

THE DIVERSITY OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE IN LATINX LITERATURE

by

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To María, Esteban, Glenn, and Anna

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by

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There are two major components in this dissertation. First, you will find an analysis of specific texts written by authors I consider having the most significant influence on my writing. In addition, you will find a collection of short stories that have been inspired by my life as a child growing in a Hispanic working-class family in Newark, New Jersey in the late 1970s. The academic or scholarly portion of this dissertation, as I have stated, focuses on authors and the texts that for some reason—whether it be their style, themes, as well as their personal views and positions on social structures, race, gender, and politics—have in some way molded my own interests and positions. Among these authors are Junot Díaz, Ana Lydia Vega, Piri Thomas, and Tomás Rivera. I try to assess the significance and importance of these authors and their texts in Latinx literature tradition. More importantly, I try to establish parallels between my work and their works. By examining these works that capture the realities of Latinx experiences, I discovered how my work, regardless of how I want to frame or portray it, is inevitably Latinx. As hard as I tried to categorize my work as “universal” and intended to appeal to a broader readership, a reflection on the works of these authors, with whom I share similar lived experiences and seemingly the same purpose for writing, has influenced my views on my own

work. The second portion of the dissertation is a collection of short stories. These stories are inspired by childhood experiences in the context of a racially and socially heterogeneous environment. They reflect the impact distorted notions of gender and masculinity have on young minds. I think the value of these stories resides in the way they portray how the adults in the lives of these children embody these notions of gender and masculinity and how the children manage the potential psychological and emotional trauma of these distorted notions. Not all stories can be or should be viewed through this lens, however. There are also stories about the realities of urban life in the United States in the late seventies and early eighties in underserved communities. Among these social challenges are the AIDS epidemic, drug addiction, crime, and prostitution. As an individual who as a child lived and experienced firsthand these realities, I have always felt the need to document these stories and make their protagonists visible. I have especially felt the need to make the women—mothers, grandmothers, sisters, teachers—of these communities visible. As the pillars of these communities, I feel they have remained invisible and underrepresented for far too long.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing about personal experiences is seemingly easy. In essence, it is couching a detailed personal account about life. It could end there. On the other hand, it could be the first step in the process of creating an inspirational and contemplative tale about the most memorable and significant of life experiences. Which part represents the greatest challenge? Scavenging through the trove of memories one has buried to the depths of one's consciousness and choosing the ones that best suits one goal? Or choosing how one intends to use the chosen memory to elaborate the inspirational and contemplative account itself? I would say they both offer distinct challenges.

I decided to write a collection of short stories inspired by my dearest and most treasured memories. Choosing the memories that inspired these stories was indeed a challenge. It entailed a balancing act between the best (or the most poignant) and what I would prefer to share with my readers. The result should be a cross between these two notions. By worth telling, I am referring to an experience that is moldable and adaptable and offers the opportunity to take creative liberties while at its heart it remains factual. By creative liberties I mean I can play with the intensity of the conflict, hoping that readers feel vested enough to crave a resolution. When I speak of memories that I feel I want to share I am talking about memories that are the most meaningful to me. However, the memories that I at times want to share are not necessarily the memories that are worthy of sharing or telling. Here is when the balancing aspect comes into play. The memories that I feel I want to share must have the intensity needed to create a memorable literary experience.

The stories that follow are inspired by childhood memories I have deemed worthy of telling and sharing. They are not exclusively autobiographical but inspired by deeply cherished personal experiences. My goal initially was to write a series of texts inspired by a community whose members had a meaningful impact on the way I viewed the world for a long time. I say viewed, in the past, because I have come to the realization that not everything I learned as a young member of said community was beneficial or correct. Nonetheless, it is precisely due to the apparent flaws of this community, which I discovered later in life as I occasionally looked back to reminisce about what I believed to be happier times, that I consider these stories worthy of telling (worthwhile and important) and I feel the responsibility to tell them. I feel the responsibility to tell them because they capture an important moment in time of a community that is so often overlooked or erased from the national narrative. I consider these stories worthy of telling and I feel the responsibility to tell them. I feel the responsibility to tell them because they capture an important moment in time of a community that is so often overlooked or simply erased from the national narrative. This is where my initial goal of simply writing of experiences lived in my community transformed into a social, cultural, and even political endeavor in which I become the purveyor and chronicler of the lives of a group of Americans whose stories are as significant to the national narrative as any other.

I call the members of this community Americans, because that is what they are. However, as a Latinx community, that singular identity triggers a variety of reactions that vary from approval to ambiguity. The identity of the members of Latinx communities, like the one I am addressing here, is often a preferred theme of many Latinx authors. The resistance to complete assimilation by the members of Latinx communities or the resistance they face from the

dominant culture often makes its way into the narrative of Latinx authors. Racial, ethnic, and cultural identity is a topic many Latinx authors feel compelled to include in their narratives because they have personally experienced the internal and external conflicts about identity that are part of the Latinx experience in the United States. Consequently, some have come to expect struggles and conflicts with racial or cultural identity to be a Latinx experience that is an integral part of narratives authored by Latinx writers. I chose to break rank and not write, yet, about my struggles with my racial or ethnic identity in the United States. I decided to take a different route because that was not my experience. That was not, at least not during the time I represent in this collection, an experience I lived. Nonetheless my experiences are still closely tied to the transplanted ideals and beliefs embraced by the Latinx community.

Although the stories in this collection do not address identity as a main theme, at least not ethnic or cultural identity, they do address ideals and beliefs transplanted from the homeland. These transplanted ideals and beliefs have become an integral part of, in this case, of the new identity of the Caribbean diasporic community that inspired these texts. Among these transplanted ideals is the concept of masculinity for example. I have tried to portray this community's interpretation of masculinity not by creating male characters who flaunt their manhood or excuse their behavior with generally accepted notions of what a man should be or what a man is supposed to act like. Instead, I have created a collection with non-adult males as main characters. The stories in this collection share two main characters: one is emotionally and psychologically impacted by the cultural expectations of masculinity, and the other—although also a victim of the same ideals of masculinity—is complicit in espousing those ideals.

The two main characters in this collection of stories are either Latinx women belonging to different generations or a pre-teen Latinx boy. As stated previously, I portray these women as accomplices that maintain the transplanted ideals of masculinity as an integral part of this Latinx community. However, I also make it clear that these women are not controlled by their beliefs. In other words, they evolve and are in the end able –ironically, through their inherited religious beliefs—to be compassionate where once they were intolerant. Moreover, they are supportive of each other and encouraging about the possibilities of breaking the cycle that keeps them at the margins even within their own community. As I stated previously, determining which stories are worthy of telling and sharing is not a simple task. The stories of these women are not only worthy of telling but they are stories I want to share. I decided to write stories inspired by these women because as Latinx women who are the pillars of Latinx communities their stories and their voices are too often erased from the national narrative.

The other and most important main character of most of the stories is a young Latinx boy who is between the ages of six and eleven. I chose Jimmy, as I have called him, to narrate some of these stories. He is the age I was during the period that inspired these accounts. These texts are inspired by childhood memories, and in order to convey the innocence that was very much a part of who I was at the time, the best approach is to have a child narrate these accounts. As I stated previously, identity in terms of race and culture are not predominant themes in these texts. Therefore, Jimmy is not a character that is conflicted in those terms. However, Jimmy's internal conflicts are a result of his struggle to understand how ideals of masculinity within his Latinx community define or determine who is accepted and who is not. Jimmy not only struggles to understand how the adults around him construct their social norms based on ideals. In

addition, he faces loss, and is alienated and neglected. In more happier terms, he enjoys healthy relationships with his friends. I believe that these themes offer the reader a sense of universality. In other words, by also focusing on these themes these stories may appeal to audiences beyond other Latinx readers.

The collection is composed of eight stories. The centerpiece of the collection is a story titled “Daniel’s Women.” I consider this story the central piece of the collection because it encompasses all the themes I touch throughout the whole collection. In this text, both Jimmy and the women are the main characters. Jimmy witnesses for the first time how the ideals of masculinity embraced by his community are invoked to ridicule and ostracize those members of the community who do not subscribe to those ideals. The women play a pivotal role in making Jimmy aware of those ideals. The rest of the collection I suppose we can divide into two groups.

First, we have the pieces that focus exclusively on Jimmy and his relationship with the adults in his life, for better or for worse. His experiences with some adults lead to his final days of innocence, while his experience with others offer Jimmy hope that life will get better. The other group of stories focus on some of the women that have a significant impact on how Jimmy is expected to view the world. The representation of these women is purposefully positive. Some are in the prime of their lives going through the motions of trying to find their place in the world, while at the same time they deal with the reality that the intersection of their conditions as poor women of color without formal education poses a real obstacle to their aspirations. Other women, belonging to an older generation, are questioning if the ideas and beliefs they have inherited are relevant in a world and in a community that is challenged by a new social order. Lastly, the oldest generation exemplifies the wisdom of their years by displaying and

demanding acceptance and tolerance toward those who have been marginalized within the community because of their sexual orientation.

Finally, included in this collection there are also stories that focus on the themes of friendship and loss. All stories are set in the early 1980s, and one of the most powerful and unfortunate memories I have of that time is of the loss of friends and relatives to drug abuse and to an unknown and misunderstood disease known as HIV/AIDS. I struggled with the idea of including stories that dealt with this reality that intensely affected Latinx communities. In the end, I reached the conclusion that these stories deserve to be told.

My hope is that these stories are not viewed exclusively as Latinx literature. This is something I struggle with. I believe that my intentional exclusion of themes or conflicts that deal with identity—racial, ethnic, or cultural—is due not only to the fact that I did experience them but also to the fact that I would like this collection to appeal to a broader audience. However, it is undeniable that some of the realities represented in these stories reflect a Latinx community or the culture.

The academic portion of this dissertation is divided into four parts. The first part focuses on what scholars such as Blas Falconer, Lorraine López, Marta Caminero Saint-Angelo, Judith Ortíz Cofer, and Bridget Kevane believe makes a text an example of Latinx literature. Some of them argue that among some of the most distinctive traits of Latinx literature is the presence of elements such as biculturalism, bilingualism, and hybrid identity. Some of them also argue that code-switching as a marker of Latinx identity and therefore is commonplace to encounter it in Latinx literature. I differ on the latter and present my reasons. In this portion of the text, I also address my concerns with labeling my work exclusively Latinx literature. As a Latinx

individual, I understand that this fact may sway many to classify my work exclusively as Latinx literature. Among the arguments I present against this possibility is that the stories in the collection do not necessarily address bilingualism and conflicts associated with hybrid identity.

The second part of the academic portion of this dissertation addresses the authors that have had a significant influence on my writing style and the themes that appear in my texts. I have separated these authors into two groups: Latin American writers, which are all Caribbean-Puerto Rican writers, and Latinx writers. Among the Latin American writers are Ana Lydia Vega, Mayra Santos Febres, and Manuel Ramos Otero. Among the Latinx writers I have included are Junot Díaz, Julia Álvarez, and Tomás Rivera. In this section I connect my work to the work of these authors by drawing parallels in the way they address themes and the style of writing they employ. By drawing parallels, I do not mean that I am copying their work, but rather that we share similar concerns or have similar experiences as Latinx people, Hispanics, or people of color that have served as inspiration for our work.

The third part focuses on the themes that appear in my work. I focus most intently on how the transplanted ideal of masculinity and the significant impact it has in the social structure of the community that inspired my work. I use the work of Richard Mora, Aida Hurtado and Anthony Ocampo among others to understand how masculinity is defined and performed in Hispanic Caribbean cultures and consequently transplanted to the diasporic communities. The purpose of addressing masculinity in academic terms is to be able to argue for the prevalence of this theme throughout the collection.

The fourth and final part of the academic portion of this dissertation focuses on what we could call a partial history of Latinx literature. In this section I address how some scholars have

classified its aesthetics and traditions during the second half of the twentieth century. In this case I have focused on how some scholars have delineated Latinx literature along national or ethnic lines along with the social, political, and cultural events or movements that motivated and inspired Latinx literature written during specific time periods. In other cases, I address how scholars delineate Latinx literature by the connection the author maintains with his or her place of origin. In other words, this approach classifies Latinx literature based on how the text reflects the characters' status within the United States from an immigration and cultural perspective.

The end of the academic section is dedicated to my assessment of how my work does or does not fall into the Latinx tradition based on the assessment of Latinx aesthetics and history. I again convey my apprehension with it being called or considered exclusively Latinx literature. Nonetheless, I present a conclusion on the matter after a thorough analysis and comparison of my work with the generally accepted aesthetics of Latinx literature.

My desire with this collection is that it serves to view Latinx narratives as more than a tale of conflicted identities and infinite battle for social justice and equality. I feel that some of the authors I have addressed here have already been successful at that. As texts that are inspired by personal experiences it is challenging to not fall into the trap of sounding telegraphic and predictable. Nonetheless, I believe I have been successful in weaving narratives that pique reader interest that at the same time offer insight into the social constructs of a diasporic Caribbean Latinx community.

CHAPTER 1

UNDERSTANDING LATINX LITERATURE

The contemporary Latinx short story collection I am presenting is inspired and influenced by my experience as a Latino gay man growing up in the late 1970s and early 1980s between Newark, New Jersey and Puerto Rico. Like other diasporic groups who are heavily influenced by their places of origin, the Caribbean diaspora is highly influenced by socio-cultural traits that heavily permeate Caribbean cultures. I believe that my work is like the work of other Latinx writers, mainly Caribbean Latinx writers, in that the homeland and Caribbean culture permeate some aspects of my work. From religion and religious beliefs, to social stereotypes, to *machismo* and constructions of masculinity, Caribbean culture—which the diaspora has transplanted to the mainland—is the foundation of the Caribbean diaspora. While I have had the opportunity to live and experience my Latinidad in the diaspora and the homeland, some Latinx authors “have never lived in or visited their homelands,” and yet their “homeland informs their work at a social, cultural, political, and historical level” (Kevane 3). What makes my collection an expression of Latinx literature is its interest in the Latinx experience which includes identity, cultural hybridity, community, and memory. However, as I will later explain, I would prefer my work not just be considered Latinx literature exclusively. Among the writers that have influenced my work are a combination of Latinx and Latin American writers. Among these are Piri Thomas, Junot Díaz, Ana Lydia Vega, Mayra Santos Febres, and Manuel Ramos Otero. The Latinx writers that I consider highly influential are Julia Álvarez, Cristina García, Tomás Rivera, and Richard Rodriguez. The works produced by these writers have influenced my approach to writing mostly as it pertains to themes and style. Community, autobiographical experiences, loss, homophobia,

and *machismo* are some of the themes and topics these authors address and have inspired some of the texts in my collection.

According to Bridget Kevane, Latinx literature reflects the bicultural reality experienced by Latinx individuals in the United States:

Much of the terminology used by critics, readers, and writers describes the sense of displacement that reveals what it feels like to be Latino: a hybrid, bilingual, bicultural individual who is sharing two worlds, straddling the fence, belonging neither here nor there, being gringorriqueño, a Dominican American, a Dominican York, a gringa Dominican, a Nuyorican, a neorican, a Chicano, a mexicano Americano.” (Kevane 9)

While I do not oppose Kevane’s argument, I do believe that my work, and to some degree the work of other authors like Junot Díaz, does not necessarily emphasize hybridity as a struggle but as a reality that is embraced. Instead of “straddling the fence,” I’d rather say that some of my characters walk back and forth through the gate or at times stay on the U.S. side and look through the holes in the chain link. In other words, these characters are at home on either side of the fence. Nonetheless, this collection of short stories focuses more on universal themes like alienation, loss, parenthood, and friendship and how they play out in a diasporic Hispanic Caribbean culture. For example, in my story “Sundays with Abuelo,” a young boy named Jimmy is alienated by his *machista* father who prefers to spend his time detailing his car. Jimmy also experiences a great loss when his loving grandfather decides to move back to Puerto Rico.

Kevane also believes that an element that characterizes Latinx literature is the duality of characters’ identities as well as the authors’ identities, consequently allowing Latinos to claim

two homelands. Landscape is an imperative element in the work of these authors. Latinx authors “draw on their urban and rural landscapes to emphasize how the sense of place affects the individual” (Kevane 10). I agree with Kevane’s assertion. The places where I have lived have affected the individuals or characters in my story. I also believe, however, that just as important as the landscape itself is the specific group of individuals from different walks of life who by chance happen to congregate in a particular landscape and given their receptiveness to social interaction produce experiences worthy of being recorded and told. As you can see in this collection of short stories, I do not circumscribe the narrative to just a group of Latinx characters. I also demonstrate that the Latinx experience is also a multi-cultural experience. Latinx communities are not always exclusively Latinx communities. They are also multi-cultural enclaves. Consequently, these stories reflect that multi-racial and multi-ethnic reality.

Among my literary influences are Piri Thomas, Junot Díaz, Ana Lydia Vega, Manuel Ramos Otero, and Mayra Santos Febres. The works of these authors offered me some needed insight into different aspects of my culture and my reality. Ana Lydia Vega, for example, offered political insight. Her nationalist views helped me understand how I, and my fellow Puerto Ricans who reside on the island, are not American citizens with full rights and how we are consequently viewed as second-class citizens due to our colonial status. More importantly, her views helped me cement my pride in my culture and heritage. Mayra Santos Febres’s work has played an important role in helping me define and accept my identity as a Hispanic man of color and understand how said condition puts me at a disadvantage among those who are not Hispanic men of color. The importance of Manuel Ramos Otero resides in his unapologetic and crude exposition of his homosexuality. At a time when homosexuality was still generally not accepted,

Ramos Otero did not hold back in exposing and expressing his homosexual identity with pride. Piri Thomas's work has offered insight into how one can use art, in this case literature, to express the frustrating obstacles we as Latinx people of color face in order to enter and succeed in mainstream America. Lastly, I see Junot Díaz's work as an example of how the inspiration for good literature can be found in our communities and history. Díaz's stories demonstrate that our stories are worthy of being told and that Latinx readership is looking for works in which they are represented.

As I stated above, my stories cover a series of themes which include alienation, loss, parenthood, and friendship, but they also address drug addiction, homophobia, homosexuality, circular migration, masculinity, *machismo*, domestic violence, race, identity, HIV/AIDS, and emotional neglect. Sometimes several of these themes appear in one text, other times the story focuses on one specific theme. Although these stories are inspired by lived experiences, they are not entirely autobiographical. In other words, this is not a history of my life.

In the preface to *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*, Judith Ortíz Cofer explains that her works are “creative explorations of known territories,” and that is a good way to describe my own writing. In other words, Ortíz Cofer is saying that she is inspired by her personal life experiences but is not necessarily interested in restating these experiences as they happened. Rather, she sees them as an inspiration or a starting point to a greater creative endeavor. She adds, “Much of my writing begins as a meditation of past events” (12). Like Ortíz Cofer, I believe that memory is a starting point and that I am not bound to it. The goal is not to tell the truth but to be inspired by it. Ortíz Cofer says that the story or the poem should contain the “truth” of art rather than the factual, historical truth that the journalist,

sociologist, scientist—most of the rest of the world—must adhere to” (12). By this I understand that Ortiz Cofer is saying that narratives that are inspired by memory and lived experiences do not to be entirely factual, but that memory could be the starting point to a creative literary endeavor.

For the most part, these stories are all set in a period of my life that covers the time between the ages of six and eleven. I found myself time after time, writing about things that took place during this period of my life. I have wondered why I instinctively focused in this period of my life, why I am so drawn to it. I have concluded that I did so because, probably, this has been the happiest period in my life. Nonetheless, this does not mean that I am writing about happy things. On the contrary, the characters in these stories face a series of familial, social, and physical challenges that leave little room for happiness. Moreover, these challenges lead these characters to be alienated, marginalized and in some cases, face death. Consequently, I am puzzled by how what I thought to be the happiest time in my life was in fact filled with turmoil and despair. Furthermore, I understand that these are important formative years in which lived experiences formed the adult I am today.

The first language I spoke and wrote was the Spanish language. Nonetheless, the period of my life in which these stories are based took place in a bilingual environment. During this same period, my early academic formation was all in English. Manuel Ramos Otero states that although he wrote most of his published work in New York City, he wrote it all in Spanish because Spanish is his language of memory (Costa 64). I believe this is a good explanation for why I chose to write about my years in the City in English. Even though I was living in a bilingual environment during that period of my life, I was becoming more aware of and more

receptive to what I have believed to be an American identity. Consequently, my memories, my language of memory at that time is in English. However, a lot of the memory is also in Spanish. For example, the chatter and banter sustained by the women in my story “Daniel’s Women,” all happened in Spanish. Likewise, any interaction with my grandmother or grandfather occurred in Spanish because they did not speak English.

I also needed to write these stories in English because it is in this language that I first developed a complex sense of humor. In Spanish, my humor was naïve. It is in the English language in which I learned to mock, to get punchlines, to be sarcastic, to hide my pain with humor, to be a cynic. Consequently, it is easier for me to tackle emotions in English and have my characters do the same. I have been lucky enough to have experienced humor in many different Hispanic cultures. The challenge is that humor in Spanish is many times expressed in colloquial language with culturally specific terminology that sometimes is difficult to “translate” from one culture to another.

I rarely incorporate code-switching in my work and personally do not use it to communicate with fellow Latinx individuals. I do not see it as necessarily an affirmation of Latinx identity as there are many Latinx individuals who do not code switch. The inclusion of Spanish words and phrases is seen by some as a way for Latinx writers to reaffirm their Hispanic identity, and some consider it a marker of Latinx literature. According to Lucía V. Aranda, “it is precisely through language that cultural loyalty and identification are more strongly preserved among minorities” (62). She adds that in addition to Spanish representing cultural loyalty and identification, the use of Spanish in Latino literature is a symbol of difference:

Much of U.S. Latinx literature has ethnic identity, and language (i.e., Spanish) is its most outstanding symbol, and is probably the most significant means of appropriating space for its own place in an otherwise English discourse. Thus, code switching in U.S. Latinx literature can be seen as: 1) a reflection of linguistic reality past and/or present and, 2) the cultural identification Spanish affords U.S. Latinos. (Aranda 63)

Code-switching should be incorporated if the community the author seeks to represent uses code switching habitually. Not all Latinx individuals employ code-switching to communicate, however. From personal experience as an educator, I have noticed that this practice is becoming less and less common even among the youngest students. Even in informal gatherings, code-switching is less apparent. I believe in part this has to do with how Latinx communities are becoming more heterogeneous. By this I mean that it is more common for Latinx individuals of different backgrounds to share spaces, in urban centers at least. Code-switching, I have experienced, employs a lot of Spanish slang. Consequently, it hinders comprehension among individuals of different Hispanic backgrounds. Also, Latinx individuals are better educated and are better prepared to communicate in English. Interestingly, I do not believe that Latinx individuals who employ less code-switching or none at all feel any less Latino as long as they have a knowledge of Spanish.

In *The Other Latin@: Writing a Singular Identity*, Blas Falconer and Loraine M. López state that “there is no single essential or singular trait of Latino identity” (1). Moreover, they argue that the idea of a Latino people as one homogeneous group is a way the dominant culture can attain “fast access and easy comprehension” to that which is alien to them. Consequently,

some Latinx writers have taken on the roles of “mediator, translator, or insider ethnographer bearing literary artifacts from the native culture to enlighten and entertain members of the dominant culture” (1). Moreover, “[he] or she often succumbs to the pressure to support the illusion of cultural cohesion despite multiple variations that challenge, counter and flat out deny the assertions of sameness that are necessary for promoting even the feasibility of such a spokesperson” (1). However, they also argue that there are other Latinx writers who “resist essentializing Latino myths of Latino cultural identity while somehow clinging to the notion of a clearly recognizable Latino experience presented through literature” (1). In *On Latinidad*, Marta Caminero-Santangelo expresses that Latinx literature itself argues against essentialist categorization:

...most prominent examples of Latino/a literature virtually do not address the differences—or even the relationships—between the various Latino/a groups at all. Sandra Cisneros, Rudolfo Anaya, and Ana Castillo write about Mexican Americans. Cristina García and Oscar Hijuelos write about Cubans. Julia Álvarez and Junot Díaz write about Dominicans. Esmeralda Santiago, Judith Ortíz Cofer, and Piri Thomas write about Puerto Ricans. (*On Latinidad* 9)

She adds that “[i]nteractions between characters from the author’s own ethnic group and other ‘Latino’ groups have been represented infrequently or not at all” (9). Moreover, there is inconsistency among authors about these essentialist categorizations. Gustavo Pérez Firmat, for example, disavows the term “Latino” which he considers an empty concept given that a “Latino” has no place of origin or defined culture (*On Latinidad* 10). Whereas Pérez Firmat disavows the term “Latino,” Richard Rodriguez embraces the term “Hispanic” over “Latino” arguing that the

term asserts brownness and a relationship with Latin America (Falconer and López 2). On the other hand, Sandra Cisneros rejects the term “Hispanic” because she considers it imposed (Falconer and Lopez 2).

Although I have called my work a Latinx collection, I would like for it to not be viewed exclusively as Latinx literature. By stating this, I am not rejecting or disavowing Latinx literature or Latinx writers. I would rather it be called simply literature that is written by a Latinx writer because I do not want to be pigeon-holed into a particular category. I believe that I belong to a generation that—although render still suffering from racial prejudice and marginalization—is comfortable enough in calling themselves Americans that they would prefer that their artistic production be “labelless.” However, this neutral or labelless space can most easily be reached by how much your work or resembles what is considered to be representative of the dominant or “normal” culture, in other words, heterosexual, white or Caucasian culture. Consequently, this labelless or neutral space is really unachievable. Moreover, this wish to achieve this labelless or neutral status raises important questions for me: Am I betraying my identity and my culture by not making it the focal point of my work? How can I actually achieve that neutrality, in other words, that parity with other non-ethnic writers, when in fact the universal experiences I want to portray stem from my experiences as a Latinx gay man of color growing up in the United States.

I do not make it a point to emphasize my Latinidad in my work, nor do I want to characterize the “struggle.” In this collection I write about universal life experiences that just happen to occur in a Latinx community or environment. Some may argue that these “universal” life experiences are in fact not universal and are produced or enabled by my specific subject position as a bilingual gay person of color. Nonetheless, I do not choose to share or write

about—at least not at this point—experiences of racial marginalization, poverty, or lack of accessibility to a first-rate education for example. I would rather write about things like loss, alienation, and friendship. That is not to say that I do not address themes that distinguish Latinx literature like hybrid identity, bilingualism, or *machismo*. Nevertheless, by trying to characterize Latinx literature as “labelless” or challenging a specific categorization we, as Falconer and López state, “defy the limitations that categorization imposes on production of creative work and [we] dismantle stereotypes concerning cultural identity” (2).

CHAPTER 2

INSPIRATION

As I stated previously, there are authors that have heavily influenced my writing. Ana Lydia Vega is one of those authors. Ana Lydia Vega is a Puerto Rican short story writer, screenwriter, and essayist who has been very critical and vocal about what she considers to be a political, social, economic, and military imposition of the United States over Puerto Rico. Ezra Engling states, “The themes of search for national, racial and linguistic identity, often via a consideration of regional consciousness and sexual politics, are central to the exploration of the Puerto Rican dilemma because of the island’s plural colonial experience and a heritage defined by paternalism and the patriarchy”(341). While the theme of colonial imposition is repeatedly reflected in her work, Vega, contrary to a generalized belief, does not believe that Puerto Ricans suffer from an identity crisis due to these impositions. On the contrary, she believes that Puerto Ricans are quite clear and quite aware of their identity. She argues that what Puerto Ricans face is in fact a challenge to maintain their identity as they struggle to balance living with the linguistic, political, and cultural imposition of the dominant culture:

Cuando se juntan esa imposición cultural, política y económica, que es una ocupación, como una ocupación militar también que hay en mi país con esta manera de vivir los puertorriqueños, que se ve como algo subordinado, como algo inferior a esa cultura dominante, o bien en el encuentro, en el conflicto de las cosas, tienen que surgir nuevas maneras de mirar la realidad y de vivir. (Matibag 78)

Vega also argues that Puerto Ricans face a type of psychological disgllossia due to having to live in a system in which Puerto Rican values have been subordinated to American values. She

adds, “Y lo que sucede no es que el puertorriqueño tenga una crisis de identidad; está obligado a vivir en un sistema dualista, disglóssico” (Matibag 79).

From a literary perspective, this Puerto Rican writer has been accused of favoring style over substance which she has unapologetically accepted to be true. She claims, “Eso es cierto, yo lo trabajo mucho, y de manera obsesiva, a veces estoy meses y años trabajando cuentos porque hay palabras que no están bien, tienen que sonar bien y tienen que tener una rima interna...”(Matibag 79). Her predilection of style over substance comes, according to Vega, from her true vocation, poetry, of which she has reluctantly not published due to a sense of inadequacy after she compared her work to other accomplished Puerto Rican poets. However, it is Vega’s obsession with style that I wish to emulate. It is dry and epigrammatic and yet it is aesthetically pleasing to the ear and encourages you to continue reading not so much to hear what she has to say, but to read, hear and experience how she says it.

I consider three of Vega’s stories particularly influential: “Encancaranublado,” “Craneo para verano y tres soneos por encargo,” as well as “Pollito Chicken.” In “Encancaranublado,” Vega tackles what she calls the effects of imperialism in Caribbean nations:

El imperialismo en el Caribe que causa una desunión de pueblos que tienen una trayectoria histórica común; tenemos todos en común el trasfondo étnico, histórico, político, cultural. Todas las cosas nos unen pero el imperialismo, la dominación y las distintas metrópolis que han colonizado al país –Francia, Inglaterra, Estados Unidos, Holanda-- son las que realmente nos han separado porque todo lo demás es igual en todo el Caribe, el Caribe es una región bien definida con una cultura bien definida y si tu viajas de

isla en isla te das cuenta de los parecidos y las cosas que compartimos. (Matibag 80).

Vega argues that her story, “Encancaranublado,” allegorizes the similarities shared by the peoples of the Caribbean. These peoples are united by these similarities but are separated by the effects of imperialism. In the story a Haitian man, Antenor, is on a makeshift boat sailing treacherous, shark infested waters. The boat is in such poor state that he uses his *guayabera* as a sail. He is trying to reach the United States. He encounters a Dominican castaway whom he allows to board his boat. The Dominican is grateful to the Haitian for his benevolence. Without understanding each other they share stories about what they left behind and what they were hoping to find. Among the similarities Diógenes and Antenor share are being black and poor as well as having survived dictatorships. The two men come across a third castaway, a Cuban clinging to a floating log. Once on board, the Cuban and Dominican feel entitled to the Antenor’s victuals, which they sequester without Antenor’s approval. The trio is finally rescued by an American merchant marine vessel. The captain of the ship ordered his crew to “[get] those niggers down there and let the spiks take care of em.” The story ends with a black Puerto Rican warning the trio that they must earn their keep if they wish to remain on the boat as he extends his black arm to give them dry clothes. Ezra Engling states, “In ending the piece in the hold of what turns out to be a modern slave ship, Vega's message is clear: when the commonly oppressed refuse to cooperate with each other, the oppressor prevails” (350). Vega is using this story to comment on the economic and socio-political realities of Hispanic Caribbean nations and Haiti at the time this piece was published. She is addressing how those economic and socio-political realities force the story’s characters to risk life and limb to reach U.S. shores in search

of a better life. Moreover, she is commenting on the discrimination and marginalization the immigrants from these nations face in the United States in part because of their African heritage. However, the most significant observation Vega makes is that the divide between Latinx people from different countries and different ethnic and racial backgrounds works against them and keeps them marginalized. In this case, the three castaways all come from three nations that—at some point in their histories were all under U.S. occupation--are transplanting their biases into a society that sees no difference among them. Therefore, while they claim unity as a marginalized group with a perceived shared cultural heritage, their internalized prejudices towards one another are only aiding the existing systematic oppression that keeps them at the margins. Instead of genuinely fighting this marginalization as a collective in the United States, they are being derailed by a competition to determine who is worthy of acceptance into mainstream America, meaning white America, as they climb the socio-economic ladder and embrace inherited prejudice beliefs. Consequently, the higher the position they achieve on the socio-economic ladder, the less inclined they are to actively take part in the fight against discrimination. Hence, embracing and defending their shared *Latinidad* then takes a backseat to individual gain.

In another story by Vega, “Pollito Chicken,” written in Spanglish, the author engages in satire and criticizes those immigrants who move to the United States and turn their back on their culture through assimilation and acculturation.

In the story, Puerto Rico native Suzie Bermúdez returns to the island on vacation. Suzie, according to Engling, “does not return to the island out of homesickness or the need to reestablish her roots,” but as an assimilated individual who now sees the island through the eyes of the dominant culture and comes to “regard Puerto Rico as the ‘tropical terminus of the

American way of life,” (342). The third-person voice is used to “[recall] and [filter] the story through Suzie’s bicultural, bilingual stream of consciousness at the same time that it undermines and ridicules her attempts at assimilation into Anglo society ” (Engling 342 As I stated earlier in the analysis of “Encancaranublado,” as Latinos assimilate and achieve what they believe to be acceptance into mainstream America or Anglo society, they are less inclined to remain associated with their places of origin. In fact, they tend to adopt positions of superiority towards Hispanic cultures. Such is the case with Suzie, who, after ten years of living in the mainland United States, feels entitled to belittle and demean her heritage. She does this by disparaging its popular culture and hoping to associate only with fellow tourists who are Caucasian. Suzie then represents what I consider to be the ambiguity of Latinidad, an ambiguity that is not present in African American culture for example. African American culture leaves little room for ambiguity, in other words it is distinctly African American as opposed to Anglo-American culture. African Americans of all social classes are seemingly consistent in, for example, the culture’s quest for empowerment. Latinx cultures is, in my view, less united and consistent. Due to transplanted ideals of class and race, it seems many are willing to defend their Latinidad until they feel validated and “accepted” in Anglo society. Consequently, this ambiguity does not allow for Latinx culture to maintain a consistent and unified front against discrimination and marginalization.

The third of Vega’s stories which I consider highly influential is “Letra para salsa y tres soneos por encargo.” Mary Green states, “‘Letra para salsa’ is related by a fictive third-person narrator and describes the sexual confrontation between a man and a woman in San Juan” (131). I would argue that using the term “confrontation” to describe the sexual encounter of the two

main characters does a disservice to the piece as it gives it a violent connotation and this is nothing further from the truth. If anything, it is a feminist affirmation of sexual liberation and independence in which la Tipa, the female protagonist, engages in the sexual encounter as a voluntary participant with equal power and say as her male counterpart. In fact, I would dare say she actually wields more power as she is the one who picks up her sexual partner, chooses the motel, pays for it and once in the motel initiates the encounter by undressing and condescendingly throwing a condom at her suitor. In the end, their sexual encounter is not consummated as el Tipo, the male protagonist, is unable to perform, seemingly intimidated by a woman in control of her own sexuality.

Of the three of Vega's stories mentioned here, it is "Letra para salsa" the most emblematic of the epigrammatic style she is known for and I wish to also be able to emulate. She achieves an amalgam of sophisticated language, slang, and popular sayings that is both pleasing to the ear and sexually charged. Its weakness some may argue, resides in its regionalism, seemingly only comprehensible by Puerto Ricans or anyone who is familiar with Puerto Rican popular culture. Nonetheless, I feel that its value, as it pertains to my body of work, is Vega's ability to take the most mundane of themes, such as a fortuitous sexual encounter, and transform it into an affirmation of female empowerment and a critique of the macho, while it simultaneously takes a shot at the island's political relationship with the United States. In this case, the island's political status has resulted in a scarcity of formidable male specimens as they have either been lost as casualties of the Vietnam War or have simply emigrated to the mainland. Consequently in my work, I wish to intertwine the very simple and basic views of the world, as

seen through the eyes of a young boy, with a sophisticated and formal language that captures and conveys themes, that although stem from a Latinx experience, are in essence universal.

In a study about the Puerto Rican female as represented in the stories “Pollito Chicken” and “Letra para salsa y tres soneos por encargo,” Mary Green states that the representation of the female characters in both stories “conflicts with the images of women perpetuated by earlier generations of (male) writers in Puerto Rico.” She adds that “[in] general terms, Vega’s work reflects the discord between the contemporary values of urban, capitalist society and the traditional values of the declining, rural society mythologized by the post-1898 nationalist movement” (129). Moreover, “A reading of this story in terms of gender allows la Tropa to articulate a subjectivity that is not oppressed by patriarchy” (131).

Vega has influenced my writing in several ways. First her ability to make serious issues humorous in her particular epigrammatic style in which she mixes formal language with slang, is something that is present in my work but needs further development and exploration. Second, Vega writes about the everyday man—at times highly marginalized—and his struggle with identity, politics, finances, sexuality, or substance abuse for example. Finally, probably the most challenging aspect of Vega’s writing is her use of satire, which in her case is used among other things to ridicule prevailing social constructs such as *machismo* and to criticize Puerto Rico’s colonial status. Given the themes and the social and political message she wants to convey, with satire she is able to do so in a way that is not perceived as threatening or can be deemed militant by those who share opposing political views. In my writing, I too challenge *machismo* for example, but it is often contextualized in such violent and demeaning situations that I question if employing satire would weaken the impact I wish to make.

Another Puerto Rican author who has had a significant influence on my writing is Manuel Ramos Otero. Ramos Otero wrote prose as well as poetry. In an interview with Marithelma Costa, Ramos Otero explains what drove him to leave Puerto Rico for New York and how his life experiences affected his writing. In 1968 he moved to New York to study film which turned out to be a financially unsustainable endeavor. He ended up studying theater direction with Lee Strasberg and eventually formed a theater troupe with other actors from Puerto Rico. According to Ramos Otero, he moved to New York in order to escape the social repression he felt living as an openly gay man in 1960s Puerto Rico and to find a lover. In 1977, he returned to Puerto Rico, lover and all, with a Master's degree in literature and was unable to find work because he had published texts that openly dealt with homosexuality.

