with a laugh. Her gums had ridges where her teeth used to be.

I joined her in her delight. I asked her about her father’s reaction.

“When I went inside he asked, ‘What happened to my cigarette?’ and I said, ‘Oh, Daddy. It didn’t want to light up!’” Here she chuckled again at her childish behavior. She couldn’t believe how daring she had been an entire world ago. Stuck in her trance she concluded, “And I’ve been smoking ever since.”

I heard that story time and again. I knew it would come when we sat in the kitchen and I always stayed. My tía did not force me to accompany her. I did not whine or say, *not again*. In the latter years, I even chimed in, supposedly predicting what would happen next without ruining punch lines. She wrapped me in her trance. Her memory became one of my own. I snapped out of it when she was finished. It was my occasional bedtime story. When she was done, I took a deep breath, told her it was late, and headed home.

The driveway was dark and the garages scared me. Although I kept my eyes opened, I hoped I wouldn’t see something or someone with malicious intentions lingering behind the cars or posts. I ran home wondering if my tía was aware of having told the story before. Maybe it was one of those anecdotes that people recounted over and over again. Perhaps she was losing her mind since she did suffer the occasional crazy spell. Whatever the reason, it was our ritual, one that I enjoyed because I entered a different world and forgot my own.

Throughout that time, my tía was ill and she took risks. We knew her routine and her limits when she was well. Anything out of the ordinary was cause for concern. She had another altar dedicated to the Virgen de Guadalupe in the garage next to her apartment. A twelve by sixteen picture of Mexico's patroness sat on a small table surrounded by fresh-cut flowers. My tía picked them herself. Even though there was a garden in front of the apartment building, it was full of greenery instead of blossoms. Three pine trees that reached the power lines aligned the fence. Plants used for remedy concoctions grew in the bricked containments—*yerba buena* (spearmint), *cola de caballo* (horse's tail), and oregano. My tía had to walk to the garden in the back using her greenish cane to cut roses for the Virgen. We worried about her. She tended to fall even with a walking stick and her wounds took long to heal. We were afraid that the bloodied bruises that resembled rotten patches on fruits would become infected. Sometimes, Nacho cut flowers for her but my tía needed a breath of fresh air. She spent most of her days indoors. We knew she should keep moving but also feared broken legs or hips. But we really panicked when her journeys took her beyond the garden. There were periods when she visited the neighbors or climbed the stairs to our apartment. Doctors never diagnosed her abnormal behavior but everyone knew that she was sick. "*Está mala,*" my mom would say.

It was normal to find my tía in the garden. It wasn't normal to see her climbing the stairs to our apartment. Our place had a large window facing the staircase. The sofa faced the outdoors and it was sitting there that we noticed my tía slowly making her way. She appeared happy and free holding on to the black railing with the *mora*, or mulberry

tree, in the background. She did this two or three times while we lived there. As soon as she was spotted, my dad would go after her.

My father guided my tía into the house. My mom scolded her for being a daredevil. My tía disregarded my mother and took a seat on the couch to chat for a while. I imagine she and my dad spoke about people from Mexico. Before it got dark, my mom talked her into going back home. If it was a weekday, my mother and I usually walked her to her apartment while my dad hopped in the shower. We wanted her to use the least amount of stairs possible to prevent a fall, so we made a left at the door and walked down the white hallway.

My tía strolled through the corridor. She knew my father got up at four in the morning but wasn't ready to head home. Who knew how long it'd been since she went wherever she wanted by herself. Nacho had been her chauffeur for years. To slow her return, she made frequent stops. My tía held on to her cane with her left hand and the rail with her right. She took a rest between apartments five and four and looked over to the neighbor's house. She most likely made a comment about the people's messy yard. There were rusty cars, spare tires, trash cans, dogs, and an unruly tree that dropped leaves onto our side. After a few minutes, we continued our journey. At apartments three and two the hallway made a ninety-degree turn. The corridor made another sharp turn at the end of the building, a living room's worth of distance, where the descent began. The staircase was one straight shot to the ground level, unlike the one at our end with a landing. The entrance to my tía's apartment was underneath the flight of stairs.

My mom and I held our breath until we left my tía at her apartment. We made sure we closed the door behind us so she wouldn't go elsewhere again. There was something charming about an old lady who went crazy sometimes but stayed lucid enough to remember me and my family. My tía relied on us and worried about us like no one else did because we lived in the same building. Her concern gave me a sense of worth that my real grandmothers hadn't had an opportunity to express and one that my Nina Angie had been too busy to help me develop. A person existed, aside from my parents, who cared about me enough to house me, feed me, and share her life stories so that I could call them my own and pass them on. This was comforting because in case something terrible happened to my parents, I wouldn't have to go very far to continue living my life. My tía was part of our family. That's why we continued to repay her kindness when she moved into a convalescent hospital.

We had been living in our own house for two years when Nacho placed my tía under the care of a convalescent home. He was diagnosed with cancer in 1994 and debated for weeks over alternate care for her. A full-time nurse was an option but Nacho and my Nina Angie were toying with the idea of selling the apartment complex. After much thought and suggestions from my parents, he opted for a nursing home. My tía's new abode was within walking distance from our house and my Nina Angie's. This fact probably brought the only consolation to Nacho during his fight with his own illness.

In March of 1995, Nacho passed away in his room at the end of the hall at my Nina Angie's. My dad saw him bald and yellow the day before he died. My tía's only son and closest family member was gone. My parents, Jackie, and I took on the

responsibility of looking after her. We knew her extended family wouldn't be there for her like Nacho had been. My tía had two grandchildren and great-grandchildren who had visited her regularly at the apartment as a sense of duty. They hardly spoke Spanish, making the distance between them and my tía even greater. With Nacho gone, my tía's descendants had also lost their translator. My Nina Angie had stated that she would visit my tía regularly out of obligation, but never daily or twice a day like Nacho had. It was up to my family to keep my tía company even though the atmosphere of the convalescent hospital wasn't one that could be enjoyed.

We paid my tía weekly visits. We saw her on the weekends on our way to the supermarket or Target. I was thirteen and my needs were changing. I had lived apart from my tía for two years. My dad had bought a house two blocks away which made it easy for my mom, Jackie, and me to visit her regularly at apartment number one. I hadn't sat down to listen to my tía's tales by myself since I was ten. I wanted to see her because she was special to me but my mind had started to wander to other things like boys and going to the mall with my older cousin. The bond we had would always exist but too much had happened for our relationship to remain the same. She had lost her son and her home while I was starting to find myself. For that reason, it was emotionally challenging having to sit with her at the convalescent hospital for an hour each week. My mom and Jackie felt the same way for their own reasons. I'm sure my dad did too but he never expressed his thoughts out loud; he owed her his presence after she helped him get on his feet. We made the trips because we knew she needed us.

The convalescent home was across the street from a set of apartment buildings. Tenants took over the parking on the side of the road. When my dad couldn't find a space the first time around, we would come back after our errands. The last room my tía was in had a window that faced the street. Sometimes she spotted us. It broke our hearts to see her sitting there waiting for someone, anyone, to keep her company. When we stepped inside the building, the smell of urine and rotting food penetrated our noses. It took minutes to adjust to the stench. There were always residents in the common area in front of the entrance. My mother hated the sight of old people with their tongues hanging outside their mouths or those on wheelchairs without limbs. It was a cruel reminder of the future that lay ahead for all of us.

“I don't want to end up like that,” my mom would say. “I want to die before I get old. I don't want to be a burden on anyone.”

When we neared my tía's room, my mom ushered Jackie and me in first. I took the lead. Years of unannounced walk-ins should have prepared me for the sight of my tía. But it didn't. I was nervous. It was as if the time we had spent apart made us forget our old selves. Perhaps if I had been alone I could've sat down and started chatting with her the way we used to. But I couldn't with my parents and Jackie tagging along. They took away part of that special tie my tía and I had. I walked in first anyway, knowing she deserved that much.

There were four residents to a room. My tía's bed was sectioned off by a curtain in the farthest corner on the right. Privacy was nonexistent. Most of the time she was sitting on her bed. A few times we found her napping. My dad didn't like waking her

up. It was probably the only time she was able to stop asking, “Why me?” At least that’s what I would have been asking... “Why would you take my only son away? Why would you leave me all alone?” My questions would be directed towards La Virgen de Guadalupe as I’m sure my tía’s were too.

“I want to join *mi’jo*,” she said sometimes. Who could blame her? I think we wished the same thing. For her sake. We knew that my tía wasn’t happy. She wasn’t in her apartment where she used to cook and smoke. Who would be happy in a place where you had no freedom? But we also wanted my tía to remain part of our lives. It’s all we knew. She was an extension of us. We stuck around as long as she did.

My tía’s face lit up every time she saw us. Her browless eyes perked up under the greenish frames she had worn since I knew her and her mouth opened slightly to display a surprised expression. The first year, she recognized us right away. Later, she stared at us until we greeted her. When my mom asked if she knew who we were, she nodded.

During the colder days or evenings, we stayed in my tía’s room. I would sit on the bed next to her, on the window sill, or a chair. My parents asked mundane questions to pass the time, to try to bring back the good old feeling of being home at the apartment complex.

“How have you been?”

“Did you eat already? What did you eat? You have to eat.”

“Did you feed the birds today? Be careful when you go outside. You might fall.”

“Has anyone come to see you?”

While the adults spoke, I stared at what had become of my tía. A small crucifix hung above her bed. Her altar had been narrowed to a miniature brown cross on the wall. I think she had some pictures of her great-grandchildren tucked inside a Bible in one of the drawers next to her bed. Aside from her clothes stashed in one of the lockers by the bathroom with her name on it, everything belonged to the nursing home. The brown tray and the blue pitcher and matching plastic cups, the bed, the bedding, the chair, the nightstand. She might have had a personal crocheted blanket lying over the covers but her two-bedroom life had been reduced to one-fourth of a room.

In the spring and summer, my tía insisted on going outside to the garden and patio area. She walked to the garden daily where she fed scraps of bread to the birds. It was probably the only normal activity she still carried on from living in apartment number one. My tía knew her home was a gloomy place and hoped the outdoors would pep us up. She told me and Jackie to bring her wheelchair along. She hadn't planned on sitting on it. My tía had nothing to entertain us with and thought that rolling around in a wheelchair would do the trick. My Nina Angie's grandchildren had come up with the idea during a rare visit. The first year, we abided. While my tía, my mom, and dad sat in the shade, Jackie and I took turns riding. We pushed each other in circles around the oval garden or drove the chair ourselves. The following year, when I was fourteen, I found the game childish, but I continued to humor my tía. Instead of racing around the garden, I sat on the wheelchair and listened to my parents and tía speaking while I toyed with the brake or rolled away. I chimed in occasionally, trying to hold on to what we had. That's the one thing I missed about us. Our visits had been private. I remember very little about

the things we discussed but my tía had been all mine. My mom hadn't been there to scowl at me for saying something she deemed inappropriate and nurses never interrupted by asking if we needed anything. My tía now belonged to the convalescent home that slowly put out her flame.

In 1997, on a Saturday morning in early April, we got a call from my Nina Angie. My dad answered. My tía was found dead in her sleep. The nurses claimed she had risen to feed the birds as usual and gone back to bed. When they didn't see her up at her regular time, they approached her. My tía was gone.

No one requested an autopsy. The cause didn't matter. My tía had lived a long life. We assumed that she died of everything that came with old age. She was born in 1904. Smoking could have finally caught up to her. Maybe she had a heart attack. Her death was bittersweet. My tía was exactly where she had wanted to be since Nacho died, with him. We took comfort hoping she hadn't suffered. I like to think that her heart took its last beat without inflicting pain.

As for my own, I don't know how my tía entered it so deeply. The connection must have been formed when I was a baby living with her in apartment number one. She planted something inside me before I was ever aware of her presence. I never got a chance to develop that bond with my grandmothers because they lived thousands of miles away. I guess this suggests that one does need a physical relationship to be close to someone. This is how people attach themselves to friends or relatives twice or thrice removed. I have a bank full of memories of this old woman versus singular episodes I remember my grandmothers by. She might not have given me tight hugs that lifted me in

the air like my abuelita Manuela or free candy like my abuelita Eloiza. My dad used to tell me that I had to love my abuelitas because they were my grandmothers. But that is not how affection works. Love happens when we feel safe with another person, physically, mentally, and emotionally. When my grandmas die, the sadness I will feel will be on behalf of my parents for their loss. I could dwell on the lack of relationship with my grandmothers but how many people can say they had a ninety-year old tía who started smoking at the age of four? My only regret is that I don't remember what my tía and I talked about. And that I only knew her as a child. But at least I can tell that one story, to anyone who will listen.

My Best Friend Polly

I was depressed. It was a Thursday night, Friday morning by the time I turned off the computer. It was one 'o'clock and I had grown tired of typing yet another story draft I was sure lacked a voice or sympathy like the previous versions. My melancholic behavior derived from the pressure of having to submit such piece at the end of the month. It also didn't help that the first day of the new school year landed on a Friday. I only quit typing because I had to be at my teaching job at eight-forty later that morning. I had to wake up early, if six forty-five is considered early. My dad wouldn't. He put in close to two hours of work by that time and been up for almost four. By the time I made my bed, my dad, a truck driver, had already driven more than sixty miles to his destination and unloaded hundreds of pounds of flour and other baking products.

As I lay on top of my turned-down sheets for their coolness, I stared at Craig Ferguson on the television. I had turned the TV on hoping that it would put me to sleep. Rather than listening to his skit with his robotic sidekick Geoff, I was wishing that someone were next to me to comfort me. This was very rare. I liked having my bed to myself. I slept diagonally, my head near one outermost corner and my feet near another. I joked that my limbs resembled a spider with its long legs all over the place, bent at the joints like a daddy-longlegs. A flash of Leo, my boyfriend, lying next to me came to mind. I didn't enjoy sleeping with him on the weekends because his medium-build form took over the entire span of my full-sized bed. But I wanted him there that night to hold me so he could assure me that everything would turn out okay. And then an image of Polly the cat took over rather quickly. She was my cat, as much as a street cat could

belong to a person. My sister had led my mother and me down the feline path when she begged my dad for one soon after we moved into our new house almost twenty years ago. We considered ourselves cat experts since we had owned several since. My mom and sister have had a housecat for years. I joined the club when Polly showed up on my doorstep. She was my friend for about a year until a deadly disease forced me to put her to sleep.

Polly didn't come to me at a time that I was particularly needy. I was busy working and going to grad school when I met her. She was the offspring of another feral I had been feeding at my apartment complex on and off for years. When this cat had a litter, she brought Polly to my porch along with her brother, whom I later named Rumpelstiltskin, and a sister-kitten as well, as if to say, *Okay, you sucked the life out of me. This kind lady will feed you from now on.*

Sister-kitten fled down the stairs behind Mom after she took one look at me. Rumpel, a black-and-white fluffy ball, stayed on the landing and waited for my next move to dictate his. Polly, a white-and-gray cutie with black stripes like cuffs on both arms, was the only one that remained unfazed by my presence. With a little temptation made possible by ham, I lured her to stay. Within a few days, Polly allowed me to pat her. Rumpel continued to be a sissy. He only came up for food if dare-devil Polly climbed the stairs to the pet dish I left with dry food and water outside my door. I tried getting him used to me like Polly, but he scurried as soon as he felt my touch on his hairy fur. Then he disappeared altogether. Polly stayed.

I used a stringy belt that came with a pair of jeans that one never used as a cat toy. Polly used her tiny but strong teeth to pull it away from me after she had caught it and won our tug-o-war game. She ran with her prize down the stairs where I'd fetch it to play again. She slept on the pergola by my staircase. When she heard my door open, Polly came out of her hiding place. A rustle of leaves turned my attention to the vines wrapped around the pergola. That's when I spotted Polly's balancing act on the two-by-fours that made up the structure's framework before she jumped to my staircase and stood in front of my door. I fetched cat food inside my apartment and came back to a very affectionate cat. Polly stood on her hind legs and looked for a pat on the head or rubbed her body against my legs. I knew it was her way of asking, *Can I have some of that, please?* She had learned what the contents inside the paper bag were in just a few days.

I continued to develop a bond with Polly without intending to. I brought a wooden pet house from my parents' for Polly to sleep in. It didn't provide much shelter during a week in January when Southern California was bombarded with storms, though. I was on vacation from work, completing my school assignments at my apartment. After a bolt of lightning lit up the gray sky in the early afternoon, I walked to the door. I opened it just enough to catch Mother Nature pour millions of gallons of water onto us. I spotted Polly scared to death of the lightning and thunder inside her house. She had taken cover in the farthest corner and her legs were tucked underneath her body. Her sad eyes looked up at me.

My first instinct told me to let her into my apartment. I couldn't close the wooden door to her house to keep her warm because I didn't want to trap her inside. Water

droplets were making their way in and the cold wind was snaking through the six small openings that served as windows; I used to stick my fingers through them to make our cats at my parent's house reach for them. My second instinct knew there was caution to be taken. I didn't want the responsibility of owning a cat nor did I have the time to care for one. My apartment was too small and I was only home in the evenings and every other weekend. It wouldn't be fair to any pet for me to take them in until I bought a spacious house with room for a cat or dog to roam in. I also didn't want to get attached.

I made excuses to push my natural cat-lady impulse away. I told myself that Polly was probably full of fleas. If I let her in, the fleas would reproduce on my carpet. Maybe she had a disease. Even though I saw her daily when I left for work and when I came back, she had a lot of time to linger with other sick cats. There was tail-less Garfield. Big Boy had bloody patches on his tail where fur was supposed to be. And Flat-Face always had scratches on his face.

I looked at Polly again and she seemed to say, *Can I pleeease go with you?* I knew if I allowed her inside she would never want to leave. I peeked into my apartment where I heard the storm being covered from the television set on KCAL news. I saw my laptop on the table and the chair where I had been sitting at for hours. The dull skies had made me gloomy and I lied to myself that Polly's companionship would give me the lift I needed, thus motivating my writing, this one time. Once again, I lured Polly into my place with the only tool I had: honey ham.

I sat at the table as Polly sniffed everything in my living room. When she felt familiar with the space, Polly chose the chair next to mine to take her nap. That told me

she wanted to be in close proximity to me. She tested the three chairs, settling on the one to my right and curled and nestled herself to sleep. Hours later I grew concerned that she'd pee in my living room. I opened the door so she could have the option to go outside but she didn't move a muscle. I was surprised at her ability to hold liquid for so long.

I took Polly in that day knowing I had to keep an eye on her. Then the night came. It was ten 'o clock and Polly was still sleeping on the chair. I knew I could not let her stay. That hadn't been my plan. Then again, I never expected her to stay the entire day, which she was already doing. I didn't have a litter box and I used that fact to keep me from backing out of my original plan. I opened the door to check the climate and it had grown colder and windier. I shut the door in a conflicted state of mind. The cat looked so comfortable in my apartment. But she needed to preserve her hunting and survival skills because she was still a feral cat. I didn't want her to become domesticated because she was used to spending most of her time outdoors. Polly was used to it anyway, I told myself. I picked Polly up against my maternal instincts and tucked her away in her little house outside my door. I gave her an old towel to keep her warm, apologized for my incivility, closed my door, and thought about her all the way to bed.

I didn't expect to see Polly the next morning. I thought she would be mad at me. I expected her to have gone to a hidden spot only cats knew about. Before Rumpel disappeared, he showed up on my porch drenched across sections of his body. He didn't belong to anyone in particular and I wondered where the cats took shelter during extreme weather conditions. But there she was, inside the little wooden house. We repeated the

visitation rights the rest of the week. Polly didn't seem to mind my rule of having to sleep in her own bed at night as long as she spent the day with me.

She had placed all of her trust in me by the end of the week. Polly had moved from sleeping on chairs to my couch to my lap. I was having a sandwich and watching the news when Polly woke up from her nap. Distracted by what was on TV, I didn't see when Polly leaped for my lap. When I saw her in midair, I instinctively pushed her away. I didn't know if she was attacking me or my sandwich. She stuck her nails out on her way down trying to hold on to my legs and ended up scratching my thigh. Polly landed in a seated position staring up at me.

My heart was racing. I was scared of Polly for the first time since meeting her months before. As I continued to read her motive as to why she had jumped on me, I figured that she just wanted to be close to me. Maybe she was one of those needy characters like my sister who could not be alone. My mere presence hadn't satisfied her. Or maybe something else was going on. It almost felt like she sensed that I was refusing to accept her on a deeper level as my pet. Maybe she knew before I did that we belonged together. That's why she had jumped on me. She wanted to fulfill the physical aspect of our relationship. I gave in too. I picked her up and put her on my lap. I ripped a piece of ham from my sandwich and fed it to her. Then she went to sleep.

I'm not sure exactly when it happened, but at some point, Polly had taken on the role of the best friend I desired since junior high. She was always there for me. Polly waited up for me when I arrived home from school at ten at night and helped me relax. Seeing and patting Polly, playing with her and the belt eradicated all of the stress from

work and school for a little while. She made me smile when no one else throughout the day had. She listened when I couldn't get a hold of Leo or my sister, and by this time, I had lost trust in my mother and did not consider her a confidante. This was due to some questionable behavior of hers, which had caused me to stop trusting her long ago. I was raised to be a good girl. I didn't talk back to my parents. I didn't curse, except on two occasions when the f-word escaped my mouth. I completed and turned in every single homework assignment and never missed class. I did all of this because my mother told me to, and because she said God would reward me.

Meanwhile, she was cheating on my father. This changed everything for me. I know she didn't take up this activity to hurt me but the thing about affairs is that they hurt everyone. Because of her, I had trouble trusting Leo when I met him. If people were unreliable like my sister when she didn't return my calls after two weeks, I blamed it on my mom. Everyone's lack of social and moral habits made sense when I put it in perspective regarding my mother's affair. She had been my rock throughout my childhood. Her blasphemous behavior shocked me. My mother's affair introduced me to real life. People were going to do as they pleased regardless of the way I behaved. To head off the coming pain, I put up a wall. I have been taking down this wall one brick at a time for ten years now knowing very well that I needed a friend. Then Polly appeared and filled that void. She fit my busy schedule and didn't complain about me not being able to spend more time with her like some human friends had. Polly was all the friends I had time for and we were happy being just us two.

I was my mother's daughter

I used to tell my mom everything. Sometimes I couldn't wait for it to be two-thirty so I could vent about how the teacher or my classmates had upset me.

"Mr. Carlow put me in the corner because I tattled on Pedro," I told her as we walked to our apartment three blocks away.

Pedro was the new kid in class. We were in third grade and he had just arrived from Mexico. Being that Pedro didn't know English, Mr. Carlow assigned me to be his buddy. I was supposed to show him the school grounds and answer his questions. But Pedro didn't have any problem getting around. He was a flirt even though he was too skinny and had a face like a horse. When I saw him cutting the lunch line, I made a note to tell the teacher when I got back to class.

"So don't inform him about anything anymore," my mom suggested. My mother was a natural-born problem solver. She had a solution to everything. And I always followed her advice. I stopped keeping an eye on Pedro. And I stopped being told to stand in the corner.

I'm the oldest of two daughters. I clung to my mother while my sister Jackie was daddy's girl. They say that parents love their children equally but I believed that my mother preferred me slightly over my sister. I was the one that listened to her demands. I cleaned when she asked me to. I was programmed to make my bed automatically when I rose in the mornings. I kept our jewelry and hair accessories tidy. I hardly got dirty or broke things. Jackie broke two of my mom's crystal plates and disassembled most of her toys. My mother nicknamed her The Destroyer.

I trusted my mother to take care of me. That's how I knew that she loved me. But I never developed that easiness for sharing my feelings like Jackie did. I didn't want my mom to judge me and dislike me if I said something that contradicted her beliefs. That's why I didn't stand up for myself. Jackie, on the other hand, disputed my parent's rulings and defended her own position with valid evidence that made my mom and dad laugh. I didn't have the nerve to tell my mother that I disliked my sixth-grade graduation dress because it was too puffy. I hated the color burgundy; my favorite color was blue. The off-the-shoulder sleeves were fine, but the tutu inspired skirt was too mature for my taste. It looked like what a teenager would wear to the prom, from what I'd seen on *90210* and *Full House*. But what embarrassed me the most were my hairy legs. I had wanted to shave for some time. I hoped my mom would give me permission after I mentioned that I'd been told I had chicken legs. When she didn't, I shaved my ankles, afraid of going any higher. I hid my evidence under a pair of socks.

I considered the white stockings that my mom made me wear that day even worse than the slutty cherry dress. Jackie and I had worn stockings our entire lives. From Santa prints for the holidays to ice cream cones in the summer, stockings were one of those accessories that my mother couldn't let go of. The hair on my legs seemed to stand out even more under the white fabric. I didn't want to leave the house knowing that past the dress, my legs looked like they belonged to a man.

I walked to school in discomfort with my mom and some neighborhood friends. I stared at my legs, oblivious that I might bring more attention to them that way. I hoped the hair would become less noticeable under the natural light. I paused at the first cross

walk. I couldn't believe that my mother had allowed me to walk out of the house with such masculine looking legs. She was the queen of looks. She followed trends and didn't get the mail unless she was fully made up and dressed. To bring my unhappiness to her attention, I lifted my right leg, and for the first time, enlightened her on the issue.

"Look how ugly the hair looks," I told her. I was on the verge of crying. I didn't know what my words would actually accomplish. I hoped that at least she'd let me take the white stockings off. Perhaps the natural blend of hair and skin would be less noticeable. Better yet, she could let me wear pants; I was more than fine covering the furry sticks I had inherited. I knew she wouldn't let me do that even in my dreams.

My comment caught my mother's attention long enough to see what I was pointing at. Then her focus went back to the lady she had been conversing with. I don't think she even heard what I said.

I was relieved when I stood in the second row of the graduation stage. No one would be able to see and be disgusted by my hairy legs. When the ceremony was over and we headed back to class, my mom made me take a picture with my crush, Ernesto. To keep him from looking anywhere else but my face, I made jokes as I approached him. I kept him focused on the top half of me.

A normal pre-pubescent girl would have just shaved her legs and dealt with a screaming mother had she asked and been denied. In my mind, asking my mom for things was the equivalent of talking back to her. It didn't help that my parents hated asking others for help. When we moved from our apartment to our new house, my uncles showed up unannounced with their trucks. They knew my dad would have never asked

for their help. The action of asking took on a negative connotation in my house. Because of that, I couldn't ask her not to walk me to middle school even though it was two blocks away.

We lived around the block that led straight to the junior high that had been recently converted from being a middle school. My mom not only walked me but picked me up from school during the two years that I attended. At the beginning, she had waited for Jackie and me by the main office. I pretended that I didn't know her because I didn't want my classmates to know that my mother still picked me up from school on foot. I was particularly self-conscious when she towed her parasol. Old ladies used parasols. It was big and blue and flowery and kids had to duck in order to avoid being poked in the eye by the end of the rods that held the cloth in place. It got better when she waited for me across the street by the liquor store. I had to be careful then of the comments that came out of her mouth. She was rude and blunt. She had always been that way; I was just becoming aware of it.

"Look at that fat girl," she said about the person walking a few feet ahead of us. She was not my friend but I had seen her before.

Before I could give her *the look*, my mom said, "She looks like a ball." I stared at her in disbelief of her immaturity. My mom laughed at her own joke. I knew then that it was best to avoid all conversations until we got home.

The humiliation didn't stop there. When I started Garfield High, both my mom and my dad walked me into the campus. I was mortified of high school. The girls wore makeup and had boyfriends. Some even had sex. And the boys would be cute and I was

not. Ninety percent of my junior high posse went to the rival high school, leaving me with one friend, Beatriz, to keep me from being called a loner. Beatriz and I hadn't discussed where we would find each other on campus. For this reason, I didn't dismiss my parents' idea of walking their first-born to her first day of high school. They wanted to see the school, they said, and had some questions about the meal application. With that, I allowed my parents to drive me to my first day of high school in my dad's minivan.