Although Ramos Otero published all his work in New York, he wrote in Spanish, which he viewed as a way to protect his cultural expression. He believed living and writing in New York benefitted his writing because it helped him develop his literary language. It is a literary language that he claimed evolved with his own reading, his contact with Latin Americans, and his need to preserve said language. He did however write in English, but he understood that it was not as fulfilling as writing in Spanish which he describes as a language of memory, of childhood experiences, and everything he knew before he arrived in New York. Moreover, he sees writing in Spanish as an expression of his Puerto Rican identity. Writing in Spanish is also a political expression which he uses to express his position against imposed and forced assimilation. He also establishes an interesting contrast between how New York influenced his work compared to previous generations of Puerto Rican writers who wrote in and whose work

was influenced by the city. He claimed that for writers like Pedro Juan Soto and Jose Luis Gonzalez, New York was a monster, for Ramos Otero, New York was anything but a monster.

Ramos Otero's work is characterized by themes such as love, death, sexuality and freedom. His poetry is more theatrical and colloquial, whereas his fiction is more poetic. He published two collections of poetry, the second and last one, *Invitación al polvo*, was published posthumously. According to Juan Diego Celdrán's interpretation, the title is an allusion to Francisco's de Quevedo's poem "Amor constante más allá de la muerte". However, it is also an allusion to a colloquial expression popular in Puerto Rico and several other Spanish speaking countries, which has heavy sexual connotation. "Polvo" or "echar un polvo" refers to the sexual act. The themes that stand out in this collection are death, homosexuality, unrequited love, and fleeting time.

In poem #8 of *Invitación al Polvo*, Ramos characterizes time as an inquisitor that constantly follows us to remind us of our failures and misfortunes. For example, he says of a laborer: "¿Qué obrero pierde la vida amontonando cansancios si al reflejo de su historia sonean otros su canto si su memoria es un callo de mil esperanzas rotas si su piel sabe la nota de estar vivo y desahuciado?" In these verses, the life of the laborer has come to an end, in other words, his time is up but does not have much to show for a lifelong lived.

Ramos Otero used his work, his prose as well as his poetry, to express the struggles he faced as a homosexual Latinx man. He was a provocateur, as he, for example, frequently used the colloquial terms for the male sexual organ in Puerto Rican culture, *bicho* or *pinga*, in his work. However, it was his references to the loneliness he experienced as gay man living a promiscuous life in New York, which pushed the boundaries of modesty. In poem #18 he

mentions the name José, who he refers to as his lover in other poems. In this poem he begins and ends it with the same verses in which he wishes to explain the loneliness lovers feel. In poem #25 he speaks of the rejection and condemnation he faces as a gay man and how he is betraying the canons of a heteronormative society: heterosexual relationships and family. We can appreciate this in the following verse: “Habr  quien diga, coraz n, que nuestro amor traiciona la familia, perfecto p ramo de toda sociedad futura. Habr  quien llamar  locura lo que no es decoroso nombrar en alta voz, porque no es natural esta pasi n oscura, esta fugaz lujuria de turbio callej n.” As for the theme of unrequited love, his mysterious lover, Jos  whom I previously mentioned, seems to be the culprit. In several instances, Ramos Otero laments Jos ’s absence and reminisces of happier days or of what could have been. Poem #6 is about Jos ’s fleeting presence in the author’s life while poem #10 is a sensuous ode to Jos , his body and their encounters.

Death is another recurrent theme in Ramos Otero’s work. He derides its inevitability and satirizes its mystery. For example, in “Insomnio” he states that he fears that death might be an eternal state of insomnia in which he finds no one to screw him.

Lastly, I would like to address the poem “Nobleza de sangre.” In this poem, Ramos Otero sarcastically thanks God for AIDS and chastises the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church. Moreover, he condemns the marginalization and discrimination AIDS patients face. In addition, he compares AIDS and the social oppression that resulted from its misconception to a form of modern-day crucifixion. He states, “Ya han cometido contra nosotros las barbaridades (y muchas mas) que dicen haber hecho contigo (con m todos privilegiados de nuestra era claro esta).” This poem is of significance because it has served as inspiration for the centerpiece of my

collection, “Daniel’s Women.” The story takes place during the early years of the AIDS pandemic, at a time in which it still was not understood. The main character, Jimmy, an eight-year-old boy, meets and becomes emotionally vested in a new neighbor, Daniel, who is gay and succumbs to the disease. After Daniel’s death, Jimmy also questions God’s intentions and motivation.

Ramos Otero’s work in prose includes essays, a novel and several short story collections, *Cuento de metal y otras orgías de soledad* is his first published short-story collection. I consider his short stories particularly interesting because he writes of marginalized or outsiders not as victims, but as empowered observers of society, who believe they are above the mundane social system they are disappointingly a part of. To some degree, the short stories “Hollywood Memorabilia” and “La última plena que bailó Luberza” reflect the author’s affinity with individuals who stand at the margins.

Written in the first person, “Hollywood Memorabilia” narrates the story of a twenty-three-year old author who is a social researcher and a part-time projectionist at a movie theater that only shows movies from the thirties and forties. When I discovered this text I was going through my personal obsession with cinema and beginning to write my first stories. Like the main character, I was also an avid reader of the *Village Voice* and obsessed with dying at a young age. The similarities between my interests and concerns and the interests and concerns of the story’s character were initially scarily similar. Nonetheless, the story opened a window of narrative possibilities to me. The fact that Ramos Otero developed a gay character through which he expressed and shared his personal obsessions and interests helped me understand that my experiences were as good a source for inspiration as the lives and experiences of others I was

focusing on to write my stories. In “Hollywood Memorabilia,” the main character narrates different life experiences—falling in love, spiritual awakenings, death—which he abhors and finds tedious. Nonetheless, he finds refuge in old Hollywood films, which he alludes to and uses to make sense of his personal experiences. A good example is a scene in which the main character is sitting in his projection booth and explains what he can appreciate from his privileged observation point. The main character states, “A veces interrumpo la mirada y escucho los suspiros de la audiencia sumergida en una soledad libre y desierta... (como la chica joven que lloraba en la escena final de *Imitation of Life*; o el chico vestido de revolucionario que casi no respira durante la proyección de *The Fountainhead*” (“Hollywood Memorabilia” 97). In this piece, there is a repetition of the themes present in *Invitación al Polvo*: death, unrequited love, homosexuality, and fleeting time. The main character repeats his wish to die at the age of thirty throughout the story, while he also dwells on fruitless relationships with four different lovers. The author uses his personal obsessions and frustrations to weave a narrative that seeks to give meaning to his existence and justify his death at the age of thirty; he was supposedly twenty-three when the story was written. In terms of how it influences my writing, in “Hollywood Memorabilia” Ramos Otero offers a very personal and honest account of a particular moment in his life and how the experiences lived in that period deeply influenced how he felt about life and its uncertainty. Likewise, my stories are inspired by a particular period of my life. Moreover, the main character, as well as secondary characters, have experiences that lead them to question life choices and bravely face the uncertainty of those choices.

Another of Manuel Ramos Otero’s better-known stories is based on the Isabel Luberza Oppenheier, a real life madam. Isabel “La Negra” Luberza Oppenheimer was a black madam

who owned a brothel in the city of Ponce, Puerto Rico during the first half of the twentieth century. The brothel known as *Elizabeth's Dancing Club*, attracted a diverse clientele that varied from blue collar workers to prominent political figures. Other authors who have been inspired by the infamous prostitute have been Rosario Ferré, who wrote “Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres,” and Mayra Santos Febres who wrote *Nuestra señora de la noche*. In “La última plena que bailó Luberza,” Ramos Otero narrates the last day in the life of Isabel la negra and her tragic death. According to Leonora Simonovis, in “La última plena que bailó Luberza,” Ramos Otero focuses on Luberza’s moral and physical decay. Simonovis states that Luberza “es una mujer cuya decadencia física deja percibir el paso de los años, así como el deterioro moral al que se ha sometido y que refleja la corrupción de la sociedad en la que vive” (67).

The story emphasizes Luberza’s triple marginalization or the intersection of her different identities that keep her at the margins: woman, Black, and a prostitute. Yet she is still a fierce businesswoman who can hold her own as she understands the ins and outs of government and church corruption which has allowed her to stay in business for over forty years. In all fairness, she led a type of business no one or very few would dare to lead. Nonetheless, it is understandable why Ramos Otero felt inspired to tell her story. They both challenged prevailing social norms in Puerto Rican society. In Ramos Otero’s case he wrote bluntly and abashedly about homosexuality, while Luberza, as a black woman, dared to head and be successful in a business which violated all social expectations of modesty and morality.

As a writer, this story has influenced my choice to write about outcasts or marginalized members of society and expose hypocritical social, religious, and political institutions that claim to be the guardians of righteousness and the rule of law.

Mayra Santos Febres is another writer who has influenced me. In her case, it is the way she places her identity as a black woman front and center of her narrative. She has been a visiting professor at Cornell and Harvard Universities. She is an academic and heads the writing workshop at the University of Puerto Rico. Her poems have been published in several international journals, such as *Casa de las Américas in Cuba*, *Página doce* in Argentina, *Revue Noire* of France and *Review: Latin American Literature and Arts* in New York (Escritores.org). She has published three collections of poems, *Anamú y Manigua*, *El orden escapado* and *Tercer Mundo*. She has also published two short story collections, *Pez de Vidrio* and *Oso Blanco* for which she won the Juan Rulfo prize. She has published four novels: *Cualquier miércoles soy tuya*, *Nuestra Señora de la noche*, *Fe en disfráz*, *El baile de mi vida*, and *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* which was a finalist for the Rómulo Gallegos prize (Escritores.org).

Santos Febres is a self-proclaimed feminist whose work focuses heavily on race and identity. As an Afro-Latina who has suffered oppression and marginalization from different perspectives—as a woman, a Latina, Black, and a feminist—she asserts that she writes precisely to challenge modes of oppression and marginalization. In some way, writing for Santos Febres is a form of vindication for her ancestors who were punished for daring to try to learn how to read and write:

A millones de esclavas las azotaron por intentar de dibujar aquellos terribles caracteres sobre superficie alguna, esas letras que las vendían o las liberaba, que le daban potestad al amo a brincarles a dentro o a vender a sus crios” (“¿Por qué escribo?” 66).

In an interview published in Afroféminas.com, Santos Febres was asked what she writes about and she explains that she writes about three specific topics: the Caribbean, what it feels like to be alive in the Caribbean, and stories about her ancestors. Asked about what it means for her to be a Black woman, Santos Febres states that in this particular moment in history, race is particularly defining for people of color. She adds that she is loved, hated, respected or devalued because she is a Black woman and that being a black woman is the primary motivation for her writing. And yet, she admits that she is fearful of being a black woman who writes. She claims that it is a fear that did not begin with her but that can be traced to slaves who dared to learn how to read and write. My understanding is that she is not fearful of writing itself, but rather it is fear she bears for just being, existing as a black individual, as a black woman. It is a fear that spills over into other aspects of life and she begins to question how her condition as a black woman will or will not affect those other aspects of life just because she is a black woman.

Consequently, as a female, Latina, and Black writer with a platform it is understandable how the fears that stem from those particular conditions may be validated by the way her work is received or interpreted: as written by a militant, Black, Latina or written by a talented author.

Santos Febres has influenced me as a writer in the way I embrace my identity. Her pride in her condition as a Black Latina is infectious. Consequently, I have grown to accept my condition as a Hispanic gay man of color who is not afraid to speak and write from those perspectives. In the interview for Afroféminas.com, Santos Febres says that as Afro-Latinx writers we have no choice but to live in fear, because, after all, we are Afro-descendants. Nonetheless, we should confront that fear through knowledge and not remain silent in these racially chaotic times. In my case, overcoming fear is manifested in my writing through the

development of characters that reflect some of the most injurious traits of Latino culture, like *machismo* and the dehumanization of homosexuals for example. Through these characters I am able to criticize and condemn these traits as well as applaud when a character has evolved, grown, and he or she too condemns these practices. By doing so, I am overcoming my fear of remaining silent which for the longest time I had confused with a fear of speaking up and having my voice and opinions be heard. In other words, my fear of remaining silent is what I call not taking advantage of a possible platform to condemn what I consider to be negative traits or beliefs in Latinx culture.

The Latinx writer who has influenced me the most is Junot Díaz and his Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In this coming of age novel, Diaz presents a Latinx main character who is a first generation American. Oscar, as the main character is named, is a Latinx teenager of Dominican descent who has embraced American popular culture, particularly displaying a keen affinity for superhero comic books. He is a geek who shows little interest in having a sex life. Nonetheless, he is pressured by his peers and relatives to abide by transplanted cultural expectations and exhibit the hypermasculine behavior distinctive of Dominican males in the Dominican Republic. By presenting a main character who embodies a diversity of cultural and social traits, Diaz is not only representing the diversity of Latinx communities, but he is also condemning how the preservation of certain inherited social and cultural practices can and are detrimental to those communities. What I admire about Diaz is how, as Ilan Stavans puts it, he breaks “from the traditional acculturation story, but also from the ethnic novel” (*Norton Anthology* 2352). In other words, the novel establishes what the younger people today refer to as a cultural reset, in this

case, a literary reset. In the novel, there is no lamenting about the chastising Spanish-speaking Latinos suffer about speaking Spanish or conflict over skin color for example. Instead, there is an acceptance of inherited traditions and beliefs and how they can coexist with American culture. Moreover, there is a lack of the typical contempt exhibited by Anglo-Americans toward Latinx cultures. It is in fact the manifestation of the culture itself which brings to the forefront its destructive nature. In other words, this is not a novel in which Latinx characters are the victims of discrimination and marginalization by Anglo society. It is the prejudices within Dominican culture itself that are the source of the demise of Oscar Wao.

In addition to *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Diaz's short story collection, *Drown*, has also had a significant influence on my work. *Drown* is inspired by Diaz's experience as an immigrant Dominican growing up in the Dominican Republic and the United States. The main character in several of the stories in this collection is Yunior, a young boy who belongs to the 1.5 generation, and like Oscar Wao, is trying to balance growing up in the United States while trying to live up to the expectation prescribed in Dominican culture. Among the stories that capture Yunior's struggle is "Fiesta 1980." In general terms, this story takes place one evening in 1980 in which Yunior and his family, led by his overbearing and abusive father, attend an extended family gathering. The action takes place in the family apartment, the family car, and the relatives' home. The events that stand out are Yunior's nervous reaction when he rides in his father's car, his father's extramarital affair of which Yunior is an unwilling witness, and the important role his mother and aunt play in comforting Yunior and creating a protective barrier against his father's aggression. It is Yunior's father, however, who draws my attention. As the disciplinarian, the provider, the role model for Dominican manhood, Diaz is using this

character to pinpoint the socially and emotionally destructive nature of Dominican hypermasculinity. Even though the text is distinctively Dominican in many aspects, it is nonetheless relatable and appealing, because of the universality of the themes, to readers of any cultural background.

One of the topics that draws me to Junot Diaz's work is his handling of masculinity and *machismo* in Dominican culture. For example, we have the case of Yuniors, Diaz's alter ego and the narrator of most of his texts. Yuniors represents young Dominican males in the Dominican Republic whose fathers have had to abandon them in search of better lives for themselves and their children. Consequently, young boys are left to base their constructed sense of masculinity on the traditional role models that remain. John Riofrio states, "The absence of the father figure and the perpetual reality of abandonment which accompanies this absence, oblige the generation of fatherless boys to construct their own vision of masculinity based, not only on the island's remaining men, but also the hollow remains of what the fathers have left behind" (26). Nonetheless, once on the U.S. mainland, Yuniors—although a geek himself—grows up to embrace and embody traditional Dominican hegemonic masculinity. On the other hand, his best friend Oscar Cabral, the main character of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, challenges these notions by embracing an intellectual lifestyle that does not involve the pursuit of sexual conquests as proof of virility and masculinity.

According to John Riofrio, "Masculinity, like race, disability or sexuality, is a component of identity which reveals profound insights about the world we live in as well as the ideologies which shape that world. Definitions of what it means to be a 'real man,' are imposed externally while functioning as social constructs masked as fundamental truths, the natural order of things"

(24). In Latin America, masculinity is defined by machismo, described by Riofrio as an “excess of masculinity”:

Machismo is present in representations of Latin Americans by Latin Americans, such as the epic Argentine gaucho poem by Martin Fierro or the Mexican corridos which sing of "el caudillo," but is also present in the ways in which the U.S. has figured Latino males in films like Zorro where Zorro is the archetypal Latin male: tall, swarthy, virile and mysterious. (25)

I must clarify that I am not singling out *machismo* as a defining characteristic of Latinx males. Latinx men also embody and practice, like men from many other cultures, positive and edifying behaviors. Latinx men also respect women and encourage their personal and professional growth, are responsible fathers, and are positive male role models. Nonetheless, speaking of Latin American men, Riofrio argues that cultural expectations of masculinity are still focused on virility. I would argue that as it relates to Latinx men, this would not be a fair generalization. Speaking from personal experience, and using my peers, brothers, cousins, and nephews as examples of contemporary Latinx men, members of the 1.5 generation or first generation U.S. born Puerto Ricans, I would argue that *machismo* or hypermasculinity is not a defining or predominant trait of these men. Instead, I would argue they reject these inherited beliefs and cultural expectations and have, for the most part, replaced them with sensibility and respect toward women and other definitions of gender and sexuality. Nevertheless, in Latin American nations, especially in places like the Dominican Republic, it seems that hypermasculine forms of masculinity are still socially acceptable.

Referring to a study conducted by Dominican sociologist E. Antonio Moya, Tara Buolos and Carmen Cañete Quesada argue that from a very early age Dominican males are made aware of the verbal and nonverbal behavior that make their masculinity questionable (174). Moreover, hypermasculinity in the Dominican Republic, according to Buolos and Cañete, is intrinsically tied to preserving a hegemonic system based on a set of values that perpetuates male superiority (174). Consequently, Diaz's two most important main characters Yunior and Oscar Wao, in their condition of culturally hybrid individuals, are confronted—especially Oscar—with the possibility of their manhood being questioned due to their active participation in intellectual endeavors and as well as in more sedentary American pass times.

In *Masculinity After Trujillo*, Maja Horn argues that Diaz's work, particularly *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and his second short story collection, *This Is How You Lose Her*, represent a type of cultural and social remittance through which Diaz sends back to the Dominican Republic a notion of how “Dominican gender relations and hegemonic notions of masculinity are articulated in the Dominican diaspora and what new gender models might emerge there” (125). Horn shares my opinion that through his work, Diaz is criticizing and condemning Dominican cultural beliefs about male hypersexuality and male domination. Nonetheless, she argues that it falls short of total condemnation and reevaluation due to its persistence labeling of women as either good or bad. This is an aspect of my work I chose to address with extreme care. While I do not categorize female characters as either good or bad based on social or cultural expectations, I do make a point to present female characters that partake in promoting and encouraging hegemonic notions of masculinity. In other words, these female characters are complicit in maintaining and reproducing these destructive notions of

masculinity. In the story “Daniel’s Women,” I present a character, Evelyn, who enters into an abusive relationship with a man in part because he fits the bill of what she had learned from female role models of what a true man should be or do. Among these supposedly manly traits is that he should drink and smoke. Finally, Buolos and Cañete argue that Díaz offers a new definition of Dominican masculinity by presenting two non-traditional Dominican young men—Oscar and Yuniór—who present traits that challenge the stereotypical Dominican male (176). I would say this is partially true. If we examine these characters closely, it is only Oscar who truly breaks with this definition. Yuniór, while aware that he has the option to not partake in that behavior, chooses to do so.

As I was writing my stories, I was also examining the constructions of masculinity I was exposed to. Having read Díaz’s work offered insight as to how literature can serve to study, criticize, and expose social constructs. In my case, the characters in stories such as “Sundays with Abuelo,” and “Chavela” inspired by my father and grandfather, offer contrasting conceptualizations of masculinity. The character, simply called Pop, inspired by my father, subscribes to more traditional forms of masculinity. This character shows little emotion and empathy towards others. He also believes in the Puerto Rican adage, “la mujer es de la casa y el hombre es de la calle.” Moreover, he believes that child rearing is entirely the woman’s job while his responsibility is to provide. On the other hand, the character inspired by my grandfather, simply called Abuelo, is not afraid of being affectionate and expresses his emotions. He is aware of the sacrifices his wife made, having to work and raise children by herself in Puerto Rico, while he worked in the United States. He longs to repay his wife for all her sacrifices by finally returning to the island.

Another author whom I consider influential is Piri Thomas. His seminal bildungsroman, *Down These Mean Streets* is a novel that focuses on race and racial identity among Puerto Ricans living in New York. Whereas Junot Diaz's work addresses and criticizes hegemonic masculinity in Dominican culture, Thomas's work addresses and criticizes the hypocrisy of so-called racial equality in Puerto Rican culture. Piri, the main character, is singled out in his own family because he has the darkest complexion while he also has to face the pervasiveness and violence that accompanied race relations in 1940s and 1950s New York City. In addition to the theme of race, Thomas also addresses how transplanted norms of masculinity manifested in a different, urban, and multicultural environment. Felice Blake argues that "As a way of adapting to the urban U. S. landscape, Piri embraces the "black macho" persona, or the hypermasculinized performance of black masculinity as the object of fear and desire" (95).

According to Marta Caminero-Santangelo, "The text explores several possible definitions of race: as rooted in biology, in social perception, or in self-definition; it both challenges and, at times, strategically appropriates dominant social understandings of race" (209). It is the persistent racism and colorism in Latinx communities--transplanted beliefs from places of origin-- that Thomas exposes and on which I would like to focus. It is an issue that I believe is yet to be fully understood by American society. I have found that the fact that the existence of racism or colorism in racially hybrid societies, as most non-Latinos perceive Latin America to be, is a reality that confounds them.

Thomas addresses the issue from a personal perspective. In other words, he uses his familial, intra-cultural experience to denounce it. In *Down These Mean Streets*, this issue is portrayed through Piri's confrontation with his father who is black and his brother who is

seemingly white. In the chapter ‘Brothers Under the Skin,’ Piri informs his brother José that he is planning to travel to the south in a voyage of self-discovery. His brother questions him about his decision to which Piri explains that he is in search of his worth in American society. In the south, he feels, he would learn how much a man of his color is truly valued. This discussion evolves into an argument about their physical differences and how, within their family, there is reluctance to accept their African heritage. In their argument, José tries to justify their difference in color by telling Piri that he is not Black because he is Puerto Rican. This is the focus of the text - Piri’s journey of self-discovery and acceptance as a Black Latinx man and how this reality affects every aspect of his existence. More importantly, it unmasks the racial prejudices ingrained in Latin American cultures.

In terms of themes, I have borrowed very little from this text. However, what I consider influential and inspirational is mostly how a Latinx author has found and used a platform such as literature to uncover and bring to light the topic of racism and colorism that is essentially taboo in Latin American cultures.

Thomas’s ability to comfortably maneuver between a variety of styles and registers, expressing himself in standard English, Black English, and distinctive Nuyorican Spanglish is an aspect of his writing I find worthy of imitation. I say this with the utmost respect, because I am able to appreciate how effective it is. At least for someone familiar with all three forms of expression, its use helps create distinctive atmospheres for the reader. Granted, I understand that there is no standard Spanglish, just as there is no standard Black English, nonetheless, the way Thomas employs his versions, shall we say, of these styles and registers, allows the reader to better situate characters, actions, and conflicts in time and space. I believe Thomas is

effective in balancing ethnic speech patterns and so-called standard English, employing each when necessary to create the appropriate atmosphere, ensuring he is not alienating any of his readers. In my work, I have tried to incorporate a distinctive form of speech representative of a particular ethnicity or nationality. However, in my case, I have also taken gender into account. Although the main character in my stories is a pre-adolescent Hispanic male, most other characters are female Hispanic inner-city women with no higher education. Consequently, the challenge for me was to create the distinctive speech patterns of these particular characters. This challenge was not limited to what and when to incorporate Spanglish terms, but it was also how to reflect particular inflections and intonations that were distinctive of inner-city women of Puerto Rican descent, versus inner-city women of Dominican or Cuban descent for example. If I was successful, is yet to be determined. If a reader can at least assume that these characters are of Caribbean origin, belonging to a particular social class, and with an obvious level of education, I will consider my text a stylistic success. Asked about coming to terms with his black identity, and if a black identity was central to his concept of self, Thomas states that he first wanted to be as a human being:

I was what I was. My greatest philosopher was Popeye the sailor man, who said, I am what I am, because that's what I am." Yes, I come from Puerto Rico. My people come from Puerto Rico, and my father comes from Cuba. I have different bloods in me: African blood, Taino blood, blood of the conquistadores. But I am a human being. Period. (McGill 182)

As in the texts of these influential writers, there are themes in my collection that stand out. In each story there is one predominant theme or in some cases several. Alienation, loss,

friendship, parenthood are themes that predominate in the collection. Although my roots are in the northeast, particularly New Jersey, and my stories take place mostly in Newark, New Jersey, in a traditional Nuyorican sense, my writing is not exactly autobiographical. Also, I do not write about my adaptation to life in Newark, and I do not have a second-class citizen complex. I am also not interested in writing about survival, or how to survive the mean streets of Newark, New Jersey. Moreover, as I stated previously, I do not focus on the struggle of racial discrimination. On the contrary, I try to focus on racial harmony as is my intention in “Claudia,” in which the main characters are a group of boys from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

I believe that Latinx characters appeal to Latinx readers regardless of the author’s or the character’s ethnic origin. By saying this I do not mean that I believe in an essentializing categorization. I understand that Latinx people are actually Latinx peoples, and that we have defined ethnic and cultural origins. Nonetheless, it can be argued that the members of the different Latinx cultures that inhabit the United States face similar levels of prejudice, racism, and marginalization regardless of immigration or citizenship status. In other words, Puerto Ricans face the same stigmas that other ethnic groups face. Consequently, the themes and the conflicts—whether social, racial, cultural, political, or familial—that Latinx writers address are shared among Latinx peoples. A good example of how Latinx literature can appeal to Latinx individuals regardless of ethnic origin is Pedro Piteri’s “Puerto Rican Obituary.”

In the poem, the author addresses a series of social and economic problems that poor Puerto Ricans face in New York. I could go a step further and say that these social and economic problems affect all poor immigrants regardless of race and ethnicity. However, the poem’s style and use of Spanglish is indicative that the poem is intended to represent Latinx

people, specifically Puerto Ricans. This proves Marta Caminero-Santangelo's thesis that most prominent examples of Latinx literature virtually do not address the differences or relationships between the different Latinx ethnic groups. Although Pietri's poem supports Caminero-Santangelo's thesis, it is a poem with which other ethnic groups can identify. Pietri wrote about problems and challenges affecting Puerto Ricans in New York. Nonetheless, the problems and challenges Puerto Ricans face also affect other poor immigrants in other parts of the country as well. That is why it would not be surprising that a poor Mexican farmer in Idaho identifies with the Puerto Ricans in Pietri's poem. Even though Latinx literature virtually does not address the difference or relationships between different Latinx ethnic groups, these groups share similar experiences and challenges and this is why text that represents Mexican immigrants can appeal to a Guatemalan in Virginia.

In the poem, Pietri addresses topics like the reality of hard-working and exploited individuals who came to the United States in search of opportunities and died just as poor as they arrived. He also addresses their deplorable living conditions; the longing to enter the mainstream, to be at least middle class; and the dream that their children could work their way out of poverty. As I have stated previously, these are themes that are relatable to any immigrant living in poverty. What makes it specific is that Pietri is addressing these issues as Puerto Rican problems. Consequently, Pietri's intention is to make sure the reader understands that these are both general issues and very specific problems affecting a very specific group of people.

In addition to Ana Lydia Vega, Mayra Santos Fuentes, Manuel Ramos Otero, Piri Thomas, and Junot Díaz, there are other Latino writers who have also influenced my writing.

These writers are Gloria Anzaldúa, Tomás Rivera, Julia Alvarez, Cristina García, and Richard Rodriguez.

A major theoretician of *mestizaje*, Gloria Anzaldúa's explorations of racism, inequality, lesbianism, homophobia, machismo, and hybridity have had a significant influence on my work. Of all these subjects it is probably her exploration of lesbianism and homophobia in Latino culture which has impacted me most. Anzaldúa appropriately expresses how Latinx individuals with extreme conservative backgrounds, particularly Catholic backgrounds, find ourselves needing to abandon or distance ourselves from the family to only find ourselves trapped in fear of rejection if we were to reveal our true selves. According to Maria Lugones, Anzaldúa thinks of homophobia as "'the fear of going home.' The fear of being caught in the *intersticios*, or the fear of being abandoned by La Raza" (33).

In "Gloria Anzaldúa: La Gran Nueva Mestiza Theorist, Writer, Activist, Scholar," Emma Pérez states that Anzaldúa's "writings illustrate that she has always lived between many worlds and to expect her work to reflect only one world or one identity was false" (3). Pérez adds, "As a queer Chicana from south Texas, Anzaldúa inhabited multiple identities at once, just as we all do, and she reminded us that our movement between and among these borderlands was necessary for our cultural and political survival" (3). More importantly, Pérez states that Anzaldúa argued "that queers of color in the borderlands navigate a politically charged and racialized terrain in which harsh violence is always a danger" (3). I have never lived in or even visited the borderlands that Anzaldúa inhabited. Nonetheless, I agree with Pérez's assertion about the need of queer people of color to move between and among the borderlands for cultural and political survival. It is true for queer people of color all over the United States. It is also true that there

are places like major urban centers that offer queer people of color safer spaces where they are able to exist with less fear. Nonetheless, if those spaces as immigrant hubs are also centers where transplanted beliefs or ideals proliferate, then they also represent a challenge to a queer person of color's political and cultural survival. I would dare say that being able to express her reality through her work was for Anzaldua another more effective way of achieving political and cultural survival, which also sought to make visible the challenges queer people of color face. Is that what I seek to achieve with my work? Probably not. In fact, I have yet to fully embrace my voice as a queer person of color, consequently my work falls short in that respect. Also, I have yet to write about the present. I would say then that in the tradition of Latinx literature, particularly Latinx literature of the twentieth century, my work plays a documentary role which records and narrates how ideals of masculinity not only contributed to social marginalization, but to emotional and psychological marginalization as well.

In "Fear of Going Home: Homophobia," Anzaldúa explains how one of her lesbian students thought that homophobia meant fear of going home. For Anzaldúa this idea seemed apt. As a gay woman of color who was going "against two moral prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality," the fear of going home was real. She describes this fear of going home as being afraid of "being abandoned by the mother, the culture, la Raza, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged" (Anzaldúa 20). This fear of not being accepted, of being rejected, is evident in my short story "Take My Hand." In the story a young Jimmy is struggling with his sexuality and trying to understand why he is rejected and mocked. As a future gay man of color, the struggle and challenges he will face are foreseeable. He does not have to wait for adulthood to face challenges and struggles, however. Jimmy's father considers violence the only way to rid his

child of any trace of homosexuality. Moreover, Jimmy already faces social rejection. In none other than a catechism class, Jimmy and his fellow classmates are asked to hold hands for prayer. The male classmate who stands next to Jimmy—a fellow seven-year-old—refuses to hold hands because he has been taught by his mother not to hold hands with *maricones*.

Another writer I consider an influential and significant role model not only because of his writing but because of his personal and professional accomplishments is Tomás Rivera. In *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* Rivera narrates what it was like to be a migrant child and exposes the brutal reality of migrant life. It captures the brutality of the working conditions in the fields, recounts the difficult choices migrant families must make in order to survive, and details the hostility, rejection and discrimination they face. I admire the unembellished simplicity of this text, simplicity in language and simplicity in structure of the stories and vignettes. It is a text that inspires one to write with honesty and vulnerability.

In “Remembering Tomás Rivera,” Luis Leal argues that Rivera “firmly believed that the principal function of Chicano literature is the creation of a sense of community” (76). Moreover, Leal understands that Rivera saw that in Chicano literature the Chicano “finds that he can identify with the characters, the ideas and beliefs, and the experiences narrated, that is, with the culture that those works document” (76). Consequently, by reading Chicano literature, “the Chicano reader can reinforce the ties that bind him to his own community, and which give [sic] him a sense of identity” (76). Leal adds that Rivera believed that Chicano writers write “about things that the Chicano reader is intimately acquainted with, and not about things he has learned” (76). In other words, the Chicano writer found his or her source of inspiration in the community

and looks to the community to give “his own reality a form, a form that previously had been denied to it” (76).

In my work, the community is a source of inspiration. However, unlike Rivera who sees the community in more benevolent terms, I try to question how the community at times functions as a reservoir of limiting prejudices and beliefs that also at times, becomes stagnant and creates a vicious cycle from which it struggles to break free. A moment of reckoning, however, is inevitable and there is the realization of how those transplanted beliefs and social prejudices do not coincide with genuine religious values, equally transplanted. Whereas Rivera tries to see community as a source of refuge, I portray community as a space in which one should tread cautiously which reveals itself as resistant to change its values.

I find interesting that in this text, Rivera not only condemns the oppression to which the laborers are subjected, but he also questions the religious dogma with which he has been indoctrinated. In the story that bears the same title as the collection, “... y no se lo tragó la tierra,” Rivera “depicts his protagonist's greatest existential crisis—his realization that cursing God for the suffering of his family was not going to cause the earth to “devour him” (Beck and Rangel 16). Along with “Silvery Night” and “First Communion,” this story “reveals to Rivera's protagonist the uselessness of traditional religious faith” (Beck and Rangel 17.) Religious beliefs, and to some degree indoctrination, plays an important role in Hispanic cultures. The values and beliefs that stem from religion have been carried over and transplanted into Latinx communities. Consequently, if your inspiration as a writer is in some way drawn from those communities, it is difficult to not address or react to the manner in which religion affects the way you view the world and make sense of your existence. Through his work, Rivera rejects faith as a space of

refuge. Instead, he questions how the justice his faith preaches seems to have overlooked him and his people. In my work, faith is more of a path to redemption. In “Daniel’s Women,” rejection and condemnation of homosexuality arises and is expressed mainly from ingrained machismo and ideals of masculinity. In the end, it is compassion inspired by faith that allows the women of the community to set aside their prejudices and accept those they had once marginalized.

Tomás Rivera’s work has influenced my writing in several ways. In the stories “Daniel’s Women” and “Claudia,” I try to draw inspiration from the community in which I lived. In “Daniel’s Women” specifically, I try to represent a working-class community with defined beliefs and prejudices. Both “Claudia” and “Daniel’s Women” as well as “Sundays with Abuelo” are written from a young boy’s point of view. In these stories, like Rivera, I am giving a young boy’s perspective of the world around him and I question the attitudes, beliefs, and prejudices of the adults in his life. I also present a multiplicity of voices as I give voice to male and female characters of different ages. In “Anna,” for example, the protagonist is a teenage girl trying to find her place in the world. Likewise, in “Chavela,” I give voice to another young woman trying to find direction in her life. I set out to write these texts with no particular goal in mind other than to record a collection of anecdotal experiences that are significant to me and hopefully others might find appealing and possibly resonate with these experiences. They are embellished accounts that are not entirely autobiographical but are inspired by individuals and events that are personally meaningful. Although I began this project with no particular goal in mind as previously stated, the outcome or the final product has proven to be more than an act of self-indulgence. In the end, these stories capture a moment in history, a small segment of society,

a specific demographic, a community that is often overlooked and even underestimated. These narratives of mostly women and children, of young Latinx individuals, all members of the same community, expose how transplanted beliefs and prejudices undermine the very essence of a diverse community, which is its tolerance and inclusivity. Among these beliefs is the ideal of *machismo*. These narratives make a point to condemn how the ideal of *machismo* embraced by Latinx communities is and has been an obstacle for tolerance and inclusivity. While these narratives could have portrayed the reality of how this ideal keeps woman subjugated and marginalizes homosexuals, these stories, for the most part, try to convey another obvious reality. They portray a turning point, a shift in the way transplanted beliefs and prejudices begin to play a less important role in social consciousness. By this I mean, at least in the case of “Daniel’s Women,” that the community is open to sever ties with its inherited ideals and beliefs and accept the social changes that espouse inclusivity, tolerance, and compassion. In this text, I demonstrate that Latinx communities, in particular the one I portray, changed in accordance with general social and cultural changes that began to take place in society at the time. Even though this community held on to traditional values, it was not controlled by them.

Another aspect of Rivera’s writing that has influenced my writing has to be Rivera’s simplicity and candidness. Although I aspire to write with the complexity of Ana Lydia Vega, after reading Rivera I understood that simple, candid, and unembellished literature can be just as interesting and appealing. I believe that simplicity and candidness in language allows the writer to create an atmosphere of similar simplicity, one that better informs the reader of the reality of migrant life, which was raw and unembellished. Similarly, I am writing about members of a blue-collar community who also lead simple, unembellished lives who face every day challenges

with common sense and determination. Their role models are not philosophers, artists, or white politicians, but athletes, hard-working predecessors, and fellow members of the community. Consequently, simple, candid, and unembellished language would be appropriate to convey the lack of sophistication and a true working-class sensibility.

Generational divide and how younger generations evolve or remain the same are topics I touch in my texts. I have looked at the work of Cuban writer Cristina García in order to understand how to best incorporate these generational shifts into my work.

García masterfully addresses how younger generations in Latinx communities deal with the positions and beliefs held by older generations. As a member of a community of political exiles, her work is highly influenced by the history and politics of her native Cuba. Although the Latinx characters in my texts are not explicitly or directly affected by politics and the history of the homeland, I am still able to find some inspiration in García's work.

García's first novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*, tells the story of three generations of a Cuban family. It is divided into three parts with a total of seventeen chapters, and it narrates how the Cuban Revolution continued to affect a Cuban family even after they left Cuba. It shares this similarity with Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in which Díaz tries to illustrate how the specter of Trujillo's regime continues to haunt Dominicans living and growing up in Latinx communities in the United States. In my work, informed and inspired by a Latinx community of Puerto Rican descent, the political themes are not as explicit as the work of these other authors. In fact, I considered my work lacking a political theme altogether. I would have to state that was an incorrect assumption. At least from the perspective of how these Latinx communities came to exist, some may argue that in the case of Puerto Rican communities the

reasons are purely based on economics. However, the economic reasons that led to the relocations of millions of Puerto Rican to the mainland are rooted in policy and political agendas. Consequently, my work is also political as it is focused and inspired by a diasporic community that came to be as a result of an economic situation that resulted from unfavorable government policies.