I was too terrified to observe people's reactions to me walking in with my parents. My heart was beating at maximum speed and my breakfast wanted to come up. We crossed the hundred yards or so of grass before we reached the main building. Three steps led to the three-story structure. The lady standing at the entrance guided us to the office upstairs where someone would answer the lunch application questions my dad supposedly had. Once inside, I started to calm down. I was familiarizing myself with the building and the kids didn't seem so scary anymore. By the time we left the paperwork in the office, I was ready to find my way around the school alone. I stood in the hallway with my parents, hoping they would see that it was time to let me spread my wings. I was figuring out a way to tell them to go but every phrase seemed harsh.

“Okay, you can go now.”

“What time are you going to leave?”

“I'll see you later.”

So I kept my mouth shut.

I walked out with my parents shadowing me. As soon as I stepped foot onto the courtyard, I spotted Beatriz. She was hard to miss since she could be a basketball player. I breathed a sigh of relief and smiled for the first time that morning. My parents felt the same ease in finding her. When they saw that I wouldn't be alone, that no senior would approach me and impregnate me, they retraced their steps to the minivan.

The next morning, I found my mother getting ready at six just like me. I had to catch the city bus at six-fifty so I could get to school on time.

"Where are you going," I asked her. My sister had one more year of middle school but she was on vacation. My mom wasn't going to be walking her.

"I'm going to take you to the bus stop," she said.

I froze. I was fourteen years old. I lived one short block away from the bus stop. I had to cross the street to get there but we had watched kids walk up and down our street for almost four years. I was not the only girl who would be sprinting to the bus with wet hair in the early morning. Like always, I couldn't find a way to tell her no, a manner in which to tell her that it was time for me to do something on my own. I couldn't find a way because deep down I didn't want her to leave me alone. I had never walked anywhere by myself and it had been all her fault. When we crossed the street to go to the mini-market, my mom still held out her arm as to shield me from cars. I knew the mockery wouldn't be worth my own insecurities. Still, I didn't stop her. My mom crossed the street with me and waited with me until I boarded the bus. The next day, she let me cross the street alone. When the bus showed up, I managed a quick wave that

seemed like I was swatting a fly away. I didn't want the kids who hadn't seen me walking with her to know she had walked me to the bus stop.

Because my mom did everything for me—cook, clean, laundry, solve my problems, walk me to school until I was eighteen—I never learned to stand up for myself. I let kids tease me as long as they didn't beat me. For that reason, when I discovered that my mom was having an affair, I kept quiet. I was too occupied trying to keep the subject away from my dad and my sister to consider how my mother's infidelity was affecting me.

I was naturally a quiet person. So no one wondered why I wasn't saying much when I made the conscious decision to ignore my mother during the length of her affair. Her lies kept me from talking because now I was disgusted. How could she lay with someone else if she had committed herself to my father, whether she loved him or not? That was a decision she should've thought about before she married him simply because she was pregnant. I might have admired her more had she raised me alone as long as she would've been honest about her feelings. But she went through with it. My mother made a promise to God. According to her own preaching, her punishment waited.

I didn't want my mom to know anything about me after I discovered she was lying to us. She was keeping secrets from us. She couldn't be mad if I followed suit. I took pictures with random guys and told her they were my friends. I snuck out to the mall with my boyfriend when I was supposed to be with my cousin. I never told her the real reason why Beatriz and I stopped talking for a week, which was that I had ditched her at a party to meet with my boyfriend, with whom I had already made plans. Between

my teenage hormones and my mom-inspired rage, my mother must've viewed my changing personality as a normal transition into adulthood.

I'm sure my mom thought she was smarter than any of us. And she was, until I caught up with her. She taught me to sneak around, to be nosy, and that's how I figured out that she was cheating. I didn't want her to think I was still the stupid little girl that followed her around when I started high school. I hinted at what I knew about the transgressions. She picked up my sly remarks. Then the real test came. If my mom cared about us in the least, realizing that her daughter was aware of her wrongdoings, she would put a stop to the affair. At least I like to think that's what I would do if the situation were reversed. But that's not what happened.

I inserted words related to the affair like "mustache" and "yellow truck" into conversations. I had taken notice of her lover's facial hair and vehicle when he used to drive up and down the street. There was one particular incident when I gathered the courage to ask her whom she had been talking to over the telephone. I knew she had been talking with her lover because she had taken the cordless receiver to the garage. I had followed her, hoping it would force her to hang up the phone. It was as much as I could do to keep my mother away from her lover. I found her leaning on the washing machine in the garage while I took on a feigned interest in feeding our cats outside. My mom didn't hang up as quickly as I wished but my presence did make it a shorter conversation. We were standing outside the house. I was balancing on the railings attached to the three steps of the rear door of the house when my mother came out of the garage. She walked straight to the plants she had aligned along the perimeter of the

house to play it off. I figured that she had an elaborate ruse, wanting the adrenaline rush triggered by the conversation with her lover to be disguised by the blood flowing to her head when she bent over to inspect her foliage.

I knew I had to tell her something. I pressured myself to talk.

“Who was that,” I asked her casually. It sounded normal enough. I didn’t want it to sound accusatory. My stunt might backfire otherwise.

“Oh, you know,” she responded in the same tone. And after a few moments, “some man.” Telemarketers called all the time. She knew I would know who she was referring to. It was the safest answer.

“The one with the truck,” I asked staring at my feet. My heart started pounding. I didn’t know how she would react. I didn’t know if she would slap me for offending her. I didn’t know if she would start crying with shame. I knew I wanted this to change things. My mom straightened up.

“What truck?” she asked. My mom looked puzzled for the first time in months. I knew that my plan had worked. The description of the car I had given her was too accurate to be random. She was making the connection. She was a problem solver, after all.

My stomach churned and I was immobilized. As much I wanted her to react, I didn’t want to deal with the proceedings alone. I didn’t know what or how much to say if she questioned me. I was afraid I would shout at her, verbalizing all of my resentment built up towards her. I didn’t want to disrespect her because that would be something I

would later regret. I wanted to take the comment back as soon as I was overcome with uneasiness.

“I, I don’t know,” I lied. “I was just saying.”

I hated myself for saying that. I would never be able to bring the daring Maricela I regularly dreamt of being during the affair to real time. I didn’t have it in me to chase her lover away with a vase like I did once in my dreams. Only then did I have the satisfaction of screaming at my mother.

“Leave him, choose us,” I yelled at her during the same reverie, hurling the vase at her feet.

My mother was too caught up in the thrill of the whispered conversation. She didn’t announce that she was ending the affair after our slight confrontation. I lost all trust for her then. Having a romance to fulfill the emptiness of being a housewife was one thing. Continuing it when her family was aware of it was irresponsible.

I took credit for bringing the affair to a close. I was in college when I dialed my Tía Fina’s number, my mother’s sister. Since my mother had chosen to ignore my insights into her relationship, I went to someone I knew my mother respected. I told my aunt what I knew after my sister had begun to complain about recorded conversations involving my mother that someone had been playing for her over the phone. My mom denied everything but a restraining order was placed the next day against her now ex-lover. That was as much as she disclosed about her five-year infidelity when I made my bi-monthly visit a week later.

From then on, I began to hate my mother's judgments and motives. Gossiping about her family was no longer funny. I found myself thinking, "Who are you to say who's wrong and who's right?" When my unmotivated, uneducated, and jobless twenty-one year old cousin impregnated his girlfriend, I wasn't surprised in the least. I was actually surprised he had taken so long to father a baby after graduating from high school. I hadn't expected more from a guy in his position. Meanwhile, my mom didn't get enough of discussing this bit of breaking news. She took pleasure in other people's troubles as if her life was perfect.

"He's not the first guy to get his girlfriend pregnant, mom," I said uninterested. My point was to remove the fun out of everything she deemed stirring. That's what she deserved for making me miserable for five years, I thought. "He wasn't the first and he won't be the last."

My mother continued to use family drama to connect with me because I stopped sharing my life with her. I was okay with that because whatever she knew was already public information. My sister's latest breakup was a perfect example of her attempt to reconnect.

Unlike me, my sister Jackie was an open book, and told my parents that her ex-boyfriend Andy had ended their two-year relationship. Jackie was in town for the weekend. The four of us had just finished having *papas con huevo* for breakfast when my mom began to question Jackie on the reasoning behind her break-up. The events had taken us all by surprise because Andy and Jackie had come to L.A. together three weeks earlier. We didn't know what could've gone awry so fast.

Jackie and I had discussed the major issues over the phone. That's why I stood up and left the kitchen when I heard Jackie start to recount the events of her breakup. I was uncomfortable for her. I would never mention the word *love* to my parents regarding a boyfriend. We as a family never said it out loud to each other.

"He said I didn't love him," Jackie told my dad who sat across from him. My mom listened from her bedroom as she folded clothes.

"He said he felt unappreciated although I don't know why," she went on to say.

I stood before my dresser mirror in the room I still shared with Jackie. I combed my hair as I nodded *no* to the rhythm of Jackie's spiel. *Don't say another word*, I said to Jackie in my head. *They're going to judge you, then laugh at you, and mom's going to repeat everything to tía Fina.*"

But Jackie needed to vent. The wound was still fresh. She didn't hold anything back. She even fought off my mom's accusation that Andy probably had another woman.

"Maybe," Jackie said calmly, contemplating the idea and then not. "But if he wants to keep rising in the political world, he's probably too focused on his career to be with anyone else."

I envied my sister's composure. That's why I didn't share my feelings. I would be on the defensive the entire time.

Weeks later, my mom was still dwelling over her daughter's heartbreak. She blamed Jackie's recent weight loss on Andy. I was visiting my parents again. We were getting ready to go shopping at the Citadel Outlets when my mother started cursing Andy.

“Poor Jackie,” she said when she was done. “I hate Andy.”

I found the scene kind of amusing. While my sister was trying to move on by keeping herself busy, my mother was still mulling over my sister’s ache. At the same time, my mother was being a hypocrite. She had hurt all of us in the past. I wanted to dismiss my sister’s breakup the way my mom had dismissed her affair when it was over. Not because I didn’t care about my sister. Because I wanted to remind my mother that it was something that everyone did.

“He’s not the first person to break up with a girl,” I said to her, “and he won’t be the last.”

My father, a victim of infidelity, agreed with me. He and I had the same view when it came to relationships. This was no exception.

“That’s right,” he said. “Everything that begins has an ending.” It was obvious that his soul had also been broken.

My mother’s heart suffered its own break when Jackie and I left for college. She went through a period of depression the first year Jackie and I were both gone. She stopped eating. My dad took her to the emergency room where IV fluids brought her back to life. When I saw her the following weekend, her clavicles seemed to reach out as far as her chin. My mother had short hair so it made the hollow space the bones created even more noticeable. Her cheeks took on a dark hue below the cheekbone like a zombie.

I watched her as we sat to eat burgers for dinner. I wasn’t completely convinced that she was afflicted with a physical condition. Her lies had made me doubt her. I

hadn't gotten over her unfaithfulness even though it had been a year since it had come to an end. It was no surprise that my thoughts headed in that direction. I speculated she had resumed the affair. The stress of keeping it a secret could have torn her apart to the point of becoming physically ill.

She was never diagnosed with depression but I know that's what she had. I know because she now has this thing I call detachment anxiety disorder. It's not a technical term. I conjured up a title that enveloped her symptoms. My mom cannot let Jackie and me go. Although we both have been living and working near Berkeley and Riverside where we studied for over ten years now, my mom stills asks when we're going to move back home.

"Do you plan on moving back to Mexico," I asked her knowing her response. She detests the idea of having to go back to the ranch where she was born. Last year her brother invited us to attend his son's baptism. I made myself available for the trip but my mom was against traveling. She cannot stand her mother's negativity and put-downs just like I can't stand hers. Plus, her youngest sisters, twenty years her junior, make her uncomfortable. My grandmother's relationship with her youngest is entirely different from the way she raised the older herd living in Los Angeles. My grandma was more affectionate with her younger children. She didn't keep my mother's sisters caged up like my mom feels.

My mother's reply to my question was, "No. But it's different."

I could have gone into detail about how it wasn't. My dad allowed me to have a boyfriend when I was in high school but we couldn't leave the house. My boyfriend and

I sat at the dining table dreaming up the places we would go to throughout the span of our relationship. Besides, it was only natural for offspring to leave the nest. My sister and I were lucky to have found jobs that we liked where we lived after we graduated with our bachelor degrees. My mom, of course, claimed that the same posts were available in L.A, closer to her. But they weren't any more; if I would've moved back home to teach, I would have been laid off years ago with this economic recession.

To avoid hurting her, I said nothing more about the subject. She didn't stop. My mom made me feel guilty during a family gathering. When asked by friends where Jackie and I lived or if we were married, my mom took the opportunity to disapprove of our single state. After giving them the names of the cities, she turned her attention to me.

"They're never going to come home," she said looking at me but talking to her friends.

"The point is to be as far away as possible from us."

I think my mom might believe that the consequences of her infidelity were the loss of her daughters. Instead of feeling sorry for her, I kept in mind that her mind games were part of her manipulative schemes. That's the reason why I turned the other way when out of nowhere, she started bawling as Jackie and I were on our way out of L.A a few weeks ago.

It happened when Jackie and I were visiting my parents. The four of us were heading home after running errands at the newly renovated Target. A grocery section had been added. I doubted that selling lettuce and tomatoes there would work since the Mexican store with much lower prices neighbored the bulls-eye-logo store.

Jackie's friend was on her way from the city of Long Beach to pick her up to drive to the Bay Area together. My dad was driving calmly, making sure not to go a single mile beyond the twenty-five speed limit, listening to a Mexican radio station. Jackie and I were sitting in the second row of his minivan; she had the floor and was chatting on about her breakup or someone else's. My mom, I assumed, was listening to our conversation as she always did. A block before turning right onto our street from the boulevard, my mother let out a wail. I didn't know if she had just experienced an awful pain like a heart attack. My dad gripped the wheel harder, trying to stay focused. Jackie turned to me for answers.

"¿*Que traes?* What's wrong," my dad asked her. He was upset that she had made a big scene when he had to concentrate.

"It's because," my mother said through tears, "Jackie's leaving." And as an afterthought, "And Maricela's leaving tomorrow."

She was having one of her detachment anxiety attacks. Instead of enjoying our time together, she had been contemplating and dreading the moment we were going to leave. Her nerves caught up with her and she had the attack.

I rolled my eyes. I had initially worried about the cause of my mother's scream. My concern diminished as soon as she spoke, knowing it was another one of her controlling antics.

I said, "You scared us," trying to calm the alarm in the van. Jackie shot me a glance that said, *You're heartless*, because my comment came out in a cynical tone. She took it upon herself to rub my mother's shoulder to the beat of encouraging words. I

looked at my mom and my mood quickly changed, as her pain made my eyes well up just like hers. I hated that she still had that kind of effect over me, and was flooded with other reactions too. I was angry that she made me feel guilty for going to school and working sixty miles away. My dad had accepted that Jackie and I had grown up. I even thought he was happy that he didn't have to provide for three women anymore. My mom, it seemed, had chosen to stay emotionally behind.

Sometimes I think she wants a second chance to make things right. By having us home, she could prove to us that she could be a good wife and a good mother. That ship has sailed. Jackie and I are looking forward to the next stage of our lives. That doesn't mean I don't respect my mom. She will always receive the respect she deserves for being my mother. She will always be the person I turn to with questions regarding cooking, cleaning, and maybe someday babies. But she will never know what's lurking inside my head.

Meanwhile, my mother is still stuck at home. At least she has Chiquita, the seventeen-year old cat who was mine before I left for UC Riverside. Last year Chiquita was diagnosed with thyroid disease. My mother wailed at the vet's office the way she wailed in the car.

"I don't want her to die," she screamed in the waiting room. My dad had to tell her to quiet down.

I know losing Chiquita will be more than losing a pet. My mom will be losing her only companion, now kept alive with daily medication. Chiquita is one of the few who doesn't resent her, the one who appreciates her meals more than my dad.

My mother watches Chiquita sleep, hoping she will not take her last breath. When she does, I fear my mom will be alone.

Promise to tell the whole truth, so help you God

I didn't walk into *folklórico* practice, a type of Mexican dance, wanting to jump somebody's bones. It was my spring quarter of my first year of college. I wanted eye candy, since the ones in my res hall were not my taste. I wanted to find a good looking guy who would make dancing more fun. Leo was tall and so slim that his Adam's apple gave the impression of being a second chin. He wore glasses and had a firm, round ass. Towards the end of the ten weeks, I learned that the instructor hadn't asked Leo to stand in front of the mirrors because he was a good dancer. Our teacher had homosexual tendencies and enjoyed staring at Leo's behind as much as I did, as I learned while we were dancing.

By the end of the following winter quarter, Leo and I were dating. Our relationship didn't begin in a typical romantic fashion. He didn't ask me if I wanted to have dinner. In fact, it was the aggressiveness I had inherited from my mother that caught Leo's interest. He asked me out after I told him, "If you think I'm going to be eating out of the palm of your hand you're wrong." He had asked me to call him after practice. When he didn't get back to me, I gave him my honest opinion about his cowardliness the next day at practice. And he gave me a telephone ring after rehearsal that night.

I had been complaining about a date I had for the weekend during our first conversation. Leo cut me off when he asked, “Can I convince you not to go?”

I was amazed at the nerve of this guy. He didn’t even know me and already wanted to control me.

“Why would *you* convince me not to go,” I asked him. He might have been all-powerful at dance practice, standing tall and straight before the mirrors, telling me, “If you want to learn the steps, look at *me*.” But outside the barn studio, he had zero power over me.

“What if *I* convince you not to go,” he repeated.

We went around in circles like that until I halted and realized what he was doing.

“Are you asking me out,” I asked him, very annoyed. The confident person I had met in *folklórico* wasn’t matching the indirect person I was talking to. I guess it’s true what they say: the real person comes out on the dance floor. Or does it?

“Yeah,” he said, dividing the word into two syllables like a valley girl.

“Then why don’t you have the balls to say so?”

Leo gave me the impression of being a lady’s man the first time I met him. He dressed well, tucking his long-sleeved, plaid shirts into his jeans and topping them off with black, dressy shoes. He was self-assured. He spoke to everyone in the group without bias and because of that, girls admired him, young and old.

Crowds larger than two, on the other hand, made me feel insecure. I feared being invisible amongst brains and beauty. I wore little make up. I had just started wearing tight jeans that showed off my curves a little more. I remained quiet until someone

approached me. Hooking up with Leo was a risk for me. I was Plain Jane to his Rico Suave. Leo's ways gave me reason to believe that the possibility of him cheating on me was there. My mom had been a flirt herself. I knew innocent yet playful ways could lead to trouble. I took the chance because I wanted to explore outside my PG relationship with my high school boyfriend.

I think Leo fell harder for me at the beginning. I wanted to take things slowly but he wouldn't have it. He was very affectionate, something I was not accustomed to. He made sure I always held his hand. He stood behind me and wrapped me in his tight embrace. Then he linked his hands with mine. He planted wet kisses on my cheeks. On our first trip to the Santa Monica pier, Leo ordered personalized name-art that an artist drew on the spot with ocean animals and plant designs. I was hesitant about having a large piece of paper with both of our names on it with a heart between them. That didn't say, *We're taking things slow*. I didn't know him well enough to commit my name next to his yet. I told Leo to paint his name alone but I couldn't picture a heterosexual male with his name hanging above his bed. I couldn't stop him.

Towards the end of the school year, Leo had distanced himself. His sudden change in character woke my woman's intuition. His affectionate behavior was gone. The daily morning calls that concluded with, "Have a good day, Babe," faded. And he stopped walking me to my dorm after dance practice. I called him instead, assuming he had gotten tired of pursuing me. He didn't return my calls. I used to go home to L.A. every other weekend. We seized the time we had when I stayed in the city. I knew something was definitely wrong after he didn't invite me to hang out on a Friday. We

had just concluded a performance. He was driving me to the dorms when I asked him what he'd be doing later that night after he changed out of his costume. I expected the usual response.

“We are going to go to dinner and watch a movie.”

After four months of courtship, this routine had become monotonous. I wanted to go dancing at a club. I wanted to wear the tight outfits I bought at Forever 21, not the silly floor-length gowns I had to wear during our shows. I wanted to show Leo off on the dance floor. When he said that he planned on hanging out with his roommate, there were no other words that I wanted to hear more than the usual ones.

My thoughts reverted to my mother's infidelity. I remembered when she suddenly started going out on Saturday afternoons with her friend Esther. Saturdays had always been reserved for family. When Jackie and I got too busy with advance placement class assignments to go shopping, my mom found a way to get out. But there wasn't anything she really needed to buy, so she made up stories about going with Esther to the mall. Then she would meet her lover. My mother's disheveled hair, smeared lipstick and euphoria reflected a night of much more than just shopping.

My instinct and my own past history of occasionally sneaking around informed me that Leo was seeing somebody else. I stared straight ahead as he drove me to my dorm. I used the windshield as my canvas and drew up his new girlfriend. She was a female of average height with long, curly blonde hair. She smiled in a sexy manner that I was not capable of. She fit the mold I knew he had desired all along—feminine and outgoing.

I knew I might have jumped to conclusions. My mother had made me suspicious of people's motives. I disliked this most about myself. I couldn't let my mom's betrayal run my life. I gave Leo space. He needed time to think about what he wanted, which I wanted to be me. During the course of four months, I had grown to love him. I gave myself to him, something I never considered doing with my first boyfriend, whom I dated for two years. Maybe Leo felt that we were moving too fast, like I did initially.

I didn't confront him about my suspicions. I wasn't afraid like I had been with my mom. I just didn't want to give him reason to push me away in case my theory was wrong. I asked him instead about the future of our relationship. My emotions were all over the place, and it was frustrating. I wanted my feelings to settle in one place or another. I didn't want to be led on like my father. It pained me to think of my feelings for Leo as wasted time and effort. He reversed the question that I had been longing to ask him.

"What do you want," he said.

"If I didn't want to be with you, I wouldn't be with you," I said.

"Let's discuss this later," he said.

I didn't want to talk about it again. My heart was on my sleeve. I needed to know.

"I can't wait till later," I told him. "Yes or no? Do you want to be with me, yes or no?"

He was sitting with his legs open. His body was leaning forward, resting his elbows on his thighs, hands intertwined. His head hung low after my ultimatum.

“No,” he said.

I stood up and walked away.

A week later, we were back on again. Just like with my mom, I was on the defensive. Even though he denied cheating on me, I didn't believe him. I brought his unfaithfulness up all of the time. I figured hearing it would make him confess but it didn't. Until I finally broke down.

I had befriended a couple of girls in my senior year. They were also in long-term relationships. They told their guys they loved them before hanging up the phone and called them Baby in between. Then my friends would go out with other guys at night. I was astounded at how meaningless words and actions were to them. They had obviously been raised in the realm I had been sheltered from until my mom introduced me to it. I was afraid of telling Leo that I loved him, especially after what my intuition told me. I didn't want him to own my truest feelings in case we broke up again. I, who seldom expressed my love, was faithful to Leo. My friends, who had an ease for articulating such emotions, thought little of it. They got me thinking.

If these girls claim to love their boyfriends despite cheating on them, why wouldn't Leo do the same? Who was I to be spared of such usual conduct?

To prove that I wasn't crazy for feeling emotionally abused, I decided to challenge Leo one last time. We were sitting in my car in the dark parking lot of a pizza parlor waiting for our order. I took a deep breath and gave him a variation of my infamous “Did you cheat on me?”

“My friends are cheating on their boyfriends,” I said. “They say they love them even though they lie to them so I started thinking. Why wouldn’t you do the same to me?”

He was looking at the building on the other side of the windshield. He asked why I was bringing this up now.

“I want you to tell me the truth. It’s not going to change the way I feel about you. I’m not going to break things off because of something that happened years ago. I just need to know.” I hadn’t been so honest with Leo since getting together after our small break.

“But why do you want to know,” he asked. I knew the answer before he clearly pronounced it.

“I just want to know. I deserve to know the truth,” I said. I was very calm. My heart was pounding. I wasn’t yelling like I usually did. I couldn’t look at him in the face because I would start bawling.

“Yes,” he said. He might have been holding the steering wheel with both hands and bowed his head between his arms when he finally admitted the truth. Maybe this was the image I created of him apologizing because he formally didn’t. In more likelihood, he must have remained seated in the most upright position with his hands on his lap staring ahead.

The truth didn’t satisfy me like I hoped it would. I thought a layer of resentment would weightlessly lift off me but it didn’t. Now I distrusted all of Leo’s words, motives, and actions. I never wanted to be lied to again. The people closest to me were deceitful

and I didn't understand why. My game plan was to catch Leo in the act at the first sign of another lie. I was focused on outsmarting him rather than moving on with the next stage of our lives.

I became jealous of all the women Leo worked with regardless of their appearance. The person I was most concerned about wasn't even a coworker. Leo was accepted into law school where he befriended a group of people that I referred to as the Disney crew because they had princess names. Three of the five people didn't pass the exam that would have allowed them to move on to second year. Leo would continue with a girl named Anastasia amongst a full set of classmates.

My friends tried convincing me that Leo's honesty meant I had nothing to worry about. He told me that Anastasia was a promotional model who handed out pens and tee shirts at car shows. So this meant she had a nice body and a pretty face. Her appearance was not my main concern. Charming personalities are what usually win us over. That was my worry. I was afraid of Leo falling in love with Anastasia's mind, the way she analyzed case after case, identifying issues he failed to.

Leo spent what used to be our weekends with Anastasia during his four years of law school. I hated that he was studying for hours at a time with a woman. I threatened breaking up with him if he didn't add folks to their study groups but I gave in. He had practically given me an itinerary of the time and place he would be spending with her. Plus, they'd moved most of their studying to the library. So I perceived Anastasia as a tool. Leo would use her brain until they had to take the bar exam and then he would dump her.

* * *

Leo's graduation took place on June of 2010. He gave the closing speech at his ceremony and he mentioned growing up in the farming town of Blythe, California. He credited his high school counselor for helping him believe that he could excel beyond his crew leader position at Burger King. He ended his speech by thanking the person who had supported him through the years. I sat in the audience recording his two minute speech with the expensive camera I had bought specifically for that event. If he mentioned Anastasia at the end of that sentence, I was going to walk out and leave our families and our friends to fend for themselves.

"I thank all of my family who came from far away, all of our friends, but I also want to thank one person who has always been there for me, through the most stressful, difficult times of these years and through the two most stressful months of our lives getting reading for the bar, my girlfriend, Maricela Ponce. Thank you."

Although I held back my tears, I was completely moved. I couldn't have received a bigger reassurance of Leo's faithfulness than the mention of my name in public, with Anastasia sitting before him. Except that I did. In November, Leo was informed that he had passed the bar. Anastasia hadn't. I had never been more certain that Leo had been studying all those weekends after all. Anastasia, apparently, had been gawking at him, or at least that's how I imagined it. But if I were a nicer person, I would've called her to thank her personally for helping my boyfriend pass the most important and difficult exam of his life.

Back to basics

My family is prone to drama, and sometimes I use it myself. In this case, I took a picture of my dying cat Polly and sent it via cell phone because I couldn't bear the pain all by myself. I didn't expect her to reply to my text message. She hardly ever did. During that time, it would take Jackie an average of two weeks to return a phone call or reply to a message. She never replied to emails. I had emailed her the personal statement I had written for my grad school application a few days before it was due. Since she had studied rhetoric in college, I knew she was fit for the job. When the deadline was two days away and I still hadn't heard from her, I revised it myself and prayed to God it was decent enough to get me accepted into the master's program. This time, I guess, my problems hit a nerve. We were cat people, my mother, my sister and I. Over the years, we have converted my dad into one too. At one point, we even maxed out at nine cats. Chiquita had had six kittens. In addition, there was Abby from Chiquita's first litter and Tommy, Abby's cousin. My father was not a cat person. He was a mad man then.