García employs alternating narrative voices in the novel which is narrated in either the first person or the third person. The first person is employed by Celia, her grandchildren and the only non-del Pino character Herminia Delgado. Celia's first-person point of view reflects the time before the revolution. The aspect of *Dreaming in Cuban* that has mostly influenced my work has to be the intergenerational dynamics. In "Sundays with Abuelo," I tried to create an intergenerational dynamic that reflects how a grandfather's and a father's approach to fatherhood differ. While the father was alienating and distant, the grandfather was loving and approachable. The grandfather's decision to retire and move back to Puerto Rico caused a sense of helplessness about a future without him in Jimmy, the child protagonist. Puerto Rico's political reality, different from Cuba's, allows for the grandfather to return to the island. Cubans who emigrate to the United States do not have that privilege. Nonetheless, the dire economic and social challenges Puerto Rico faced –and continues to face—contributed to a mass migration of which the grandfather was a part. Like Cubans for political and economic reasons, the grandfather was forced to leave his homeland in search of a better life.

Lastly, I would like to address Julia Álvarez as a writer whose work has in some way influenced my work as well. Ilan Stavans describes Julia Álvarez as a "chronicler of in betweenness" (*Norton Anthology* 1738). Some of the central themes in her works are history,

memory, identity and self-representation (Álvarez and Myers 169). I would have to agree with this notion of Álvarez as a chronicler of “in betweenness” because her work reflects characters who although aspire to assimilate, are also very much connected to their Dominican cultural roots. The text that best portrays this in betweenness is *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent*. In this novel, the patriarch of the García family decides to emigrate to the United States from the Dominican Republic with his wife and daughters trying to escape retribution by the Trujillo regime. The daughters struggle to assimilate and find themselves engaged in relationships that they believe would assist in the process. As the title suggests, the process of assimilation entails losing a part of their identity and replacing it with a new one. The story narrates what compromises, meaning what the Garcia girls had to lose—willingly or not—so that they may be and feel assimilated.

Although Álvarez succeeds in portraying in betweenness with the García girls, I struggle to consider her a genuine diasporic voice due to her affluent background. By saying this, I do not want to dismiss her work or insinuate that her work is not based on a genuine Latinx experience, but I would dare say that it is not based on the prevailing Latinx experience of economic and social hardship, a hardship that can be traced to the countries of origin. That is not Álvarez’s case. Nonetheless, she succeeds in presenting how Latinx communities struggle to negotiate transplanted ideals and beliefs and how these negotiations challenge the stability of family relations. At the same time, she demonstrates how power and privilege could not be transplanted and consequently could not save you from discrimination and marginalization.

I see similarities between my work and the work of Álvarez as well as Thomas, Díaz, and García. My work could be considered a memoir of intrafamily relations and generational

confrontation, but with significantly less intent on laying out a Latinx narrative which focuses heavily on how pervasive and influential politics, ideals, beliefs, and culture are in Latinx communities, or on how Latinx communities continue to face discrimination because of race or ethnicity. I have taken a different route because I understand that those stories have been told, and they have been told well. I am not saying that they should no longer be told, because they should. I am tempted to say that it could be due to my less evident struggle with my racial identity, with my in betweenness. However, that would not be correct. My struggle with identity was, and is manifested in, a somewhat different fashion when compared to what these authors have experienced and written about however.

In my case my identity became an issue upon my return to the island. Contrary to what might be expected, it was not because I could not fit into a culturally traditional society. Upon my return, I encountered a society that was much more Americanized than I was, even though I had spent the ten previous years of my life in the United States. Now that I can look back objectively, I can say that upon our return, we entered into what I would call the equivalent of American middle class. It was somewhat of a culture shock how my teenage peers were so much more informed about and interested in Rambo and The Dukes of Hazard than I was and would rather listen to Run DMC and Def Leppard than to salsa music. My humble and frugal upbringing up to that point, a vestige of my parent's extremely financially limited lives growing up on the island, clashed with the unabashed consumerism and materialism of 1980s Puerto Rican society. Racially, for the first time I became aware of my color and made the connection between color and disadvantage. I learned and added the term "*blanquito*" to my vocabulary to

identify the kids who were seemingly white, lived in the more affluent neighborhoods and whose parents dropped them off at school in European made cars.

When I mentioned that the Puerto Rican society I encountered upon my return was more Americanized than I was I meant exactly that. I grew up in a household in which I was instilled pride for culture and tradition. Humility and frugality were encouraged, Spanish was spoken, Catholic values were observed, and music, literature, and other traditional artforms were enjoyed and respected. After our return, I came to understand why some elders would say that the Puerto Ricans of the diaspora were more *boricuas* than the *boricuas* on the island.

There are no texts inspired in this period of my return in this collection. Nonetheless, my unique experience, in which I question and become aware of my identity in an unconventional circumstance is something I find worth telling. Julia Alvarez believes that in order to write a good story you should write about something you are trying to figure out and helps us find its meaning. Moreover, it should be something that seriously matters to you (Tabor and Sirias 152). Although there are aspects of my identity that are defined and definite, my identity has not been static, it has not stopped evolving. Knowledge, time, space, experiences, and relationships affect it continuously.

Like Álvarez, I also address loss in my work, but not as a steppingstone to assimilation. In “Sundays with Abuelo,” Jimmy is coming to terms with losing his grandfather’s companionship. More importantly, he fears losing the one person who gives him a sense of belonging and sense of self-worth. In “Daniel’s Women,” I deal with the loss of childhood innocence. In this story, Daniel’s presence leads a young Jimmy to question his sexuality for the first time. In addition, the way in which the adults in Jimmy’s life deal with Daniel’s

homosexuality and illness compounds Jimmy's loss of childhood innocence with an awakening to real prejudice and homophobia. In "Elmi," the title character deals with the loss of her mother to drug abuse. In "Chavela," Chavela and Anna come to terms with losing their ability to go back to Puerto Rico if they wish to lead a decent and prosperous life.

My work has entailed considerable introspection and objective analysis of what at times may have been painful experiences. The process of introspection and self-analysis has been crucial to bring forth a tale, or tales, that can be perceived as honest and relatable. One author who, after reading his work, has given me insight into the importance of confronting painful and difficult memories and the courage needed to share them is Richard Rodriguez and his text *Hunger of Memory: The Autobiography of Richard Rodriguez*.

According to David Cooper, "Rodríguez's first book - *Hunger of Memory: The Autobiography of Richard Rodriguez* (1982), is a penetrating and controversial account of his early life as a 'scholarship boy.' Cooper adds, "It is a painful and liberating journey in which education takes him from the intimacy of his Spanish-speaking family life in Sacramento, California, into the larger public world. At the same time, the book is a searching meditation on a paradox that would impel his life as a writer" (Rodríguez and Cooper 104).

In this text, Rodriguez addresses topics that have formed his identity, from language, to religion, to his education. He does it in a way that is more clinical and objective than romanticized. By this I mean that his intent is clear, which is to let the reader know how he has or has not benefited from, for example, his education.

He demonstrates bravery and honesty when he expresses his firm positions on these topics which for the most part are unorthodox for someone of his background. Consequently,

this has turned him into a target for criticism. I, in particular, do not agree with many of his assumptions. For example, although he is a bilingual individual, he disapproves of bilingual education. As a bilingual educator, a product of a bilingual education system, and a bilingual person, I disapprove of his stance. Nonetheless, I can appreciate that his purpose is not to be antagonistic but to suggest that from his personal experience existing policies should be reexamined and debated.

As a writer, it is Rodríguez's introspectiveness that has marked the way I go about examining my life and home in on what aspects I understand are meaningful enough that I feel are worthy of sharing. By expressing his position on issues that some may deem controversial, Rodríguez displays a fearless vulnerability. It is that vulnerability that I aspire to feel and not be limited by a preconceived notion of how my work might be interpreted or misinterpreted.

For Rodríguez, personal writing, the act and the art of remembering in words, is difficult, frustrating, and daunting (Rodríguez and Cooper 111). This is due in part to some residue of the culture he grew up in "where the man doesn't talk this way" (Rodríguez and Cooper 111). Rodríguez states that within Mexican culture men are expected to embrace a certain degree of formality. It is a formality he experienced with his father who would not express his feelings. "Formal" in Mexican culture, according to Rodríguez, "means sobriety, the silence within the whole notion of *machismo*, the cult of the *macho*. The *macho* does not sing except playfully, with irony, against his own grief" (Rodríguez and Cooper 111). Therefore, personal writing is an affront to the formal, to the sobriety expected of a Mexican man. Consequently, Rodriguez states that beginning in his childhood, when he first engaged in personal writing, he felt that by doing so he was effeminate.

I can relate to Rodríguez's idea of writing, of using language intimately, as a betrayal to *machismo*. As in Mexican culture, there is also a notion of the "formal," of *macho* sobriety in Puerto Rican culture. Consequently, I struggle with writing intimately. I struggle with a fear of not sounding *macho* or masculine. I too, believe that this is due in part to the culture I grew up in. However, I do not feel effeminate as Rodríguez does. I do struggle with the fear of seeming weak, however. By weak I probably mean vulnerable. I agree with Rodríguez's notion that the writer should never assume that the reader is someone they know. Nonetheless, this is easier said than done especially when you are inspired by people you do know. The challenge then is making your writing intriguing and novel enough that even those who you are writing about are indeed surprised.

In my collection, I try to avoid specific cultural references, the same way, as I have stated before, I try to avoid the use of Spanglish. I am not one hundred percent sure if avoiding Spanglish is a good thing given that it is a very specific cultural marker. What if non-Latinx readers choose to read Latinx literature precisely because they want to encounter Spanglish? I do not think that non-Latinx readers choosing to read Latinx literature to encounter Spanglish is a bad thing. On the contrary, I worry that I am limiting my potential audiences precisely because I did not incorporate Spanglish considerably into my texts. Nevertheless, I consider the use of Spanglish in a text as labeling the text for a specific audience; consequently, as a writer, I might be limiting the scope of potential audiences.¹ In other words, Spanglish might also only appeal to Latinx readers.

¹ Ilan Stavans defines Spanglish as "The verbal encounter between Anglo and Hispano civilizations" (Spanglish, 8). Stavans does not believe Spanglish is an abomination as Octavio Paz once referred to it. On the contrary, as stated in his definition of the term, he understands that in Spanglish "English and Spanish have found each other, they have

One of the themes I am most drawn to is masculinity in Latinx cultures. In order to write about how masculinity manifests itself in Latinx cultures it is important to understand the social and cultural dynamics that take place and lead to the construction of specific notions of masculinity. In “Dicks for Chicks: “Latino boys, masculinity and the abjection of homosexuality,” Richard Mora argues that for U.S. born Dominican and Puerto Rican adolescent males “masculinity involved the ongoing repudiation of the abject identity ‘fag’” (340). Speaking from my experience as a Puerto Rican male who grew up between the island and the mainland, the expectation in both circles to exhibit masculine behavior starts at a very young age and it is manifested in many ways. It was common to hear a father boast about the size of the penis of a newborn; ask a preschooler how many girlfriends he had or how many girls he had kissed; be forced to play baseball and no other sport; be called “pato” or “faggot” by adults if one should exhibit a behavior that could suggest any trait of femininity. As one entered adulthood, it is important that males understood that the man was the head of household

become partners in this ever-expanding mode of communication” (Spanglish 18) In a study of New York-raised Puerto Rican children, Ana Cecilia Zentella states that code switching by the children “proved they were not semi-or a-lingual hodge-podgers, but adept bilingual jugglers” (59). Gloria Anzaldúa states, “Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English and Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate” (81). For Stephanie Álvarez Martínez, Puerto Rican poet Tato Laviera’s use of “Spanglish constructions legitimize the language, and therefore the people who use it” (89). On the other hand, Roberto González Echevarría calls Spanglish “an invasion of Spanish by English” (117). Moreover, he states that “Spanglish treats Spanish as if the language of Cervantes, Lorca, García Márquez, Borges, and Paz does not have an essence and dignity of its own” (116).

regardless if the female had a higher income. Lastly, abuse was condemned but rarely acknowledged. I would have to agree with Mora, a man could be called an epithet about the color of skin, and that was tolerable. However, to be called or someone to insinuate that you are a “faggot” or a “cabrón” meaning that your female partner had been unfaithful, were insults that attacked the very essence of manhood and were deemed unacceptable.

In the text, “Take My Hand,” I address this dilemma. The main character, Jimmy, goes through a process of self-discovery and struggles to meet cultural expectations of heteronormativity. His hybrid condition, bicultural and bilingual, leads him to question, if indeed he is gay, if the pejorative terms used in each culture to refer to gay men carry the same weight. Jimmy struggles to determine which term “*maricón*” or “fag” inflicts less pain. If in fact one term is more negative than the other. If he were to determine it to be true, that one term is more negative in one language than in the other, then could he have to option of being gay in the culture in which the term is less insulting. In Mora’s study he discovered that the use of the term “fag” was used often to emphasize and claim “heterosexual subjectivity” (348):

For example, in the sixth grade, while arm-wrestling Albert, Ignacio asked him: ‘You’re the son of a fag?’ With a homophobic slur commonly used in the boys’ social worlds to stress the heteronormativity underpinning their gender practices, Ignacio jokingly implied that Albert’s poor physical display suggested that Albert’s father was a homosexual who had passed on his physical weakness to his son. (348)

Whereas in Mora’s study, masculinity involved the repudiation of the identity of “fag,” for Aida Hurtado, masculinity or its Hispanic manifestation better known as *machismo*,

“involves displaying a hypermasculinity that thrives on power and domination and that is threatened by weakness” which is represented by women and homosexuals (55):

Within the paradigm of machismo, women—conceived as the opposite of men—are disdained, considered weak, and subjected to domination and abuse. Similarly, weak heterosexual men and homosexuals are perceived as being more like women than men, as parodies of what men should be, and are therefore also subject to abuse. (Hurtado 56)

Machistas, according to Hurtado, “harbor feelings of extreme homophobia with an underlying tendency toward physical domination and abuse of those who fail to live within the parameters of their perspective of...masculinity” (56).

These views and attitudes appear in my text “Take My Hand” when Jimmy, the main character of the story, is attending Sunday school and the teacher asks the students to hold hands for prayer. Jimmy is rejected by the boy standing next to him because he perceives Jimmy to be a homosexual. When questioned by the teacher about his refusal to hold hands with Jimmy, the boy explains that he has been instructed to not do anything that could be perceived as “pato” or something that “fags” would do. Not only does the boy acknowledge that this is a learned behavior, but he also admits that it is his mother, the matriarch and not the patriarch, who has instructed him to act this way.

Jimmy’s reaction to his father’s threat to violently rid him of any unmanly behavior and mannerisms incite Jimmy to question his own manhood at an early age. These encounters which Jimmy has experienced at an early age have opened the door for future literary endeavors in which Jimmy will explore his relationships with his immediate relatives, his culture, and peers

from his perspective as a gay, second generation immigrant—although I am aware that Puerto Ricans aren't necessarily seen as immigrants—American. Jimmy will do it as part of the process called “moral management”.

Moral management is intended to help change prevailing beliefs about gender and sexuality. For Anthony C. Ocampo, “Moral management refers to the way that gay children of immigrants strategically display their sexual identity in order to maintain rapport and social support from family members” (156). Ocampo states, “Second-generation gay men initially viewed their sexual orientation as inherently incongruent with the moral and gender ideologies of their ethnic culture, which in turn prompted many to manage their sexual identity with their immigrant parents,” as part of the process of moral management (156). Moral management entails slowly changing prevailing attitudes in Latino culture that view the stereotypical as the norm:

Moral management entails the hyperconscious monitoring of gender presentation, behaviors and mannerisms, voice inflections, clothing choices, cultural tastes and even friendship networks. The strategies of moral management vary depending on one's degree of sexual identity disclosure (closeted versus out). However, what remains consistent is the desire of gay children of immigrants to complicate gay individuals and communities beyond the rigid caricatured stereotypes internalized by their family members. (56)

I concur with Ocampo on the concept of moral management. Again, speaking from personal experience, I would argue that not only second generation gay men, but 1.5 generation gay men as well, have felt the need to, even if not in the closet, manage their homosexuality,

their gayness, in order to minimize the level of discomfort or even shame it may cause family and peers. In other words, for those that are out of the closet, for example, they are to remain partially in the closet given the pressure they feel to monitor, to police their gayness. The problem with this is that it spills over to other aspects of life. When I write, especially as I was writing this collection, I inadvertently find myself monitoring and policing how I address any scenarios that reflect or is inspired by any experience that stems from my condition as a Latinx gay person. The questions and concerns always arise: What if my father reads this? What will my aunt think? What if they interpret this as perverted? The most effective way I have discovered to deal with this self-policing is to approach these expressions of Latinx gay experiences as a form of moral management. Instead of being concerned and preoccupied by unjustified fears of how my kin would interpret my work, I decided to view my work and use my platform as a way to challenge the beliefs of those who hold stereotypes as the norm. I am trying to do this through honest and authentic portrayals of a member of the Latinx community.

CHAPTER 3

BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE EVOLUTION OF LATINX LITERATURE

Latinx Literature can be described as having a particular aesthetic in which bilingualism and the autobiography are probably its two main characteristics. Richard Perez and Lyn Di Iorio Sandín argue that “Latino literature carries a foreign element, a newness that resists total incorporation into the culture at large.” (1). Furthermore, it “imaginatively carves out very particularized textures and spaces for its texts—from startling bilingualism and genre-bending of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) to the obsession with street life in writers [like] Piri Thomas and Luis J. Rodriguez...” (1). In the foreword to Falconer’s and López’s *The Other Latin@: Writing Against a Singular Identity*, William Luis states that Latino literature “tends to narrate a familiar and personal experience, mainly from a first-person perspective. The author provides insight into the life of the protagonist, who has undergone a significant experience or come [sic] to terms with a particular moment in the past” (vii). Moreover, Nick Kanellos argues that “the first phase of contemporary Chicano literature promoted cultural nationalism and separation from the Anglo-American culture, regarded as oppressive and corrupt.” Nonetheless, “today’s Mexican-American literature, like much of Nuyorican and Cuban American literature, embraces hybridism, synchronicity, and synthesis” (29). If we were to narrow down these descriptions of Latino or Latinx literature, we could say that it is inspired by the intersection of culture and personal experiences in which the latter usually involves some kind of struggle to negotiate an identity that complies with American values while at the same time it tries to remain loyal to inherited culture, values and beliefs even when these could be detrimental. As much as I aspire to break away from this tradition, I would have to say it is

virtually impossible to do so entirely. Even though I thought I was writing of universal themes that I believed had very little connection to my culture, I discovered that I was wrong. My experiential proximity to my culture makes this impossible. As a member of the 1.5 generation, my ties to heritage are ever present, even unintentionally, in the way I view the world and react to it. In “Sundays with Abuelo” as I was writing about experiences inspired by my interactions with my father when I was a child, I did not realize at first that his behavior and his inability to connect at an emotional level were not just due to a genuine disinterest, but they were also due to his meeting or complying with cultural expectations. In this case it was to comply with the expected role of provider, and not the unexpected role of nurturer. The women in “Daniel’s Women” are excellent examples of how transplanted ideals, behaviors and beliefs are perpetuated. The younger women, although more liberal about their sexuality at least, still subscribed to traditional views of masculinity: rugged, controlling, who partake in habits and vices associated with virility such as drinking and smoking. In addition, lately, it has become more evident that in our country it is very difficult to disassociate your experiences from your condition as a person of color. It seems then if one, as an author, wishes to limit the ways a text can be identified as Latinx literature, the way I have ingeniously suggested I would like to do with my work, one must negate essentially almost every single lived experience. I would then have nothing to write about. There is an easy solution to my dilemma, simply do not draw inspiration from my personal experiences or engage in another genre, maybe fantasy. Even then the question will arise of how my condition as a person of color inspired my work.

The bulk of Latinx literature is made up of works produced by authors that belong to the three predominant Latino ethnic groups in the United States. Although they all share aesthetic

characteristics, they also have traits that distinguish them. Manuel Martín Rodríguez addresses the different aesthetics of Latinx literature produced by the three predominant Latino ethnic groups in the United States: Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans from the 1960s to the late twentieth century. In general terms, this scholar has focused on demarcating the aesthetic concepts that permeate the literary production of these three influential ethnic groups.

Due to its overwhelming presence historically and demographically in the United States, this study's most exhaustive examination of the most distinctive aesthetic concepts of Latinx literature are those pertaining to Chicano literature.

According to Martín, "The collective identity and the identity of the creator are at the base of contemporary Chicano literature as a conscious gesture of artistic, cultural, and social legitimization "(8). Furthermore, "[motivated] in great part by the Chicano Movement (or *La Causa*), the great profusion of works that have emerged since the mid-1960s have constituted an outburst (called by some a renaissance, or a flowering) that, like a great many of the last century's cultural revolutions, has been accompanied by all kinds of programs, manifestos, and poetics" (8). Martín adds, "The very reclamation of the word *Chicano*, which previously was considered pejorative and was rejected by many within the community, indicates a desire for aesthetic and political renovation" (8).

Growing up in the northeast with parents who did not attend institutions of higher education and in one case did not finish high school, I never had any formal exposure to sources, literary or otherwise, that offered a significant and relatable representation of what it meant to be a member of a Latinx community growing up between two cultures in the United States. In the classroom and other places that entailed some type of social interaction, I was encouraged or

threatened to not speak Spanish which was my most intimate contact with my heritage. Regardless of one's background, or which region one's heritage hails from, there is a commonality to the experiences of all Latinx peoples. I do not oppose the classification of Latinx literature by culture, but I wonder if by doing so we risk marginalizing the literature that is produced by groups that have smaller demographic representation.

As the largest demographic Latinx group in the United States, Chicano literature will naturally have the most exponents, get the most exposure, and have the most demand. As I stated above, there is a commonality to the experiences of all Latinx people living in the US. We share stories of migration, discrimination, and of the negotiation of how we practice and embody two or more cultures and languages. Nonetheless, just like at a certain point I stopped watching television or commercial films because I did not find myself represented, or not represented appropriately, I also felt the need to read literature in which I felt represented not just as a Latino but as a Puerto Rican Latino as well. Consequently, there is a very important value in understanding the differences, if subtle, between the literatures of each demographic group. For the most part, these differences entail the economic, historic, and socio-political realities of their places of origin that in turn serve as the catalyst for migration to the north. They are differences nonetheless, and if these differences are represented in their literature all literatures should enjoy somewhat equal exposure.

As I mentioned above, one of the scholars who best explains the distinctive traits of the literature produced by these three demographically predominant groups—Mexicans, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans—is Manuel Martin Rodriguez. In his work, he explains the distinctive characteristics, influences, and variations of said literature throughout the second half of the

twentieth century. In the following pages, I follow Martín in order to offer a succinct account of the evolution of Latinx literature throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

In the 1960s, Chicano literature was influenced by the civil rights movement and working-class struggles. In the case of poetry, works were “oriented toward a direct presentation to the public and was frequently recited aloud [in which] a tone of urgency [as well as] an attitude of direct rebellion and radical militancy predominated” (Martín10). Poets saw themselves as the voice of the people and responsible for educating the masses. Poetry was seen as a means of public orientation, consequently it had the characteristics of oral poetry: “the use of rhyme, repetition, and rhythm to facilitate the comprehension of the poem, the use of immediately recognizable images, a defiant tone...and a narrative style characterized by a clear delineation of the conflicts” (Martín 10). Poetry was predominantly “expressed in dualities and examines in depth the questions of identity with an eye toward the past” (Martín 10). The poet is an active agent, not only voicing the people’s lamentations but he or she must also be an active participant in the struggle against oppression and marginalization. In this way creativity stemming from the populace also found a venue in which it could be manifested.

In terms of symbols, Chicano literature sought out images and symbols that were unique to the Chicano culture and especially for those that transmitted the notion of resistance and survival. Some of the more recurrent symbols were the *pachuco*, the labor fields, and the barrio with the last two “representing [spaces] peculiar to the Chicano, at times with a connotation of positive values but always with the duality inherent

in threat or destruction” (Martín 11). Moreover, when destruction is imminent, Chicano writers attempted to preserve memory by recreating the Chicano experience through literature. It was a “conscious attempt at cultural affirmation” (Martín 12).

Another characteristic of this period was the rediscovery and embrace of the oral tradition. This tradition is composed of “songs, folkloric music, and declamatory poetry” (Martín 12). Rodriguez and Osmun state, “The oral tradition is seen as the repository of the customs, knowledge, and history of the community and as a result, the incorporation of these materials into the literary work is equivalent to a historical contextualization of the present struggles” (Martín 12).

In the 1970s, there was a focus on the contributions of the pre-Hispanic peoples. According to Martín, “The search for an indigenous or *mestizo* identity and the recovery of the Amerindian ancestral cultures became the key foundations in the literary and artistic work of a good number of authors, especially in California” (Martín 12). Authors and artists believed that indigenous culture was innate in all Chicanos and that “literature can serve as the effective vehicle by which to raise it to consciousness, and in this way provide a sense of nation and a sense of pride with which to counteract the aggressions suffered in daily life” (Martín 12). The focus on pre-Hispanic culture “promoted the discussion of ideas and the reevaluation of the cultural and social history of the Chicano” (Martín 12). In addition, authors and poets began incorporating more Spanish into their texts in an effort “to represent the Chicano’s linguistic reality” (Martín 14). During this time there was an effort by the publishing houses to publish works that portrayed a “positive image of Chicanos that contrasted with the negative characterization dominant in the mass media” and in which

individual and collective identity became an important theme (Martín 15). More works written in Spanish were being published as well.

The authors who stood out during this time, among them Tomás Rivera, Rolando Hinojosa and Rudolfo Anaya, were writing texts that focused on their personal formations which in turn “offered valuable information about the aesthetic concepts of their creators” (Martín 16). Among the characteristics of the novels of this period is the notion that “Chicano literature is a synthesis arising from the traditions that shape it. It is no longer entirely Mexican, but neither is it completely Anglo American. Rather, it is something different—a product of the mixture of the two” (Martín 16). Moreover, authors assume the role of chroniclers in an effort to avoid having memories erased. Also, most of the novels lack a conclusive ending given that “the conflicts in these works have been more privileged than their resolutions” (Martín 16).

During this period there are another three aesthetic approaches embraced by Chicano authors: myths, magical realism, and the description of customs. Of the myths we can say that they were recovered “for the purpose of incorporating them in a current context” in an “attempt to produce a fusion of mythical and social reality” (Martín 17). In regard to the novels that embraced the techniques and methods of magic realism in varying degrees, “the more immediate reality is relativized upon coming into contact with other ways of understanding reality that are less rooted in empiricism” (Martín 17). As for the description of customs, these were “frequently imbued with greater moral than political intent” (Martín 17).

As for poetry, it “became less strident and more personal. Instead of being recited at demonstrations or in the workplace, poetic readings were institutionalized in the so-called

floricantos, gatherings of authors and critics—generally in a university setting” (Martín 18).

Authors began to cultivate a “polished poetry centered on the image, and with a major emphasis on technique. Without neglecting the human aspect of their poetry, they attempted to write well without the sense of urgency that stirred many of their predecessors” (Martín 18). They introduced a “private and distanced” narrative voice that was “distinct from the declamatory style of the socially committed poets and in open conflict with the idea of the *engage* author” (Martín 18). Moreover, the urgent tone of oratory disappeared and “Chicano cultural references had all but disappeared” (Martín 18). These new aesthetic approaches expanded their audience to more than just Chicano readers.

The mid 1970s saw a new aesthetic “that had its origins in an egalitarian thrust in the works of Chicana writers” (Martín 21). Moreover, “The feminism of many of these authors produced a literary revolution in terms of themes, tone, images, and style. The predominant tone, although one of protest against the abuses institutionalized by society and customs, was frequently one of lucid irony that contributed to the discovery of the artifices of domination” (Martín 21). Chicana authors now prefer “sarcasm and a calmer exposition of their themes” over profound lament (Martín 21). Female characters cease to be the comforting *jefita*, the stereotypical duality of the virgin/prostitute is discarded. Instead, women are now independent writers and university students “without dissimulation at the hour of discussing her sexuality” (Martín 21). Likewise, the vilified figure of *La Malinche* is vindicated and no longer portrayed in negative terms by Chicana poets. Instead *La Malinche* is endowed “with more human qualities, among them that of mothering the first mestizo” (Martín 21). These poets “generally cultivate a

very direct language, without taboos or euphemisms, and give an uncommon vitality to erotic poetry” (21).

In the 1980s “feminine narratives came to set forth that which the novels of the male Chicano writers had left aside with their treatment of racial and class relationships but lack of consideration for the social relationships that exist between the sexes’ (Martín 21). Moreover, in an effort to fend off the double marginalization they experience as women and Chicanas, these female writers “dedicated themselves to constructing a feminine subject and endowing her with the power that the narrative voice confers” (Martín 22). In other words, these Chicana writers were giving their female point of view of racial and class relationships. They tackle questions of “identity, assimilation, struggle, and the role of the writer” from a female/Chicana perspective (Martín 22). From a genre perspective, these writers were also producing hybrid texts in which the traditional divisions between literary genres appear blurred,” such is the case of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La frontera*.

The historic novel or the novel with a historical setting from a Chicano perspective also gained importance in the 1980s (Martín 23). These novels sought to present Chicano history in different geographic points in the south west and west coast.

Linguistic diversity is seen by prominent Chicano authors as one of the most distinctive characteristics of Chicano Literature. Its linguistic diversity relied on the use of bilingualism or interlingualism:

[T]he intercalation of languages and different sociolinguistic codes was an original characteristic (although not lacking historical precedent) that reflected the Chicano’s existential situation. Moreover, it permitted great liberty at the time of

the recovery or reclamation of other languages in their tradition, such as Náhuatl or Maya. (Martín 24)

While in the 1960's bilingualism was a way to reclaim national identity, in the 1970's—at least until the middle of the decade—writing in Spanish “became a way of challenging and confronting the system,” and of building “a bridge toward Latin America” (Martín 24). Spanish and interlingualism was eventually supplanted with mostly all English publications that helped expand internal markets and increased their chances of appearing in newspapers and magazines (Martín 25).

In the case of Puerto Rican or Nuyorican writers, beginning in the 1960s, they “saw a clear consciousness among writers of Puerto Rican origin of being Nuyorican, something distinct from their ancestors on the Island, begins to be observed” (Martín 29). Among the things these authors share is their New York roots from which the appellation Nuyorican was born. Unlike writers from the island who were members of the elite, the Nuyoricans belonged to the working-class:

This class identification would play an important role in the language, conflicts, and sources of inspiration of *neorriqueña* literature. For all of them, the adoption of the term “Nuyorican” or its equivalent, *neorriqueño*, conveys taking a position in the face of society and is equivalent to the proud reclamation of their traditions without renouncing their distinctiveness from the Puerto Ricans on the Island. (Martín 29).

These authors primarily focused on their adaptation to life in New York and their survival in the city and their works were mostly documentary autobiographies, *Down These Mean Streets*

being one of its most prominent examples. Moreover, the use of popular language in *Down These Mean Streets* set forth a trend followed by subsequent Nuyorican writers (Martín 29). Furthermore, “the street and the *barrio* continue to constitute the social, cultural, and geographic reality from which the inspiration of the writers is drawn” with their texts, whether they were poems, short stories, or novels, becoming “a kind of chronicle of life in the *barrio*” (Martín 29).

From a linguistic perspective, “[t]he Nuyorican language, the only language capable of re-creating in literary form the new reality of the Puerto Ricans in the United States, is a mixture of Spanish and English that has resulted in a greater verbal wealth than either of the other two languages provide by themselves” (Martín 29). Moreover, due to it being street-inspired, “Nuyorican literary language contains a large dose of orality and ritual” (Martín 32). It stands out due to its colloquial voices and expressions. In addition, “everyday language becomes stridently militant... and the apparent chaos of society in the United States motivates some Nuyorican poets’ aesthetic link with marginality, perversity, and insanity” (Martín 34). Through the use of humoristic and imaginative language and the juxtaposition of unexpected images, poets like Pedro Pietri “attempt to denounce the absurdity of Puerto Rican’s social reality in New York” (34).

Nuyorican writers of the period also found themselves with the need to redefine their personal and cultural relationship with the island—which is to say, “to demythify it” and define their own reality (Martín 32). As the children and grandchildren of emigrants who “have grown up with the embellished recollections of their elders,” when they ventured to the island they faced “disillusionment upon encountering an island that has been socially and culturally

transformed through the influence of the United States, to be Nuyorican becomes...more a state of mind than a geographical distinction” (Martín 32).

Nuyorican writers of the time were not inspired by cultural myths, but by reality. The streets offered the inspiration they needed and they sought to “create new alternatives between enslaving labor subordination and the pursuit of street culture, [as well as] new relationships in the community” (Martín 32). Hence, the community, not just the streets, “becomes a source of inspiration and, at the same time, the addressee of the literary creation” (Martín 33).

Nuyorican literature also identifies with African cultures. Thus, “[t]he vindication of Négritude that has antecedents in the Afro-Antillean poetry of Luis Palés Matos is not achieved in an immobile or regressive manner but rather because of a consciousness of change” (Martín 35). Moreover, the identification with and the incorporation of African elements in their literature demonstrates that Nuyoricans embraced a “cultural and linguistic” synthesis that made them “no longer entirely Puerto Rican” but something new (Martín 36).

In the case of women, similar to Chicana authors, female Nuyorican authors began to question the absence of female figures and writers from Nuyorican literature. Like Chicana authors and other female authors of color, female Nuyorican authors sought to fight “for the conservation of a culture threatened and rejected by the dominant culture, while simultaneously fighting for the radical transformation of this same culture to eradicate discriminatory abuses against women” (Martín 35). Female Nuyorican writers then sought to solve this dilemma by depicting female figures which represented “a personal and collective liberation, the assumption

of the power and the voice with which the silence imposed by the patriarchal tradition is broken” (Martín 35).

Nuyorican literature is then a “literature of collective affirmation” and of protest that denounces the subordination, marginalization, and racial discrimination Puerto Ricans face in the United States. Its basic foundation is the vindication of a new language and a new identity (Martín 38). Moreover, “[t]he emphasis on popular culture, on the African legacy, and on the re-creation of daily life makes it a literature of communal orientation and inspiration” (Martín 38).

In the case of Latinx literature produced by Cubans, its earliest form was aesthetically and thematically informed by their status as political refugees. According to Rodriguez and Osmun, Latinx literature produced by Cubans of the post revolutionary diaspora is “a literature of exile tending toward political propaganda and denunciation of the revolutionary regime” (Martín 39). It is characterized by nostalgia and mourning for the loss of paradise, country, and traditional values which opened the door for the integration of *costumbrismo* and folklore into the literature.

Inspired by their life in the United States and not by the memory of Cuba, the works of younger Cuban writers lack the “tone of urgency that could be seen in politically intended literature.” Additionally, it is “tinged with humor and irony” in which satire and parody find a new life principally through the use of popular Cuban speech instead of the neo baroque style of older writers (Martín 40). These younger writers wrote mostly in English and focused and “poeticized” about bilingualism and about the “consequences that the contact with the English language will have on the speech of all generations of Cubans” (Martín 40).

Cuban American literature is then characterized by being initially inspired by political displacement and the experience of living in exile. As the idea of returning to Cuba became an unrealistic expectation, Cuban American literature fell in line with the literature produced by other Latinx groups. The similarities are shared “in the area of linguistics and in thematics relative to immigrants’ adaptation to a new system of values and a new way of life” (Martín 40). From a political perspective, with few exceptions, Cuban American literature showed a “greater patriotic counter-revolutionary preoccupation in contrast to the “social and leftist militancy that is common among Chicanos and Puerto Ricans” (Martín 40).

Having knowledge of the different categories in which we can divide or classify Latinx literature will offer readers a better understanding of the purpose of the authors and from where they draw inspiration. Understanding how this literature draws particularly from the experiences these authors and their communities live as members of a minority and marginalized communities, helps readers comprehend that this literature has a social and even historical value due to the way in which it captures specific historical periods. Like other demographic groups, Latinx communities have not enjoyed the benefit of having their stories accurately portrayed through more accessible art forms, such as theater and film. Hence, Latinx literature plays an important role in documenting Latinx life. Moreover, knowledge of these categorizations also helps to bust the myth that Latinx peoples are a monolithic group. While some may argue that the texts themselves offer enough insight into how this literature portrays the differences among the groups, I argue that having some level of knowledge of the sources of inspiration and their motivation as well as the techniques they employ makes the texts significantly more meaningful.

In *Hispanic Immigrant Literature*, Nicolas Kanellos calls in general terms Hispanic immigrant literature the literature produced orally or in written form since the early nineteenth century by Hispanic immigrants in the United States. Kanellos proposes an interesting schema in which he focuses on what he considers to be the “three general trajectories of Latino expression in the United States since the 1800s” (19). These trajectories are native literature, immigrant literature, and literature of exile.

Native literature is based on what Kanellos calls the Hispanic native culture. Hispanic native culture “developed among the descendants of the Spanish, Hispanicized Native American, Hispanicized African, *mestizo*, and mulatto settlers under Spain, and later Mexico” (19). Among the perspectives of the Hispanic native culture are “a sense of place with geographical location” and a “sense of history rooted in the Hispanic past.” Moreover, they are a “dislocated and oppressed minority within the new political, judicial, and economic arrangements resulting from defeat in war or being literally purchased by the United States” and have “a growing awareness of racial and cultural difference and resistance to assimilation within the new Anglo-Protestant majority” (19). Nonetheless, they understand they have and are entitled to cultural and civil rights established by American citizenships and treaties (19).

Considering the characteristic of native culture stated above, Kanellos has established a number of aesthetic traits that pertain to native literature and its authors. Native texts identify with a specific location in the United States and see the United States as the homeland (23). Native texts “position themselves as American...from a minority or marginal perspective” (24). As literature of “citizens with civil rights, native texts protest discrimination, marginalization, and dispossession of Latinos in the United States” (24). Native literature authors also understand

that their texts are weapons in the struggle for civil and human rights and against racism (23). This type of literature presents a working-class perspective as it portrays the struggles of working-class individuals. Since the 1800s, native texts have been written in Spanish. However, today they are mostly written in English and for a long time have been “synthesizing Latino and Anglo-American culture, creating a hybridism both in language and in an outlook on life” (27). The *bildungsroman* or autobiography is the preferred genre (23).

The next classification or category Kanellos addresses is immigrant literature. This type of text is mostly written and inspired by economic refugees. Hispanic immigrant literature according to Kanellos, is not about “assimilating or ‘melting’ into a generalized American identity” (Hispanic Immigrant 7). Instead, it is literature attached to the homeland. It is constantly “comparing the past and the present,” in other words life in the homeland and life in the United States. It is a literature that “reinforces the culture of the homeland” and is “fervently nationalistic.” Yet, it also “seeks to represent and protect the rights of immigrants by protesting discrimination, human rights abuses, and racism” (8). According to Kanellos, immigrant literature proposes a return to the homeland “as the only solution to dying physically or culturally, that is, losing one’s identity and personality on the Metropolis” (20). The return to the homeland in particular “may be physical,” –preferably during one’s lifetime—or “metaphorical” (55). “The representations of the return,” Kanellos states, “are as varied as the idiosyncrasies, class standings, genres, and ethnicities of the authors” (55). Nonetheless, not all main characters are able to return and many “meet their demise in pursuit of the American Dream” (56). Drawn to the United States by technological superiority and materialism, New York “becomes the symbol of the totality of American culture for its cold indifference, extreme materialism,

inhumanity, its luring of transmigrants from around the world into its factories, devouring and spitting out masses of them” (59). Immigrant texts also express the “conditions for leaving the homeland, the immigrant’s exploits on leaving and arriving in the United States, and their experiences looking for and finding work” (20). Linguistically, Hispanic immigrant literature “adopts the working-class and rural dialects of the immigrants” it represents (7). In addition, immigrant texts tend to contrast the new home with the homeland, the new culture with the culture left behind, as well as “language, religion, landscape and a host of other markers” (24). Also, immigrant literature warns the people in the homeland about the reality of life in the United States and promotes the preservation of “language, literature, and culture of the homeland” while it also condemns symbols of American culture, such as “the Metropolis itself, capitalism, and social mores that represent threats to their family as well as “religious, and societal arrangements” (24). Presenting a working-class perspective and as it pertains to rights as citizens, immigrant texts “protest in Spanish” their exploitation and oppression rather than protest a lack of civil rights. What’s more, the majority of immigrant texts, being highly nationalistic, “tend to conceive and promote pure culture as identified with the homeland left behind” (29). Characters and frequent stereotypes present in immigrant texts are the *agringado*, the *pelona* (flapper), as well as the *pocho*, and *verde* “or greenhorn, who misinterprets American language and culture and becomes the subject of extreme exploitation” (31). Among the predominant themes in immigrant literature are the family, and labor exploitation. Other themes present in Hispanic immigrant literature are the description of the Metropolis in satirical and critical terms; the trials and tribulations immigrants face during their journey to the United States and once in the United States; and “the expression of gender anxieties in nationalist reaction

against assimilation into mainstream culture” (8). These themes all stem from the immigrants’ desire to return to the homeland rather than dying in the United States.

The last type of literature Kanellos addresses is exile texts or the texts of political refugees. They are texts written by authors who are political refugees and have been persecuted, exiled, or have had to leave the homeland for fear of “imprisonment, a death sentence, or losing their privileged social position of comfortable economic status” (21). Exile texts are written with the purpose of “effecting change” or with the expectation of change in the homeland and see themselves as “engaged in the battle to change governmental order in the homeland and are often not concerned with the politics and culture in the United States” (24). For exile texts the only important culture is the culture of the homeland, consequently culture change is inevitable in the homeland. Moreover, they often attack the government of the homeland as a form of protest against colonialism or dictatorship. Some of these texts are written by authors who are persecuted for their sexual orientations forcing them to seek political refuge (26). Contrary to native and immigrant literature, exile literature is “the product of cultural elites” (27). Their texts are “representatives of Spanish-language purity (*casticismo*), canonical European referents, and, at times...[show] a disdain for the working-class and the racial inferiors (economic refugees) of their homeland now sharing their exile” (27).

Exile literature also aims for cultural purity. Texts exemplify high culture and their authors are characterized as poets in “Babylonian captivity with the Metropolis configured as Babel” (29) In addition, authors are disillusioned with the lack of political change in the homeland (29). As part of a nation building project, exile literature “is militant, supporting revolution, coups and invasions” with early Hispanic texts of exile “providing a liberal ideology

for the wars of independence from Spain” (30). The stereotypical figures in exile literature include heroes, epic and tragic figures, dictators, revolutionaries, and counterrevolutionaries (23). Themes include political injustice and authoritarianism. Lastly, the preferred genres are novels, epic dramas, and essays (23).

CHAPTER 4

A PLACE IN LATINX LITERATURE

If we were to follow Nick Kanellos's schema on Hispanic literature, I would say that my work should fall under native literature. In native Hispanic literature, characters have a sense of place in the U.S. and remain in the U.S.; are working-class with a minority consciousness; have a hybrid identity; have themes that cover race-class-gender and community; and are bildungsroman. In other words, they are texts that deal with a character's evolution from youth to adulthood and the moral, spiritual, and the psychological changes they experience in the process.

Examples of the traits espoused by Kanello can be observed in, for example, the story "Daniel's Women," in which the mothers and sisters of Puerto Rican descent have a sense of place in the United States. They feel that where they are is where they belong and have no intentions of going back to Puerto Rico. Their sense of belonging is so strong that when a white family moves into the neighborhood, they feel that their space is being invaded or usurped. In "Chavela," for example, the main character, newly arrived in New Jersey, struggles with finding her way and lacks a sense of belonging. That is until she meets Anna who has returned to New Jersey after leaving behind a backward and poverty-stricken Puerto Rico once and for all. Anna helps Chavela see that there is no sense in going back, that America is where they have a chance.

All the characters in all of the stories are working-class. Because most of the characters are young, this aspect is not so obvious. Nonetheless, the setting of most of these stories, Newark, New Jersey or rural Puerto Rico, should give the reader a sense that these characters are indeed working-class. Probably one of the stories in which this is most strongly represented is in "Sundays with Abuelo." In this story, the working-class reality is probably mostly represented

by the two adult male characters, father and grandfather. The grandfather has retired after many long years working at a factory and the father is hardly ever home because he needs to put in extra hours to make ends meet. In both “Anna” and “Chavela,” the main characters lack an education beyond high-school and they believe limits their aspirations to find and fall in love with a man who is financially stable and can provide for them.

Although these characters are working class, there is no intent on my part to focus on their marginalization as non-white members of the working-class. In other words, I am not attempting to present experiences of suffering or struggle, at least not from an identity or racial perspective. My focus is on the emotional and personal struggles these characters face. My intention is for the reader to focus on the internal struggles of the characters. Whereas Latinx literature is known to focus on issues dealing with discrimination, racism, economic subordination, and identity, I want the reader to focus on things like the lack of a sense of belonging, feelings of emotional alienation, the lack of a sense of achievement, or the emptiness and sadness felt when a loved one departs physically or figuratively. Nonetheless, I am aware that their struggles are in part a result of their condition as a marginalized community. I am aware that the main characters in “Chavela” and “Anna,” because they are women of color, members of a marginalized community, have a lower chance of receiving the higher education that would free them from the need to rely on marrying a working-class man in order to secure, essentially, their chances at a decent life. That is unquestionably true, and I address it. However, these characters are also human beings who have emotional and personal struggles that are relatable to readers who are not necessarily members of a marginalized community.

I must point out, however, that I am not saying that the themes of discrimination and identity are not addressed in my work is not entirely truthful. In fact, they are very important themes. The difference is that I do not address these themes in racial terms. Except for the disappointment the women in “Daniel’s Women” express when they discover their new neighbors are white, there is no real hint of racial discrimination in the collection. I have focused mostly on gender related discrimination. Both Daniel in “Daniel’s Women” and Jimmy in “Take my Hand” are gay and face discrimination. Daniel faces discrimination from his new neighbors and Jimmy faces discrimination from his classmates and his father. I also focus on identity from a gender perspective. Jimmy, for example, is a young boy who is slowly realizing that he is different and effeminate.

The stories in the collection share traits and characteristics in some aspects but vary in others. A characteristic that almost all stories share is that the main character is either a woman or women play important supporting roles. I have given women prominent roles in my work because they have played prominent and important roles in my life. The stories “Anna,” “Chavela,” “Claudia,” “Elmi,” “Daniel’s Women,” and “Promise Me” are all inspired by women, young and old, who have influenced the way I see the world and the way I see myself, for better or for worse. While I try to present positive, uplifting characterizations some women play on the stereotype of the Nuyorican Latina and their prejudice stance towards other races, homosexuality, and masculinity. While these characters are all inspired by actual individuals, some of the plots reflect some lived experiences while others are almost entirely fictional. Some stories address the problems with drug addiction prevalent in Latinx communities, while others deal with the loss of loved ones, friendships, and hope. Likewise, the plots vary from a young

boy coming to terms with his sexuality, to a young girl losing her mother to drug addiction, to a young woman willing to leave behind a sick mother and the only life she has ever known in search of a better future. Although the intended audience is anyone interested in coming of age stories and stories about people facing adversity, demographically the stories will probably appeal mostly to young Latinx readers.

Conflicts also vary widely. In one story, a young girl must survive in a home with a misogynistic and abusive father. In another, a community struggles to accept a newly arrived family because of their race and because two of its members are homosexual. In yet another story, a young woman struggles to find her place in her new home in the United States and struggles with the desire to return to a poverty-stricken life in Puerto Rico. Because the stories are inspired by personal life experiences, they rely on anecdotes to move them forward. I also employ allusions in order to help establish time and space. Characterizations are both direct and indirect. In the case of Jimmy's father, for example, I chose to characterize him through his absence, actions, and dialogue.

Most stories are narrated from the first person. I prefer this point of view because it allows me to convey a very personal view of how I saw the world, my world, at a very young age. Allowing the reader to view this world through a young boy's eyes is necessary in order to convey the sense of alienation and disappointment as well as the revelations the main character experiences. Let us take for example the story "Daniel's Women." In this story I am able to convey to the reader the young main character's awakening to his sexual identity which is never revealed to other characters in the story.

The tone of the stories varies from fatalistic hopelessness to contently hopeful. In the story “Sunday with Abuelo,” for example, a young Jimmy is inconsolable and has dire expectations about his immediate future once he learns that his grandfather is leaving. On the other hand, in “Chavela” and “Ana,” both stories begin with the sense of hopelessness felt by the main characters who see little chance to escape their realities and yet towards the end they see a small glimmer of hope when they find love. Likewise, the mood in the stories varies from melancholic, pessimistic, and fatalistic to optimistic, light-heartedness, and amusement.

The common thread of these stories and what makes them hold together as a collection is the connection all the stories share with the character called Jimmy. It is through Jimmy’s eyes that most of these stories have come to be. It is through the eyes of a young boy that I have crafted these narratives. Jimmy is not necessarily always the narrator, but his view of the world is my inspiration.

One of my goals with these stories is to elicit a diversity of emotions and reactions from the reader. Among these are the lack of a sense of belonging, feelings of emotional alienation, the lack of a sense of achievement, or the emptiness and sadness felt when a loved one departs physically or figuratively for example. I try to achieve this by creating characters with which a reader can be empathetic. I also try to achieve this by developing plots that give the characters the space to elicit a cathartic response from the reader.

T.C Boyle states, “The joy of the story is that you can respond to the moment and events of the moment” (Shivani). By this I understand that Boyle is saying that the short story is about immediacy. It is not about long build ups and endless descriptions. It is about an immediate reaction to the action which is not necessary in the novel. I enjoy the challenge of fitting a big

idea into several pages, of reducing a particular world into a minimal amount of words, all this while trying to create something to which the readers feel the need to create their own subplots. By this I mean that the story is so meaningful to the readers, and the characters either are so intriguing and endearing or so repulsive that the literary experience does not end with the last printed word. For example, Mayra Santos Febres's story "Oso blanco" is a text that fosters this type of reaction in me. It is a story of a woman who drives by a state penitentiary every morning and evening on her rushed journey to and from work every day. Each time she is greeted by a man's arm that slips through the bars of a window to wave at her as she drives by. The arm becomes a sensuous respite in the woman's otherwise hectic life. After reading the text for the first time, I found myself wondering what were the chances that the woman would one day meet the arm's owner, or what psychological or emotional impact would it have on the woman should the arm stop greeting her? Hence, I aspire to write something short but memorable that prompts further analysis and reflection by the reader. Hopefully I can achieve this with "brevity and the necessary coherence which gives the effect of totality" (Lawrence, J. 274).

Despite my desire to transcend the tradition of Latinx literature, some may argue that my work is inevitably Latinx. It is in part inspired by a community with deeply embedded transplanted beliefs. It is the manifestation of these beliefs, whether cultural or religious, revealed through character interaction, that maintain a consistent connection with their culture. As stated previously, some argue that Latinx literature is characterized by bilingualism and for being autobiographical. In my case I try to avoid the use of Spanglish, but there are Spanish words present sporadically in the texts. Based on William Luis's description of Latinx literature, my work also has a main character, in this case a young boy named Jimmy, who has undergone

a series of significant personal experiences and has come to terms with those experiences which occurred at a particular moment in his life.

I see Latinx literature as a chronicle, a way to document the lives of diasporic communities and the way their political, racial, economic, social, and religious realities influence the way they live their lives, by choice or circumstance. The focus is usually on a character or group of characters that are meant to represent archetypes of a specific demographic that face similar challenges. This is a characteristic that I believe has been borrowed or inherited from the Latin American literature tradition. From the writings of Bartolomé de las Casas (whom I understand was not a novelist or short story writer but a chronicler), to José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi, to José Mármol, to Cirilo Villaverde, to José Hernández, and Martí, moving on to the twentieth century to Mariano Azuela, José María Arguedas, or Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Latin American literature has a tradition of chronicling through its texts the realities a character or group of characters face at a particular moment in time, focusing on the effects or consequences of significant political events or on the barriers or challenges their race or ethnicity or political beliefs may pose. I see Latinx literature—again, a trait borrowed from Latin American literature—as literature of militancy. It is a literature that denounces injustice and tries to make sense of who we are and what makes us who we are. While it denounces the injustices, we face as individuals and as a community, I appreciate that it is also introspective and self-critical. I at one point struggled with describing my work as militant, but there is no doubt now that it is. There is an evident denunciation of the inherited ideals of masculinity portrayed in some texts.

As previously stated, there is a tendency to lump Latinx literature into one box. As we have also addressed, while the different demographic groups that comprise the Latinx

communities in the United States share similar experiences of marginalization and racial oppression, it is also true that there are differences in their art just like there are differences in the politics that inspire these authors. In my case, based on the definitions presented here, I consider my work more in line with Nuyorican literature. However, as a writer who is not entirely Nuyorican—at least I do not see myself as such—and a writer who is familiar and knowledgeable about the social, economic, and political reality of the island, I struggle, based on these definitions, to call myself exclusively a Nuyorican/Latinx writer. No doubt, as I have explained in preceding pages, the works of successful Latinx authors have had an influence in my own work, regardless of their heritage. However, as I have also stated, the stories about cultural and racial survival have been told and told well. By that same token, and given the renaissance of cultural and racial consciousness we are living, I have come to realize that the fight for equality and the fight against oppression and marginalization continues. At some point my work will indeed need to reflect that. I do feel the need to add that even though there is no reference to marginalization or oppression suffered at the hands of the dominant culture, it does not mean it is not present. It is present in the way it represents a community and how the members of said community embody and preserve transplanted ideals of the patriarchy. In this sense, the main characters in these texts—a young boy named Jimmy in several pieces, as well as different young women in others—are confronted with patriarchal oppression and find themselves having to negotiate how they survive it.

From Nick Kanellos's perspective, I have stated that it most significantly resembles native literature, but it could also possibly be a cross between native literature and immigrant literature. From a native literature perspective, I have focused on a working-class community.

The text is not exclusively a *bildungsroman* because it is not a novel but rather a collection of short stories which in some cases share the same main character. If we were to group the stories with the same lead character, the young boy named Jimmy, we could somewhat have a coming of age story. However, all the stories revolve around the same time period. In other words, it does not occur as part of a longer process from childhood to adulthood. The main character's conflict with society, which is represented by the adults and children in his life, reject or marginalize homosexuals.

I would have to say that my stories, especially those that revolve around Jimmy, were not initially intended to be tools or weapons defending civic or human rights. In a way, they are, however. Although they do not explicitly condemn the rejection of homosexuals, Jimmy's struggle to understand why he and Daniel are rejected could qualify the stories as denouncing a violation of human rights. The stories also synthesize certain realities of Latinx life. In "Anna" and "Chavela" the United States is viewed as the panacea for the main characters' two main problems: economic distress and lack of opportunities to evolve and grow.

Some texts could fall into the immigrant literature category. In "Chavela," the main character, Chavela, feels strongly attached to the island. However, she is aware and constantly reminded of the island's economic stagnation of her reason for fleeing. Also, all of the texts are based on a working-class community. There is not, however, an intent by any of the characters to preserve culture or an explicit condemnation of any violation of civil rights.

Are my texts strictly Latinx literature? Although I am dared to say no, I am truthfully more inclined to say yes for several reasons. First, they are inspired by a Latinx community who held onto transplanted beliefs and ideals. They document a moment in time and try to reflect the

linguistic, although minimally, and social traits of said Latinx community. On the other hand, there are no racial conflicts or condemnation of lack of civil or human rights. There is an explicit suggestion to preserve the inherited culture and language and the desire to return to the homeland. More importantly, as a Latinx author who as much as he desires to break with tradition, I am drawn and inspired by the traits that make Latinx communities what they are. These characters represent members of a community who have come to the United States in search of the American dream, but have yet to move beyond working-class status, and have yet to assimilate entirely. My work steps away from Latinx literature tradition in that it does not reflect marginalization of the main characters because of their ethnicity. In fact, in one case, it substitutes the condemnation oppression and marginalization enacted towards them for rejection and marginalization from the community towards homosexuals. In other words, the community takes on the role of the oppressor as a result of preserving and embracing inherited beliefs.

As my work evolved, I realized it was not entirely possible to break with Latinx literature tradition. This work is highly influenced by experiences lived in a Latinx community who held onto beliefs and ideals that were transplanted from the homeland. Issues with identity, as experienced by and reflected in the works of Thomas and Alvarez for example were not personally common. I would dare say that race, ethnicity and nationality were clearly demarcated, and because of the community's multi-racial, multi-ethnic nature racial tensions were, at least from a child's perspective, virtually non-existent. Therefore, if my writing is going to remain loyal and truthful to lived experiences, it can only reflect truthfully what I have lived. I faced significant challenges regarding my identity upon my return to the island after being taught to respect my traditions and my Puerto Rican and Caribbean identity. The encounter with an

extremely Americanized society was difficult to comprehend and assimilate and that is a story I also plan to tell. However, there is a valid reason for identity in racial or ethnic terms not being a significant theme in my current collection. Nonetheless, the work reflects another aspect of Latinx culture which is the belief of transplanted ideals from the homelands that are deeply embedded in the communities. Consequently, some of the stories aim to record and reflect how ideals of masculinity are embraced and how women, even though they stand among the victims of these poor examples of masculinity, perpetuate these ideals among younger generations. Moreover, these ideals of masculinity also contribute to oppression and marginalization of homosexuals within the community.

My work is introspective, a reflection of how Latinx communities, in this case a community of Puerto Rican heritage, could be self-destructive and contribute to marginalizing their own. I believe that my work not only documents aspects of life within a Latinx community of the late 1970s, it is also militant as it denounces the toxic and detrimental ideals of masculinity within the community. Moreover, it also documents the community's evolution as it moves beyond those ideals and finds a way to break the cycle of self-marginalization.

As a Latinx writer I deem it necessary that we take it upon ourselves to tell our stories. I believe this is important because no one can tell them better than we can and because it is unlikely that anyone outside this circle will deem them worthy of telling. I have come to realize that this collection presents a picturesque image of a Latinx community at a particular time in our nation's history that only I or someone like me could tell. I took the opportunity and decided to weave stories around its flaws and in some cases how these said flaws were remedied.

CHAPTER 5

DANIEL'S WOMEN

Looking back, when the Rizzos moved into the neighborhood no one suspected the effect their presence would have on our lives. Daniel Rizzo, along with his mother and sister, moved into the house next door sometime in the early summer of 1981. They moved into the apartment on the third floor. In order to get to their apartment, they would take the exposed wooden stairs in the back at the house. Daniel struggled to climb them. However, his sister Giovanna raced up those stairs and barely broke a sweat. She could have been a hell of a running back; God knows she was built like one and pretty much dressed like one as well. In contrast, Daniel was a pale, balding, chubby guy who stood about five-seven. He must have been around thirty, but his receding hairline and spare tire gave him an aged appearance. I saw Daniel's mother the day they moved in, and I didn't see her again until a year later for the funeral.

That summer, our neighborhood was teeming with prepubescent youth. If it was a Saturday, some of us tirelessly played whiffle ball, rode our bikes, and skated from early morning to early evening. Later in the day, once they had complied with their socially and culturally imposed domestic duties, our moms and aunts would emerge, strategically position themselves on the porch steps and engage in their weekly in-depth analysis of the *telenovela* they were all following. That Saturday, when the Rizzos moved in, Milagros, our landlord, her sister Anna, Mom, and my aunt Chavela, were out on the porch of the house that we all lived in. Mom, Pop, aunt Chavela, my brother and I lived on the second floor. Anna, Milagros and her girls, Viv and Eve, as well as the girls' father lived on the first floor.

Across the street, Purita peered through her blinds every fifteen minutes or so. Her two tenants, Alba and Cathy, whom we jokingly called *Las majas*—the epithet my mother sarcastically used to refer to them in reference to Goya's famous portrait of the nude and unabashed Spanish beauty—sat on their porch. *Las majas* were always decked out in tight mixed polyester jeans and equally snug blouses, which they were only able to squeeze into thanks to some hefty girdles. They had matching hairdos blow dried *a la* Farah Fawcett and Jacqueline Smith, set into place with an overabundance of Aquanet, which withstood the usual ninety-degree weather and sixty-five percent humidity typical of Newark summers. Only women waiting in line trying to get into Studio 54 wore make-up. Their most distinctive and classiest fashion accessory was probably their leather flip flops, with the name "Puerto Rico" stamped on the straps in gold lamé letters.

There were always at least three different conversations going on at the same time between the two porches; all of them revolved around the telenovela. That summer, *Maite*, a love triangle starring Venezuelan beauty Caridad Canelón and Venezuelan hunk Orlando Urdaneta, was the story that ignited the passionate discussions among the women. They argued about superfluous things such as Caridad's hairstyle or Orlando's moustache, but it was always *la mala*, or the vixen, that drew the shared wrath of the unforgiving bunch.

As the ladies discussed every excruciating detail of *Maite's* confrontation with *la mala*, a moving truck pulled up in front of the house next door. Carmen, who lived in the first-floor apartment of the house, stuck her neck out her window to catch a glimpse of her new neighbors. Carmen was kind of the odd man out in the porch gathering. She would join the banter by sticking her head out her bedroom window which faced our porch. The fact that I could only

see Carmen in her framed window from the waist up reminded me of The Muppets. She kind of looked like one too. I would imagine that Jim Henson was kneeling next to Carmen shoving his fist up her ass making her move, talk, and laugh at the usually off color comments the women made, which were offensive to people of all races, religions, genders, and sexual orientations.

When the truck screeched to a halt, all conversations stopped, and every single one of their necks stretched to lengths that were only surpassed by the necks of the Kayan Lahwi women. They looked like a pack of meerkats who had picked up the scent of an approaching predator.

A young twenty-something, brown, chubby, half pint of a mover stepped out of the driver's seat wearing basic cream converse high tops, a worn and dirty pair of Levi's blue jeans, and a black Led Zeppelin t-shirt, which given how a quarter of his belly peeked out just above his jeans, he probably bought when he was in junior high. As he made his way toward the back of the truck, he noticed the observant female audience. He nodded and offered a polite yet timid half smile. The ladies replied with an alliterated cacophony of "Hi!" "Hello!" and "Hey!" and one or two even inserted an "*Hola!*" in there somewhere. Then the salacious evaluation began.

"I think he has a little one," Chavela started.

"Why do you say that?" Anna questioned.

"Girl, look at him, so short, and chubby. I mean, come on, *chica*, you know you're gonna need a wrench to pull that little sucker out." Chavela replied.

"You know what, I think you're wrong, 'cause wait until he turns sideways, and you'll see it kinda protrudes," Anna stated with absolute certainty.

Mom, the most serious of the bunch, light-heartedly asked the younger Chavela and Anna to refrain from discussing the man's anatomy.

"Oh my God! You guys are worse than men! Is that all you guys think about?" Mom questioned.

"That's the first thing. Then I think about the size of his wallet. Something's gotta compensate!" Chavela replied.

"All I know is that my man, whenever I find a man, better smoke and drink! Nothing sadder than a man who doesn't smoke and drink!" Anna sheepishly commented.

While the women shared their expectations of the male anatomy, his purchasing power, and his desirable and potentially addictive habits, Milagros's two daughters, Viv who was ten and Eve who was nine, and I, listened attentively. Of the two girls, I was always closest to Eve. Our friendship continued into our adult years.

It seems that the words spoken by the women that summer resonated heavily with Eve, so much so that when she met Junior in her early twenties, she believed she had found a real man. He smoked, drank heavily, and she claimed she could only have sex twice a week, five days in between each time because, well, he was just too big. Junior also had a hefty bank account. He owned two bodegas in two prime Newark locations. Unfortunately, he also had a temper that he liked to take out on Eve.

Junior's abusive nature was no secret. Dark sunglasses and extra make-up became unintended fashion statements for Eve. However, she never spoke of it and she most definitely never shared—not even with her sister—that Junior raped her. A year into their marriage, Junior came home drunk late one Friday night after hanging with his homeboys. That night, he once

again forced Eve to have sex. Once Junior had his way, he rolled over onto his back, his massive manhood still throbbing from the criminal invasion. It had been so violent, there were traces of blood on the sheets. Eve laid beside him in pain, in tears. She had thought about revenge many times before but never acted on it. That night, however, the physical agony and emotional assault had been insufferable. Once Junior had fallen into his immutable sleep, she quietly rolled out of the bed hunched over with her left hand gently rubbing her sex to ease the pain. She made her way to Junior's closet and rolled open the mirrored door behind which Junior kept his aluminum baseball bats. Eve grabbed the Slugger and dragged it across the carpet until she reached the foot of the bed. She stood right between Junior's legs. Her hatred and utter disgust boiling over as she stared at his dick. In one heaving breath, ignoring the physical pain that consumed her, she raised the bat over her head. As Eve dropped the bat onto her aggressor's loins, she let out a painful wail that awoke Junior. In the blink of an eye, he was able to swiftly roll out of the bed and onto the floor, barely escaping the brutal ball busting bomb. He quickly got up, snatched the bat from Eve's hands and flung it across the room. He then grabbed Eve by the neck and slammed her forcefully against the wall.

"Bitch! What the fuck is wrong with you?!" Junior yelled as his hands tightened around Eve's neck. "Are you kidding me Eve?!"

Eve struggled to gurgle a sound, any sound. The veins in Junior's muscular arms were bulging out of his skin just as Eve's eyes were bulging out of her skull. It didn't take much longer for Eve's struggle to subside. Her eyes remained wide open, even after she stopped breathing. Junior continued to squeeze and squeeze, digging his fingers into her neck.

After learning of Eve's fate, I couldn't help but wonder what her life could have been like had she not embraced the distorted ideals of masculinity that she learned from the women.

On both porches, the women continued their chatter, this time shifting their attention to the truck driver's young Erik Estrada-ish companion who had stepped out of the vehicle. They sexually objectified their prey with equal opportunity, and their new victim could not escape the searing stares that followed along the contours of his faded Wranglers.

"Now that's what I'm talking about!" Anna said, dropping her voice down a couple of decibels until she reached the purring pitch of a bargain basement Lauren Bacall. The women broke out into simultaneous laughter which called the young mover's attention as he was unlocking the truck's gate. He turned his head and trained his sight on the porch to find a gaggle of multi-generational gawkers, and me.

"Hi!" said Chavela, as she waved and stood up to adjust her Daisy Dukes, ensuring that they were sitting as high as possible as her thick thighs would allow.

Las majas across the street caught Chavela's move. "Chavela! Mami, give us old old-timers a break!" one of the *Majas* yelled jokingly and not so jokingly.

"Sorry, mama, I'll do charity work when I'm as old as you!" Chavela yelled back, as the women burst out in laughter.

Las majas laughed, but it stung. The movers caught on and laughed and shook their heads as, more than likely, their insecurities probably began to creep up.

"Hey, *papi!*" Anna called to whichever of the two movers wanted to reply, "You guys know who's moving in?" The short chubby mover nodded. "What they like? Are they cool?" Anna questioned. "They not white, right?"

The mover, without turning his head to acknowledge Anna, and as he adjusted his gloves, nodded once again. Whereas the older women all remained unfazed, Anna and Chavela both disapproved of the news.

"Oh, hell no!" Chavela yelled angrily.

"What the fuck?!" Anna added.

"Girls, girls, relax, you need to stop judging people like that. What if they're guys and they look like Beau and Luke Duke?" my mother tried to reason with the girls using her slut complex theory.

"Oh, girl that's true!" Anna said as she padded Chavela on the shoulder.

"I guess," Chavela replied reluctantly.

"Hey guys, you know if these folks is women or men?!" Anna yelled to the movers.

Again, the short mover, without acknowledging Anna, and without stopping the unloading of the truck, responded. "Nah, it's three ladies," the mover replied as his partner chuckled.

"Oh man, these bitches better not get in my business, that's all I know!" Chavela threatened as she snapped her fingers three times, tracing an imaginary air "z" between each snap.

"Don't worry, I don't think they'll be in your business. You might even get your hair and make-up done for free," Erik Estrada wannabe said in an effeminate voice as he raised his right arm to the height of his chest and let his wrist go limp.

"Ay *chus*," the chubby mover replied mockingly.

"Oh shit! They *maricones*?!" Anna yelled.

"Oh dang! Paquito!" Chavela yelled to the *santero* who lived across the street two houses down from Purita and *Las majas*. "You got some friends moving in. Now you can have them over when you do your voodoo shit to those guys you tell to get naked so you can 'exorcise them!'" Chavela joked as she made air quotes.

Anna, Chavela, and the movers all laughed thunderously. Mom wasn't so amused. She slapped Chavela on the back of her shoulder and demanded that she refrain from speaking further.

"Chavela, I don't like that."

"I'm only tripping, Maria, gosh!"

"I don't care!" Mom asserted as she threatened Chavela with telling my Pop, Chavela's older brother.

The women now had a new topic to keep them amused for the rest of the day. As time passed and the movers continued unloading the truck, you could sense the anticipation shared among the women, all nervously excited about what new gossip worthy adventures the new neighbors would gift to the neighborhood.

Thirty-five minutes after the moving truck arrived, a beat-up Grand Cherokee Wagoneer pulled up behind it. You know, the kind with the wood panels and every joint from bumper to bumper squeaking. Immediately after the driver shifted the gear into park, Giovanna, a short haired brunette, looking somewhat like Kate Jackson *a la* Sabrina Duncan, but shorter, much shorter, and stockier, leaped out of the passenger seat. She opened the door to the back seat and helped an older woman out of the wagon. Estelle, the older woman, was shorter than Giovanna, and to my eight-year-old eyes she looked like she was at least one hundred fifty, but my forty-

year-old memory estimates she was around seventy. Once out of the wagon, with feet set on *terra firma*, Giovanna let go of her mother.

"Mom, you good?" Giovanna asked and waited for a sincere confirmation.

"Yeah, honey, I'm fine, go help your brother," Estelle ordered as she took dainty steps toward the moving truck, securing her movements by placing her hand against the Wagoneer.

Daniel, her son, had stepped out of the Wagoneer while Giovanna and Estelle addressed Estelle's secure footing. The women on both porches did not waste a minute and were already passing judgment.

"You know what? That girl looks really butch," Cathy, one of *Las majas* commented to the other.

"Yeah," Alba, the other *maja* agreed. "He is definitely *maricón* and she is definitely a dyke," she jaded pouting in apparent disgust.

Our new neighbors had no choice but to encounter us face to face in order to get to their new dwelling. For some reason, the main entrance to that house was never used. Everyone who lived or visited anybody who lived there had to use the alley to access the apartments. The alley ran right between our houses. The movers had already been up and down the alley several times. Bruno, the new neighbors' landlord, appeared from the alley and greeted his new tenants on the sidewalk. They exchanged customary pleasantries and then Bruno led the family into the alley.

Bruno was an eighties Guido, which is not much different from a twenty-first century Guido. He had straight black hair and wore it relatively short for the time. He was always clean shaven, only the face, never the chest. I would say he was about twenty-nine and that house was probably his first major investment; the first of what I suspect became a very lucrative real estate

business. He liked to come out of the house shirtless in his seventies short shorts, especially when he knew his neighbors were on the porch. "*Hola!*" he would say or tease I should say. All the women on the porch would reply "*Hola!*" in unison as they were captivated by Bruno's tight shorts, tight abs, and Stallone-ish good looks. Chavela and Anna would always pepper the shared "*Hola!*" with a "Hey Bruno!" or a more daring "Looking good Bruno!" which always brought a smile to Bruno's face, and earned Chavela and Anna a coveted Bruno wink. Even though they would bite their lips every time they got a glimpse of his glistening torso whenever they were lucky enough to catch him returning from his jog in the park, they knew that biting their lips was all that would come of it. Italian boys didn't date brown Puerto Rican girls. They just fucked them or kept them as a side piece.

As Bruno led Daniel, Giovanna, and Estelle toward the alley, you could sense that the new neighbors were aware of the intense scrutiny to which they were being subjected. Nonetheless, they maintained a pleasant demeanor showing no sign of intimidation.

"Ladies," Bruno said as he walked by acknowledging his neighbors. Of the three, Daniel had the most pleasant demeanor. He seemed quite carefree and very comfortable in his own skin, and nothing really indicated femininity other than the way he swayed his hips. On the contrary, he was a burly fellow, dark stubble covered his face, and his arms were thick and hairy enough to look like they belonged to a marine.

Unlike Daniel, Giovanna had a vigorous gait. It was firm, purposeful, like it was saying: "Yeah, I could kick your ass if I wanted to!" Even though she didn't seem as carefree as Daniel, she also didn't seem overly tense. However, you could tell that she was feeling the weight of the stares a lot more than Daniel and Estelle. As they stepped into the alley, Giovanna, who walked

behind Estelle, kept her eyes trained on the back of her mother's head, at times nervously shifting her eyes to look at the women on the porch. She knew she wasn't feminine and that the women were all judging her for it. Nonetheless, she didn't care. In fact, she would wear her oversized jeans and t-shirts and sported high-top Converse every time she went out. Sometimes, when I'd hear her girlfriend's Gran Torino pull up in front of the house late at night, I'd peek through the window and spy on them making out in the front seat of the car.

As the new neighbors walked by, the women on the porch smiled coyly, and some even expressed a welcoming hello, in this way enacting the love for thy neighbor instilled by their staunch Catholic upbringing. Our new neighbors had barely disappeared into the back stretch of the alley, when Cathy, one of *Las majas*, yelled from across the street.

"Hey *chicas*! Did you welcome your new neighbors?!" Cathy asked as she swayed a limp wrist.

"Girl, I don't know if we have new *vecinas* or new *vecinos*!" Anna replied mockingly.

"*Muchacha*, be quiet! Can't you see they barely made it to the back?" Milagros scolded her younger sister.

"Ay Millie, please. They're probably in the apartment already," Anna replied.

"What? Bitch are you blind? Did you not see the mom? Bruno is probably still carrying the old bag piggyback up the stairs?" Chavela joked.

"Oh my God! Poor Bruno!" Anna added as the rest of the women and us children finally gave in to Anna and Chavela's imprudent comments and burst into laughter.

The weeks following the Rizzos' arrival were uneventful. As usual, some of the kids rode their bikes up and down the sidewalk, others rode their roller-skates, some of the boys—and

occasionally a girl or two—would sometimes play a game of whiffle ball in the middle of the street. Carmine, who worked at City Hall and was one of the patrons of the Italian members-only club next door, carried a fire hydrant sprinkler in his Cadillac. Whenever the heat and humidity reached fever pitch levels, and if he'd happen to be in the club, Carmine would pull out the sprinkler from the trunk of his Cadillac Seville and attach it to the fire hydrant that stood right in front of our house. Everybody gave up their bikes, skates, and whiffle bats, heck, even the women gave up their porches for a day of inner-city recreational aquatics.

The Rizzos never took part in any of the carousing. As a matter of fact, after their move-in day, no one really saw or heard much from them. Occasionally, if Mom would let me stay out late, I would see Giovanna or Daniel arrive from work. They never arrived together but both took the bus to and from work. They both also always offered me a kind smile and a simple hello.

Sometime around mid-August—I am sure it was a Friday because Pop had not come home after work—almost everybody had retreated after a hot day of usual summer fun and Mom let me stay out on the porch a little while longer. I enjoyed being out on the porch in the evenings all by myself. It usually cooled down significantly and I had a rare chance to be alone in somewhat silence. It also gave me a chance to catch up on my reading. That evening, I was finishing *Moby Dick*. I had a special spot in one of the middle steps where I was able to nudge my flashlight in the iron railing, so that it illuminated my pages without having to hold it in my hand. I had barely read three pages when I heard approaching footsteps. I was sitting with my back against the railing; consequently, my back also faced the alley. The sound of a man's voice interrupted me. "Hi!" I heard as the footsteps suddenly stopped. It was Daniel. I turned around

and peered through the iron railing to find him standing barely a foot behind me. He was wearing a denim suit, a white button-down shirt with an oversized collar. His pitch-black hair was always somewhat disheveled which I believe was intentional to disguise his receding hair line. He wore typical large, tinted seventies glasses with a gold metal frame. I'd say he was a cross between George Constanza and Elton John.

"Hi," I replied cautiously.

"What are you reading there?"

" *Moby Dick*," I replied.

"Oh, I think I read that in high school. You must be pretty smart," Daniel said.

"I guess," I added.

All the time I remained sitting on my step, with my upper body half-turned and peering through the iron railing, my flashlight still illuminating my now closed book. Daniel stood casually, with his right hand grabbing the strap of his brown leather messenger bag and his left hand tucked in his pocket.

"You like to read?" I asked.

"I do, but I don't have much time. Work keeps me pretty busy," he said.