I could not figure out why Jackie and I couldn't have what I assumed to be a normal relationship between sisters. As kids, we couldn't stand each other. We fought a lot, pulled each other's hair, kicked each other, pinched and twisted limbs in directions they weren't meant to. My dad would bring us to a standstill with his notorious little speech: "There's only the two of you. Instead of taking care of each other, you're going to kill one another." My dad always made me feel guilty, especially since I felt his eyes on me. He directed most of his anger at me because I was the oldest by nineteen months.

I was expected to take care of Jackie all the time. My parents didn't know that it was I who needed shielding from my wicked little sister.

Jackie's purpose in life was to irritate me. She was excellent at it. Between my modest amount of patience and her strategized annoyances, Jackie accomplished exactly what she wanted from of me—a reaction of any kind to give her the attention that the baby in every family so desperately seeks out.

If I was playing Super Mario Bros. on the Nintendo, Jackie would stand to the side of me. She would hold her index finger between my eyebrows about an inch away from my face. She knew this would distract me from my game but I tried to ignore her. When I felt the blood rushing to my face, I would yell for my mom. Jackie would say, "I'm not touching you. I'm not touching you." I would end her program by slapping her arm away, usually missing it, to my utter dislike.

But her most painful diversion came when she kneed my butt. Jackie caught me by surprise when on one occasion as I walked by her she grabbed my shoulders from behind to hold me steady. Then she kicked her knee up into my behind, like a soccer player does to a soccer ball. Her bony knee touched my tail bone. The pain hurt too much to give chase.

I hated that Jackie bothered me so much. I took out my anger with footsy tickles during the latter years of our childhood. I remember Jackie sitting on the floor with her back against the wall of our room. I kept her there by tickling her stomach with my feet, which would appear like stomping to an outsider. I held her in that position until her laughter turned to cries. I never hurt her enough to see tears running down her face,

except only to fill her eyes. My worst offense came when I slapped her on the face. I hadn't planned on smacking her the way I did. My arm took on a life of its own as she stood before me, either annoying me or contradicting me the way she always did. I guess I really hurt her because it was the one time she didn't fight back. I think she uttered something about me going too far and walked away. I had never felt so guilty about mistreating her. A slap was more mature compared to her kiddy stuff. I wanted to apologize but my family didn't show public displays of affection. I felt even worse holding the pang of guilt inside, pretending I was proud to have won that fight.

We were adults now. We were two educated, single, career women living in opposite ends of the state of California. When I accompanied her to her freshman orientation at UC Berkeley, I saw right away that we had chosen the campuses that corresponded to our personalities. She had chosen the slightly crazy and wacky and friendly campus just like herself. UC Riverside complimented my conservative, reclusive, and structured ways.

My dad couldn't take time off from work to go with Jackie to see the campus. So he stuck me in a Greyhound with my sister. Seven hours and a taxi later, Jackie and I arrived at the campus. It was green and chilly. Jackie went in one direction to meet her roommate for the weekend. I went in another to mingle with parents who could never miss the opportunity of accompanying their brainy child and taking responsibility for their progeny's achievement.

The trees could have been as old as the brick buildings at UC Berkeley. The towers on some of the structures looked like what I'd seen in movies with castles and

characters that spoke old English. The university grounds were hilly. I had no idea how students made it from one class to the next on time. There were swarms of people, not all of whom were students. Berkeley is a tourist attraction. You could identify the visitors because they had fancy cameras hanging around their necks. The People's Park, the original breaking ground for hippies, was a few blocks away. One-way streets forced people to drive in circles.

My campus was in the middle of nowhere. Other than the Mission Inn and the orange groves, UC Riverside had no reputation. It was small, which is why I had chosen it in the first place. The modern structures had sharp angles and the newest technology available. Classrooms were equipped with what were called smart screens that looked identical to whiteboards. If a dry-erase marker was used on a smart screen, the marks became permanent. The landscape was more or less even and the neat rectangles of grass dictated our paths. On that day when I had followed her up north, it was obvious to me that Jackie and I were in our respective homes.

Of course behind our individual qualities, Jackie and I had one thing in common: blood. Our blood had the same genes because, as far as we knew, we were fathered and mothered by the same two people. Blood had to have some kind of special power that, despite outside factors, made two sisters friends and sometimes even best friends. At least that's what I wanted. I was tired of hoping that each friend I made would be "the one." I hadn't had a best friend since high school. I missed having a half that completed me. I liked when people had asked for my friend Beatriz when they saw me or asked her for me because they knew we were a team. I missed having a person to whisper secrets

to over the phone. Heck, I missed talking on the phone, period. Nowadays, everyone texted and emailed each other. I knew best friends didn't do that. Best friends put the phone to their ears and listened closely to what the other had to say. They talked to each other regularly, including of course when terrible things happened, like animals dying.

I wanted Jackie and me to be very good friends. I stopped waiting around for fate to do its thing; it had already taken its sweet time. I thought the first thing we had to do was get to know each other's adult selves. That could easily be accomplished by setting up regular phone calls. Jackie and I talked randomly. My mom usually filled me in with the latest news concerning my sister on the rare occasion that Jackie had spoken to her. It was a Thursday night when I dialed Jackie's number to let her in on my plan. I was driving back from class. It was eight-thirty. I had an hour drive ahead of me and talking to my sister on my way home would make time fly. But better than that, we would reconnect. Although she was my sister, I didn't really know her. I knew that she was messy, a procrastinator, liked guys of mixed races, and little else. I didn't know the real Jackie, her dreams and her fears. I didn't even know what she did for a living.

She answered. I started a normal conversation. She asked how school was going. Then I told her about my plan. Since I talked to my mom on my way to school, I said that I would talk to her on my way home. I made it clear that although I attended class twice a week, I would only call her on Thursdays. I reserved music for Tuesday nights. Jackie agreed and I was ecstatic. I wanted to tell her to clear her Thursdays for the next ten weeks but I didn't think it was necessary. It should have been a given with the

mention of my big plan. And if I brought it up, I could've risked sounding like the bossy older sister I used to be.

“Hey, by the way, this means you can't make plans for that night. You know that right?”

I didn't want to revert to the old days. I wanted to be the new, cool sister she hadn't met yet, the one that had been cultivated at college.

Jackie didn't answer her phone when I called her the following week. I gave her the benefit of doubt. After all, we were trying to launch something new. She could have forgotten to clear her calendar. The text message I received when I got home didn't sound too apologetic, though.

“had dinner with anissa. is it 2 late to call?”

I looked at the clock on top of my file drawer. It was ten 'o clock. I had to shower and get to bed. I had to be up at six forty-five to be at work the next day. So much for a first date.

I called her again the following week. No response. I didn't have a choice but to blast my music to keep me from falling asleep on my drive home. I had a familiar text message when I got home.

“having ice cream with friends.”

At least we were improving. She was acknowledging my phone calls and replying in a timely manner.

But still, I was disappointed. I thought she wanted the same relationship we lacked because we were the only sisters. She didn't. She had friends. Jackie didn't need

me as much as I needed her. Then she surprised me. She said we should go to Las Vegas. I took it as her attempt to connect with me. She and I had never travelled anywhere together without our parents. We had been on our own for six or seven years, yet this had never occurred to us. I accepted immediately.

Jackie travelled with her friend Roxanne and I towed Leo. We had adjacent rooms at Excalibur which made us act childish. Leo and I crashed their girl time by hanging in Jackie's room our first day there. Then we spent the afternoons walking around the strip. Jackie and Roxanne strutted their stuff for free passes into the clubs. We still waited in line, but we didn't have to pay. We hit the clubs three nights straight. Leo and I headed to our room around two in the morning and learned that Jackie and Roxanne had stayed up all night long, once at a bachelor party with a bunch of cops.

I think we had a smooth time in Vegas because Jackie had a buffer. Having Roxanne there forced Jackie to stay on her feet. She was able to comply with requests easily because the group was relying on her. We didn't have such luck when we went to San Diego a couple of months later. I was thrilled to pick Jackie up from the local airport near my apartment. It seemed like such an adult thing to do. Since she arrived late Friday night, we planned on making the two-hour drive to our destination the following morning. Things got off on the wrong foot when Jackie took her infamous hour-long shower. That didn't include the additional sixty minutes it took her to get ready. The early departure I had intended took place at noon.

The rest of the day revolved around Jackie's friend, Reyna, who lived in the San Diego area. They were friends from college and Jackie hadn't seen her in months. Leo

and I wasted a lot of time with them at an outlet mall and walking around the Gaslamp District looking for a bite to eat. By Sunday, I was upset that I hadn't seen much of San Diego. I was moody because we had to rush our sight-seeing since Jackie had taken over the itinerary on Saturday. We barely had time to have a nice dinner before driving her to the airport on Sunday evening.

Our travels worsened when we went to Washington State recently with my dad. We accompanied him to his brother's fiftieth birthday surprise party, we being the surprise. On Sunday, the day after the big bash, we planned to visit another uncle who lived thirty minutes from where we were staying. Because my dad also wanted to revisit the birthday boy once more before the day was over, I kept rushing Jackie out of the hotel. I wanted us to have ample time to see everyone before we flew back to California the next morning. After my second or third, "Hurry up," Jackie snapped, "Stop being a bitch."

My dad had been pacing the room back and forth, waiting for his lovely girls to be ready for close to two hours. When he heard Jackie talk to me that way, the same look he used to give me seemed to appear half-heartedly. Just like twenty years before, he gave me the impression of blaming me for picking another fight with her. I ceased telling Jackie anything anymore. It was my dad's family. He hadn't seen them in five years. I had merely wanted him to pay a quick visit to everyone. If he didn't care about maximizing our time, neither would I.

When we finally left, Jackie realized in the car that she'd left the battery to her camera charging by the sink.

“I forgot it,” she told me, “because you were rushing me.”

I can't say Jackie and I haven't attempted to create a bond. I tried it my way. I wanted to use the phone to establish the relationship I have been craving for a decade but Jackie didn't. We tried it her way. We took some trips but our strong and stubborn personalities got in the way of having fun. It makes me sad to think that nature created two seedlings from the same patch of earth, yet we repel each other like polar opposites.

I am disappointed that as adults, Jackie and I can't be more compromising for the sake of our sisterhood. But after discussing this issue with a gym buddy who is old enough to be my mother, I became hopeful. My story resonated with her and she explained that now that she and her sister have children, they have become best friends. Something about their link as mothers brought them together. At this rate, Jackie and I have about ten more years of arguing ahead of us, that is, if we're in the same room. Otherwise, since we don't speak on a regular basis, I hope the phrase “no news is good news” holds true.

Jackie and I went to Vegas again just a few weeks ago. This time she stayed in a hotel down the street from Leo and me with her friend Brenda. Knowing how long she takes to get ready, Leo and I took on the city by ourselves until Jackie met up with us. We were having dinner at Wolfgang Puck when Jackie and Brenda showed up for drinks. Then we headed to LAX club at the Luxor where we got in for free because Jackie had met a promoter during her stroll at yet another outlet mall and he took us to the front of

the line. After a few drinks, Jackie was all over her promoter friend, ditching Leo and me on the sticky and crowded dance floor. They reappeared an hour later and soon after Leo and I left.

Jackie called me the next day. It was four 'o clock. She wanted us to meet up for lunch at Margaritaville before Leo and I started our four-hour long drive. I had called her at eleven to invite her to come with us to the buffet at The Cosmopolitan but she had more or less just gone to bed. We killed two hours at the outlet mall waiting for her to call. As much as I wanted to hang out with her one last time that weekend, driving to the strip, finding parking, having a drink, and getting out again would take too long. Leo and I had to hit the road. We had to work the next day. We didn't take the day off like she had. I told Jackie I wouldn't be able to make it.

“We didn't even take a picture,” she whined before we hung up.

* * *

Jackie helped me get through Polly's loss. My dramatic gesture had worked. She was helping her friend Anissa prepare a baby shower for a mutual friend when she received the image on her cell phone, and she called me between chopping onions.

“I couldn't imagine having to do that with Tuxie,” she told me. Tuxie was Jackie's black and white feline. She had climbed up to Jackie's window one day when she was a third year student in college. Jackie posted signs hoping to find Tuxie's owners but the cat had already found her.

My conscience was momentarily at peace when I heard that putting Polly down had been the right thing to do. I had felt so guilty doing it.

“If you let her die at home,” the vet said to me, “she can go into convulsions. I wouldn’t want you to see that.”

Jackie didn’t talk to me for long—she was about to move on to a pasta salad. She said she’d call later to check up on me. She never did. I had hoped that my tragedy would bring us together. But Jackie had friends and a cat. She had an entourage at her disposal twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Leo and I had dinner at the Olive Garden that night. He gave a toast that made me cry in public.

“To Polly,” he said raising his glass with red wine, “who’s running and playing again.” I had looked down at the paper placemat to hide my tears but they could not be shielded.

I promised myself that I would not adopt another cat until I left the apartment complex. It had been an emotional rollercoaster and I didn’t want to experience anything like it soon again. I was ready to find a best friend with two legs instead... although I kept my refrigerator stocked with ham for the next stray that came along.

Apartment Number Six

I always thought that *home* meant *house*. I didn't think a family could make a home until they had their own space to do as they pleased. I was too young to understand that home could be wherever my family was; it could've been a car as long as we were comfortable and happy. Therefore I didn't appreciate living at 3726 Princeton Street. Other than exchanging the 70's drapes for horizontal blinds and a wall mirror for a medicine cabinet, my dad couldn't do much with our one-bedroom apartment. I wasn't allowed to draw on the driveway with jumbo colored chalk or run through the hallway because the building wasn't ours. Not only did my mom want to avoid the possibility of adults scolding my sister and me, but we had to be respectful of the neighbors in the other five apartments. The only reason I wanted to live in a house was so my family could finally have a home. Actually, we already had one. I never viewed our living space as cramped because I had my own bed, a doll house in the living room by the air conditioner, and a corner between the couch and loveseat reserved for our toys. Yet I dreamed of the day that I would have my own room. But even if I had to share it with Jackie, that was okay because DJ and Stephanie Tanner from Full House did too. The media taught me that our home should have a green back yard, not a cemented driveway, with a swing set and an above-ground pool. The entire TGIF lineup on ABC led me to believe that I would not be home until my family owned their dwelling like the Winslows (Family Matters), the Fosters (Step by Step), and the Tanners, of course.