"What kind of work do you do?" I inquired.

"I own a salon," Daniel replied.

"A salon?"

"You know what a salon is?" Daniel asked.

"No." I replied.

"It's where people go to get their hair cut," Daniel clarified.

"Like a barbershop?"

"Well, a barbershop is for men. A salon is mostly for women," Daniel explained.

"You cut women's hair?" I asked with incredulity.

"Yes, I cut women's hair. Doesn't your mom go to a salon to get her hair done?"

"No," I said shaking my head. "She goes to Teresa's. Teresa doesn't have a salon. She cuts my mom's hair in her backyard," I said.

"Oh, okay. Well, here, take my card and give it to your mom" Daniel said as he toiled with his messenger bag trying to find his cards. "Tell her she can stop by anytime and I will give her a first cut for free. She can just stop by any day during the week before seven. Tell her to ask for Daniel. Here, let me write that on the card."

He finished writing the instructions on the reverse side of a business card and extended his hand toward one of the openings between the bars of the railings. I pushed my small arm through the bars to grab the card, and just when I was about to nab it with my fingers, Mom stormed onto the porch.

"Jimmy, get inside now!" she yelled.

Startled, I swiftly turned to find her standing at the top of the porch, her right arm stiff at her side, her hand in a fist; her left arm extended and pointing at the door.

"But Mom, it's early, I'm almost done with the book," I pleaded.

"James Armando González Martínez, get inside now."

This time she didn't yell, she deepened her voice and stared me down.

"Man!" I complained.

I stood up, unhinged my flashlight, turned it off and put it in my pocket, then I grabbed my book and stuck it under my arm and stormed up the stairs. As I climbed the steps, Mom remained motionless, her stiff posture unchanged until I crossed the threshold into the foyer. When I reached the top of the porch, right before I stepped into the foyer, with the side of my eye I caught Daniel walking down the alley with his head hung staring at the ground. As I was wiping my feet on the welcome mat, Mom stormed in pushing me aside and slammed the door behind us. She grabbed my arm and squeezed me so tight that I felt her nails digging into my skin.

"Young man, you listen to me and listen to me clear," Mom began to say, her voice still deep, waving her index finger in my face with her free hand. "I don't ever want to see you talking to those people again," she commanded.

"But Mom I wasn't doing anything wrong," I clamored as my heart began to race and my voice began to shake. Tears began to roll down my face. Mom was unmoved.

"I do not care," she continued. "You will do as I say unless you want me to tell your father, do you understand?" she insisted.

"Yes," I mumbled as I wiped my tears.

"I mean it, Jimmy. Those people are dangerous," she said.

"Dangerous?"

"Yes, stay away from them!"

"Okay," I said.

"Now go wash up and get ready for supper," she demanded.

Mom finally let go of her grip. Her nails were clearly marked on my arm. As I washed my face and hands, I tried to make sense of what had happened. Mom had never been so upset about me talking to a neighbor. I talked to Carmen all the time when I read in the evenings on the porch. She never got upset when one of the Italian guys from the club next door tried to teach me how to play soccer. Furthermore, she never had called anybody dangerous. I didn't think Daniel was dangerous, on the contrary, I thought he was quite nice. Heck, he was going to cut her hair for free!

I had never seen Mom so upset with me except for one time when she caught me playing with Eve and Viv's Barbie dolls. That day she lost it. She gave me a beating so bad, my behind throbbed for three days. I suppose she never told Pop. She did tell him about Daniel, however.

School began in mid-September, and Mom and the other ladies did not sit out on the porch anymore. There was no more cooling down with the water from the fire hydrant and more significantly, Mom did not let me stay out late on the porch anymore. I ended up sitting in the fire escape to read instead. I didn't like reading in the apartment. Mom would watch her *telenovelas* turned up high and my baby brother would constantly break out crying for what I thought was no reason. Luckily, our fire escape was inside the house, so I didn't have to worry about the dropping fall temperatures. It wasn't as secluded as I thought it would be, however. The fire escape also led to the basement where Mom had her washing machine. When I least expected it, Mom would appear with a load to drop in the washer. It worked for the most part.

I'd go to Branch Brook library on a weekly basis. Every Saturday, after watching the Super Friends, Mom would secure my brother in his stroller and she'd walk me to the library and

she'd patiently wait while I skimmed book after book. Sometimes—mostly when my brother became unruly—she would pressure me to hurry, but for the most part, she was patient. I would always first look for books about sports and sports figures. I had borrowed practically every book on bobsledding. I was obsessed with those slick man-powered speed machines. I'd watch ABC's Wide World of Sports hoping there would always be a segment on bobsledding, but of course there wasn't.

In early October, Halloween decorations began to pop up all around the neighborhood and, of course, my imagination soared. I spent hours trying to figure out who or what I could be for at least one day. I didn't want a generic costume. The previous year I had been Batman. It was one of those generic, plastic Batman costumes with the plastic mask. Mercedes, a friend of Mom and Pop's who'd been born and raised in Newark, had taken me trick-or-treating the previous year for the first time. My Batman costume was so cheaply made the inseam tore after going up and down the stairs of just a few porches. Mom and Pop had never taken me trick-or-treating, they didn't think it was safe and they just didn't get it. When they were growing up in Puerto Rico in the fifties and sixties, American traditions like Halloween were only observed by the rich folks, who were a minority, and mostly rejected by the masses. In the end, I settled for another generic plastic costume because, well, I just didn't have any choice. Neither Mom nor Pop had any interest in helping me create a costume. They thought it was a waste of time and, most importantly, a waste of money. I had thought of being a scary clown. When I shared the idea with Mom, she looked at me like I was crazy. She laughed. "You think your father is going to let me spend money on something you are going to wear one night? Ha!" she said. And just like that my mother crushed my creative drive forever.

On Halloween night, the street was filled with adults and kids wearing extravagant and generic costumes alike, all marching up and down Garside Street, knocking on doors and ringing bells, all hoping to end the night with candy spilling out of their plastic pumpkin baskets. Around nine o'clock, Mercedes walked me back to the house. Halloween fell on a school night that year. I was excited that my pumpkin was at least half full—I had sweets to last through Christmas—but sad that I had to go back to being myself. My sadness didn't last long, however. Just as we were approaching the house, I noticed a soft white light emanating from the alley. It became brighter as we moved in closer. When we reached the front of the house, a magical, ethereal being emerged from the light. It was covered in a white, silky fabric reminiscent of Glenda the good witch and wore its hair up in a giant beehive that was topped with the most extravagantly bejeweled crown. I was speechless. Mercedes wasn't. In fact, it seemed as if she didn't even see what I was seeing.

"Wow, these faggots really go all out," Mercedes mumbled as Daniel floated across the sidewalk and struggled to fit his ballgown and two-foot-tall wig and crown into a cab.

The rest of the fall was uneventful. I was having a pretty good year in school. My third favorite holiday was coming up—Christmas was my second after Halloween—and I couldn't wait to march once again in the Thanksgiving parade. That year we were chosen to march alongside the Montclair State University football team. Those of us that were lucky enough to have been chosen to march were paired with one player. I was paired with Tom who was a wide receiver. He was the nicest white guy I had ever met, besides Mr. Del Grosso, my first-grade teacher. Before the parade, we went on a trip to Montclair State and Tom took me all around the university. We also went on the field and he taught me how to throw a football. I didn't know

much about the game and Tom didn't make me feel bad about it. On the contrary, he said I had a good arm. Then he took me to see his locker and Tom introduced me to some of the other players. Several of them were naked which surprised me and strangely enough made me nervous. Even though I was only eight, seeing male naked bodies that day awakened what at the time were inexplicable feelings and emotions that scared me which I eventually suppressed for a very long time.

The first weekend of December, Mom dragged me out of bed to do some Christmas shopping. It was a cloudy and cold Saturday morning. I begged her to let me stay home, but she needed an extra set of hands to carry some of the things she planned to buy. We walked to the bus stop and waited for the bus alongside several other freezing moms with equally freezing, unhappy progeny. When we boarded the bus, there weren't any free seats in the front which really pissed off Mom. She hated sitting in the back. We had no choice but to sit in the very last seat. The bus was packed with factory workers itching to spend every last cent they had withdrawn from their Christmas Club accounts. The bus, like most of Newark, was beat up, dirty and smelly, but had a lot of character. I always took the window seat because I enjoyed looking at the dilapidated buildings as we made our way downtown. That day, I noticed something shiny nudged between our seats. I, as curious as an eight-year-old could be, was about to grab it when Mom slapped my hand away. She looked around and found an empty seat just ahead of us. Without hesitation, she grabbed my arm and pulled me away to the empty seat, away from that shiny used syringe. We made the usual stops: basement sales at Bamberger's, McCrory's for some more shopping and pizza, and one last stop at May's, because, according to the jingle, every day is a sale day at May's.

The days leading up to Christmas were extremely cold, but we were lucky to have snow since late November. Of course, that type of luck is subjective. My feeling lucky was because I could play in the snow. It was a nightmare for Pop, who had to get ready for work an extra hour early just so he could brush it off from his car. I'm sure that those days played a big role in his decision to uproot us not many years later and return to the island.

That winter, I enjoyed playing outside in the snow with Viv and Eve and our Turkish neighbors, Tamer and Meltem. We'd build bunkers and line up snowballs for our offensive. I wasn't very good at making snowballs. My hands somehow couldn't cup the snow properly in order to give it a round shape. I'd usually team up with Tamer and Meltem and we would play against Viv and Eve. "Boys against girls!" Viv would yell. Looking back, I find it interesting how we, at such a young age, were already categorizing, labeling and differentiating each other. If I had been on Viv and Eve's team, we would have been Latinos against Turks, Christians against Muslims, locals against foreigners, Americans against Middle Easterners, anything, as long as it entailed identifying the other as the other.

I liked teaming up with Tamer because he treated me with respect. He never found any faults in me, unlike Viv and Eve who made fun of the way I threw my snowballs. "You throw like a girl," they would say, or "you run like a girl," or "you have girl lips." Viv and Eve were probably the first women in my life who tried to emasculate me.

Tamer was pretty much the only boy I spent any time with outside of school. He lived in the house on the opposite side, on the opposite side to where Daniel lived that is. Tamer was a few years older than me—maybe three years—and, consequently, we weren't always interested in the same things. For one, we weren't interested in the same music. Whereas I was in my

Menudo phase, Tamer was a rocker. I didn't dig rock music until much later in life and I can appreciate that Tamer never discouraged me from listening to what I liked. On the contrary, he never criticized my taste, but did expose me to new things, not only music. For example, we talked about our religions even though I didn't know much about it, and I think he didn't either. I remember explaining to him that there was a man named Jesus who was the son of God, but was also God, and a spirit, all at once. He didn't get it. Honestly, I didn't either. He knew that I went to church every Sunday and that there was a book we called the Bible, which to this day I have read twice for ten minutes each time. I explained to him that our God was merciful but would not hesitate to punish me for sinning, and that I should be very afraid of making God angry. He asked me about Easter, and all I could say was that it was a week we couldn't eat meat. All I knew about the Virgin is that she was Jesus's mother and that Mom would pray to her every time Pop would go out and not return until the next day.

Tamer tried to understand. He, on the other hand, seemed to know less about Islam than I knew about Catholicism. He talked to me about the Quran, and I think he even showed me a book, I am not sure. I can't remember much else. Nonetheless, besides sharing his religion and his taste for music with me, Tamer was like a big brother I wish I had. He taught me how to do things that I deemed important, like riding my bike without training wheels. For that I will always be grateful. More importantly, I believe he tried to protect me.

One fall afternoon when I was around ten years old, I was jumping rope with Viv and Eve. After Viv and Eve were called inside, I went to Tamer's porch. He was sitting quietly at the top of the stairs. I climbed the stairs and sat next to him. We both remained quiet for a while until he broke the silence.

"You know, you shouldn't be jumping rope with the girls," he warned.

"Why not?" I asked innocently.

"Because guys don't jump rope," Tamer explained.

"What about boxers? Boxers jump rope," I countered.

"Yeah, but they don't jump rope with their sisters," he said.

"Yeah, but they jump rope," I insisted.

Tamer gave up, but he never gave up on me. I thought of that brief encounter much later, when I was older. I am so grateful that he didn't say that only faggots jumped rope with girls.

When I woke up Christmas morning, I got up and made my way to the living room. Mom was already sitting on the floor next to the Christmas tree helping my brother unwrap his gifts. Pop was still in bed; he had worked over-time the night before.

"Jimmy, it is about time you woke up! Aren't you curious about your gift?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said as I scratched my head and picked the rheum out of my eyes.

"Go brush your teeth and wash your face and come back!" she demanded.

I followed Mom's orders and returned to find my brother trying to put a nose in the spot where Mr. Potato Head should have an eye.

"Sit down, sweetie," Mom said. "This one is from Abuelo and Abuela. I told them to stop spending money on you guys, but they just won't listen."

I opened the small box to find several books, among them were Abelardo Diaz Alfaro's *Terrazo* and Luis Pales Matos's *Tuntun de Pasa y Grifería*. They were all in Spanish. Before he moved back to the island, Abuelo made me promise I would keep up with my Spanish and I tried. They were books I didn't learn to appreciate until much later, when my struggle with my

identity began. As I was skimming through my new treasures, we heard the siren of an ambulance approaching and it seemed to stop right in front of our house.

"*Ay dios mio*, I wonder who it's for?" Mom said as she made the sign of the cross and got up from the floor and rushed to the window. I followed her, leaving my brother by himself toiling with his Mr. Potato Head.

When I reached the window, the paramedics were stepping out of the ambulance. They went to the back of the vehicle, opened the doors and pulled out a large bag. We lost sight of them when they climbed the porch of Bruno's house.

"*Ay dios mio*, is it Carmen?" Mom wondered.

After approximately ten minutes, the paramedics returned to the ambulance, pulled out a stretcher from the back and rushed it through the alley. We waited patiently. Mom went back and forth checking on my brother. Then, after what seemed an eternity, a paramedic appeared from the alley pulling the stretcher.

"Mom!" I yelled.

Mom rushed back first to scold me for yelling while Pop slept and then to try to decipher who was on the stretcher.

"I can't tell who it is," Mom complained.

She contorted her neck and upper body trying to identify the ailing neighbor before the medics boarded him or her onto the ambulance.

"I can't...see...oh wait...oh my God, it's that *muchacho*, what's his name? Daniel?"

My heart sank. I felt as if someone dear to me was suffering. I couldn't understand why I would feel so much despair for someone I hardly knew and never had really spoken to.

Giovanna, Daniel's sister boarded the back of the ambulance along with one of the paramedics. They turned on the siren and rushed away as Mom watched the speeding ambulance.

"Oh my God, I hope it's not what I think it is. God help him," mom said.

"What do you think it is?" I asked.

"His poor mother," she lamented. "*Nada, papito, nada*, go read your new books. Or play with your brother. Go."

I stood there, also watching the ambulance rush away, hoping that Daniel would be alright. Not two minutes had gone by when someone was banging on the front door.

"Jimmy, hurry, go check who it is before they wake up your dad," Mom said.

I ran to the door and opened it to find Anna. She almost ran me over trying to get into the apartment.

"Jimmy, where's your ma?" she said as she pushed me aside and rushed in without a proper invitation.

"Maria!" she yelled.

"Shh," I said. "Pop is sleeping."

"Oh shit, I'm sorry," Anna replied in a whisper.

"Mom is in the living room," I said.

Anna rushed to the living room to find Mom still looking out the window with my brother in her arms.

"Maria, did you see?" Anna asked, somewhat exasperated.

"Girl, yes," Mom replied.

"Girl, I hope it's not what I think it is?" Anna said shaking her head. "That guy is young so it can't be no heart attack or no stroke."

"Ay Anna, please. Don't be so negative," Mom said trying to be optimistic. "It could be the flu, it's really bad this year," Mom added.

"I don't know Maria, these *potos* are dropping like flies. Haven't you seen the news?" Anna asked.

"You mean that gay cancer?" Mom replied

"Yeah," Anna said, shaking her head, crossing her arms as she sat on the edge of the couch.

"You remember, last year, my cousin Angel. One day he was joking with us on the porch and the next day he was wasting away in a hospital bed," Anna said as her eyes welled up with tears.

"I don't think it's that," Mom said.

"I hope not, Maria, that is a horrible way to go. I remember there were nurses that refused to touch Angel. I was so pissed I almost ripped the head off one of them. His mom and I ended up taking care of him. It was so sad, Maria. He was so full of life," Anna lamented.

"I remember Anna, I remember," Mom said.

We didn't see Daniel again until the spring, when the weather warmed up and the women once again started gathering on their porches. He would arrive earlier from work, and of course, whenever they saw him, the women would comment on his appearance, on how much weight he'd lost, on how aged he looked, but no one explicitly said he looked ill. At least not at the beginning. Even though they all suspected he had that gay cancer they had heard about on the

news, the same gay cancer Angel probably died from a year earlier, their collective fear of the mysterious illness somehow kept them from acknowledging it. It was as if not acknowledging it would make it go away. If there was something positive that resulted from the possibility that Daniel might be ill, was that Mom became more compassionate toward him. Whenever she saw him, she offered him a smile and asked him how he was doing. She seemed to be genuinely concerned about his well-being. That made me happy.

One day, Pop, on his way back from the liquor store, walked by the bus stop. Giovanna was stepping off the bus so they both walked down the street together. It seemed they had struck up a conversation that was quite amiable because they both occasionally laughed along the way. Mom was at the bottom of the porch stairs swaying my brother in his stroller as she watched the unlikely pair. When they reached the alley, Pop said goodbye to Giovanna.

"Alright, see ya later, G," Pop said.

"Okay man, take care," Giovanna said as she smiled at Mom who did not return the gesture.

"What the hell is that about?" Mom asked Pop as she moved her face away when Pop tried to kiss her on the cheek.

"What the hell? You jealous?" Pop asked.

"Me? No," Mom replied dryly.

"Oh, come on Maria, you know she only likes pussy," Pop said flippantly as Anna and Milagros who were also on the porch tried to hold back the urge to laugh to no avail. I even chuckled.

“Stop using that language in front of the boys. I’ve told you a dozen times!” Mom scolded Pop.

Before going up to our apartment with his six pack of Miller High Life, Pop tried to pull Mom closer, which he managed to do even though she tried to push him away because she felt he was being facetious. When she finally gave in, he spoke softly, but I heard him say, “She wanted me to thank you for being so kind to her brother. She said it makes him feel good when you ask how he is doing.” That made me happy.

The end of the school year was quickly approaching, and I was excited about summer, staying out late, playing tag, and roller skating. I hadn't seen much of Daniel except occasionally on Fridays when Mom finally began to let me stay out a little longer. One Friday he arrived home from work and I was sitting on the porch with Viv and Eve. He was wearing the same denim suit he wore the day Mom called him dangerous. This time, however, it looked like a totally different suit because it didn't fit him properly anymore. This time the suit looked like it was several sizes too big. His cheeks had sunken in and he had lost a lot more hair. He had switched his groovy gold rimmed glasses for an almost pitch-black pair that even at dusk he would not remove. As I observed him walking from the bus stop, I wondered if I would ever again see that beautiful vision I experienced on Halloween night. I also wondered if Daniel would ever be himself again. I had heard the adults mention that he could be sick, but I thought he just had a cold, that he would be better soon. Yet, since Christmas day, I could see that he'd been getting worse. It was the longest cold I had heard of.

As he crossed the street, he noticed that we were sitting on the porch and quietly observing him. He slowed his pace, hung his head and lifted his collar in a fruitless attempt to

become invisible. I was overcome with sadness and I turned to look at Viv and Eve to see if their faces revealed a similar emotion, but all I saw were blank stares. Daniel approached the alley stealthily, trying hard not to tap the ground too hard with his leather boots, but I saw him and heard him. As soon as he took the first step into the alley he tripped. Luckily, he was able to reach our railing with his left arm and was able to hold on before his knees hit the ground. His black sunglasses were hanging off one ear and as he struggled to straighten his body and regain his composure, he looked up at me. His blue eyes had sunken in even more than his cheeks, and they were searching, pleading for compassion. I got up and began going down the stairs when Viv, as if she had sensed what I was going to do, grabbed my arm and pulled me back so violently, my behind slammed against the stone step.

"Don't touch him," Viv whispered in my ear.

"But, but..." I tried to plead.

"Mom said he has a weird disease and it could be contagious," Viv tried to whisper once again but to no avail.

Daniel heard Viv, and he stood still after those words were uttered. Then he took a deep breath, his left hand still hanging on to the railing. He fixed his sunglasses with his right hand. Using all the strength his frail body could muster, he completely straightened up and threw his leather messenger bag over his shoulder. "Children, have a good evening," he said looking at us now through his sunglasses before he took his first step. Even his voice had changed. Compared to that fall night when he asked me what I was reading, his voice now sounded deeper and older. I watched him as he tried to walk normally, but I noticed that each step was a struggle. I sat there

with Viv and Eve as Daniel disappeared into the alley, and I thought about how I had failed to be the good Samaritan to Daniel. I failed to be the good Christian my Mom expected me to be.

The summer was around the corner, and school would be out in a week. Every morning on my way to school I would look up to Daniel's apartment hoping to see a sign that indicated that he was okay. On the last day of school, just as I was approaching the crossing guard, I heard a siren. I looked up Bloomfield Avenue and saw that the ambulance was turning on Garside. My heart sank and I ran back home. When I turned on Garside, I saw the paramedics rushing into the alley, just like Christmas day. I hid behind a tree, making sure Mom or Pop would not see me should they step out for some reason. I waited and I heard the school's morning bell ring, but I waited. It wasn't long before the paramedics reappeared with Daniel on the stretcher, just like Christmas day. However, this time it was different. I didn't see any urgency in the faces of the paramedics or in Giovanna's face for that matter. They put him in the back of the ambulance and Giovanna went with him to the hospital, just like Christmas day. This time the ambulance did not rush to turn on its lights or the siren. They drove down the street to the intersection before all that happened. Mom, Milagros and Anna, *Las majas*, and Purita were all looking out their windows.

School ended and all the kids were on the street and back to their usual antics. I rode my bike, roller skated, and played whiffle ball with Tamer. Now, little Stevie and Peewee, the only black kid on the block, began to hang with Tamer and me. Every now and then I would take my occasional peek at Daniel's apartment hoping for a sign. The women were back on the porches arguing about the *novela*, but sometimes the conversation turned to Daniel. They too wondered how he was doing and wished that God would help him.

One evening, one very hot evening, just as we were about to call it a day, we saw Giovanna walking home from the bus stop. She looked broken, her sturdy gait no longer threatening to kick your ass. Milagros called Viv and Eve inside, but Mom, Anna, Chavela, and I remained on the porch. I am sure Giovanna felt the weight of our stares, just like the day she moved into the neighborhood. As she entered the alley, Anna called out to Giovanna.

"Hey G, how you doin' girl?" Anna asked casually.

Giovanna stopped in her tracks, the dark circles around her eyes indicative of long sleepless nights.

"Hey..." Giovanna replied, trying to come up with a name.

"Anna," Anna said.

"Sorry, my mind is not right these days," she explained trying to disguise her inability to remember all the women's names.

"It's cool, girl. No worries. Say, how's your bro doin'?"

The question caught Giovanna off guard. She remained silent for a moment, her tired eyes now staring at the ground. She took a deep breath, raised her head and looked at the sky. Her chin began to quiver, her eyes full of tears. She began to shake her head, and then looked at Anna, tears rolling down her eyes. She turned her head and stared at the now dark alley.

"He needs to go. He needs to let go. The suffering is too much. Mom and I can't take care of him anymore. I'm at work all day and I just can't anymore," Giovanna said as she rested her head on the railing and cried inconsolably.

Anna stepped off the porch and into the alley entrance towards Giovanna. She placed her hand on Giovanna's shoulder.

“Come here,” Anna told Giovanna, and embraced her.

“It’s okay. Let it out,” Anna said.

Giovanna let out a cry full of pain and sorrow only relatable to those who have seen a loved one fade away.

“I tell you what. I’m going to give you guys a hand with your bro,” Anna said.

“What?” Giovanna asked, trying to understand Anna’s selfless offer.

“Yeah, you heard right. I’m not asking for money or nothing. I just know how hard it is. I took care of my cousin until he took his last breath. So, I know what you’re going through,” Anna explained.

Those words brought Giovanna to tears again. “Oh my God, thank you.”

“I mean, I ain’t got nothing better to do. Tell your ma I be there tomorrow at 9:30.”

“Okay, I will,” Giovanna replied as she stepped into the dark alley.

Anna went up the stairs of the porch and opened the door to the house. As soon as she stepped into the foyer, she was startled by Milagros’s voice.

“Just what the hell do you think you’re doing?!” Milagros asked angrily.

“Fuck! Milagros you scared the shit out of me!”

“What the hell do you think you are doing?” Milagros asked again.

“What? I offered to help her with her brother. The man is sick, Milagros.”

“Exactly, and you don’t know what he has. And you’re going to risk catching whatever he has and bring it into my home where my daughters live? I don’t think so *señorita!*”

“Milagros, come on *chica*. You know what he has. If you’d helped take care of Angel while he was alive you would know better. But no, you just spent your time judging him!” Anna screamed.

“God punished Angel for the unnatural things he did! He brought it upon himself!” Milagros retorted.

“So, who was it Milagros? Was it Angel or was it God?” Anna fired back.

“Don’t get smart with me lady!” snapped Milagros.

“I am going to help her whether you like it or not. If you want to throw me out, do it! Besides, what am I going to do here all day? The girls are at camp during the day and I can get the housework done in an hour” Anna challenged Milagros as she walked away. With her back to Milagros as she walked into the apartment she added, “Instead of worrying about me getting your daughters sick, you should worry about them growing up to be compassionate women.”

The next day, just as promised, Anna went to Daniel’s apartment. Estelle received her with a hug, fresh coffee and homemade cannolis. After they made small talk and Anna savored her treats, Estelle took her to Daniel’s room. Anna could feel her pulse racing; her mind was suddenly bombarded with images of Angel. She felt dizzy, light-headed but managed to maintain her composure. When Anna saw Daniel curled up in the fetal position, now about a quarter of the man he used to be, she could do nothing but think of Angel.

“Oh, Angel,” she mumbled.

“What was that, honey?” Estelle asked.

“Oh, nothing sweetie, I was just talking to myself.”

Anna approached Daniel and ran her hand through the few strands of hair Daniel had left. Estelle was touched with Anna's demonstration of tenderness.

"So, Estelle, what do you need me to do?" Anna asked.

"Oh, just be there for him," she said. "He hates being alone. When he wakes up and doesn't see me there, in that chair, he goes crazy. All he wants is for me to hold his hand. He doesn't see very well anymore so touching my hand is comforting. I spent the whole night in that chair. I am tired and would like to rest if you don't mind," Estelle said.

"Go right ahead. I will be here," Anna added.

Estelle left for her bedroom and Anna pulled out a glossy magazine and sat down in the chair in which Estelle had recently spent so many nights.

When Chavela and Maria found out that Anna had offered to help their neighbors they were puzzled, but not surprised.

"This Anna is crazy with a capital K," Chavela told Maria.

"Why?" Maria asked.

"Because, Maria, what if she gets something?"

"Anna took care of her cousin and she is fine." You just have to use gloves and be careful if they bleed or have other secretions. At least that's what I heard on the news," Mom added as she folded her laundry.

"But still, Maria. They're not family and they're, you know, white. They wouldn't do that shit for us I tell you that much," Chavela assured.

"Love thy neighbor, Chavela, love thy neighbor," Mom said.

"I know. It's just weird." Chavela said, shaking her head.

The women gathered on the porches in the evenings right after they cooked supper. Everybody was there except for Anna. They all knew where Anna was, but nobody dared mention it. When she would appear from the alley, they would act joyful to see her, but you could feel the tension. Milagros for one, wouldn't acknowledge her sister's presence, she couldn't understand Anna's selfless act thinking she was putting everyone in her home at risk. Chavela, who was closest to Anna age wise, still goofed off with Anna. *Las majas* from across the street now pretty much kept to themselves when Anna appeared. Those days, when Giovanna arrived from work, she and Anna would step aside and discuss whatever happened with Daniel that day. Sometimes Giovanna would show up with a box of fresh doughnuts or cannolis for Anna as a show of gratitude. Anna would share with all of us on the porch, except with Milagros who just refused to take part.

In late June, summer was in full swing. Temperatures were soaring and Carmine had opened the fire hydrant a couple of times already. Anna began to show signs of fatigue. She seemed tired most of the time, she wouldn't hang on the porch as much, and well, she just wasn't that much fun anymore. On one of those last days of June, Chavela approached Anna after she appeared from the alley.

"Girl, you look like someone beat with you with a baseball bat," she told Anna.

"Girl, he can hardly move anymore. He's just skin and bones. If I'm not there that poor lady is just helpless," Anna said as she broke down in tears.

"Oh no, do not do that to me," Chavela begged.

"It is a horrible way to go Chavela, horrible," Anna cried.

Chavela hugged Anna trying to comfort her. She took a deep breath, broke their embrace and looked Anna in the eyes.

"I'm going with you tomorrow," Chavela said.

"What?" Anna asked in disbelief.

"Yeah, you heard me. I'm going with you tomorrow."

"Oh no, you're not feeling sorry for me, are you?"

"Course not. I just want to help that's all. You and me, Anna, we ain't got much goin' for us right now. Might as well do some good with our time," Chavela stated.

From that day on, Chavela would accompany Anna to Estelle's apartment. Occasionally, even Mom would tag along. Those days, Chavela would stay with my brother and me while Mom and Anna helped Estelle.

The days went by without any major incidents. Chavela and Anna spent more time at Estelle's than on the porch, but everybody else was pretty much doing the same thing. Sometime in mid-July, Milagros approached Anna in their apartment before she left for work while Anna was folding the laundry.

"So, how is he doing? Milagros asked.

Anna was confused with Milagros' question.

"What? Who?" Anna asked.

"*El muchacho*, how is he doing?"

Anna, no longer confused, continued to put away her laundry, and without looking at Milagros, shook her head.

"Not good. I don't think he has much left," Anna said.

"I'm proud of you," Milagros said as she combed Anna's long black hair with her hands.

"I ain't doin' nothing special, Millie. I just know how hard it is."

"I know," Milagros said softly.

That evening after work, instead of sitting on the porch after cooking supper, Milagros opened a drawer of one of her night tables and pulled out rosaries that were all tied into knots. She sat patiently on her bed as she separated them and gave her husband instructions. "Edelmiro! I'm going next door, keep an eye on the girls!"

Milagros stepped out onto her porch, went down the stairs, took a deep breath, and went into the alley. *Las majas* saw Milagros and were puzzled. To Chavela and Anna's surprise, Milagros appeared onto the wooden deck of Estelle's apartment. They saw her through the kitchen window and seemed just as puzzled as *Las majas*. Anna rushed out onto the deck.

"Milagros is everything okay? Are the girls okay?" Anna asked somewhat startled as Chavela peered through the kitchen window.

"Yes, Anna, everything is fine," she assured her.

"Here, let's pray," Milagros said to Anna as she held out her hand filled with rosaries.

Anna could not believe what she was seeing or hearing. She ran to her sister and hugged her. Then, both women entered Estelle's apartment and along with Chavela and Estelle, they gathered around Daniel's bed and prayed.

Every evening thereafter, the women gathered around Daniel's bed, lit candles and prayed for Daniel's soul. Even *Las majas* joined. They took turns watching each other's children so that at least one could join in prayer. The prayers went on every day for a week, until one evening, during a terrible thunderstorm, sometime around late July, Daniel took his last breath. Giovanna

was the first to notice, and she let out a terrible wail. Once the women realized what had happened, Milagros immediately took over. She closed Daniel's eyes and signaled Anna to call for an ambulance. Then she raised her voice so high in prayer that not even the thunder from the storm could be heard. The women, Daniel's women, following Milagros's lead, also continued to pray louder than the thunder.

At Daniel's burial, the women along with their children and their husbands all gathered around Estelle. Giovanna was crushed, but grateful to her neighbors for their love and support. Each of Daniel's women took a turn throwing a red rose into his grave. Later that evening, once all the mourners had left Estelle's apartment, the women gathered to pray the rosary one last time. They prayed with fervor and feasted on cannolis and fresh hot coffee.

When Mom arrived from Estelle's apartment, she found me sitting alone in the kitchen. I had been thinking about Daniel all day, trying to understand why people had to die. Mom moved closer and asked, "Are you alright?" I nodded.

"Mom?"

"Yes?"

"Is Daniel going to heaven?" I asked, as I crossed my fingers hoping that my mother would say yes. I suppose the question posed a serious maternal conundrum.

"Well, what do you think?"

"I think he is," I said.

"Why do you think he is?" Mom asked.

"Because he was a good person and he wanted to cut your hair for free," I said.

Mom chuckled and hugged me tight. “Yes, I think you’re right. Daniel is going to heaven.”

CHAPTER 6

SUNDAYS WITH ABUELO

Mom woke me up earlier than usual to attend Mass on that last Sunday of October 1980. “You’re going to be late!” she warned as she laid out my clothes at the foot of my bed. I remained motionless, battling the early morning rays of sunlight that she let in when she deliberately opened the drapes. I heard the bacon sizzling and smelled the bread baking in the oven. “Hurry up!” Mom yelled several times. Her sensible yet amorous call to make haste was followed by a thunderous: “You heard your Mother!” The unexpected command shot out of Mom and Pop’s bedroom like an F-35 bursting into hyper-sonic speed. Who knew that earthly sonic boom would torment me for the rest of my life? That auditory kick in the butt had me in the shower and brushing my teeth in no time. By the time I finished getting dressed, all the components of my breakfast were perfectly positioned on my plate. If she left it up to me, I would be late for Mass—intentionally. Mom and I usually attended Mass together; however, every other Sunday, when we expected Abuelo, she usually stayed behind and cooked a small feast. That Sunday, Abuelo would be joining us for lunch, so I attended Mass by myself.

On an average Sunday, Mass usually ended around eleven in the morning, and once Mom and I arrived home from service, I would sit in front of the television and tune in to WPIX to watch a Laurel and Hardy or Abbott and Costello marathon. Pop would likely be out getting lunch if he didn’t find any meat defrosting in the kitchen sink. If that was the case, he would show up around noon with Chinese food or a family sized order of White Castle or greasy Church’s chicken. To help it go down, Mom would prepare some Lipton’s iced tea—the powdered kind. Occasionally, Abuelo would also take part in our poor gastronomical choices.

I don't think Abuelo cared as much about the meal's nutritional value as he did about sharing it with his family. However, he never seemed more content than when Mom cooked his favorite: chicken stew and white rice with a slice of avocado on the side. Those Sundays he would walk into our apartment and with just one whiff he knew he was in for a glorious afternoon. After lunch, he would sit with me in the den and watch whatever marathon was on. He wasn't an Abbott and Costello fan, but he enjoyed the physical comedy. After about an hour, he would doze off. I would nestle in his side, his big brown arm draped over my shoulders. I would also fall asleep only to wake up and find that he had already left, and Mom had switched the movie marathon to *Siempre en Domingo*.

Mom had been extraordinarily quiet that morning. She even forgot to check if my shirt was tucked in or my shoes were properly shined before I left. She seemed to be more involved than usual in the kitchen, getting all the ingredients ready to cook lunch. I didn't think much of it at the time. I just figured she had argued with Pop the night before. She was silent for two or three days after each spat with Pop. I learned early on not to ask many questions when I suspected something was wrong. I either got the "look" from her or was completely ignored by Pop. Not that being ignored by Pop was an oddity. It was the norm.

Pop arrived with Abuelo in tow around noon. The fact that Abuelo had arrived with Pop should have been an early sign that it was not going to be an ordinary Sunday. Pop picking up Abuelo was unusual. The old man always took the bus. There were times that after Mass we'd go out for lunch or to the park and we'd stop by Abuelo's place and pick him up, but never to bring him home with us. Those days Mom and I would sit in the car and wait in front of Abuelo's house while Pop went in to fetch him. I only stepped foot in that house once. I remember Pop

and I racing up the stairs and crossing a dark hall that was barely illuminated by the sunlight that snuck in through a dirty skylight.

Abuelo's surprisingly small room was at the end of the dimly lit hall. He slept on a modest twin sized bed. He had an old dusty chest on top of which sat a hot plate and a coffee maker. Next to his bed stood a small night table with a lamp and a Bible he received as a gift from St. Columbus Church the day he was ordained a deacon. I thought it was strange that he didn't offer to show me the rest of the house considering it was my first time there. I also didn't understand why the room next to his was occupied by a stranger. It wasn't until many years later that I realized that the huge Victorian home did not belong to him. He just lived there with other boarders.

When Pop and Abuelo arrived, the house was already heavy with the aroma of chicken stew. It would be a fine day for Abuelo. I was in my room changing out of my church clothes when I heard the door to our apartment creak open. I assumed it was Pop returning with a six pack of Budweiser he normally chugged down after lunch. However, when I heard Mom's reaction, I realized Pop was not alone.

"*Suegro*, I cooked your favorite dish," I heard Mom tell Abuelo, a hint of nostalgia in her voice.

"*Si!* I could smell it in the street!" Abuelo replied with a tinge of sadness.

A momentary silence ensued, which in turn was followed by what seemed to sound like muffled sobbing, my mother's muffled sobbing. Hearing my mother cry made my heart race. I tried to rush out of my Sunday clothes and felt tempted to leave them all bunched up on the bed. I knew that would trigger Mom's compulsion for order and cleanliness if she caught sight of it,

however. My punishment would have been to be constantly reminded—for a week at least—of how she had not raised me up to be a pig. So, I decided to take several minutes—that given my state of sudden desperation felt endless—and I hung everything neatly in my closet. I even took the time to make sure that the shirt I changed into was properly buttoned and tucked in my jeans, and that my belt was not twisted or that I had missed any loops; anything and everything to avoid an afternoon of Mom’s nagging. “Jimmy, *mijo*, we must always make a good first impression, especially us,” she would constantly remind me. Not much later in life I would learn the truth of those words the hard way.

After a second check in the mirror, I swung open my bedroom door with just the right amount of force and constraint that would not call attention to my exit but would also allow me to release a minimal amount of pent up anxiety. I tried to approach the distraught pair as unassumingly as possible, but to no avail. My efforts at being inconspicuous were fruitless. Even at his seventy-five years of age, Abuelo had the hearing of a barn owl. I tried to take my steps as quietly as possible, like the ninjas in those low budget martial arts movies so popular in the eighties, and I would have succeeded if it weren’t for those freaky hippie beads Pop hung in the entrance to the living room. Just a slight brush against those beads and Abuelo’s bionic ears picked up on it. He turned to find me standing there, staring through the streams of multi-colored beads. My breathing suddenly picked up again, and I just stood there motionless, unable to speak or move, hoping I did not have to hear the news. Whatever it was, I did not want to hear it. I tried to act as natural as a nervous and confused eight-year-old could act. I stood there, Mom and Abuelo both now facing me.

Mom wiped her tears as Abuelo motioned with his hand for me to come closer. Suddenly, everything seemed to move in slow motion. Abuelo's hand. Mom's tears. I felt like I was in one of those point of view sequences you see on television shows right before someone is about to pass out. I began to move toward them, every step heavier and slower than the last. My heartbeat increased with every step, and in an effort to stay calm, in the brief but seemingly endless time it took me to move from behind the draped beads to the middle of the living room, I tried to fool myself into believing that Mom was crying tears of joy, while deep inside I knew they were not. I had seen Mom cry too many times to know that she only cried out of sorrow or anger.

"*Hijo*, get closer. Aren't you going to hug your Abuelo today?" he asked in his particular loving tone. I approached him and Mom cautiously, still trying to hide my apprehension as to not upset Mom even more. Once I was within an arm's length, Abuelo put his large brown hand on my shoulder and pulled me closer, my cheek landing on his chest. His hand, calloused from thirty-five years of pipe fitting, welding, and tool making at the steel mill, was padding my back repeatedly, offering me a comfort I had not requested.

I could hear his heart beating, slow at first then fast then slow again. I think it was the first time I had heard a beating heart. I was so captivated by the revelation that I momentarily forgot about Mom's tears. However, my brief trance ended when I felt Mom's hand softly caress my head, my face still buried in Abuelo's chest. Mom's hand felt small, but heavy, and it smelled like the garlic and onions she had been peeling and chopping all morning.

"How are you, *mijo*?" Abuelo asked, his voice a little deeper now, with a note of melancholy seeping through.

“Fine,” I replied as I pulled away from Abuelo and raised my head. I looked for his clouded eyes, and instead I was met with a thick, wide nose, filled with unevenly trimmed graying hairs peeking through large nostrils. I stepped back even further until I was able to see him looking down at me, his expression lovingly somber.

“Jimmy, do me a favor please?” Mom asked.

“Yes, *mami*, what?”

“Go downstairs and tell your Father to go to the bodega and get a bottle of Coke,” she requested.

Of all the things she could have asked me to do, this was probably the one I hated the most. Talking to Pop was something that required mental preparation and emotional detachment. As soon as Mom spoke the word “Father,” I felt my heart start to race again. My ears began to burn, and I felt overcome with anger. I mean, of all things, couldn’t she stick her head out the window and tell him herself? No, she could not, that would be undignified. What would the neighbors say? What would Purita think? Purita, our neighbor from across the street who drove to China Town every other Saturday to buy counterfeit purses which she then sold from the trunk of her rusty Datsun 210 to sweatshop workers during their lunch breaks. Or what about Panchito? What an embarrassment if Panchito should see or hear her yell out the window. Panchito was the neighborhood Cuban *santero* who lived next door to Purita. He created potions from the blood of chickens whose necks he would wring with his own hands. He’d then use the blood of the slain bird to concoct potions which he claimed could cure anything from a malignant tumor to a crumbling marriage. Why Mom would worry about appearing classless before these characters is still an enigma to me.

As I went down the stairs toward the porch, in my mind I practiced how I would deliver Mom's request. I stepped out of the front door to find Pop sitting in the driver's seat of his new Cutlass Supreme, polishing the dash like a British butler polishes silverware, focusing as intently on the indiscernible nooks and crannies as he did on the large flat visible surface. I went down the porch stairs and when I set foot on the sidewalk, I quietly moved in closer.

"You coming to help me?" Pop asked without looking at me, with the usual hint of malevolence. His eyes trained on the vents of the air conditioner as he meticulously inserted a rag in each crevice.

"No," I replied cautiously.

"What do you mean no?" Pop rebutted. I was unable to decipher whether his question was a coded threat for my negative response or if he was being playful, in his own special way, which was distinctly unplayful.

"Mom said we need Coke," I stated.

Like a robot whose on/off switch was abruptly turned off, he suddenly stopped introducing the rag into the crevices of the air conditioning vents.

"What?" he asked as he slowly turned to look at me.

"Mom said we need Coke," I repeated.

"I asked her this morning if anything was missing on the list! Now I have to spend twice as much at the goddamn bodega! Cause I sure as hell ain't driving to Path Mark again!" Pop complained to himself.

I stood there in silence, staring at the ground.

"And what the hell is wrong with you?" Pop asked when he noticed my melancholy.

I stood in silence trying to muster the courage to ask Pop what was wrong with Abuelo.

“Well?” he insisted.

“What is wrong with Abuelo?” I finally uttered.

“What is wrong with Abuelo?” Pop repeated.

“Is Abuelo dying?” I finally asked.

“Dying? Why in the world would he be dying?”

“He’s crying and he looks sad.”

“Crying?” Pop asked with incredulity.

“Yeah. Mom is crying too.”

“Well what is strange about that?” Pop questioned sarcastically.

I stood before him patiently and quietly, letting my silence serve to instigate him for an answer. Pop resumed polishing his dashboard, this time in an opposite circular motion. I remained motionless, my eyes now following the polishing oil-infused rag in his hand. I knew he knew I was still standing there, waiting, demanding an answer. At a very young age I learned that Pop did not react well to emotional outbursts. Instead, indifference and silence would most likely elicit a reaction.

“Abuelo is fine,” he finally said in a Mr. Spock-like mumble. “He is just retiring, that’s all,” he added.

“Retiring?”

“Yeah, retiring.”

“What’s retiring?”

“What’s retiring? What’s retiring? Retiring is the best thing that can happen to a man, Jimmy,” Pop said as he resumed polishing the dashboard, his wife beater beginning to show sweat stains.

Pop assumed that his explanation was clear enough and that I would just leave and let him work in peace. He stepped out of the driver’s seat and leaned into the back seat to grab the white button-down shirt he had been wearing all morning. He flung it over his back, slid one arm through a sleeve and then the other. He started buttoning from the top, not once acknowledging my presence. As soon as he began to tuck his shirt in, he ordered me, without looking at me, to tell Mom he was on his way to the bodega.

“Tell your Ma I will be back with her stuff.”

Pop turned around to check his appearance in his reflection in the car’s window. As he finished buttoning and tucking in his shirt, he noticed the unchanged concerned look on my face that was also reflected in the car’s window. Then, in one of those rare instances in our lives in which he showed a minimal degree of tenderness, he turned around and knelt and placed his large brown hands on my shoulder, rocking me and putting me off balance.

“Listen, there is nothing wrong with Abuelo, okay. He is just retiring. What I mean is that Abuelo does not have to work anymore. He has worked hard for a long, long time. Now it is time for him to rest, take it easy, enjoy life.”

“Well, shouldn’t he be happy? Why is he sad? Why is he crying?” I asked.

Pop stared into my eyes, and several times tried to utter a response, but each time he halted and gasped like trying to recover from a punch in the stomach.

“Abuelo is leaving,” he finally said.

“Leaving?” I questioned.

“Yes, leaving. He is going home to be with Abuela. They have been apart for a long time, Jimmy, thirty-five years. It’s time he goes home.”

I was confused, trying to make sense of the news. All I could think of was how life would be now every other Sunday. Did it mean that all Sundays would be the same? Mom and I going to Mass then waiting for Pop to either bring lunch or pick us up and go to White Castle or to Mom’s favorite Chinese place? A mostly silent journey, a silence often interrupted by some petty argument between Mom and Pop. A silence often interrupted by Pop interrogating me on how I was doing in school, a grilling so intense it seemed intended for suspected murderers. A journey that made me sick to my stomach and ended with a headache.

I dreaded the Sunday outings when Abuelo wasn’t around. I hated riding in that car Pop so meticulously cleaned. Every time I stepped foot in it, I was slapped with an intense floral aroma. It was always present, but heavily permeated the air on Sundays after Pop washed the car while Mom and I attended Mass. The degree to which he cleaned, polished, and perfumed that thing was borderline pathological. As usual, on our way to either White Castle or the Chinese restaurant, I complained about my headache. As usual, I was rebuffed by both. Mom would say it was hunger, Pop would say it was *changuería*, childish nonsense. However, one day I had the audacity to suggest that what was making me sick was the overwhelming scent of the car. Pop made it clear I had taken *changuería* to a whole new level. No, this was beyond *chanquería*. This was a mental issue. I, at eight, according to Pop, was mentally ill, not physically sick. If the smell of cleanliness he was so proud of did not make him sick, then no one could get sick. The topic was never touched again, and I suffered my ailment in silence until I either became

accustomed to or grew out of it. The truth is I never felt sick when Abuelo was with us. In fact, I hardly even noticed the intense floral aroma. Who knows? Maybe Pop was right. Maybe it was all in my head.

Pop's words about Abuelo's departure put me in a trance. My mind wandered from one potential future scenario to another, Abuelo absent in every one. I struggled to come to terms with the fact that I could no longer look forward to a Sunday with Abuelo, shielding me from Mom's scrutiny and Pop's indifference.

"Is he coming back?" I asked with a glimmer of hope.

"I don't think so," Pop answered coldly. "He has been here too long. He has a house, a house that just last year he was able to finish building. A house steps from the ocean. Why would he want to come back to this dump?"

"Because I'm here" I thought.

"Look, go tell your Ma I'm going to the bodega to get her stuff," Pop said as he turned around and opened the door to his car. He stepped in the car with an agility now long gone from his aged body. I remained frozen.

"Boy! Go inside and..." Pop began to say, giving up in mid-sentence, shaking his head with disappointment. I stood there on the sidewalk, for a minute or two, trying to regain some degree of composure. Figuring out how or what to say once I went inside. I knew I had to tell Mom that Pop had left for the bodega, but then what? Of course, I immediately went into denial mode, and my imagination took over.

As I climbed the porch stairs, I tried to convince myself that Abuelo would not be able to handle the island. I remembered a story he told Mom one day over flan and coffee at the kitchen

table. I was in the den watching television, but I could hear their conversations through the air conditioning vents. I remember he told Mom that as a child he would go hungry most nights, and how sometimes he and his four brothers and sisters would go to *el pueblo*, or into town, and beg for food, and how when he was my age he helped the family by shining shoes at the *plaza*.

One time, Abuelo told Mom about a young man who was his neighbor, *el muchacho* as he called him. When Abuelo was around eight years old, *el muchacho* offered Abuelo his shoe-shining kit. He taught Abuelo how to shine shoes in a couple of days and took him to the *plaza* to show him his spot. Turns out it was the best spot in the *plaza*, right next to the church. According to Abuelo, *el muchacho* told him that no matter how old and tattered his clothes were, they should always be clean and that he should always be polite and respectful to all customers.

After a week, the shoe-shining business was officially in Abuelo's hands, and the young man disappeared. According to Abuelo, the young man had been shipped out to fight in the Great War. When he returned, Abuelo had become the most sought shoe shiner in town. Although he was happy to see the young man back home safe, he also feared having to return the shoe shining business to its rightful owner. Luckily, Abuelo's fears were promptly quelled. *El muchacho* never asked Abuelo for the shoe shining kit. In fact, Abuelo said that the young man never talked to him again. It seemed like he did not recognize anybody, and he would disappear for days leaving his mother alone and distressed.

Often, the young man's Mother would ask Abuelo and his siblings to help her find her son. Their attempts at finding the young man were usually fruitless. *El muchacho* would usually reappear after a few days, hop into his hammock and sleep for another two days straight. One day, on his way back home from the *plaza*, Abuelo noticed a commotion. People were running

toward the ravine that ran along the north side of the shanty town Abuelo called his *barrio*. He followed the crowd, and as he moved closer to a group that had congregated by the giant mango tree that fed half the neighborhood, he heard the most dreadful, painful cry. He couldn't make out who it was, so he ran around the massive trunk of the mango tree to find *el muchacho*'s Mother kneeling under the tree, her head tilted, staring up at the thick branches with her hands extended over her head, as if reaching for an unattainable mango. "*Mi hijo, mi hijo!*" she wailed. Abuelo could not make sense of it all until he too tilted his head and saw *el muchacho* hanging from the highest branch of the mango tree. "*Fue la guerra,*" it was the war, Abuelo's mother would say when the neighbors congregated for the *velorio*, the young man's wake. I couldn't understand why Abuelo would want to go back to a place where he'd gone hungry and saw so much suffering.

I walked into our apartment and Abuelo was sitting alone in the den watching Abbot and Costello. I could hear Mom tinkering in the kitchen, the aromas triggering my appetite.

"Jimmy!" Mom called out when she heard the door creak as I swung it open.

"What?"

"Where's your father? Lunch is almost ready!"

"He went to the bodega!" I yelled.

Abuelo sat quietly at one end of the couch, focused on the television, but he wasn't laughing at the antics on the screen as he usually did. "Jimmy, Jimmy, look how crazy!" he would usually yell out and we would both laugh unabashedly, but not today. He sat quietly, pensive, almost not aware of my presence. I approached the couch and sat on the edge at the

opposite end. I planted my feet on the floor as to not slip off the plastic cover with my hands in my pocket. “Jimmy, *mijo*, if you want to change the movie, is okay with me,” Abuelo said.

I shrugged my shoulders. I could feel Abuelo’s eyes examining me and I could also sense his concern.

“Are you okay, Jimmy?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I replied; my eyes glued to the television set.

I knew Abuelo did not believe me. He knew me better than anybody, better than Mom or Pop. Normally, Abuelo would insist and ask several times if I was okay until I finally cracked and told him, but not today. Today, he remained quiet, still and unobtrusive, as if waiting for me to take the lead.

“Pop said that you’re leaving,” I finally said, my eyes still glued to the television set, my hands making fists in my pockets, my feet digging into my shoes.

“Yes, Jimmy, I’m leaving,” Abuelo acknowledged, his voice the lowest I had ever heard.

“Why do you want to leave?” I asked.

After several seconds, Abuelo stood up and moved closer and sat next to me. He too sat close to the edge of the couch; his big brown hands placed flat on his knees. He shook his head as he struggled to find the best way to explain his decision to an eight-year-old boy.

“Well, Jimmy, I am old, I am tired, I need to rest.”

“That’s what Pop said.”

“And I want to be with your Abuela. She is alone, and I must take care of her,” he explained.

“But Abuela is with Aunt Julia,” I argued.

“Yes, but Abuela has her own home, our home, and that is where she should be,” Abuelo said. “I’ve wanted to go back home for the longest time.”

“But I don’t want you to be hungry and sad,” I said, my eyes welling up.

“What are you saying, Jimmy? Why would I go hungry, *mijo*?” Abuelo said now looking at me, his large brown hand on my shoulder.

“Because one time you told Mom that you and your brothers and sisters were always hungry,” I said as tears rolled down my cheeks, my sight aimed at the floor, my breathing interrupted with momentary spasms. Abuelo, baffled, tried to make sense of my words. It didn’t take long for him to realize I was talking of a time long gone.

“Jimmy,” he said as his hand gently circled the space between my shoulders. “I am not going to go hungry. Things are different now. You see, I’m retired, and I’ll receive a pension.”

“A what?”

“A pension. I am going to receive money every month for all the years I worked, and your aunts and uncles and cousins will also take care of me just like they take care of Abuela,” he explained. “You have nothing to worry about.”

“I don’t?”

“No, you don’t.”

I felt somewhat relieved to hear those words. However, the idea of not seeing Abuelo every other Sunday still tormented me.

“But I don’t want you to go!” I cried; I buried my face in his shoulder.

“Jimmy, Jimmy, stand up. Look at me,” Abuelo demanded as he pulled me to my feet and positioned my body facing him.

“Look at me,” he demanded as he lifted my chin and stared into my eyes.

“I am not going to forget you. I promise I will call you every Sunday, not every other Sunday; every Sunday after church I will call you. You understand?”

I nodded.

Abuelo added, “The only thing that is going to change is that we won’t see each other, but I will still hear your voice and you will hear mine. Do you understand? Nothing will change.” I nodded.

Just then, Pop swung open the door, a plastic bag with two large bottles of Coca Cola in one hand, car keys in the other. I turned and looked at him as a knee jerk reaction to the unexpected noise. Pop noticed I was crying and stopped before continuing to the kitchen.

“Jesus Christ, *muchacho*, are you crying?” Pop asked. “Papa is he bothering you? Leave your grandpa alone, boy. He doesn’t come here to deal with *mocosos*.”

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Abuelo said trying to calm Pop down.

Pop went into the kitchen and five seconds had not passed by when Mom chimed in.

“Jimmy, no more *changuerías*! And go wash up! Make sure you wash your face too, and you better have your shoes on!” Mom yelled from the kitchen. “Papa, come on, lunch is ready!” she added.

Abuelo didn’t immediately get up and head toward the dining room. Instead, he wrapped his big brown hands around my scrawny arms and pulled me closer. This time, tears welled up in his eyes. He took a deep breath and reassured me, “Everything will be fine, Jimmy, I promise. I’ll call you every Sunday.”

Abuelo kept his word.

Every Sunday after Mass, in the middle of an Abbott and Costello or Laurel and Hardy marathon, the phone would ring. After several minutes, Mom would tell me to rush to the kitchen. She would hand me the phone, and for ten minutes—for ten precious minutes—everything was fine.

I still had my Sundays with Abuelo.

CHAPTER 7

PROMISE ME

The first rays of sunshine seeped through the blinds to find me wide awake. I was lying on my right side close to the edge of the bed, almost falling over, like I usually do when my anxiety kicks in. It's a habit I picked up when I was a kid and I was afraid to go to school. I would spend most of the night on the edge of my bed worrying about how much taunting I would have to face the next day. Years later, I avoided sleeping in my bed altogether and slept on my couch until my back gave up on me. I had to return to my bed if I wanted to walk upright again.

I had resigned myself to sleep in a bed that remained mostly empty, except for the sliver of space to which I now confined myself. I was so close to the edge that I couldn't curl up into my preferred full fetal position. I compromised and shifted a little back toward the center to feel the heat emanating from Richie's body. Although I was avoiding any contact, I could sense that he was also awake, waiting for the right moment to ask me if I was okay. I suddenly felt him shift and shuffle under the sheets until I felt him slowly move closer, engaging in his daily morning spooning ritual, burying his forehead just below the back of my neck, throwing his left arm over my shoulder, and then falling deeply asleep one last time for about fifteen minutes. In the meantime, my mind and heart wandered, unable to stop thinking about Abuela. It was her birthday.

My memories triggered an emotional storm that ran the gamut from gratitude and jubilation to sadness and anxiety. I needed to breathe. I stretched out my legs and the sudden jerk awakened Richie. A deep sigh and a groan were always followed by the same groggy-sounding phrase: "I need coffee." He noticed that I didn't give my usual response, my habitual

tapping of his arm to indicate that I will get out of bed to prepare his cup of Joe. He lifted his head and finally asked: “Are you okay?” For a second, I wondered what I would do the day that he was no longer there to ask that question when I most needed it. “No,” I responded, and he tightened his embrace. “I’ll make coffee,” I added, and he relaxed his arm to let me roll out of bed. As I took my last sip of coffee, I decided to personally wish Abuela a happy birthday.

I left before noon. As I pulled out of the parking garage onto the street, I headed toward the flower guy who stood on the corner of Kings Court and McCreary. Normally, as I approached the flower stand, my sight would be drawn to the red ginger plants. It grew wild in Abuela’s backyard. I wasn’t interested in those, however. I wanted white lilies. Those were her favorite. I remembered that after she spent all morning scrubbing floors, washing bed sheets, and cleaning windows, enveloping the house with a unique scent of cleanliness that married the pungent smell of disinfectant cleaner with the salty ocean breeze, she would pick a bunch of white lilies from her garden and place them in a vase in the living room. Their fragrance did not diminish the smell of cleanliness, but rather enhanced it, appeasing my anxiety or any other crippling emotions.

After I placed the lilies in the backseat, I pulled down the car’s retractable top and headed toward the highway, the midday summer sun pounding my freshly shaved head. I pulled out an old, raggedy cap from the backpack that sat in the passenger’s seat to protect my head and face from the sun’s wrath. Abuela would make me wear a cap when we would walk to the farmer’s market that one summer I came to the island from Newark to visit her. The half mile trek to the market in the morning was a breeze, but the walk back, usually close to noon, was a killer, but I didn’t mind.

The fragrance from the lilies put me in a good, and it transported me to that summer trip to visit Abuela that Pop gifted me for doing well in school. I was six years old when Pop promised me that if I made straight A's he would let me spend part of the following summer with Abuela. The offer was appealing for two reasons: first, I would be with Abuela, and second, I would be away from Newark, away from Mom and Pop. I had spent the first three years of my life with her. Most people have no recollection of those first years of their lives. I am no exception. I had not seen her after we moved to Newark, but we talked over the phone as often as we could afford it. The mere mention of her name alone relieved all my tension. I worked hard in school and it paid off.

Two weeks after the last day of school, I was on a plane bound for the island. Before heading to the airport, Pop pulled out an envelope and in his usual threatening tone made me promise I would guard it with my life and that I would hand it to her as soon as I arrived. He placed it in one of the outer pockets of my carry-on and menacingly waved his finger in front of my face as he again demanded I not forget. My excitement was such that I didn't bother to worry about the consequences if I lost the envelope. All I wanted was to be with Abuela. I thought of how cool it would be if I could just beam down to Abuela's like Captain Kirk in Star Trek.

At the airport, my mother began to sob as she prayed to the Virgin Mary to keep me safe, while she struggled to wipe off all traces of her cheap lipstick from my face. Pop pulled out a bill, could have been a ten or a twenty, I don't remember, and handed it to me. "Put it in your pocket," he ordered. Then he hugged me. I wasn't sure if I should hug him back.

The airline agent accompanied me through the checkpoint and to the boarding area. “Wait here sweetie,” she said. “I have to go pick up another UM. I’ll be back in twenty minutes to help you board,” she added and marched off in the direction we came.

I sank into the seat, shyly scanning my surroundings. It was on that day that my fascination with habitual airport readers began. Even today, I awkwardly shift and twist in my seat trying to make out the title of the books people are reading if they’re not reading on their electronic devices. A woman sitting across from me pulled out a magazine from the outside pocket of her carry-on and suddenly I remembered the envelope and wondered about its contents. I rationalized that if Pop had emphasized its safety, I should not be messing with it, but then again, he never explained anything to me, it was either you do it or you do it. I tried to trick myself into thinking about something else to no avail. My heart began to race at the thought of losing the envelope or somebody stealing it. What would happen when Abuela called Pop to let him know I had arrived in one piece and he asked her about the envelope? I could ask her to lie. Or could I? For a moment my heart settled down and I found myself unzipping the pocket where Pop hid the envelope. I slowly pulled it out making sure everyone who was around me was busy and uninterested in my undertaking. I hunched over in order to keep my hands hidden between my knees and behind my carry-on. Surprisingly, the top flap of the envelope was not sealed but tucked. I pulled out a birthday card. Inside, there was what seemed to be ten twenty-dollar bills and something Pop had written. I tried to make out the words one by one, feeling thankful for the extra effort I had put into studying my sight words that school year.

Dear Momma,

Thank you for taking Jimmy in for the summer. He is excited about spending time with you although I am not sure how much he remembers you. If he gives you any trouble, feel free to give him a good ol' whoopin' like the ones you would give me when I acted up. I don't think you will have to do that though, he's a good kid. He's smart and quiet, a little too quiet if you ask me. His silence drives me crazy sometimes. Anyway, there's a little something for you to help with your bills or whatever you want to use it for. I will mail you a little extra in the following weeks to cover Jimmy's expenses. Who knows, maybe next summer I will be able to fly down for a week or so. Happy Birthday.

Love,

Esteban

I looked up to find the agent standing over me.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Yes,” I replied as she glanced at the card.

“That looks like it's important. Make sure you store it in a safe place. Don't want you getting trouble,” she added. I put the envelope back in my suitcase and we boarded.

My cousin Nelson picked me up at the airport. He was around seventeen at the time. During our ride to Abuela's he smoked four cigarettes at least, triggering signs of my asthma, but my fear of sounding weak kept me from complaining. I tried to face the rolled down window for the forty-five minutes the trip lasted, only turning my head to answer his questions with a shrug, a nod, or a simple yes or no in an effort to keep myself from inhaling the tainted air circulating inside the car.

When we finally made it to Abuela's, I felt a rush of excitement that meshed with a little fear and a lot of joy. Before I knew it, Nelson was out of the car climbing the porch stairs with my carry-on when he turned around to discover I was still sitting in the car. It upset him to see that I was not behind him. He raised his hand and signaled urgently for me to come in the house.

“Hurry up! I'm already late for work!” he yelled.

I gently pulled on the door handle and thrust my scrawny fifty pound body against the heavy door until it flung open. I got out and straightened my shirt and checked my pants for any possible stains from the grease splattered in some spots of Nelson's car. I crossed the gate and climbed the porch stairs with trepidation, my emotions slowly subsiding.

“Come in!” Nelson yelled from inside the house.

I pushed the screen door to find Abuela standing before me, all four feet and eleven inches of her. Dressed in one of her many colorful moo moos and sandals, she walked toward me, and hugged me. I knew I should hug her back. She felt and smelled a lot nicer than I imagined. She felt like those expensive goose down pillows I always say I am going to save up for and never do, and she, of course, smelled like fresh white lilies.

“It's so good to see you Jimmy! You've grown so much!” she said.

“Grown?” Nelson mockingly interjected.

“Nelson, get your supper and go to work!” she reproached.

“Are you hungry?” she asked me.

“A little,” I replied nervously.

“Well, wash up and change out of those clothes if you want, and come back to the kitchen,” she said lovingly. “Come on, I'll take you to your room.”

I returned to the kitchen with the envelope. I stood in front of her with my arm stretched out, envelope in hand. She rushed to the sink to wash the grease and flour from her hands.

“What’s this?” she asked surprised as she grabbed the entrusted document.

“It’s from Pop,” I replied shyly.

She sat down at the kitchen table and read the card silently. Tears began to roll down her eyes. When she was finished, she placed the envelope into one of her moo moo’s pockets and sat quietly for a short while, staring at her simple china cabinet. I stood still for as long as she sat quietly. She took a deep breath and looked at me.

“How about some fried chicken, Jimmy? You like fried chicken?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Well, I got some delicious fried chicken for you. And you know what else I got?” she continued.

“What?” I questioned with genuine curiosity.

“I have some even more delicious guava turnovers with sugar. I know you liked those since you were a baby,” she stated joyfully.

I spent the following weeks being Abuela’s shadow. In the mornings, while she raked the small leaves, I’d pick up the humongous dried-up ones that had fallen from her giant breadfruit tree. We’d then scan the tree for a breadfruit that was just right. If we were lucky, we would find three at least. She’d then pull out a twelve-foot-long bamboo pole that had a sharp blade tied at one end which she kept on the ground along the fence. With ninja-like dexterity, she would steadily reach the desired breadfruit with the bamboo pole, place the sharp blade against the stem and with one swift tug the breadfruit would tumble down to the ground

miraculously intact. We'd spend the rest of the morning cleaning windows, dusting, or scrubbing floors.

My favorite parts of the day were lunch and dinner time. I'd sit on one of the kitchen stools and marvel at how she'd eyeball all her ingredients and yet was able to create the most delicious and satisfying meals. Today, even after attending culinary school and cooking for a living, I still need to measure everything and taste as I go. In the evenings, we'd sit in front of her black and white television set and watch the news and one sitcom or another. Abuela liked to go to bed early. She would tell me that she was fine with me staying up late to watch television, but I was too exhausted from our busy days. Instead, I would go to her room and listened to her pray her rosary before going to bed.

Saturday evenings we would go to Mass. It was the one day out of the week she had to wear something other than her *mumu*. She preferred to go to Mass on Saturday evenings in order to avoid walking under the Sunday morning sun. She always wore a linen dress and her *mantilla*, and to keep us cool in the crowded church she would also carry one of her many Spanish folding fans.

The first time I saw one of her fans I was captivated by their beauty. I remembered having seen them in old Sara Montiel movies Mom would watch and being enthralled by how the Spanish film siren used them to entice her suitors, appearing to be both mischievous and innocent. I knew where Abuela kept hers, and many times I felt tempted to look at them. I longed to examine the drawings of bull fighters and Spanish flamenco dancers and touch the delicate lace that adorned them. I resisted because I was afraid of getting caught, of feeling

embarrassed for doing something boys are not supposed to do. It was something my Pop made sure I understood; boys don't do girls stuff.

I remember coming home from the neighborhood playground one day, I must have been in the second grade, crying and with a black eye. Mom almost had a heart attack and didn't even ask me what had happened. She was more worried about Pop's reaction, as if my black eye had been her fault. When we heard Pop's truck pull up into the driveway later that evening, I don't know who was more nervous. We were sitting in the living room and as he walked in, I could tell he immediately knew something was wrong. He walked up to me, lifted my chin, and stared at my face for a few seconds.

"What happened?" he asked stone-faced.

"Nothing," I replied.

"Nothing?" he questioned. "I am going to ask you one more time, and if you don't tell me I am going to hit you on top of the black eye."

"I got into a fight with some kids."

"Why?" he inquired.

"Because they called me a faggot!" I yelled as I began to sob and shake uncontrollably.

Pop remained unmoved, still stone-faced.

"Why'd they call you a faggot?" he asked in a monotone voice.

"I was playing with the girls and these boys just got in my face about it," I replied a little more composed. Pop stood over me, stared at me face for a short while that felt like an eternity. He turned his head, then the rest of his body, and as he began to make his way toward his bedroom he said, "Stop playing with the girls if you don't like to be called a faggot."

My last days with Abuela were quickly approaching and I was trying to make the most of them, mostly by spending as much time as I could in the kitchen. I tried to memorize the ingredients of the dishes I liked the most, which almost all had breadfruit in some shape or form: breadfruit fritters, stuffed breadfruit, boiled breadfruit, and even breadfruit flan. I would wander about the backyard and the herb and vegetable gardens, trying to get my sight and smell to memorize the colors and fragrances that made me smile. I would wander around the house, sitting in every chair, lying in every bed, observing my face in every mirror, hoping that my body would remember every sensation and every reflection. One of those days I went to Abuela's bedroom to sit in her rocking chair and hold her rosaries. I tried to take in every detail, the figurines and small statues of saints and the Virgin, the pretty lace curtains, the orchid on her night table. At one point my eyes focused on the top drawer of the chest; it was where she kept her fans. My heart raced; I knew I couldn't leave without holding them. I approached the drawer and cautiously opened it to discover fans of different colors and textures. There were many I had seen Abuela take to church, but there were others I had not seen at all. One in particular caught my attention. It was black and its shimmer and lace seemed mysterious. I carefully pulled it out and I delicately unfolded it to discover the image of a dashing bullfighter handing a red rose to a beautiful *doncella* cheering him in on from the stands. I was so absorbed by the image that I didn't realize that my cousin Nelson had walked into the room. I was startled to say the least.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I replied as I dropped the fan back in the drawer and swiftly put my hands behind my back.

“Nothing?” he inquired. “Does grandma know you’re in here looking through her shit you little faggot?” I shrugged my shoulders.

“I knew there was something weird about you from the moment I saw you at the airport,” he claimed. “I’m telling Grandma,” he threatened.

“No!” I pleaded.

“Hey Grandma!” he called. “This little faggot...” and before he had a chance to say another word, Abuela appeared and pushed him with such force he landed on her bed. She moved in closer and pounded on him repeatedly. She looked like she had grown an additional five feet. Nelson had no choice but to shield himself from the onslaught by covering his face with his arms.

“Why the hell are you hitting me for?” he asked.

“Don’t you ever call him that again!” she demanded; her words filled with rage. “Now get the hell out!” Nelson cautiously got up from Abuela’s bed, afraid of turning his back to her. He walked out, his face and pride bruised. Abuela immediately turned to me, her anger instantly turning to compassion.

“Don’t worry, baby,” she said softly and hugged me.

My last day with Abuela finally arrived. She helped me pack my things. We were quiet most of the time, except for whenever she asked me if I was sure I had packed everything. We had lunch in the kitchen. No breadfruit this time, just some cod fritters and sweet tamarind juice. I was afraid to ask who would take me to the airport. Nelson hadn’t returned to the house after the incident. At some point in the afternoon, Aunt Julia’s car pulled up. I felt so relieved.

After lunch, Abuela went to her room, which was unusual, and stayed there. I remained alone in the living room watching television. Aunt Julia went to Abuela's room. I heard Abuela sobbing and Aunt Julia offering some comforting words. They came out a few minutes later. Aunt Julia grabbed my carry-on and asked, "Ready?" I nodded. "I will wait in the car," she added and winked at me. Abuela sat quietly next to me for several minutes and grabbed my hand, her eyes still red.

"Now Jimmy, I want you to promise me something," she said.

"What?"

"Promise me that you're going to work hard in school, and that you'll do as your Pop and Mom say."

"I promise," I said.

"And promise that you will never, ever let anyone put you down," she said as she squeezed my hand and stared into my eyes. "Promise me," she repeated.

"I promise," I said.

"Okay, I will call once in a while to make sure you're keeping your promises. Now let's go." Abuela walked me to Aunt Julia's car. We hugged, no words were exchanged, not even a goodbye.

The vivid memory of that trip reminded me of why I had decided to move to the island, even though it entailed giving up a good job and struggling to find another one. I had moved back to be close to Abuela. No one had ever made me feel so loved.

I finally made it to the cemetery. I reached Abuela's tomb and was glad to find that none of my relatives were present. Someone had left plastic flowers; she hated plastic flowers. I

removed them and left the white lilies in their place. It was the first birthday since I had moved to the island that I would not be able to hold her in my arms, so I just stood in silence. That didn't matter. Abuela and I never needed many words; somehow, she always knew what I was feeling, thinking, wishing.

“Happy birthday, Abuela. I love you,” was all I needed to say.

CHAPTER 8

CHAVELA

One afternoon, in the spring of 1978, Mom was waiting for me in front of the school. She wasn't alone. Next to her stood a tall, slender, and fresh-faced *mulata* wearing a pink mini skirt dress and a blue sweater. I later learned that was Chavela, my Pop's youngest sister, who had come to live with us. The weather was chilly. She felt uncomfortable, having lived in tropical eighty-plus degree weather all her life.

I really wasn't sure who she was at first. When I had visited Abuela the year before, Chavela had gone to spend the summer with relatives in San Juan. Besides Abuela, I had little to no contact with my relatives on the island. I also couldn't recall having spoken to Chavela the whole time we had been in Newark. Her name did, however, come up often as she and Mom wrote to each other weekly.

Mom spent a lot of her time writing letters. She not only wrote to Chavela, but she also wrote to each of her three sisters, her mother, and several cousins she had been close with growing up. In return, Mom received at least one letter every day. Early on, I realized that receiving a letter from the island was the highlight of her day. I enjoyed watching my mother as she read her letters. As her lips moved silently to the rhythm of the words plastered on the paper, her face would display an array of emotions, contorting as she whispered the news to herself. Joy, sorrow, surprise, anger, and disappointment were some of the emotions she expressed silently with her face. Many times, regardless of the emotion, tears would punctuate the final sentence.

As I stood on the sidewalk in front of the school staring at Mom, she hugged, kissed, and blessed me. She then pulled Chavela closer.

“Jimmy, hug and kiss your aunt,” Mom demanded, an abhorrent ritual I despised. Nonetheless, I stood passively and looked up at Chavela, waiting for her to make the first move.

“Jimmy, don’t you remember me?” Chavela asked sweetly.

I didn’t respond. I didn’t know how to respond. If I had said no, I’d be lying because I did remember her, if slightly. If I had said yes, I would be lying because I didn’t really remember her. Either way I’d be lying and the thought of it, the thought of lying, the thought of doing something for which *Papa Dios* could punish me for, was paralyzing. So, I stood there, quietly.

“Jimmy don’t be rude. I have not taught you to be rude. When an adult asks a question you respond,” Mom scolded me and, in the process, fueled my scorn for authority figures.

So, I lied. “Yes,” I said. My answer was the permission Chavela needed to gracefully kneel and kiss me on the cheek. She then took my hand and we started walking home. I wasn’t asked anymore questions, thankfully. Chavela and Mom, however, chatted up a storm about anything and everything that had to do with their old neighborhood.

Chavela eventually began to work at the factory where Mom worked. It was a toy factory and Mom worked there until she became pregnant with my younger brother. Mom had started working there thanks to Milagros, our landlord. Milagros had been slaving away at the toy factory for ten years when she helped Mom land a job there. Every morning, before I got up to go to school, Mom, Chavela, Milagros, and two other ladies, would meet in front of the house

to catch a ride to the factory in Milagros's Impala. Milagros in turn would charge each of her car poolers a fee for the ride to and from work.

In the beginning, Chavela was content with her job. It felt good to make her own money for the first time in her life, but it eventually became clear that it was back breaking work and that the compensation was not commensurate to the effort. Wasting away in a factory was not in Chavela's plan for making it in America. In fact, her plan was quite simple: she would marry rich. However, for a brown Puerto Rican girl in the middle of Newark, New Jersey this aspiration was essentially unrealistic. The best she could hope for was to meet a steel mill worker who would set her up in a two-bedroom apartment that at least had heat in the winter.

By the fall, Chavela was beginning to feel the strain of life under my father Esteban's roof. He set the rules and he was the only one allowed to have a social life. She grew restless and considered going back to the island. Even though broke, she'd be happier she thought. My Mother tried to convince her otherwise.

"Think about it carefully," my mother warned Chavela as they sat at the kitchen table rolling dough to make *pastelillos*.

"But Maria, I am so bored. I miss my friends, the beach, and I didn't think I would admit it, but I miss Pucho," Chavela complained.

"Shh, don't say that. If your brother walks in and hears you saying that you won't hear the end of it," Mom said. "And besides, what does this Pucho have to offer you? Does he work? Is he going to school at least?"