I was eleven years old when my dad finally purchased our home late in 1993. He saved nearly fifty thousand dollars while we were living in our one-bedroom apartment

for a down payment. He lied to us my entire life about his financial situation. He told us he didn't have money when, in fact, he had been putting it away. My dad claimed to have no funds to buy extravagances like a Skip It, a bicycle with a built-in radio, or a Nintendo like Michael and Allison, my Nina Diane's kids, had. Instead, he indulged my tendencies for knick knacks at Starlight Swap Meet. There, he bought me miniature dairies, pencils, erasers, and boxes of tiny rocks that when thrown to the ground popped. I also got a pink skateboard with a black eagle and clothes. I didn't know what a mall was or what Nikes were. My mom put coats and comforters on lay-away at National Store. She bought more clothes on credit from Doña Tere who stood in a driveway across the street from Rowan Avenue Elementary with a folding cart full of garments from downtown L.A. That's where my coolest birthday outfit came from—a jean skirt with a matching jacket and large, rainbow studs. My mom paid Doña Tere every other week. During vacations, we delivered the payments personally to her house behind the school. Doña Tere crossed off numbers on a sheet in her pocket notebook and replaced them with smaller ones.

When the realtor, a woman in a skirt suit and glasses, led us to the house on Ditman Avenue just one block east and one block south of 3726 Princeton Street, we thought she was joking. We had seen it driving to the 5 freeway or coming home many times before. The plywood was painted a dull gray hue which reminded my mom of a funeral. It also had a white picket fence, something I thought belonged in the 1800s. The house was ugly but we humored the real estate lady like we had at least three times before.

The living room was wide with a spotty, brown carpet. It looked and smelled like the neighbor's cat that Jackie had fallen in love with. There were two bedrooms and a kitchen big enough for our oval table and four chairs—at the apartment, the table was tucked in a corner, allowing the use of only two. The bathroom was smaller than the one at apartment number six. The sink stood before the toilet and the bathtub instead of being lined up in a row. The bathroom also had two doors, one leading in from the hallway and the other from a bedroom. A tiny guest room, a two-car garage, and a backyard the size of a park rounded up the rest of it.

My parents weren't sold on it at all and neither was I. I masked my fear of change with aversion for the ugly house. I thought it was too big although it didn't consist of two floors or a staircase like the ones I saw on TV; the fence along the perimeter separated the house on Ditman Avenue from six different neighbors. The carpet had to go along with the wood paneling in the living room that made the room dark. There were cracks on the walls in the bedrooms as well as in the driveway. My dad whined to the realtor about the repairs so she could pick it up as disinterest. But the real estate agent possessed the right qualities for the business. She said the right things to persuade my push-over dad. She told him that the money would come from the rent he'd collect from the one-bedroom unit in the lot behind the main house. My dad complained about the modernization projects but the realtor convinced him that they weren't urgent and could be fixed a little at a time.

After the tour, the real estate agent followed us to apartment number six with her brief case in tow. She pushed applications in my dad's direction while Jackie, my mom,

and I made a ring around them. The realtor didn't even give us a minute to analyze if the house on Ditman Avenue was right for us before making the sale. With her pushy personality, she tricked my dad into signing papers before we met men in suits to finalize the purchase. The following week, instead of watching *novelas*, we found ourselves driving twenty miles to fancy buildings with people in ties at eight 'o clock at night. We never went out during the week, let alone so late. We went to bed early because my dad rose before four in the morning to head to work and Jackie and I needed to be rested for school. Some people viewed change as good, but my family had experienced very little of it since we had welcomed Jackie into our family at apartment number six ten years before. My Nino Andy called with a job opportunity that turned my dad from a welder to a truck driver when I was in first grade; we hadn't been subjected to hesitation over our future since. I watched how our realtor worked with people I assumed were her bosses and considered the career for myself. I wanted to be a teacher but I knew selling houses would make me rich. My setback was my shyness but I hoped I could outgrow it. My dad signed the rest of the papers while Jackie and I fell asleep on cushiony chairs with armrests.

Before I knew it, my tío Ismael, my tío Jose, and my tío Ino were at 3726 Princeton Street with their trucks. They helped us unload apartment number six and load our house on Ditman Avenue. Jackie cried because she didn't want to leave the neighbor's cat behind. My tío Jose resolved the issue by loading the feline in his cab and surprising us with it after the last trip. I scanned apartment number six before I exited the door for the last time. The white walls were unusually plain. Four decked-out wooden

frames from Starlight Swap Meet had hung from them through most of my elementary career accompanied by wall décor my mom had ordered from catalogues. The bar/counter appeared taller without the loveseat sitting in front of it. The green kitchen seemed greener because there were no objects to distract the eye. And the bedroom suddenly felt large without the bunk beds, my parent's queen bed, the dresser-mirror, and two nightstands. I wasn't sad to leave for our house. I was scared to leave everything I had known. I said goodbye to apartment number six and headed home, or so I believed.

I thought someone had played an optical illusion when I got there. The layout of the bedrooms inside the house on Ditman Avenue was different in my memory than what I saw in person for the second time. For weeks I pictured my bedroom on the left side of the house and the kitchen on the right. But I was standing in the kitchen and there was nothing further to the left. Instead, there was a door to my right. A peek revealed the bedrooms I was sure had been on the left hand side weeks before. The actual floor plan turned out to be the complete opposite of what I remembered. My room's window didn't face the driveway after all. It stood less than ten feet away from the neighbor's bedroom. I shook my head. My memory had failed me. I had spent the last couple of weeks designing my bedroom and the plan was now useless. I was mad at the confusion and didn't want to live in the house anymore because I felt like it had lied to me. I should've taken this as the first sign of bad things to come.

But I couldn't go to my dad now and express my disapproval for our home. His savings were gone and papers had been signed. We were stuck with the house my mom believed would not withstand an earthquake. Disillusioned with the design plan of my

bedroom, I walked out to the porch where my tío Jose had left the ex-neighbor's cat. He cried incessantly for three days, never leaving the deck, never wandering off to find his real owners. But soon enough, he settled in, faster than any of us, into the house on Ditman Avenue. He didn't care who we were as long as we kept feeding him ham and giving him attention. His instincts told him he could make a home wherever he found a family that cared about him, played with him, and confided in him. We weren't so lucky.

Societal norms have taught us that we need to own houses and cars to represent our class status so others can measure our worth and we can feel good about ourselves. It's almost impossible to assume that a family could live happily, packed into a one-bedroom apartment. Those privileged with their own rooms since childhood don't know that a family forced to stay close because of space constraints *becomes* close. At the kitchen table with our two chairs, my mom asked Jackie and me about school on a regular basis and we spoke freely. Since we didn't have our own rooms, we never developed that personal space mentality. During the summer, my mom, Jackie, and I played Monopoly endlessly. We left unfinished games at night on the carpet between the TV and coffee table to be continued the next morning. For exercise, we played what we thought was tennis without a net only to learn later on that it was called badminton. I also tossed a baseball around with my dad while Jackie rode her red BMX with hand brakes in circles around us. On Fridays, we accompanied my dad for two blocks towards Rowan Avenue Elementary to the Hernandez video store and rented movies.

My family began to disintegrate when we found separate corners within the house on Ditman Avenue. While I liked to assume that we were more considerate in apartment

number six, the house on Ditman Avenue made us territorial. The non-stop meowing cat got the best of us, with the exception of Jackie. She knew the feline should not have been separated from his owners and allowed my dad to return him to his space next to 3726 Princeton Street. Jackie and I begged to come along but he didn't let us. I had no intention of saying goodbye to the cat. I wanted to revisit apartment number six, which I was already missing after just a few days.

Since extended family members owned the apartment building, part of me believed that apartment number six was mine. I was practically born there. I started off at apartment number one when my elderly aunt, my tía, took my parents in right before I was born. When my Nina Diane and Nino Andy moved out of apartment number six, we moved in. I knew the complex better than I knew myself—the alley way in the back where the meters were, the tool shed, the white maggots that lived near the trash bin. Living at the apartment complex never felt like we had invaded anyone's space. But the house on Ditman Avenue made me feel otherwise: when I first saw it, a shaggy dog greeted us in the living room next to a piano. Knowing that another family had had a life there and that their grandmother had recently passed away in one of the bedrooms made me feel like the house still belonged to them. Just the same, apartment number six no longer belonged to us either. If Jackie and I tagged along to return the cat, we'd convince my dad to take a peek at the apartments to catch a glimpse of the folks who might have already moved into *our* home. He must've sensed that I wanted to go back and knew that we would never settle into the house on Ditman Avenue if we kept living in the past. Maybe my dad desired to return as well, unsure if his recent investment had been the

right choice for his family. He took the cat and left us behind, asking us to make the house on Ditman Avenue our home the way the cat had made us his.

We had been living at the house for about a month, settling into a rhythm, when the Northridge earthquake hit. My mom's words lingered in my head. "This house will not withstand a quake." It was before five in the morning. Light seeping out from the bathroom meant my dad hadn't left for work yet. I knew that if the house remained upright we would be able to survive anything. If it didn't, well, perhaps we'd move back to 3726 Princeton Street.

I played my part during the shaking to the best of my abilities. The last big quake I recalled was one in the late eighties when I was in first grade with Mrs. Golobif. As soon as the earth started moving, I simulated the training I'd practiced many times before—drop, cover, and hold. On my drop, I banged my right cheek bone on the edge of the wooden desk. I pulled further away and ducked more on my second attempt and made sure I held on to the legs. But in my new bedroom there was no double wooden desk to take cover in. I knew I had to keep my head safe, though, so I hid under the blankets.

Jackie and I were sleeping in our bunk beds-turned twin beds. A night stand separated us which eased her leap on top of my body for protection. The entire house crackled. Wood sounded like it was breaking apart and falling to the ground behind the painted walls. The door that separated our room from my parents' swung open and in ran my mother. She piled on top of Jackie and me, using her arms as a shield. After what

seemed like minutes, the house stopped rattling. My dad burst in through the door that connected my room to the bathroom.

I called strike one against the house. It didn't matter that it was still standing after the earthquake, a 6.7 magnitude, as I later learned. The rest of L.A. hadn't been so lucky. About sixty people died from direct and indirect causes of the quake. In San Fernando Valley, closer to the epicenter, apartment buildings, Cal State Northridge, and businesses suffered serious damage. Busy So Cal freeways like the 10 and the 5 collapsed.

Had we been at apartment number six, my family would have been in one room, with the exception of my father. As soon as the quake hit, I could've looked over to my mother in her queen bed from my top bunk for comfort. She never panicked. I thought knowing exactly what to do during emergencies came with the territory of being an adult. Now I know it's a trick to make kids believe that everything will be fine. I knew Jackie had looked to me for that comfort the day of the earthquake. Jackie jumped on me out of fear, relying on me to protect her but I couldn't move. I felt helpless under her weight, hoping the ceiling didn't come down. Fortunately, my mom rushed in and I let her take charge. I became a frightened child again, praying to La Virgen de Guadalupe to make the shaking stop.

I was always told that earthquakes had felt awful because we lived upstairs. I wondered how much calmer the shaking would be if we lived, let's say, in apartment number one, the only one on the ground floor. After our house-warming gift from Mother Nature, I finally had something to compare it to. I don't know if it was my fear or the magnitude, but the intensity that I felt was about the same in the house as it had

been at the apartment. I don't think the force mattered too much, though. I panicked just the same with a 3.7 quake. In fact, I had a sixth sense for them. I always opened my eyes right before the many tremors that came our way during our sleep. I sensed the movement underground before the seismograph probably did. My heart started racing as soon as I was awake. The moving floor and the horrible noises that emanated from behind the walls accelerated my heart rate, no matter how big or small the quake. I have to say, though, that I did feel safer upstairs. If the apartment collapsed, there would only be one ceiling on top of me versus two. The downside to that would be that I hated roller coasters that shot straight down. I knew that falling from apartment number six would resemble one of those Six Flags rides that I always avoided.

After the pyramid of humans peeled away, we walked about the house, assessing the damages. My mom had taught us to keep a pair of shoes, whether they were tennis or sandals, by our beds. She ordered us to put on our footwear because we didn't know if things had been broken; we hadn't been attentive to the specific sounds we heard. The cracks in my parent's bedroom were bigger, like long snakes. That was the only damage the earthquake seemed to have caused. Needless to say, we didn't go back to sleep that morning; there were too many aftershocks. The four of us remained together throughout the morning. If I had to go to my room, I ran in and out. I didn't want another big quake to catch me by myself while my parents and Jackie remained together in the living room.

When the sun came up, we headed to the front yard. The sunlight shone brightly in its oblivion to the disaster that had taken place in southern California. It was just as sunny the day of my first earthquake experience at apartment number six when I was

five. I remember standing at the foot of the staircase in my Barbie nightgown listening to the residents' accounts of their encounter with the quake. And now there I was, standing at the foot of the three steps that led up to the porch of our house on Ditman Avenue. I listened to our neighbors, still strangers to me, exchange lists of damages with my parents. No one in my neighborhood was hurt, in contrast to what we had seen on the news all morning. It was almost as if our house was trying to convince us to stay.

I'm not here to hurt you, it seemed to say that historical January day. *You are safe here.*

It had lived up to its end of the bargain. My mom would have to find another aspect of the house to take displeasure in. Our home had proved it would be able to provide us with shelter. And yes, physically it would be able to protect us. But the house on Ditman Avenue never stood a chance of warding off the changes that would inevitably occur to my body or extramarital feelings that my mom would develop for a former classmate. When I started to add everything up, including the earthquake, things didn't look good for our new living quarters.