"He started going to college, but he dropped out to work at the Union Carbide, but you know people are getting laid off left and right here so just imagine how bad it is over there."

“That’s exactly my point, Chavela. That boy has nothing to offer you, Puerto Rico has nothing to offer you. Sometimes your brother gets homesick and mentions that he wants to go back. I told him if he wants to go back, he is going by himself.”

“But Maria, don’t you miss your mother?”

“Of course, I miss her. I’m not heartless. But my mother lived her life and now I must live mine. I have the chance to offer my child a good life,” Mom said. “I dropped out of school in the eighth grade, Chavela, and I did so because I did not have a mother with the balls to tell me that I had to go to school or else. And forget about my father, you know he showed up whenever. I don’t want that for my child. I don’t want that for my children.”

“Children?” an incredulous Chavela asked.

Mom nodded. “I think, not sure yet,” she added.

“Did you tell Esteban?”

“God no. Not until I’m sure.”

“So, if you’re pregnant, are you keeping it?”

“What do you mean?” Mom asked.

“I mean, you could have an abortion if you don’t want it,” Chavela casually suggested.

“An abortion? Why would I get an abortion?” Mom asked, aghast at Chavela’s remark.

“Well, what if Esteban doesn’t want to have another child?”

“If I’m pregnant, he doesn’t have a choice,” Mom stated resolutely. I am not getting rid of it.”

Chavela, having realized her proposition did not sit well with Mom, tried unsuccessfully to shift the tone of the conversation by engaging her in a related and shared memory. “I

remember when you were pregnant with Jimmy and your mom showed up at our house,” she began.

“Don’t remind me. How can I forget? She slapped me and then dragged me along. I was surprised your mom took the news so well.”

“Mom has always liked you, Maria,” Chavela assured her sister in law.

“I knew she had high hopes for Esteban, Chavela. He was the first one in your family with a chance to go to college. Then here comes miss goodie-two-shoes who has nothing to offer this man with so much potential and just fucks everything up.

“Sometimes I think Esteban is the way he is because he resents the fact that I got pregnant. Sometimes I think that’s why he shows Jimmy such little affection. I mean, he cares about how he does in school, but that’s about it. Never a hug, not even a smile.” An awkward silence ensued. “But enough about me,” Mom finally added. “Tell me again what does Pucho have to offer you?”

“Nothing, but I miss him. I miss being touched by a man!” Chavela yelled as she caressed her breasts and she and Mom broke into laughter.

“Oh, I don’t think you are homesick, I think you’re horny,” Mom joked. “But seriously, think about it, young lady. I don’t think your brother will allow you to come back if you go and you realize you made a bad choice,” Mom warned. “You know how petty your brother can be.”

Chavela spent the rest of the day pondering her choices. She felt trapped, afraid of making the wrong move. To appease her mind, she decided to go out and smoke a cigarette on the porch. When she stepped out of the house, an unknown young woman was sitting on the top step.

Anna was about twenty years old. She was more voluptuous than thin, and she proudly displayed the characteristic Puerto Rican ass white women in the seventies ridiculed but white men secretly desired. She wore her dark brown hair long and straight and never wore make-up.

“Hi!” Chavela said effusively as she closed the door behind her. She sat next to Anna. “Hey, I’m going to smoke. I hope it doesn’t bother you. You smoke? You can have one,” she offered.

“No, thanks. I don’t smoke, and the smoke doesn’t bother me,” Anna replied coyly.

“Okay, thanks,” Chavela said as she took her first puff, noticing Anna’s complexion.

“Hey, I’m sorry but how are you so tanned in the middle of fall?”

“Oh, I just arrived from the island this morning,” Anna said.

“What? Oh, I’m so jealous, I wish I was there now,” Chavela whined.

“What? Why are you jealous? There are no jobs, inflation is through the roof, and crime is rampant.”

“Inflation? I know but still,” Chavela complained. “What town are you from?”

“Vega Baja,” Anna replied.

“Oh nice. I’m from Yabucoa. We are both from the coast. I’m Chavela by the way. I live with Maria and Esteban. Esteban is my brother,” she said as she tapped her cigarette.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Anna.”

“Hi Anna. Your first time here?”

“No. I went home a year ago, but my mother was driving me crazy. Milagros is my sister.”

“Oh, okay, nice,” Chavela said as she blew smoke through her nose.

“How long have you been here?”

“Since the spring,” Chavela replied.

“Do you like it?”

Chavela rolled her eyes and shrugged her shoulders. “I mean, it’s not bad. I just miss my boyfriend and my friends. What the hell, I miss my mom too.”

“Your boyfriend? You’ve been here since spring? Are you sure you still have a boyfriend?” Anna asked sarcastically.

“I hope so! If it weren’t for my brother, I’d have one here, but I can’t do anything,” Chavela lamented. “I want to go out and have fun once in a while, but I can’t.”

“What do you mean you can’t?”

“I mean I can’t,” Chavela said as she shrugged her shoulders again.

Anna looked at Chavela skeptically. “Wanna go to a bar?” she asked mischievously.

“A bar? I can’t get into a bar. I’m eighteen,” Chavela replied.

“Oh, they don’t care. This is Newark, they don’t care about anything.”

“Are there cute guys?”

“Yeah, a few. I mean I haven’t been in over a year but I’m guessing there should be,”

“Forget it. There is no way Maria will let me go,” Chavela said, shaking her head.

“Let me talk to her. I used to hang out with her in her apartment when I was here before.”

“What are you going to tell her?” Chavela asked nervously.

“I don’t know. We’re going to a birthday party?”

“Oh shit! I’m nervous,” Chavela said.

“You’ll be fine,” Anna assured her.

That same Saturday evening, Pop, who usually was not home on his day off, showed up unexpectedly and uncharacteristically sober. Normally, on Saturdays, he would show up drunk around ten or eleven at night. On that fall Saturday, however, he showed up much earlier, around six, with Hector in tow.

Hector was Pop's friend. They met at the GM plant where they both worked before Hector quit and opened his own bodega. I once heard Mom tell him that he reminded her of soulful salsa crooner, Hector Lavoe. He was tall for Puerto Rican standards, and fair skinned, which he used to his advantage. Being able to pass for Italian, or even Jewish, allowed him to engage in business dealings with less scrutiny. Mom tolerated Hector but resented him for encouraging Pop to go out as if he were a single man.

Anna had just asked Mom permission for Chavela to accompany her to a "birthday party," when Pop and Hector walked in.

"What the hell?" Mom muttered.

Pop strolled into the dining room—where we were all sitting—with Hector right behind him. As soon as Anna and Chavela got a good look at Hector they glanced at each other and nodded in approval. Pop kissed Mom on the cheek.

"Is something wrong?" Mom asked cynically.

"No. Why?" Pop asked, surprised.

"It's like, you're off schedule," Mom added sarcastically.

"Look, Maria, if you're going to give me a hard time, I will just go," Pop threatened.

Mom rolled her eyes.

“By the way we have a guest. You could at least say hello,” Pop said referring to Hector as he walked into the kitchen.

“Hello, Hector,” Mom said dryly.

“Hi Maria,” Hector replied, inflecting his words with the typical Latino ladies man charm that piqued Chavela’s curiosity.

Anna kicked Mom under the table signaling Mom to introduce her. Meanwhile, Chavela and Hector had already exchanged flirtatious glances.

“Oh yeah, Hector, this is my neighbor, Anna.”

“Nice to meet you, Anna.”

“Likewise,” Anna replied shyly, as she moved her hair away from her face,

“Have you met Esteban’s sister?” Mom asked.

“No, I haven’t had the pleasure,” Hector said, piercing Chavela’s brown eyes with his.

“This is Chavela, Esteban’s baby sister,” Mom said.

As Chavela stared into Hector’s eyes, she forgot about all the other people in the room.

“Hi, Chavela, nice to meet you.”

“Hi,” was all Chavela was able to enunciate. She was obviously smitten by Hector.

Anna decided it was the opportune moment to leave for the “birthday party.”

“Well, Chavela, I think we should leave now. I want to get back early,” Anna said.

“What?”

“The birthday party. We should leave,” Anna insisted.

“Oh, right, right. Let me go change really quick.”

“I’ll wait outside. Have a good night everyone,” Anna said as she left the apartment.

“Where is Chavela going at this time of night?” Pop yelled from the kitchen.

“She is going to a birthday party with Anna!” Mom yelled back.

“If something happens to her, it’s on you!” Pop said.

“Yeah, whatever!” Mom replied.

Chavela walked back into the dining room and thanked Mom for letting her go out that evening. As she began to head out, Hector excused himself to go to the bathroom. Instead, he followed Chavela down the hallway and snuck up behind her. Just as she was about to open the door, he softly tapped her on the shoulder. Startled, Chavela swiftly turned. Her eyes were met with a half-dollar-sized golden medallion of the Virgin Mary that was buried in the untamed mass of hair that peeked through the unbuttoned top part of his polyester shirt. His mixed scent of Paco Rabanne and sweat overwhelmed her. She raised her eyes to find Hector staring down at her, a cheeky grin drawn on his face.

“Hey,” Hector said almost inaudibly, trying to not draw the attention of Mom and Pop.

“Hey,” Chavela replied coquettishly.

They stared intently and deeply into each other’s eyes, Chavela trying to decipher Hector’s intentions, and Hector feeling confident this would be an easy conquest.

“Your brother didn’t tell me he had such a beautiful little sister.”

“He didn’t tell me he had such a cheesy friend,” Chavela rebutted trying to seem uninterested.

She turned and tried to pull the door open when Hector threw his arm over her head and blocked it.

“Do you have a problem?” Chavela asked, feigning annoyance.

“Yes, yes, I do have a problem, and it’s that I am asking myself where you’ve been all my life?”

Chavela turned again. This time she immediately looked up at Hector.

“Man, there is no way someone can be this corny,” she said stoically, when what she really wanted to do was to burst out laughing.

“Do you think I could see you some time?”

Chavela tilted her head. “Have you not met my brother?” she asked sarcastically.

“Oh, don’t worry about your brother. I’ll take care of him,” Hector assured her.

“Oh, will you?” she replied derisively.

Hector nodded, transforming his grin into a smirk.

“I gotta go,” Chavela snapped as she turned and slapped Hector’s hand off the door and ran down the stairs and into the street.

After that first encounter, Hector started coming around the house almost every other day. He was right, he did take care of Pop. I don’t know what he did or said, but Pop seemed content with his buddy courting his little sister. For me, this became another scenario of life lessons, as I attentively observed as Chavela and Hector’s relationship evolve.

It began like I suppose most relationships do, with the excitement of the newness, the unabashed joy of knowing that someone is thinking of you, hoping to share every minute of the day with you. I sensed that joy in my aunt Chavela. She couldn’t help but smile when she talked about Hector, which in the beginning seemed to be constantly. Hector could do no wrong.

Monday through Friday, Chavela would come home in the evenings after slaving away at the factory. Mom stopped working there after she got pregnant with my brother. Looking back,

having Mom take care of us twenty-four hours a day was probably a blessing and we were probably luckier than most kids in the neighborhood. Yet, I wonder how Mom felt about giving up her economic independence even if it meant she would no longer have to face the draconian working conditions of American factories. Chavela wasn't too happy to have to car-pool to work with the other ladies without Mom. She also was not content to spend so many hours in a space she despised without the benefit of having a familiar face to offer some degree of psychological and emotional support. Nonetheless, she still had her independence, an independence that was new and opened a world of possibilities, as many possibilities Newark, New Jersey could offer a brown Puerto Rican girl with a high school diploma.

Along with her newfound financial independence, Chavela had found love. She gushed over Hector like teenage girls gushed over Leif Garrett. Hector treated her well. He'd show up every Saturday around noon and picked her up to go out for lunch, a long lunch. They'd usually return in the evening. Most of the time, Chavela returned with a gift or a prize Hector had won for her at an amusement park game at Asbury Park. During the first year of their relationship, Hector expanded his business, which some people like my Pop thought was a risky move given the state of the economy at the time. His store stood in one of the poorest neighborhoods of East Orange. Hector was an optimist and had a natural knack for business. He'd say to my Pop, "Don't worry *negro*, it's cyclical, we'll get out of this one soon enough." He was right. Somehow, he foresaw and managed to hitch a ride on the wave of prosperity the following decade offered some Americans.

Toward the end of their first year together, Chavela and Hector were spending less time together. Mom also noticed that their conversations had dwindled from two interminable hours to just minutes.

“Hey,” Mom said to Chavela one Saturday afternoon as she did the dishes and Chavela walked into the kitchen.

“Hey,” Chavela replied as she sat at the kitchen’s dinette table and began to eye the *TV Guide*.

“Not going out today?” Mom asked.

“No,” Chavela answered, still eyeing the magazine.

“I haven’t seen Hector in a while,” Mom continued. “Is everything okay between you two?”

“Sure,” Chavela answered shortly, hoping that Maria would lay off the subject.

“Okay,” Mom said, uncertain if she should insist until she finally did. “You know you can talk to me about anything.”

“I know.”

Mom continued washing the dishes, respecting Chavela’s unstated wish for Mom to stay out of her business.

“Maria?”

“Yes.”

“Are you happy? Do you like being a mother? A wife?” Chavela asked without warning.

Mom was caught off guard by the question. She weighed her possible reactions and answers. Should she continue washing the dishes and offer an affirmative yet dismissive

response? Or should she stop, sit with Chavela, and inquire about Chavela's sudden curiosity about her happiness, or lack thereof? Truth is no one had really cared to ask Mom how she felt. She wondered if opening up to Chavela about the complexity of her feelings about being a wife and a mother would send them down a rabbit hole of which they would not be able to get out.

"Well, that's random," Mom said nonchalantly.

Chavela remained unmoved, staring blankly at Mom, expressing her dissatisfaction to Mom's response without saying a word.

Mom understood. She closed the faucet, dried her hands, and sat next to Chavela.

"I don't think if I want this for me, Maria," Chavela started.

"Well, that's a good start. At least we know what you don't want."

"Hector is talking about marriage, but I don't know if this is for me."

"Whatever happened to marrying rich?" Mom asked.

"Forget about that. He hasn't officially asked, but he suggested we get married and work his business together," Chavela stated.

"Well, I don't see anything wrong with that. You'll be your own boss. Sounds like a decent offer to me," Mom reasoned. "Do you love him?"

"I do."

"Well?"

"I have my dreams too, Maria."

"Look, Chavela, you asked me if I was happy, if I liked being a mother and a wife," Mom began. "The truth is that I do, but not every day. There are days that I don't want to be called *mami* or help the kids with homework. There are days that I don't want to cook for your brother

or clean the house. There are days I think of my dreams, because I had them too. But my reality is that as a Latina without a high school diploma who got pregnant at eighteen, I am one of the lucky ones. The truth is that your brother is far, so far, from perfect, but he provides, and in his own way he cares. You know how hard it is to find a good man in our circle? A good man that is hard-working, that doesn't want to use you as a punching bag. What I am trying to say is that I didn't have many choices, but I'm content with what I have. Would have I done things differently? Of course. Would the outcome have been different? I'm not sure. But this is me, Chavela. Your life doesn't have to mirror mine."

Chavela remained silent as Mom got up from her seat and made her way back to the sink to finish the dishes. Soon after, Chavela got up, grabbed her coat, and made her way to Branch Brook Park to get some fresh air. She sat on a bench facing one of the little league baseball fields as she thought of Mom's words. She also thought of her hometown and the reason why she left it. After a while, she made her way back to the apartment. When she arrived, she picked up the phone and dialed Hector's number.

"Hello. Hector? Hi, it's me. Yeah. I'm good. Hey, remember you asked me if I wanted to learn how to work the cash register? Yeah. Well, I think I want to try. Yeah, yeah, okay. Hey, do you remember I told you I had an idea for a business? Would you like to hear about it and tell me what you think? You do? Great! Yeah, you can pick me up. I'll be ready in an hour."

Chavela sat quietly on the porch waiting for Hector. She felt excited and scared all at once. Excited for the adventure she had decided to embark on and fearful of the unknown, of failing. She thought of how she would pay Maria and her brother back for their help and kindness; for letting her live with them without paying a cent. She thought about what it would

be like to be married to Hector, if he would change or remain the caring man he had been up to that point. Most of all, she thought of herself, of her happiness. She wondered if like Maria, she would have days she regretted the choices she made. This scared her the most. As Hector pulled up in his Pontiac Grand Prix, she was still lost in thought. As she went down the porch stairs and crossed the street toward the car, Chavela felt like crying but she didn't know why. Once she stepped into the car, Hector grabbed her hand. She thought that his gesture would appease her emotions, but to her surprise it did not. Was this a sign? It didn't matter. She had made her choice.

As Hector pressed his hand against hers, he asked, "Are you ready?"

Chavela laughed nervously, took a deep breath and looked straight ahead. She then turned her head and looked at Hector in the eyes. "So ready," Chavela replied. "So very ready."

CHAPTER 9

ANNA

Anna went to the *panadería*, the neighborhood bakery, to get *pan sobao* like she did almost every morning. She and her mother, Clotilde, would each have a piece of warm, fresh bread with salted butter and two cups of *café con leche*. It was a ritual they shared, and one which Anna now led after Clotilde's cancer diagnosis. When she was healthy, before heading out to work and before Anna and her older sister Milagros would get up to go to school, Clotilde would be the one to go buy the bread at the neighborhood bakery in the mornings. After having hers, Clotilde would leave the rest of the bread and a fresh pot of coffee for the girls. Anna imagined that she'd drink *café con leche* before she drank breast milk.

As Anna approached the bakery, she saw that the line to buy bread extended outside the bakery's doors. She lined up and waited her turn patiently under the bakery's awning, avoiding the rays of the summer morning sun which were starting to burn. As the line moved along, she noticed many familiar faces, all of them ready to engage in a similar morning ritual; buying fresh baked bread to share with their loved ones along with a hot cup of *café con leche*. The usual suspects were there, like Doña Matilde, a retired school cafeteria worker who shared her bread and coffee with her husband, Don Pedro. She'd have been sharing her bread with her son, Pedro Jr. too, had he not been killed in Vietnam ten years earlier. Doña Matilde kept Pedro Jr.'s bedroom exactly how he left it the day he shipped out to Ft. Bragg. Carmela, the neighborhood seamstress, was also standing in line. She used to sew all of Anna's school uniforms. If there was something Anna enjoyed about school, it was all the new things her mother would buy her for the new school year, especially her new school uniforms. Just as much as she enjoyed

getting her new uniforms, she also enjoyed donating her old ones. At the end of every school year, Clotilde, Anna, and Milagros, Anna's older sister, would make their way to the convent that sat in the outskirts of town and donate old uniforms and any other good clothes that did not fit.

As Anna reminisced, she saw Andrés step out of the bakery. She had been in love with Andrés since the first time they met five years earlier. She was only thirteen at the time. Andrés had been Milagros's boyfriend. They'd been together for a year when Andrés asked for Milagros's hand in marriage. Anna was crushed, but not for long. A short time after Milagros had accepted Andrés's proposal, she met Edelmiro, who swept Milagros off her feet. She broke her engagement to Andrés and married Edelmiro after having known him for just a month. They moved to New Jersey soon after. Andrés was devastated, to say the least. After Milagros left, he would visit Anna and Clotilde and ask if Milagros ever mentioned him during their phone calls. Clotilde would always say no, and Andrés would cry inconsolably. This went on for several months until Clotilde had enough.

"Now you listen to me, young man," Clotilde began, "you need to move on. Milagros is married and is gone. She has moved on, and she's not coming back!"

"But Doña Clotilde, I love Milagros. All I do is think about her," Andrés would repeat between sobs of despair.

"Well, she is not thinking about you, Andrés. You need to understand that. You need to accept that it is over. There are plenty of young, pretty girls in this town who would die to be your girlfriend. Find one and be done with it," Clotilde would scold Andrés.

Every time Anna heard her mother tell Andrés to find another woman, her heart raced, as she hoped that Andrés would find in her what he needed to mend his broken heart.

Unfortunately for Anna, Andrés saw her as a kid, which she was. Eventually, Andrés stopped visiting Clotilde and Anna. However, Anna's feelings never changed. They would run into each other at the pier from time to time, but their encounters were limited to non-effusive hellos.

Anna was no longer the awkward thirteen-year-old she was when Milagros left five years earlier. In fact, she had blossomed into a beautiful young woman whose large hips—so desirable in the tropics—accented her sensuality to the point that she literally stopped traffic. As she observed Andrés stroll down the street picking at the warm bread he had just bought, she wondered if he had found the woman that made him forget Milagros.

On her way home, Anna decided to cut through Betances Street. Even though cutting through this street shortened the distance between the house and the bakery by several minutes, she avoided it. Gustavo lived on that street. Gustavo was her father, or at least the man she once knew as her father. He lived in a small house with his second wife, Samantha, and his stepdaughter, Carolina who was also eighteen years old. Whenever Anna cut through Betances Street, she did so in the hopes that she would run into Gustavo, which happened almost never. As she approached the simple one-story home with the stucco façade, she slowed her pace hoping she could at least catch a glimpse of him. It'd been a long time since they last talked. It'd been five years, to be exact. After Milagros left, he didn't come by anymore. When he decided to leave her mother, he promised Anna nothing would change between them. He promised her he would always be there for her, that he would always love her.

Her pace almost reached a standstill as her eyes surveyed the windows. His truck wasn't in the driveway. She knew he wasn't home. She picked up the pace again, but her thoughts remained with Gustavo, her head filled with happy memories of them fishing together at the pier.

On Sunday mornings, when he still lived with Anna, Milagros and Clotilde, Gustavo and Anna would get up early in order to get to the pier before almost anybody else so they could get a good spot. They'd spend the whole morning and part of the afternoon there. As he paraded back and forth checking on the lines of the five rods he'd set up, Gustavo would patiently listen to all of Anna's stories about school and of a whole bunch of other nonsensical stuff. It didn't matter. Gustavo listened and played along and made her feel special. Even the days when they didn't catch anything, Gustavo was never in a rush to leave.

The first year after he left, nothing changed that much. Occasionally, he would come around on a weekday evening and take Anna and Milagros out for ice cream. He and Anna would still go to the pier to fish on Sundays. However, everything changed when Gustavo met Samantha. He started coming around less and their fishing dates dwindled from every Sunday to once a month, until eventually, once Milagros left, none. It took Anna a while to get used to all the changes. It took some time for her to get out of the habit of getting up on Sundays at the break of dawn. Her mother would get up to find her dozed off on the couch. It saddened Clotilde to see her daughter like that. It saddened her even more to know that she was to blame.

When Anna arrived at her house, her mother was sitting in the dining room with a cup of *café con leche*.

"What took you so long?" Clotilde asked.

"There was a long line. Everyone was hungry for bread today it seems. Everybody was there. I even saw Doña Matilde," Anna said.

"How is she doing?" Clotilde asked.

"I don't know. I didn't have a chance to talk to her. She left while I was still in line."

Clotilde grabbed the loaf of warm bread and tore off a large piece for herself before she went to the refrigerator to fetch the salted butter.

“I also saw Andrés,” Anna added.

Clotilde closed the refrigerator door, walked back to the kitchen table, and grabbed her half full cup of coffee as she stood facing the window. “How is he? Did you talk to him?” she asked.

“I didn’t get a chance to talk to anybody,” Anna repeated.

Clotilde took a sip of her coffee and placed her mug on the table as she followed with her eyes the cars that drove by their window.

“I don’t know what your sister was thinking,” Clotilde stated, shaking her head and holding her cup of coffee close to her lips.

“About what?” Anna asked.

“How she left that poor boy. Such a good boy.”

“Well, she didn’t love him,” Anna stated.

“Love? And you think she loved Edelmiro when she married him? They had known each other for one month, for crying out loud.”

“Well, it’s been five years and they are still together,” Anna affirmed.

“Yeah, and you’re forgetting she showed up here last year with the girls and a black eye,” Clotilde reminded Anna.

Anna remained quiet, wondering how her mother could judge her sister after what she had done to Gustavo.

“I walked by Gustavo’s house on my way back,” Anna stated.

“You did? How is he doing?” Clotilde asked.

“I don’t know. I said I walked by, not that I stopped to have a chat with him,” Anna snapped.

“Well, excuse me for asking,” Clotilde said defensively.

Right before she took another sip of her coffee, and without looking at Anna, Clotilde asked, “So, have you decided what you are going to do?”

“About what?”

“About your life.” Clotilde stated; her tone impatient.

“I think I am going to New Jersey to be with Milagros,” Anna said.

“What?” said Clotilde, caught by surprise with the news.

“I said I am going to go to be with Milagros.”

“I heard you. What the hell are you thinking?!” Clotilde yelled. “What I wanted to know is if you were planning to stay here or you were going to live on campus?” she clarified.

“I don’t want to go to college yet,” Anna said.

“And just when the hell do you plan on going to college? She added, “And besides, I am still recovering. I don’t think it is a good idea that I be alone yet.”

“Is that what’s bothering you? You’re scared of being alone? The doctor said you are in remission after all.”

Clotilde abruptly got up from the table, picked up her plate and mug and threw them in the kitchen sink. She turned on the faucet and began washing them roughly.

“You know what? Do whatever you want. If your mind's made up, nothing I say is going to change it. You are stubborn just like your father.”

Those last words caught Anna by surprise.

“Really? Which father?” she asked angrily.

Clotilde dropped the mug she was washing and took a deep breath, clenching the sponge in her fist.

“Tell me. Which father?” Anna insisted.

Clotilde tried to hold back the tears. She was overwhelmed with guilt and shame. She closed the faucet, dried her hands with her t-shirt and stormed out of the kitchen. Anna remained in her seat wondering whether it was worth it to demand an explanation. She needed to understand what drove her mother to cheat and lie and drive away Gustavo. Clotilde sat quietly

in the living room, tears running down her face as she stared blankly at the wall. Anna got up from her chair and made her way to the living room to find her mother crying. She leaned against the wall with arms crossed staring at the floor.

“When were you planning to tell me?” Clotilde asked somberly.

“I...I don't know. Soon I guess,” Anna replied almost in a whisper.

Both women remained in silence until Clotilde finally spoke up. “I am not proud of what I did,” she finally said.

“What exactly did you do, Mom?”

“What do you mean? You know what I did. I'm sure everyone in town still talks about it.”

“Okay, then tell me why you did it,” Anna demanded.

“You won't understand,” Clotilde supplicated.

“What won't I understand? That you ruined the good life you had? That you hurt a good man? Out of all the men in the world you could have cheated with, you had to do it with his brother?”

“I never meant to hurt anyone, much less Gustavo,” Clotilde cried. “It wasn't like I was running around Gustavo's back with your father, your true father. It happened twice and I ended it. I was riddled with guilt. I couldn't look at Gustavo in the face. You must believe me, Anna.”

“Did Gustavo always suspect I wasn't his child?” Anna asked.

“I suppose so,” Clotilde replied.

“You suppose? What do you mean you suppose?”

“Gustavo and I were having problems. He was working all the time. He would go away for weeks at a time to work on construction projects on the other side of the island. I brought

work home during the school year. We weren't exactly living as man and wife. Your uncle, I mean your father, was helping us in the construction of this house. He'd come on his days off and work on it. It was during the summer, so I was home and your sister was at camp most of the day. We were young. We were alone in this house. I felt abandoned by my husband and things happened."

"Abandoned?" Anna lashed back. "He was breaking his back so that you could have a good life! So that you could live in the biggest and prettiest house in town!"

"I know, Anna. I know. Believe me I know," Clotilde said sobbing.

"So, if you and Gustavo weren't having sex, he must have known I wasn't his child! And yet he stayed!"

"Yes."

"And you knew? You were sure and never admitted it?"

"No."

Anna shook her head as she paced back and forth trying to make sense of everything.

"Did he ever suspect who it was? Did he suspect his own brother?"

"I suppose he didn't know until you were born, and he saw that you were Domingo's spitting image."

Anna sat down across from her mother and buried her face in her hands.

"Were you the one who decided to come forward?" Anna asked, her palms covering her eyes.

"No. One day, you were around six years old, he said he was leaving. He said he was tired of being the punchline of every joke about a *cabrón* at the plant or any other place he set foot in. I asked him what he was talking about and he told me to stop, that I was deceiving no one. He wasn't angry. He wasn't violent. He was just tired."

"That sounds like him."

"When did you stop calling him *papá*?" Clotilde wondered.

"How is that relevant?"

“Anna, Gustavo loves you.” Clotilde assured her daughter.

“He stopped coming around years ago, Mom. After Milagros left, there was no reason for him to come. I wasn’t a good enough reason.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean...”

“Shut up!” Anna yelled at her mother. “He has no reason to love me! Because of you he has no reason to love me!”

Clotilde was startled by Anna’s outburst. In any other circumstance she would have slapped Anna, but she understood and knew she deserved Anna’s resentment.

Anna stormed out of the house. She walked with no destination in mind. She thought of her mother’s revelations and her deception. She also thought of her illness and how she could easily lose her. Nonetheless, her mind was made up and she would go live with her sister and her family. She hoped that by leaving Vega Baja, by leaving the island altogether, her broken heart would heal. As her mind wandered, she found herself at the pier. She stepped onto the creaking wooden planks on her way to the end and sat down at the edge. She followed the brown pelicans with her eyes as they hovered above the surface of the water and then dove in to snatch their prey. She remembered how she would mimic the hovering birds when she and Gustavo would go fishing and sat at the very spot where she sat now. She would extend her arms and run up and down the pier, zig zagging from one end to the other.

Anna left the pier and wandered about town. She went to the *plaza* and sat in the shade of a rubber tree. She struggled with her mind which insisted on thinking about her mother. She tried to focus on the buildings that surrounded the *plaza*, on the Spanish clay shingles that adorned some of them, on the intricate iron work of some of the balconies, on the art deco disc

and spire that capped the tower of her elementary school. She tried to record it all in her mind as she would soon be gone and was not sure when she would see that scene again.

Anna knew she could not stay out all day, and yet she did not want to see her mother, not yet. So, she waited, and when the shade of the rubber tree turned into darkness she went home. She arrived home to find her mother sleeping on the couch. She covered Clotilde with a blanket and went to her room.

The next morning, before her mother had awakened, Anna was on her way to the *panadería*. There was a shorter line that day, and she again saw many familiar faces. As she moved closer to the door, she spilled coins from her money bag onto her hand and counted enough to pay for the bread. As she counted the last cent, a man's voice interrupted her.

“Anna?”

She raised her eyes to find Andrés standing before her.

“Yes,” she replied, her heart racing a million miles a minute.

“How are you? I thought I saw you yesterday, but I wasn't sure. You've changed so much,” Andrés said.

“I'm well,” Anna said nervously.

“How is your mom? How is she feeling?”

“She is actually doing well, thank you for asking.”

It was Anna's turn to order.

“Give me one second,” she said, hoping Andrés would still be there when she turned around. To her delight, he still was.

“So, how is Milagros? And don't worry I am not going to cry,” he joked.

“She is fine. Mother of two now,” she pointed out.

“Wow, two,” Andrés said with a smile.

An awkward silence ensued.

“Hey, what are you doing tonight?” Andrés asked.

“Nothing.”

“Well, we are going to grill some fish we caught yesterday. You remember where I live? Come down and bring your mom.”

“I will ask her.”

“Alright then, hopefully I will see you tonight,” he said as he walked away. “Come around seven!” he yelled from across the street.

Anna arrived back at the house to find her mother sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of *café con leche*. Neither spoke a word. Anna placed the bread in the middle of the table. She went to the cupboard and pulled out two plates. She placed one of the plates in front of Clotilde. Next, she went to the refrigerator and took out the salted butter and placed it on the table. She cut two pieces of bread, one for herself and one for her mother, before she prepared a cup of steaming *café con leche* for herself.

“Do you know when you are leaving?” Clotilde asked, finally breaking the silence.

Anna moved to the table and sat next to Clotilde. This time she sat facing the window. As she stared out, she grabbed Clotilde’s hand, and to her mother’s surprise, a smiling Anna said, “I don’t know. I just don’t know... I think I’ll have to wait and see.”

CHAPTER 10

CLAUDIA

It was the summer of 1981 and we were a diverse bunch: Cubans, Turks, Italians, Boricuas, and Blacks. For the most part, it was Peewee, Tamer, Mandy, Little Stevie, and I who hung out together. Mandy, Little Stevie and I were the youngest, we were between eight and ten years old, whereas Tamer and Peewee were older. Peewee was around twelve and Tamer maybe around thirteen. Mandy, *el cubano maravilloso*, was in a wheelchair due to a congenital condition. We'd fight over who would push Mandy up and down the street when we went for walks or went to the corner bodega to buy candy or popsicles. This pissed him off; he never wanted anybody to push his chair. He insisted he was quite capable to move about on his own.

Sometimes it was just Peewee, Tamer and I who would hang out. We would talk about pretty much anything: food, cars, music, girls. As I was the youngest of the three, I mostly listened to the conversations between Peewee and Tamer. It felt good to be part of a group, a part of something. Sometimes, after buying candy at the bodega, instead of going back home, we would turn the corner and walk up and down Park Avenue. We'd always find weird shit strewn along the sidewalk: syringes, condoms, tattered porn magazines, even money. The porn magazines and money we'd pick up, everything else we ignored. Tamer, as the oldest, was kind of the leader of the bunch. If Tamer said we were playing whiffle ball, we played whiffle ball; if Tamer said we were playing cards, we played cards; if Tamer wanted to play soccer, we played soccer; if he wanted to sit on the porch and talk, we sat and talked. No one complained, but no one felt bullied either.

Now and then the girls would hang out with us, Viv and Eve mostly, Meltem occasionally, and Claudia once in a blue moon. Claudia drove Tamer and Peewee crazy. She moved in with Mrs. Marichal, her grandmother, after her mother decided to move to Miami to find work and eventually send for her. At fifteen she looked much older and was already showing traits of a Cuban seductress, the kind you probably would have met at the Tropicana before the Revolution. Since the day she arrived in the neighborhood to live with her grandmother, who lived across the street from Mandy, Peewee and Tamer would only hang out hangout on Mandy's porch. Every time Claudia stepped out of the house for some reason, Peewee and Tamer froze. It didn't matter what they were doing, playing whiffle ball, cards, or tripping over the previous night's episode of *The Dukes of Hazard*, one sight of Claudia and they were in a trance. Whenever she crossed the street to hang out, she mostly talked to Tamer and Peewee. She knew the power she had over them.

"Oh, here comes your sexy mama," Mandy teased Peewee and Tamer one hot June afternoon as Claudia crossed the street to apparently hang out with us. Tamer and Peewee focused on the approaching beauty.

"Goo, goo, ga, ga," Little Stevie added.

"Shut up! You guys are just jealous 'cause she only talks to us," Tamer retorted.

"I could care less if Ms. Booty-choker talked to me or not," Mandy countered.

"Hey, you guys!" was her go to greeting, especially when she had something in mind.

"Hey, Claudia," Tamer replied coolly.

Little Stevie, Mandy, and I never missed an opportunity to make fun of the way Claudia greeted us.

“Oh, hi Jimmy!” Little Stevie would say as he flipped his imaginary long hair with one hand and placed the other on his hip.

“Hey, Claudia, how you been?” Peewee asked.

“I’ve been good. How about you guys?”

“Good, you know, just hangin’ out.” Tamer said, trying to outcool Peewee.

“That’s awesome. Hey, any of you going to the bodega by the way? I’m dying for a guava *pastelito*,” said Claudia, pouting her lips and placing her hand on her stomach. She looked first at Tamer, then Peewee. Suddenly, both Tamer and Peewee both needed to go to the bodega.

“Well, now that you mention it, I was just on my way to get some chips,” Tamer lied.

“Yeah, me too,” Peewee also lied.

“Hey, if I give you seventy-five cents, could you bring me a *pastelito*?” Claudia pleaded.

“Sure thing. I will bring it for you. No need to pay me nothing,” Peewee offered.

“Nah, I will bring it,” Tamer argued. “I got you.”

Tamer and Peewee exchanged glances, silently challenging each other to be the first to curb Claudia’s craving. They got up from the porch stairs at the same time. Once they were several feet away from the gang, Tamer punched Peewee on the arm.

“Man, what the hell is wrong with you?” Peewee questioned Tamer.

“What the hell is wrong with me? What the hell is wrong with you? I told her I would get it for her, and you stick your big nose in my business?” Tamer replied.

“Business? Man, you ain’t got no business,” Peewee told Tamer.

The boys made their way to the bodega, at first walking leisurely, but as soon as Peewee moved slightly ahead of Tamer, the latter decided to make a dash for it. If he made it to the

bodega first, it meant he had a chance to return first with the coveted *pastelito*. Back on Mandy's porch, Little Stevie, Mandy and I continued playing cards, ignoring Claudia.

"Hey, what are your guys playing?" Claudia inquired.

"Go Fish," Mandy replied.

"I haven't played that in a long time," Claudia said, hinting that she wanted to take part.

Mandy, Little Stevie and I didn't get the hint and we continued playing. Claudia sat quietly waiting for her admirers to come back with the sugary treat, when a black Oldsmobile pulled up in front of her grandmother's house. When Claudia noticed the vehicle, she got up and swiftly crossed the street. As she crossed, the driver pulled down the window. A man with a beard who looked like he was in his mid-twenties was sitting in the driver's seat. Claudia walked up to the car and hunched over to have a better view of the car's occupant. They talked. The man in the car remained serious and Claudia occasionally giggled. After several minutes, Claudia's grandmother appeared through one of her front windows.

"Claudia!" she yelled.

Claudia hunched over even more in a fruitless effort to hide from her grandmother.

"Shit, my grandmother. I can't talk anymore."

"Claudia, *ven aquí ahora!*" Claudia's grandmother again yelled at the top of her lungs.

"What is it?" Claudia replied as she appeared to her grandmother from the other side of the car.

"I told you to come here!" Claudia's grandmother demanded in her broken English.

"Hey man, I really gotta go," Claudia told the mysterious stranger.

As she stepped away from the vehicle and walked around it to meet her grandmother, the driver began to roll up the window and slowly pulled away, not before taking a glance at the bunch that was so intently observing his every move.

“Who was that?” Claudia’s grandmother asked angrily as Claudia approached the window.

“A friend,” Claudia replied.

“I do not want to see him here again! Do you understand?” Claudia’s grandmother ordered.