Almost four months later, on May 4th, I got my first period. I was in sixth grade. My girl friends liked to hang out in the restroom but I never used the toilet, so I didn't go there. On that particular day, I remember laughing so hard during the first recess that I thought I peed a little on myself. It still wasn't reason enough for me to use a stall because I was afraid of what I would see. I didn't want to have to ask Mrs. Sheen or the nurse to call my mommy so she could bring me a set of clothes. I dealt with my accident by pulling my long, white, granny sweater over and below my behind.

The annual Cinco de Mayo celebration was going to take place the next day. My class had been practicing a Mexican dance for a month that my Indian teacher learned from another inexperienced one. Although I had been conscious of the wetness that wouldn't go away all day, having to dance with Jose Covarrubias, my secret crush (I hadn't told any of my friends because A. they would tell him and B. he wasn't *that* cute), would be beyond humiliating if he found out. I know I should have checked what had happened underneath my clothes in the morning but I didn't want the nurse or my teacher or my mom to think that I still wet my pants. All I could hope for was for the spring air to blow away any foul odor and that my sweater stayed glued to my pants.

As Jose and I stood next to each other on the small dodgeball circle painted on the blacktop, I pulled my dirty sleeves over my hands. I had to pretend that he disgusted me when we made contact with each other so my friends wouldn't suspect a thing. Secretly, though, I couldn't stop thinking of the day my hand had touched his. Jose and I shared the same table in class. His right hand was resting on the desk closer to my side. I was getting up and accidentally placed my left hand over his for support. I had been so focused on my work that I didn't notice the placement of his limbs. He and I simultaneously yelled, "Ew!" My shocked body gave out and I plopped back down on the wooden chair, almost out of breath. The touch had sucked all of the energy out of me and transferred it over to Jose because he pulled his chair away from me with lightning speed. When my body composed itself, I followed his lead in continuing to shake off any remaining cooties we had failed to remove. After that incident, I didn't want to give Jose more reasons to dislike me. So during practice, he and I had an unspoken mutual

agreement to hold hands with our sweaters over our fingers. When we had to dance close, we stayed at arm's length, literally, my fingertips barely grazing his shoulder. I was relieved when class was over. I had to get home and check things down under.

I rushed to the bathroom and turned the light on. The switch made the ventilator my dad had installed turn on with a loud lawn-mower-like noise. This came in handy when we did our business but blocked the sound of the television in my bedroom when I brushed my teeth. I locked the bathroom door that led out to the hallway first and then the one to my room. I undid the button in my pants, the zipper, and pulled my jeans down. I noticed a red spot on the seam of my crotch but didn't think period; I thought I was bleeding to death like Vada in "My Girl." The character in the 1991 film was surrounded by death. Her mother had passed away at childbirth and her father ran a funeral home. Vada's mind had been programmed to think the worst. That's why when she got her period, she believed that she was hemorrhaging. I related to Vada's panic that moment in the bathroom, except that I didn't react by running through the house screaming for my dad. When my briefs came down and I saw the dark red stain that resembled a smashed plum, I knew that I wasn't going to die. I had gotten my first period. What I had learned during a health lecture with my female classmates in the auditorium had finally happened to me. I got flashbacks of pads and cramps and penises and babies. My childhood was over, at least for the next "five to seven days," as Vada explained to her best friend Thomas J.

The most horrendous events seemed to be taking place under the roof of the house on Ditman Avenue, which brings me to strike two. First a natural disaster and then a

physical one. Unlike Vada, my dad was not my go-to guy. I didn't even want to tell my mother. I feared her reaction more than the troubles that were about to ensue now that I was the owner of a female reproductive system. It was an uncomfortable subject. Before the fifth grade sexual reproduction course at Rowan Avenue Elementary, I knew that women bled every month but not why. At apartment number six, my mom's box of hefty maxi pads had always been stored underneath the sink in the bathroom. I was about five years old when I first asked her what the rectangular cottony things were for. I was sitting on the toilet while she put on her makeup next to me, leaning on the vanity towards the mirror. Without losing momentum of applying her Maybelline eyeliner she said, "When you become a woman, you bleed down there."

I took my eyes off her and stared at the yellow bathroom mat that she was standing on. It was sad to have to bleed when one became a woman. Especially because it meant that we had to wear those thick band-aid look-alikes. But my mom only kept a few in the box at a time. Shouldn't she have to buy them every time we went to Kmart if she needed them every day?

"Why don't you have more if you bleed every day," I asked her. I thought I might have to start saving my birthday cash for the future.

Still focusing on herself in the mirror, my mom said, "You don't bleed every day. Just for a few once a month."

A smile cut across my face, relieved that there would be days that I could do anything I wanted without the strange-looking diaper.

My period wasn't something I could hide from her the way I had been hiding shaving for a few months since moving into the house on Ditman Avenue. Because she never talked to me about managing body hair, I took it upon myself to tackle the matter in the new bathroom. I started shaving my armpits with my mother's pink Schick at apartment number six first. When we moved into the house on Ditman Avenue, I moved on to my ankles. I didn't want my mom to find out that I was using her razor or see clear patches on my legs so I contained my shaving to my ankles. I usually wore socks that would easily hide the skin that had been freed of hair. One day I got too comfortable and careless with the blade and I yanked off about an inch of skin. Tiny red beads covered the injured area immediately. I was confused because I had felt no pain. It wasn't until I looked at the razor that I saw my skin still intact on the blades. I pulled what had been a piece of my ankle into the water in the tub and put a band-aid over the wound when I got out. My mom never found out because my sock covered the cut until it healed.

And now I needed to use a bigger version of the band-aid, and in some way it was like I was covering up something to be ashamed of. I knew about maxi pads but was unsure of how to use them. Although I knew where my mom stashed them, I couldn't start taking them. She would figure out that she was buying pads twice as frequently. So I pulled up my underwear, zipped my jeans, buttoned the button, and embarrassedly sought my mother in the living room. She was watching Cristina, the Latino version of Oprah.

I don't know if I said to her, "I'm bleeding," or "I got my period." I just know that my mom stayed calm, just like she did during earthquakes. She sent me to my room

to get out of my clothes. She pulled clean underwear from my underwear drawer. Then she brought a thick maxi pad from the bathroom and modeled how I had to paste it onto my briefs. I was still stepping out of my underwear when my mom said, “You can get pregnant now.” I froze like a flamingo with my leg in midair as she walked out of my room with my pants in her hand. Her blatant words erased the embarrassing day I’d had and replaced it with the horrific future that lay ahead.

I refused to go to school the next day. The pad was uncomfortable and I had bled through my pajamas and sheets during the night. It was obvious that being on my period required trials and errors. I didn’t want to risk having another accident at school. So the house on Ditman Avenue became my haven. While my mom took my sister to school where she would undoubtedly tell her little friends about my entry into womanhood, I dug through the closet. I searched for the sample bag I had received at the sex ed class. I had already used the sample of Secret deodorant and antiperspirant. Now it was time to try the Always feminine napkin. When my mom came home, she suggested I wear two pairs of underwear to keep the pad in place because we were going to go to Rowan Avenue Elementary. My sister was performing at the Cinco de Mayo celebration and my mom wasn’t going to miss it. I didn’t stay in my sanctuary for long.

I mentioned to my mom on our two-block walk that the Always brand maxi pad was more comfortable than her generic ones. She decided that we would stop at the nurse’s office before heading to the playground for the festivities. She wanted to snatch some samples. My mom always seized free samples, whether it was food in a supermarket or products at Kmart. I didn’t mind going up to the stands if I wanted to try

them. But when my mom pushed me towards the counter and made me take a sample even if I didn't want one, I blushed with shame. I worried that my mother's actions would be interpreted as desperate, which I was not. My mom was just greedy and simply wanted my share. Stopping at the nurse's office to ask for a sample of sanitary napkins put me in the same position. Being that my mom was a grown and experienced woman, she knew where to buy maxi pads. She didn't have to beg for them. I told her that we would just go to Kmart when my dad got home and stock up. Plus, I didn't want the nurse to know that I was menstruating. But there was no convincing my mom and she led the way.

When she asked for a sample, the nurse looked in my direction immediately with an emotionless stare. I didn't know whether she was disgusted by me or memorizing my features to describe me in the staff room later on that day. My mom stuffed the sample bag in her purse and we carried on to our last traditional Cinco de Mayo celebration. Both Jackie and I would be graduating in June. I would go off to seventh grade and Jackie would follow because the district had added sixth grade to the local middle schools.

I didn't want my classmates to see me. As soon as they did, the girls would start asking why I hadn't attended class. They would know that I hadn't experienced anything life threatening since I was there, in one piece and as healthy as the day before. I wasn't in the mood to tell them about my period yet although I would be the center of attention. I wouldn't be able to explain what was happening because I was still trying to make sense of what my body was doing to me. While the spectators found a spot on the blacktop

alongside the classrooms, I stayed behind the fence nearby. My mom told me not to leave my place as she made her way to watch my sister with the rest of the parents.

I scanned the people and found Mrs. Sheen. We weren't very far from each other. She saw me too but didn't appear the least surprised and I figured she knew why I was absent that day. I wondered what my mother had told the secretary when she called the school.

"My daughter, Maricela Ponce, is not going to go to school today because she got her period. Please tell her teacher."

I hoped that wasn't it, but Mrs. Sheen would understand. I took my focus off her and searched for Jose Covarrubias. I was concerned about his future in the performance without me. He was tall, the tallest one in our class. I found him standing close to the fence, almost leaning on it, with his arms crossed over his chest. He was looking across the playground, watching the commotion. He had never participated in the event before. Jose had been the newest addition to my fifth/sixth combination class in the middle of the year. The day he walked in, a surge of disgust filled me accompanied by goose bumps. He was ugly and transparent, as white as a sheet of paper. He had big, round eyes that sported an irritated shade of red. Since the desk next to me was unoccupied, Mrs. Sheen sat him there.

Over the months, he lost his repulsive allure. I think it was his eyes. They glowed with kindness and honesty and the constant smile on his face confirmed these notions. He happily watched others take the stage. I was attracted to him, seeing that he was enjoying himself when he could've been concentrating on looking cool. I felt awful

for letting him down. Although I assumed that he didn't want to dance, I was sure he didn't want to escort anyone else on that blacktop. I don't remember if he was benched, if he danced with a partnerless girl, or if Mrs. Sheen paired him with another couple, making him the third wheel. Either way, I was mad that my period had deprived me of having him close once more before we parted ways after graduation.

My mom didn't let me stay home a second day. On May 6, I put on two pairs of underwear and my Always maxi pad and headed to school. My girl friends asked me why I had been gone; I had broken my perfect attendance record. We were sitting on a lunch bench overlooking the playground when I let them in on my secret. One or two of them had already started menstruating. They didn't make my entrance into womanhood a big deal as much as a joking matter.

"No wonder you're walking funny," one of them said.

I was mortified. I didn't want my walk telling people what I was feeling or going through. I wondered if Jose knew. Was there a specific scent boys picked up from girls who had started their period? Were they attracted to or repelled by them? Would he admire me for being a woman? I believed he would be nicer to me if he found out. But I couldn't continue contemplating the what-ifs. My new objective had become to stay stain-free.

Yet nothing could've prepared me for strike number three. As I have mentioned before, I discovered my mother's infidelity when I was in eighth grade. My suspicions began when my dad displaced his shoulder. At work, he had slipped off his trailer's liftgate after the chain gave out. He hadn't begun making deliveries yet when he was

trapped between the chain, liftgate, and loading dock. Miraculously, my dad didn't break anything but might as well have. He had to wear a sling and attend physical therapy. I remember coming home from middle school and seeing him sitting on the couch with his arm over his chest. I was confused at first because he was never home before we were. He looked small and embarrassed as he watched TV. His eyes were red as if he had been holding back tears. After he told me what happened, he lifted his shirt to show me his badly bruised mid-section. He was supposed to be on disability for two weeks.

My mother the housewife was furious over the added responsibilities she had to take on for the next fourteen days. She didn't say this out loud; she didn't have to, we read it all over her face. She grew irritated with having my dad home all day. She was annoyed that she had to help him get dressed. But I later figured out the real reason behind her unkindly behavior—she couldn't attend her citizenship class where she met up with her special male friend.

My mom had been attending English courses since I started grade school. My dad took a similar course at Plaza del Sol where my mom, Jackie, and I shopped while he learned something. He couldn't stand being in the room for two hours on Saturday afternoons, sitting on a stool and copying what was on the board like a child. So my dad quit after one semester, citing irreconcilable differences with the English language. My mom, however, was more resolute. She even took summer courses and brought us along. While she learned grammar, I designed my ideal home plan and played M.A.S.H (mansion, apartment, sewer, and house) with other girls. We took turns asking each other for the number that would count off our future. Then we used that digit to cross off boys'

names, the number of babies we desired, the cars we wanted to drive, the places we wanted to live, and the kinds of homes we would end up with until there was one choice left in every category. According to the game, I'm supposed to be living in a house in San Francisco with a man named Victor and our two children with a Jeep parked in the driveway. During her break, my mom took us across the street and bought a bag of plump french fries with ketchup. By the end of the summer, my mom had advanced to the fourth grade.

When I was in middle school, my mom started attending a class that was designed to prepare her for the citizenship test. I had no idea where the school was or its name. The only thing I did know was that she had made a friend, Stella, who lived up the street. This was the class my mom had been taking when my dad got hurt. What was supposed to be a two-week hiatus from school ended up being a permanent leave. My dad could barely raise his arm above his shoulder at the end of the initial disability term. He ended up staying home for a month before he went back to work as another's driver's helper. By then, my mom had been put on the defensive. She blamed my dad for not being able to go to class and announced that she wouldn't be going back. We didn't know how important the citizenship course was to her. I thought she really missed the friends she had made or worried about not passing the test if she didn't learn the material that hadn't yet been covered. She quit to make my dad feel guilty for the inconvenience he brought to her, but I also sensed that there was a different story brewing at the base of her resentful behavior.

While my dad's bruises went from purple-black to yellow-orange, my mom took on a secretive disposition. She had begun to blush when she answered certain phone calls. I knew she wasn't talking to my tía Fina or her friend Stella. She never hid those conversations from us. The blushing was followed by taking the calls outside. Then she started going out with Stella. It was late by the time she came home. Her hair was messy and her lipstick gone. She looked like she'd just gotten off a roller coaster. Her dreamy smile revealed the joy of falling in love for the first time. That's when I knew something was definitely wrong. I put on my trench coat, jotted my observations on a legal pad, and concluded that my mom was having an affair. Strike out! The Northridge earthquake had not been able to break the house on Ditman Avenue, but my mom managed to break our family.

I wondered if my mother would have played this game had we stayed at apartment number six. I didn't think so. The tight spaces in that place would have made it hard to keep a secret. I knew my dad had caught on to my mother's lies at the house on Ditman Avenue when he started sleeping in the guest room. He would have never slept on the couch at apartment number six; my dad wouldn't have stooped that low. I think he would have left her. And I would have followed him. Something about that place made it a No Bull zone.

The house on Ditman Avenue was now encouraging betrayal. There were no consequences to her actions. She talked to her lover whenever he called. She left with her friend Stella in the daytime and returned after an evening with him at night. She verbally mistreated my dad and continued sleeping on their queen bed in their room.

In the mean time, my dad sulked in the guest room on the full bed over the loss of his manhood. He kept his end of the bargain. He continued to work and provide for his family. He attended family gatherings where he had to see all of my mom's relatives. He hosted his in-laws. My dad stayed with my mom not only because he had vowed to but because he had two children whose futures he had to consider. And there was the issue of family drama that my dad was not fond of. He swallowed his pride in order to keep us united while my mom tore us apart.

No one discussed my mother's infidelity. My dad made sly comments about it. He told her he didn't like her talking to the neighbors and I knew it was because they were male. But no one ever felt comfortable bringing the actual issue to the table. I didn't feel it was my position to say anything that involved their marriage. I hoped my dad would one day burst with anger, calling her out at the dining table. But he was a better man than that, a better husband than my mother was a wife.

Jackie was the only one who remained clueless almost to the end. I broke my silence and let her in on the secret when she asked me about suspicious phone calls that had gone through when she answered. For years, if anyone other than my mother picked up, the person on the other end hung up. My dad and I knew that it was my mother's lover waiting for her to answer. But during my senior year in high school, Mr. Lover changed the rules and started playing with Jackie's mind. She was unaware of my mother's extramarital affair and he knew it. I, on the other hand, had been staring him down for years. I picked him out one summer afternoon after following my mom's gaze to his truck when he drove up the street. I bet he was able to discern my no-nonsense

personality through my ongoing surveillance. He and my mom could do as they pleased but I was not going to allow them to bring Jackie down with them. Her innocence made her his target. He could scare her or force her to do things out of fear. Jackie told me that the same man had asked for my mom on two different occasions when she answered the phone. The second time, she heard a muffled recording playing between a man and a woman. Jackie said she hung up. She asked me if I knew who it could be. Maybe Mr. Lover was ready to throw his life away for my mom by coming clean. I knew he had a family. Jackie's friend had a crush on his son, whom I'd seen riding in the man's truck. Perhaps Mr. Lover had become obsessed. His reasoning wasn't clear yet.

The phone calls made me believe that there was tension in my mother's fantasy relationship. Mr. Lover had never attempted to make contact with anyone but my mom in the past four years. Suddenly, his interest in speaking to Jackie was followed by creepy stalker behavior. The man appeared strategically en route to the places my mom and I walked during the summer before I left for college. In the early stages, when I narrowed him down to the mustachioed man, he had been driving an older model yellow truck. By the time I was in the twelfth grade, he had upgraded to a navy blue Silverado or F150. The same truck had been parked on Percy Street when my mom and I walked to the library. He also stalked us when we ran errands to various local stores. Mr. Lover had sat in his car with the passenger window rolled down and his eyes fixed on us. His head followed his stare the instant he saw us until we left his field of vision. Instead of blushing like she had years before, my mom became nervous as we tried to carry on with our conversation. Once, out of the corner of my eye, I could see that my mom had turned

pale and broken into a sweat. Her spacey days were over. Mr. Lover wasn't very happy either, hence the harassment over the phone.

I came clean to Jackie sitting on the bed in the guest room-turned-hiding room. She took it very calmly, to my surprise. Jackie was the clingy one in the family and also the most outspoken. I figured that if she said anything at dinner, it was meant to be said, and rightfully so after the amount of elapsed time. But it wasn't until I was in my dorm room at UC Riverside that the end came. Jackie called me to tell me about the turn the pestering phone calls had taken. Mr. Lover played lengthy and discernible recordings of the conversations he had had with my mother. Jackie wasn't able to decipher what was said. She didn't like where the affair was going. She was relying on me to finish it.

I thought I had been protecting Jackie all along by keeping my knowledge of the affair a secret from her. It turned out that I was being a coward. Had I been upfront with my mom or dad about the situation, Jackie would have never had to ask for my help. I fooled myself into thinking that I was tough because I had figured out my mother's lies on my own and because I gave Mr. Lover evil looks. Only in my dreams was I the bold and daring Maricela that I wished I could be in real life. There were several times that I dreamt I had the courage to point out the obvious to my mother. It was only in my deep slumber that I conjured up the nerve to beg her to leave her lover to no avail. I didn't know what the consequences would be if I brought up the affair at dinner. If I spoke out, my family could be destroyed forever. I would feel responsible for our disintegration knowing my mother had been at fault all along. I didn't have the courage to end the affair by approaching my mom. It didn't seem like the respectful thing to do.

So I called my mother's other half, my tía Fina, her sister. My hall mates were busy decorating our floor for a Halloween contest when I seized the rare opportunity of having the dorm to myself. I didn't go into detail because I didn't want to taint her opinion of my mom. I told her that I suspected my mom was seeing another man. There was evidence because a man kept calling Jackie and playing tapes. I asked her to tell my mom that the man had to stop bothering Jackie who had nothing to do with any of it. My aunt got back to me the next day. My mom had denied the affair. She told my tía Fina that a friend had become infatuated with her. She and my dad had already placed a restraining order against him. And just like that, it was over.

I went home every other weekend. The first time I visited my parents after having spoken to my tía Fina, I realized that I had watched the five-year infidelity saga unfold, only to miss the grand finale. Except for one thing. My mom had a deep wound on her forehead. She claimed to have fallen off the small wooden ladder we had in the garage. Jackie told me a different story. She said that my mom had asked her to go straight home from school the day the gash appeared on her face. But Jackie arrived later than usual and my mom held her partially responsible for the lesion.

"See? I told you to be here," Jackie claimed my mom said to her when she got home.

We assumed her lover had come to the house on Ditman Avenue and attacked her. I don't think he held my mother at gunpoint or else, I believe, he would have shot her. He must've had another weapon, a knife perhaps, and threatened my mom. Maybe she ran through the house to get away from him. It's possible that he could've just

cornered her somewhere. Whichever way it played, Jackie and I were pretty sure that Mr. Lover had struck my mom. I saw her and, as awful as it looked, I was initially satisfied with her disfigurement. It gave me pleasure knowing that bad decisions did have consequences. I had been in distress over the last five years trying to keep Jackie oblivious to the happenings and not knowing what the future held for my family. And I was hurt. The person I had trusted the most throughout my childhood had lied to me for a very long time. I would never be able to confide in her again. I hated her for breaking that bond. But my satisfaction didn't end there.

I also wanted my dad to suffer. I wanted him to hurt for not being strong enough to put a stop to my mother's lies, for not protecting me throughout the last five years, and for making me ride an emotional rollercoaster because he didn't step up to the plate. Instead of directing my anger towards my mom, I started talking back to my dad. I was short with my answers and rude with my responses. The same way he had made sly comments about my mother's affair, I made clever but subtle comments about his lack of manhood. My mom was no fool. She caught on fast to my game. It was barely Saturday morning when she brought my attitude to my attention.

"Why are you acting that way with your dad," she asked me in the kitchen by the refrigerator. Her words came out almost in a whisper even though my dad was in the guest room or somewhere in the backyard.

I looked at the tiled floor and shrugged.

"If it's because of me you have to stop," she said. It was the first time she had acknowledged any wrongdoing. It was gratifying hearing those words; they made me

feel sane after having questioned myself and my observations for the duration of the affair. Sometimes I felt like I had been reading too much into her actions. Her short declaration proved me right all along.

“He had nothing to do with it,” she continued. “You better start treating him right.”

She walked away then, leaving me standing in my UCR sweatshirt. Her last words ricocheted in my head. Part of me knew that my mother was right, that my dad didn't deserve to be mistreated yet again. And another part of me couldn't help hating them both. They were being childish. They were now trying to keep the truth from us after I had spent half a decade sparing Jackie from the details so she wouldn't be repulsed by them like I was at that moment. My parents had forced me to grow up too soon and I was tired of being the adult. It should have never been me who brought the affair to a close. My dad should've stopped my mother in her tracks by helping her realize that her stupidities would tear our family apart or by divorcing her. Neither one of those options would have led to five years of anguish.

It was clear that my parents weren't going to discuss anything related to the affair when my mother walked away. They probably thought that not discussing it would trick us into believing that we had imagined everything. If they didn't bring it up, none of it would be true and we could quickly move on. They could pretend that nothing had ever gone awry, that our family was the happy little unit we had been at apartment number six, but there was physical evidence that proved otherwise. My mother had that big slash on her face. If she were not willing to apologize, because of pride or embarrassment, then it

was only fair that she carry her version of the Scarlet Letter. I hoped that the scar would remind her of the dangerous path she had taken and dragged us along every time she saw herself in the mirror. I wished she would live in regret as long as I had lived in grief after the cut healed and disappeared.

But there was more. She had taught me another lesson and it was one that I did not like. From my mom, I learned how one person could hurt another with indirect actions. She didn't cheat on my dad because the house on Ditman Avenue gave her freedom. Our home simply allowed us to explore outside the boundaries we were used to. All of our needs were changing when my dad purchased the house. Jackie and I were entering our teenage years. We were lucky to have an extra room or two to escape to when we got on each other's nerves. My dad's focus became everything that encompassed the house. He had to figure out how to pay more bills with the same paycheck and tend to the never-ending repairs. That left my mom alone in a big space. She could no longer help Jackie or me with our homework—the English was past her level of education and the math too complicated. She still cooked and cleaned and tended the garden but our family time was gone. There was little contact with my mother, and Jackie, my dad, and I began to take her for granted. This was no excuse for having an affair but it might justify it. My mom found autonomy living at the house on Ditman Avenue that hadn't existed in our one-bedroom apartment. Since Jackie and I had become self-sufficient, my mom took that extra time to help herself. She studied to become an American citizen. Then she began her affair, keeping secrets that were easily lost in sixteen-hundred square feet. She ran with her newfound liberty and didn't know

when to stop until it was too late. The independence that came with our house on Ditman Avenue, the one that had protected us in an earthquake, destroyed the tight family unit we had been for eleven years at apartment number six.

Throughout my high school years, I had been dreaming about apartment number six. If I recounted a reverie to Jackie in our bedroom on a Saturday morning I would say, “We were home, back at the apartment.” I didn’t understand why I continued to dream the pastel green kitchen with the oval table that partially blocked the entrance to the bedroom and the bathroom. I was in college when I recognized why.

Home was where I felt safe. At apartment number six, I had slept on the top bunk with my sister below me and our parents practically next to us in their queen bed only a foot away. Home was where we were innocent and if I happened to flirt with neighborhood boys, there were no consequences. I could stand on the staircases dancing away to my Walkman while the boys next door or across the street stared at me and that was all. Home was where the school years were never ending and adulthood far away. At apartment number six, Christmases and birthdays didn’t come soon enough. Home was the place where my imagination roamed free. I pretended to be an ice skater on my bike when I leaned forward and stretched out my right leg in the air, letting the air hit my face as I rode up and down the driveway. I hadn’t worried about my family breaking apart at 3726 Princeton Street. I didn’t know this then, but apartment number six—all four-hundred feet of it—was home. The house on Ditman Avenue, although just two blocks away, would be our home only because it looked like one.

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If I could file a lawsuit against the house on Ditman Avenue, I would charge it with false advertising. I would plead that my dad had purchased the house with the belief that we would be able to form a home there. Instead, we were hit with tragedy after tragedy. Yet I know that the changing dynamics of my family would have brought on the disasters wherever we lived. The Northridge quake would still have hit. I would still have gone through puberty. And my mom would still have cheated on my father.

Years after I moved away, I have come to realize that home is a state of mind. The tiny apartment where I'm now living has been my home for the past six years because it's the place I want to go to after work or having spent a few days with my parents. I am safe there. I have fun there. I save money by living there and have used the funds to go to graduate school. Confusingly enough, though, sometimes, very rarely, I crave the warmth of the house on Ditman Avenue. After all, my parents still live there, and for them, it is still indeed a home. If I say that I'm going home for the weekend in reference to the house on Ditman Avenue, I mean that I'm going to eat a home-cooked meal. My mom has always cooked Monday through Friday. If I leave on a Friday afternoon, I know one of my favorite dishes will be served. When I'm there, I become a child again. My mother washes my clothes and makes *avena* or *arroz con leche* for breakfast. And my dad pays for most take-out meals even though I make more money than he does. These have become the fundamental aspects of a home for me now. My dad could sell the house on Ditman Avenue and become a renter, buy a farm, or move out of state and their residence would still be my home as long as I have authentic Mexican

food, wake up with my clean clothes folded by my side, and eat out on the weekends, compliments of my father.

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My friends and coworkers constantly ask me why I haven't purchased a home yet. They mention tax credits and other incentives that are supposed to convince me to become a house owner. What they don't know is that I already have three: my one-bedroom in Riverside, the house where my parents continue to live on Ditman Avenue, and the one little place that doesn't cease to reappear in my dreams, my home forever, apartment number six.