“What do you mean? It’s a free country. If he wants to park in front of the house, he can park in front of the house,” Claudia replied like a spoiled brat.

“Don’t get smart with me!” Claudia’s grandmother yelled. “I will go down there and smack you in front of everybody!”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Claudia replied as she turned and crossed the street to meet us again.

Peewee and Tamer had arrived while Claudia was conversing with the stranger.

“What the hell...?” Tamer said.

“Looks like somebody scooped up your girl,” Mandy joked.

Little Stevie and I laughed. Even Peewee laughed.

“Shut up, Mandy,” Tamer said sullenly.

Claudia sat down with us again. Her grandmother no longer stood at the window. Tamer was quiet, holding a bag with a *pastelito* in his hand but not quite sure what to do with it. He felt

jealous although he didn't understand why. It wasn't like Claudia was his girlfriend but seeing her talk to the stranger in the black car made his blood boil.

"Hey, Claudia, so, who's that dude you were talking to?" Tamer asked casually.

"Oh, nobody, he's... he's my girlfriend's boyfriend."

We all, except Tamer, looked at each other, not believing Claudia's story.

"Oh, is your girlfriend alright?" Tamer asked feigning concern.

Yeah, she's fine," Claudia replied.

"Oh, here, I got you a *pastelito*."

"Thank you, Tamer," Claudia said, as she grabbed the bag, paying little attention to its content. She sat pensively.

"Aren't you going to eat it?" Tamer inquired.

"What?"

"The *pastelito*, aren't you going to eat it?" Tamer again asked.

"Oh yeah, sure, I am going to save it and have it for dessert after dinner tonight,"

Claudia got up and crossed the street without saying goodbye. Tamer observed as she climbed the front steps of her grandmother's house and disappeared into the foyer. The rest of us played on, paying little attention to Claudia.

"I think I'm going to head home guys," a dejected Tamer said.

"What? No! We are playing D&D today!" Mandy protested.

"You guys go on and play, I'm not feeling well," Tamer said as he stepped off the porch and headed home.

"You suck!" Mandy yelled.

“Whatever!” Tamer replied.

It rained cats and dogs the next several days. We only had one television set so I had to negotiate with Mom the times and shows I could watch. Nothing I could say would make her give up her *telenovelas* though. So, I also sat and watched Mom’s *telenovelas*. Eventually, I became an expert on Mexican and Venezuelan soap opera actors.

On the third day of my unwilling isolation, the rain let up, but night had already fallen. I still had to wait close to an hour before it was my turn to watch television, and even though my Pop had bought me a Pong console, I had no television set to which I could hook it up or anybody to play with. Unlike the guys, who had siblings closer to their ages, I was seven years older than my brother. So, I sat on my windowsill and watched the still drizzling rain. It was around nine o’clock and while I waited I noticed that the black car that had pulled up in of Claudia’s house three days earlier reappeared. After several minutes, Claudia stepped out on to her porch and she cautiously tip-toed down the stairs and hopped into the black car. She was obviously making every effort to avoid drawing her grandmother’s attention. The car took off. I couldn’t believe what I had just witnessed, and I felt tempted to tell Mom. I was torn. I knew something wasn’t right, but I didn’t want to be a snitch.

When I woke up the next morning the sun was shining, and I was excited because I knew I was going to hang out with the guys. Three days locked up in our apartment felt like three years. I heard voices outside my window. I peered through the drapes and outside on the sidewalk was Claudia’s grandmother, Mom and other neighbors. Claudia’s grandmother looked distressed. She was crying and everyone around her was consoling her. I remembered what I had witnessed the previous night as I tried to listen to what Mom was saying to Mrs. Marichal.

“Calm down, Mrs. Marichal, please. The police are on their way. Kids do these things. I am sure she’ll show up at any moment,” Mom told Claudia’s grandmother.

The crowd grew and the police finally arrived. They talked to Mrs. Marichal and they took notes in their little notebooks. The policemen were Hispanic which meant there was a better chance of they would take the situation seriously. Mrs. Marichal was inconsolable. When Mom finally came inside, I asked what the commotion was about.

“Jimmy, get dressed we need to go downtown and do some shopping,” Mom ordered.

“What’s going on out there? Why are the police here?” I inquired.

“Claudia disappeared. She wasn’t in her bed this morning and Mrs. Marichal is upset.”

“Maybe she went to the bodega,” I suggested.

“No, we went and asked if she had been around. We went to the school playground and nothing. No one has seen her. Mrs. Marichal says that when she went to bed last night, Claudia was watching television. Her bed hasn’t been slept in,” Mom explained. “Has she been with you guys lately?” Mom asked.

“A couple days ago for a little while,” I replied.

“Did she say anything about running away or about going somewhere?”

“Nope,” I replied. I remained quiet, as the image of Claudia getting into the car overwhelmed any other thought.

Mom and I walked to the bus stop. Luckily the bus showed up almost instantly preventing us from standing in the scorching sun. Once we sat, I decided to tell Mom what I’d seen.

“Mom, I need to tell you something.”

“What?”

“I saw Claudia get in a car last night.”

“What do you mean she got in a car?”

“Last night a black car parked in front of her house and she got in it,” I stated nervously.

Mom pulled the bus’s stop cord. We got off and crossed Bloomfield Avenue to catch a bus heading north. Once we made it on the northbound bus, Mom questioned me about why I had not come forward with what I knew.

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?” Mom asked.

“I didn’t remember, I just remembered,” I lied.

“You just remembered?” Mom asked skeptically.

“Yeah, I promise, I didn’t remember,” I insisted.

We got off on Bloomfield and Garside and raced to Mrs. Marichal’s house. As we moved in closer, it seemed that the police had returned with twice as many cars. Although I had been brought up to mistrust the police, I was happy to see them that day. I even felt relieved, believing they had found Claudia and brought her back to her grandmother. I saw the gang standing front of Mandy’s house. No one was smiling, especially not Tamer. I crossed the street to join them.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Claudia,” Mandy said.

“Claudia? What’s wrong with Claudia?”

“She’s gone,” Tamer added solemnly.

“Where’d she go?” I asked innocently.

“No, Jimmy. She’s gone. Gone forever,” Tamer stated passively.

My heart sank when I finally understood what Tamer was saying. “I knew she shouldn’t have gotten into that car!” I thought out loud.

“What car?” Tamer asked.

“The black car. I saw her get in the black car last night.”

Just as I spoke those last words, several police officers crossed the street along with my Mother. They asked me all sorts of questions about the black car. Since the rest of the guys had also seen the car several days before, they were also questioned.

There wasn’t a funeral or any other service for Claudia. Her mother arrived and took her body and her grandmother back to Miami. I was relieved that the guys and I tried not to talk about what had happened, even though the adults in our lives did it constantly. Moreover, our parents understandably became reluctant to let us hangout unsupervised. That didn’t last long, however. The following summer, they had all but forgotten about Claudia.

Tamer was never the same after that tragedy, and he hardly hung out with us. I tried to tell myself that because he was older, he had probably moved on to friends and activities that were more appropriate for his age. I knew, however, that he avoided the gang because he did not want to be around me. I knew he blamed me for what had happened to Claudia, and to be honest, I blamed myself for a long time as well. I wondered what difference I could have made had I told Mom about Gloria the moment she stepped into that car. Could I have saved her?

The following summer, just like the adults, it seemed that the kids had practically forgotten Claudia. Little Stevie and Peewee would ring my bell and I’d come out and we’d head to Mandy’s to play cards. Occasionally and unintentionally, I’d stare at Mrs. Marichal’s empty

house and see Claudia again sneaking out and getting into the black car and I'd be overwhelmed by a feeling of impotence that a young boy should not have to bear.

CHAPTER 11

CARLITO'S WAVE

From the moment I met Carlito, I knew that I loved him. Not in a carnal or romantic way, but in a spiritual, fraternal way. He was the youngest brother of my aunt Chavela's boyfriend, Hector. I was eleven years old when we met. He might have been around fifteen. He stood about five-seven and wore thick Buddy Holly glasses that the girls for some reason found cute. He had a thin, slender yet muscular build, like Bruce Lee, whom he idolized. He'd even get his hair cut like Bruce in *Enter the Dragon*. The walls in his bedroom were covered from one end to the other with Bruce Lee posters and he had a pair of worn out nun chucks he'd sport around his neck when he went out on the black BMX he bought used with money he was able to save by working at his brother's bodega. I'm sure those nun chucks came in handy more than once in the rough streets of Irvington, New Jersey. As much as he loved everything Bruce Lee, he loved skipping school even more. This got him in a lot of trouble, especially with Hector. According to Hector, their mother was too easy on Carlito. Hector was the total opposite. One weekday morning around ten, Hector was on his way to the bank to deposit his store's previous day's earnings when he spotted Carlito shooting hoops at a city court. Hector stopped his car, walked up to Carlito and back slapped him right then and there. After dragging him to his car, he proceeded to drop Carlito off at school. That scenario played out frequently.

Sometimes Carlito would ride his bike all the way from Irvington to Newark to hang out with me, but not really. He'd do cool stuff for me, like lower the seat of his BMX so that I could ride it and take me to Dairy Queen for ice cream. The truth is, however, that Carlito came to hang out with my Pop. Carlito didn't have a dad, or at least not one that lived with him. When

he and Pop hung out, all Carlito wanted to do was talk about Pop's time in the Army. I found it terribly boring, but Carlito reveled in it. He planned on joining the military service. It seemed like the easiest and fastest way to get out of Irvington.

Carlito's father abandoned him, his brothers, sister, and his mom when Carlito was five or six years old. One day Simón, Carlito's father, showed up drunk at their apartment with his mistress, a young Dominican twenty-something hairdresser who already had two children of her own and was pregnant with a third. The third was supposedly Simón's. According to the story I overheard Carlito tell my Pop, Simón was so drunk, his Dominican lover had to prop him up against a wall.

"Where is your mother?" Simón asked Carlito slurring his words, as he barged into the family apartment, Carlito remembered.

"What the hell do you want, Simón? And who is this this *puta* you've brought into my home?" Carlito's Mom asked, after she walked in from the living room.

"Lemme tell you something. This *puta* is no *puta*. She is the woman I love," Carlito's father retorted. The stench of alcohol was so strong Carlito said he could taste it.

"If she is the woman you love, you better love her somewhere else and not in my house. So, get the hell out before I call the police!" Rebecca, Carlito's mom, warned her husband.

"No, no, you don't have to call no police because you see here," Simón said as he waved two plane tickets in Rebecca's face, "we are leaving. We are going together," Simón replied taunting his wife.

"Then go and don't you come back, okay. Because when this one," Carlito's Mom said as she pointed at the Dominican woman, "kicks your drunk ass out—because she will—don't come

running to me. I am through with you, Simón!” Carlito’s mom yelled as she pushed a drunken Simón and his mistress out of the apartment and slammed the door. Carlito didn’t see his father again until ten years later when Rebecca sent him to live with Simón in Puerto Rico.

When Carlito’s father split, Rebecca made Hector the man of the house, which entailed looking after his brother Carlito, as well as his other two siblings. Hector did the best a fifteen-year-old could do. He juggled school, a part-time a job after school at the local grocery store, and he made sure his brothers and sister stayed out of trouble. It was a big sacrifice, but not as big a sacrifice he felt his mother was making with two jobs and four kids to feed.

Carlito showed up at our place with one serious shiner one day. I was shocked at first but excited to hear about the fight and how Carlito for sure kicked some punk’s ass. Carlito said nothing. I begged him to tell me, but instead he sat quietly in our living room waiting for Pop to get home from work. When Pop finally arrived, he confessed that Hector had kicked his ass for taking a packet of cigarettes from the bodega without paying for them. Mom gave him a frozen bag of peas to put on his eye. She and Carlito chitchatted at the kitchen table while Mom prepared her *sofrito* for the week and Pop took a shower. I sat quietly in a corner.

“That brother of yours is an animal,” Mom told Carlito. “I don’t know how Chavela can stand him.”

“He ain't that bad Ms. A,” Carlito replied.

“How can you say that after what he did to you? And for a pack of cigarettes? Which, by the way, you shouldn’t be smoking young man. Does your mother know you’re smoking?” Mom asked.

“Of course, she does,” Carlito lied.

“Really? You know I’m going to ask her when I see her.”

“Maria! Leave the kid alone. Can’t you see he is in pain?” Pop yelled from the bathroom.

“*Tu te callas*. You need to stop covering up for him!” Mom yelled back.

“Your Mom still have two jobs?” Mom asked Carlito.

“Yep. Sometimes three when she does her catering.”

Mom shook her head. “Why does she still work so hard? I know Hector can help her out and he probably does.”

“What else is she going to do, Ms. A?” Carlito asked. “She ain’t got a man, no little kids. If she stays home, she is going to get old and grumpy. I mean, more grumpy.”

“No little kids? How about you?” Mom asked. “Oh, you think just because you smoke a couple of cigarettes behind her back you’re all grown up, huh?”

“Nah,” Carlito replied.

“You still seeing that cute *morena*, what’s her name, Daisy?” Mom asked.

“Sometimes. I mean I like her, but I think she wants something serious, but I ain’t lookin’ for that. Like I feel her, but I don’t at the same time.”

“Don’t you be playin’ with that poor girl’s heart Carlito. And don’t you get her pregnant,” Mom warned Carlito as she waved an authoritative finger at Carlito from where she was standing in front of the kitchen sink.

“No ma’am. Dang ma’am you’re making blush.”

“I’m just telling it like it is young man.”

“I appreciate it, Ms. A.”

“Jesus, Maria, you need to leave the kid alone!” Pop now yelled from the bedroom.

“I’m not saying anything wrong. Just giving him good advice, which is what you should be doing instead of wasting his time talking about how much “fun” you had in the Army!” Mom yelled back. “Don’t listen to anything he tells you, he’s crazy,” Mom whispered to Carlito.

“I heard that!” Dad yelled from the hall.

“Whatever!” Mom replied.

I sat quietly in a corner of the kitchen listening to Mom give Carlito advice. She always gave everybody advice, even if they didn’t ask for it. She always seemed so cheerful and always willing to help anybody, just like she was doing with Carlito at that moment. I wondered why or how she was always so cheerful? Pop wasn’t always the easiest person to be around and sometimes he made her cry. Did she give herself advice to stay with him? I sometimes felt she wanted to be someplace else, with somebody else, without me.

Carlito had dinner with us and thanked Mom for her kindness. After that evening, we didn’t see or hear from Carlito for a while. Aunt Chavela had moved in with Hector so she wasn’t around anymore for Mom to ask her what he was up to. Mom could have called her, but Mom and Chavela didn’t talk much after Chavela started going out with Hector. Mom didn’t like Hector, and she didn’t hide it. She thought Hector was arrogant and she accused him of “changing Pop.”

Before meeting Hector, Pop was already his difficult self, but he was always came home after work. All that changed after Pop and Hector became friends. Mom couldn’t understand what a married man with two small children could have in common with a player like Hector. Pop started coming home late from work, especially on Fridays; he’d come home drunk and smelling like perfume. The worst days were when he showed up with lipstick stains on his shirt.

The yelling was unbearable and the occasional physical violence even more so. If he could be mean when he wasn't drunk, Pop could be a flat-out punk when he was, especially with Mom. The name calling was especially bad. When Hector shackled up with Chavela, you would have thought that things would have gone back to the way they were. No, the damage was done.

Carlito showed up again after about two and half months.

"Carlo!" I yelled with joy when I saw him on our porch.

"Hey squirt," he replied, "is your Pop home?"

"Nope. He's working overtime," I said.

"Oh, okay."

"Come in."

"Is your mom home?" he asked. He seemed nervous.

"Yeah, come in. She's in the kitchen like always," I joked.

Carlito stood in the doorway.

"You wouldn't happen to have a few dollars I could borrow?" Carlito inquired.

"A couple of dollars?" I was surprised by the question. "I have some money in a piggy bank, but I am not allowed to take it out."

"Why don't you ask Mom? Come in," I insisted.

"Oh no, no," Carlito said discouraging me from asking Mom, "don't say anything to your Mom."

"Why not?" I asked.

"No, I just don't want her to worry that's all."

Mom called out from the kitchen as Carlito stood in the doorway.

“Jimmy, who are you talking to?”

“It’s Carlito!”

“Tell him to come in and get something to eat!” Mom requested. “Haven’t seen you in a while, Carlito!” Mom said.

“I know Mrs. A., but I can’t stay! Hector is waiting for me at the bodega!” Carlito yelled back.

“Oh ok,” Mom replied.

Carlito and I stood on the porch in silence. He then began to pace back and forth, rubbing his hands, growing seemingly impatient.

“Jimmy, I really need this big favor buddy,” Carlito said.

“What?” I asked.

“I’m gonna leave and come back in two hours, but I’m not coming to the house. I’m going to wait for you at the corner, next to the bodega. I need you to lend me whatever money you have.”

“I can’t. I’ll get in trouble, I told you already,” I pleaded.

“Jimmy, if you’re my friend, if you’re really my friend, you’ll lend me the money.”

“Why don’t you ask Mom for the money?” I insisted. “She’ll lend it to you,” I tried to convince him.

“I can’t, Jimmy. I can’t ask your Mom or Pop ‘cause she’ll call my mom and I can’t have that.”

“But why?” I asked.

“Look, are you helping me or not?!” Carlito’s yelled. I was taken aback with his reaction.

“How much money you think you got in that piggy bank of yours?” Carlito asked.

“I don’t know. Like two hundred.”

“That’s perfect,” Carlito mumbled to himself. He realized he had upset me with his outburst, and even more so with his request. “I’m sorry I yelled at you, but we’re homies, right? I promise I will pay you back next week. Your Mom won’t even notice the money is gone. I promise, Jimmy.”

I wrestled with the idea of having to explain the disappearance of the money to Mom and Pop. I couldn’t understand why Carlito didn’t ask his mother or Hector for the money, or even my folks for that matter. For a moment I decided I would not go through with it. I felt like I was betraying Mom and Pop’s trust, and the beating would have been one for the history books. At the same time, I felt I’d be betraying Carlito if I didn’t do as he asked. My love for him was such, that the thought of losing him terrified me.

“Okay,” I said. “But you promise you’ll give it back next week?”

“I promise,” he said.

“Okay,” I agreed.

“I’ll wait for you down the street, at the corner.”

I returned home and went straight to my room. My stomach was in knots.

“Jimmy!” I heard mom call.

“Yeah?”

“Did Carlito leave?”

“Yeah,” I replied.

“Okay.”

I went to my closet and pulled out a beat-up piggy bank my aunt Lourdes gave me as a present during a family trip to visit her in Delaware. The last time I counted its contents I had around two hundred and twenty dollars. It was money made up of birthday gifts and what I had earned over the summers washing the neighbors’ cars. Even though I promised Carlito I would let him have it, I knew there was something not quite right. Why should I have to hide to help my friend? I felt like throwing up. I was overwhelmed with guilt and unease.

I placed the piggy bank on my bed and carefully tipped it over so that I could open the security latch. Once open, a river of quarters, nickels, and dimes spilled onto my bed. I knew Mom could walk in at any moment, so I quickly cupped mounds of coins in my hands and placed them softly in a brown paper bag I had found in the kitchen. When I was done, I checked the clock and I realized I still had an hour and half to go before I could meet Carlito. I sat in my room staring at the bag. It felt like time had stood still. I tried to calm down by going to the living room to watch television with Mom.

“You need something, honey?” Mom asked, surprised with my presence.

“Me? No,” I replied as I sat on the couch next to her.

“Are you going to watch the *novela* with *mami*? That’s so sweet,” Mom said as she pulled me closer.

I sat still next to Mom. My eyes were glued to the television set and I occasionally shifted them to look at the large round clock mounted on the wall above the television set. Ten minutes before reaching the two-hour mark I got up from the couch, walked back to my room, and

grabbed the coin filled bag I had hidden under my bed. I carefully pulled it out trying to make as little noise possible. I knew that in order to leave the apartment, I had to walk by the living room. I hoped that Mom would be so concentrated on her *novela* that she wouldn't notice me. I stuffed the paper bag in a backpack and topped it with t-shirts in order to muffle the noise of the loose coins.

I took a deep breath and opened my bedroom door, put on my backpack and headed out. My heart was racing but I made it out without a hitch. When I stepped out onto the porch, Purita, our neighborhood vigilante who lived across the street, was taking out her trash. She waved at me and I returned the gesture. I hoped she hadn't noticed my effort to close the door as inconspicuously as possible. When I made it to the corner, Carlito was already there.

"Hey man, thank you for coming through," Carlito said almost joyfully when he saw me.

As Carlito placed the brown paper bag in his own backpack, I realize that his clothes were unusually dirty and tattered. It was unlike him to look unkempt. I thought about asking him about it, but I didn't. All I wanted was to get back in the house before Mom noticed that I was up to something.

"Carlito, promise me you are going to pay me back every cent," I demanded.

"Of course, you my home boy. Every cent," he promised.

"Cool, now I have to go before Mom finds out what's up," I said.

Carlito took off and I ran back home. When I reached the apartment, Mom was no longer sitting in front of the television set. The unusual silence felt oddly suspicious. When I stepped into my room, she was sitting on my bed holding the now empty piggy bank.

“What the hell is going on?” Mom asked. “And you better tell me the truth before your father gets home!”

“How...how...” I stuttered.

“How do I know? Purita called,” Mom did not hesitate to say. “You know you can’t do anything in this neighborhood without her finding out,” Mom stated.

“Son of a bitch!”

“Watch your language, and start talking,” she commanded.

“I promise it’s nothing bad,” I said.

“Okay.”

“You know Carlito came earlier, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well he seemed really desperate and he asked me for money. I told him that I would ask you and he got all nervous.”

“Nervous?”

“Yes, nervous. He asked me if I had money. I said that I did, and he asked me if he could borrow it, but he didn’t want you to know that he had borrowed it.”

“What?”

“Yeah, for some reason he wanted it to be a secret.”

“That does not sound right. I’m calling his mother. No, wait, maybe I better not. I don’t want her to worry. I’ll call your aunt Chavela,” Mom decided.

Mom and Chavela spoke on the phone for a seemingly long time. As Mom listened to her sister-in-law, she was shocked and disappointed. I sat beside her in silence, trying to understand the cause of her shock.

After the conversation ended, Mom tried to explain everything to me. According to her, during the two months Carlito had not visited our home, he had also not stepped foot in his mother's house. Apparently, Carlito was an addict. He had stolen from his brother Hector as well as from his mother and was living on the streets. I was overcome with guilt. Not because I had lied to Mom, but because I had given Carlito money to buy something that could probably kill him. I felt that if something happened to Carlito I could never forgive myself.

Carlito disappeared again, and when he reappeared Hector almost beat him to death. His mother, Rebecca, according to Chavela, was fed up. She could deal with him skipping school but would not tolerate the stealing and the drug abuse. She threatened him with sending him to Puerto Rico with his dad, but Carlito argued that nobody could force him to leave. However, Carlito's resistance to going to the island soon subsided. He had accumulated so much debt with his dealer that he'd have to disappear if he wanted to stay alive. He didn't call or come around to say goodbye.

On the island, Carlito's dad tried to set him straight. He set strict rules and found him a job at a grocery store. The school year was almost over so Simón dad decided to enroll his son in the fall for his senior year. Carlito stuck to his father's plan for a while.

Everything was going well except for the fact that Carlito had to live under the same roof with the woman who had broken his mom and pop's marriage. He hated coming home and being under the same roof as her. He tried to overcome his anger toward her and tried even

harder stick to the straight and narrow, but it didn't last long. About three months after his arrival, he was arrested for possession of marijuana and shortly after that he was fired for coming in late or just not coming in at all. He started disappearing again, first for a couple of days and then for weeks at a time.

The only good thing for Carlito now was that when he disappeared, he'd sleep under a palm tree on the beach instead of under a bridge or on a dirty bench of an Irvington city park. He had a favorite spot on Isla Verde Beach where he'd like to get high. It was far enough from the crowds that he didn't make anybody feel threatened but close enough to not feel lonely.

On a stormy summer day, Carlito set up a makeshift tent on the beach next to his favorite palm tree. It was made up of two by fours and plastic trash bags. He loved being on the beach when it rained. As the wind threatened to take down his improvised refuge, he tied a rag around his upper arm before putting a little bit of heroin in a metal spoon he had found while dumpster diving. He added water with a syringe, then dropped a rolled-up cotton ball into the illegal solution before he heated it with a cigarette lighter. After the slam, he lied down, eventually falling asleep on the wet sand. When he came to, the rain had subsided, and the sun was setting. Carlito came out of his tent and walked to the shore. He inhaled the crisp ocean air that tasted extra salty that evening. As the waves washed his feet, he slowly began to move in, taking small steps until the water reached his shoulders. He stood in the water scanning the buildings that lined the avenue that ran parallel to the shoreline until the sun finally set. When he decided to return to the shore, he had to battle rough waves, remnants of the storm that had just passed. The darkness distorted his notion of the distance between him and his tent. He assumed the tent's position in the sand due to its proximity to his favorite palm tree, whose tall green fronds were

discernible at night thanks to the excessive and artificial light that illuminated the overcrowded beach community. When he felt that he was finally making up ground in his attempt to reach the shore, an undercurrent did away with all his progress, carrying him so far out that he confused the headlights of the cars driving up and down Isla Verde Avenue with the stars in the obscure ocean sky.

A morning jogger found his body three days later. It had washed up ashore, several miles away, in Piñones. When Mom told me Carlito had died, I suddenly forgot how to breathe, and I felt as if my heart was being crushed. If I had not given him the money, I thought, he'd probably have not disappeared again, and his mother would not have sent him with Simón, even though I knew he had left escaping certain death on the streets of Irvington. Nonetheless, I still felt I should have been stronger and wiser. I should have resisted his insistence and noticed that he was not well. It took me a long time to understand and accept Carlito would not come back, and I wondered if Carlito knew how much I loved him.

CHAPTER 12

ELMI

My cousin Elmi loved staying over when we were kids. We'd play Candy Land or Simon or just watch cartoons. Other times we would just talk until late at night when Mom thought we were sleeping. Elmi particularly enjoyed cooking with Mom. She'd say Mom was the best cook in the world. I'd have to agree with that. Mom, I think, really enjoyed having Elmi over since she was raising two boys. I had heard her mention several times how happy she would be had either of us, my brother or I, been a girl. She only had a girl's name picked out for when she was pregnant with me, she once told me. Sharon Ivette, that would have been my name had I'd been a girl, Sharon Ivette.

I don't know why Tio Pedro hated Elmi, why he hated his own daughter. I say that he hated her because of the way he treated her. He basically treated her like shit. It was like he had his own personal slave whom he could torture psychologically and physically. I would go visit Elmi but never stayed over. I enjoyed going over when Tio Pedro was not home. That was before Elmi's Mom started getting sick and supposedly was in the hospital often. Mom and I would go over so that Elmi and I could play, but what she was really doing was checking up on Elmi. She wanted to make sure she was eating, healthy, that her mother was somewhat functional.

I hated the way Tio Pedro treated her. I didn't like the way Pop treated me, but the way Tio Pedro treated Elmi was indescribable. Just the utterance of her name would send shivers down Elmi's spine. At just five or six years of age Elmi understood that her role was to serve without question. "Elmi my paper!" or "Elmi, my slippers!" or "Elmi, my beer!"

Elmi's mother could not defend her, protect her, because she was either passed out from popping too many pain killers or she had gone out on a crack run and lost her way back. Elmi had asked Mom and Pop many times to let her live with us. Mom would have been glad to allow her to do so and she even considered reporting Tio Pedro and his wife to child protection services, but Pop spoke against it. He thought that would entail betraying his brother.

Mom felt it was her responsibility to protect Elmi anyway she could, and that is why besides going over to visit she would have her over at our place whenever possible. Sometimes Pop spoke against it but looking out for Elmi was one of the few times Mom was consistent in standing up to Pop. Nothing would stop her from making sure Elmi was at least well.

Things got worse for Elmi as time passed. Her mother would disappear for weeks at a time and the abuse coming from Tio Pedro worsened. One time, we must have been around ten years old, I was allowed to visit Elmi by myself. I remember Tio Pedro picked a glass from the cupboard to get a drink of water and when he noticed the glass was stained, he was furious.

"Elmi!" he yelled from the kitchen. Elmi and I were in the back yard.
Elmi froze when she heard Tio Pedro's voice.

"Elmi!" he repeated. Elmi still couldn't move.

"I will be right back," she was finally able to utter.

"Want me to go with you?" I asked sensing her fear.

Elmi shook her head, "No, I will be right back, I promise."

"Okay," I said.

"Elmi! God damn it get your ass over here!"

"Coming!" She replied as she nervously walked towards the house.

I stood watching Elmi, wondering how she was able to put up with all this bullshit. From a distance I heard Tio Pedro's voice, scolding, demeaning, insulting. I had to spend the rest of the afternoon by myself; Tio Pedro made Elmi empty the cupboard and wash and dry every glass one by one. By the time she was done it was time for me to leave.

I tried for the life of me to understand why Tio Pedro hated Elmi and I sought answers wherever I thought I could find them.

"Mom?"

"Yeah sweetie?"

"Why is Tio Pedro so mean to Elmi?"

I'm assuming Mom was caught off guard because she didn't reply immediately. I suppose she was pondering the best possible answers to my question

"Sweetie, Tio Pedro has a lot on his plate right now," she began, "and sometimes adults get so overwhelmed with responsibilities they unintentionally hurt the feelings of other people. I'm sure he loves Elmi and I am sure Elmi loves him."

"If he loves her, why does he scream at her all the time and act like he doesn't love her?" I added. "I don't think he loves her."

Mom once again remained silent, probably trying to construct a logical rebuttal that would certainly render her triumphant in our discussion. She went generic.

"I know it is hard for you to understand, but someday when you are an adult and have children of your own you will understand what I am talking about."

I digressed from Mom's assertion. I doubted I would ever understand how you can cause so much pain to someone you supposedly love. At least at that point in time, to my young mind, Tio Pedro's actions, the way he treated Elmi, made no sense to me.

Gloria, Elmi's mother, was a crackhead. Of course, I did not know or understand Gloria's addiction at the time, and I suppose Elmi did not either. We were told she was sick. We were told, whenever she'd disappear, that she was in the hospital and we believed it even though she always looked worse when she returned.

"So, what is wrong with your mom now?" I remember asking Elmi when we were around seven years old.

"I think she has a breathing problem, at least that is what Grandma told me," Elmi claimed.

"She gets sick a lot, doesn't she?" I asked.

"Yeah," Elmi replied.

"Why do you think she gets sick so often?" I asked.

"I don't know," Elmi replied, staring at the ground, holding a long twig and poking ants that ran around and between her feet.

Sometimes Tio Pedro would allow Elmi to go out with us, whether it was to the movies, the park, or a quick run to the grocery store. On one of those days, Mom and I picked up Elmi so that she could accompany us to buy decorations for my upcoming birthday party. Gloria, Elmi's mother, had been gone for several days. Elmi and I had been told the usual story that Gloria had fallen ill once again, and she was hospitalized. We drove around town and stopped at several places to get balloons, streamers, and hats. After our last stop, on our way back to Tio Pedro's

apartment, we passed under a bridge where there were several people living out of cardboard boxes. Others were just sitting on the ground talking, while another group was huddled helping each other shoot up. Traffic was heavy so we had to stand under the bridge longer than Mom wanted. Just as traffic began to move Elmi noticed someone familiar among the indigent bunch. She stuck her head out the car window and focused on a short stocky brown woman with an afro wearing torn jeans and a red jacket.

"*Mami!*" She yelled at the woman who did not acknowledge her.

"What?" Mom asked seemingly confused.

"*Mami!* It's *Mami!*" Elmi repeated.

Mom checked her rear-view mirror to see in what direction Elmi was looking. When Mom noticed the woman Elmi was calling *mami*, she told Elmi to roll up the window.

"Elmi! Roll up your window now! That is not your mother!" Mom ordered.

"But *mami, tia,*" Elmi said almost crying as Mom was finally able to speed away from under that bridge.

Elmi wept inconsolably as Mom tried to convince her that she was wrong, that the woman she saw was not Gloria. Mom pulled the car over and turned around in her seat to talk to Elmi.

"Elmi, listen to me. That woman was not your mother. Do you understand?" Mom stated.

"Your mother is in the hospital."

"I want to go see her!" Elmi clamored.

"Elmi, you cannot go because they do not allow children to enter where she is. We have talked about this before. I thought you understood."

Elmi stared out the window she had just rolled up, tears rolling down her face.

"Now I need you to stop crying before you get back home. You know how your father gets when you cry, Elmi," Mom warned.

Mom took us to Dairy Queen for ice cream which seemed to take Elmi's mind off the confusing encounter. By the time we reached Tio Pedro's apartment Elmi had completely calmed down.

"How are you feeling sweetie?" Mom asked Elmi before she stepped out of the car.

"Fine," Elmi said somberly.

"Okay. Hey..."

"What?" Elmi asked.

"You know I love you, right?" Mom asked Elmi as they stood beside the car.

Mom hugged Elmi before she headed into the apartment building.

"Everything will be all right. Okay?"

"Okay," Elmi replied.

The phone rang later that evening around nine thirty. It was Tio Pedro, exasperated, looking for Elmi.

"Did you pick up Elmi again?"

"No, Of course not, I dropped her off around four hours ago," Mom stated seemingly confused.

"She is not in the apartment. I thought she might be with you?" Tio Pedro wondered nervously.

"No! She is not here, Pedro. Did you check the back yard? I dropped her off and I saw her go into the building with my own eyes, Pedro," Mom stated.

"I've checked everywhere."

Did you call the police?"

"No, I haven't."

"Call the police, I will be right over."

The truth is Elmi waited until Mom pulled away to sneak out of the building. The truth is Elmi was certain of what she saw. She saw Gloria and nothing or no one would change her mind. Elmi decided to sneak out of the house and walk three miles to the overpass where she believed to have seen her mother.

When Elmi finally found her mother among the other indigents and addicts, she tried to awaken her by shaking her. Gloria awoke startled, not immediately realizing it was her daughter who stood before her.

"*Mami, soy yo*, Elmi", Elmi said in Spanish as Gloria shuffled her legs trying to scurry away from Elmi.

"What?" Gloria replied as she suddenly stopped at the sound of Elmi's voice.

"It's me Elmi," Elmi said as she began to sob.

"Elmi?" Gloria questioned for assurance.

"Yes, *mami*, it's me," Elmi repeated.

Gloria stood up grabbed her daughter by the arms and pulled her in closer, finally embracing her, Elmi's face buried in Gloria's bosom.

"What are you doing here, baby?" Gloria asked. "You shouldn't be here, baby. How did you get here? Where is your father?" Gloria questioned Elmi as she laid her hands on Elmi's shoulders, pulled her away and shook her both angrily and lovingly.

"I thought you were in the hospital. Why are you sleeping on the street?" Elmi asked Gloria.

"Where is your father, baby?" Gloria insisted, tears now rolling down her sore-covered face.

Elmi lowered her head and cried uncontrollably. Seeing her daughter suffer made Gloria feel ashamed and unworthy. Mother and daughter held each other tight, when suddenly a familiar and unwelcomed voice shot through the air.

"Elmi!" echoed throughout the makeshift encampment under the cavernous overpass as Tio Pedro approached his wife and daughter. Mom stood at a distance. Once Elmi discerned her tormentor's figure, she clung to Gloria as if her life depended on it, and maybe it did. "Let go of her Gloria!" Tio Pedro demanded as he moved in closer.

"It's not her fault, Pedro," Gloria stated.

"No, it is not. It is all your fault," Tio Pedro accused Gloria.

Gloria did not reply, instead she pried Elmi's arms from around her waist and held them tight as she stared into her eyes. "Elmi, *mamita*, you have to go with your father," Gloria managed to speak through her sorrowful sob.

"I don't want to! I want you home!" Elmi insisted.

"Elmi, I promise I will be home soon, and I will explain everything, but you have to go now," Gloria said softly as she caressed her daughter's face.

Elmi just stood before Gloria, crying, immovable.

“Go!” Gloria yelled as she pointed toward Tio Pedro.

Elmi finally took a step back, turned, and walked to her father and aunt. Tio Pedro roughly grabbed her arm and dragged her away.

“Watch it Pedro!” Gloria demanded.

“Shut up, Gloria. You have some nerve telling me to watch it,” Tio Pedro countered.

As Tio Pedro and Gloria walked away, Mom mouthed the words “it’s okay” to Gloria and Gloria nodded. Mom approached Gloria.

“Gloria, how are you?”

“I’ve been better,” Gloria replied.

“When are you coming home?” Mom asked, her words tinged with concern.

“Home? What home? I lost that a long time ago.”

“You want to lose Elmi too?”

“I think I already did?”

“No, no you haven’t. She needs you. She really does,” Mom begged.

“Look, Maria, I think you better leave. It’s getting dark and the crazies are starting to come out.”

Mom reached out and grabbed Gloria’s hands.

“I can help you,” Mom insisted.

“I don’t need your help. I’m fine. Just do me a favor and look out for my baby girl until I come home,” Gloria requested.

“I already am,” Mom assured Gloria.

“Okay, then. Now go. Really, you don’t want to be around here much longer.”

“Okay, okay, I will go,” Mom conceded. “But promise me you will try to go home. Promise me. For Elmi, please.”

“Okay, I promise, I promise.”

After that incident, I thought Tio Pedro’s heart would soften. I hoped he’d show some compassion towards Elmi, but nothing changed. If anything, he became isolated, shunning the family, which meant we saw less of Elmi. Gloria never returned home. In fact, we don’t know what became of her. Mom still tried to keep in touch with Elmi, but Tio Pedro made it difficult. Eventually we didn’t see Elmi at all as Tio Pedro decided to move to another state.

During my senior year in college I received a call from Mom. She told me Elmi showed up at the house. Mom and Pop did not recognize her. Mom said she had a baby boy named Jimmy. She said she named him after me. Mom gave her my number, but I never heard from her. As for Tio Pedro, Elmi said that she saw very little of him and that she didn’t hate him but felt sorry for him. Mom said she seemed happy and she laughed wholeheartedly at all of Pop’s stupid jokes. Mom also said it felt strange to see her laugh. Before she left, she said she would call and keep in touch. She still hasn’t. I hope she shows up at my door again someday. Hopefully when I see her again, she will continue to be happy. I have a lot of stupid jokes of my own I’d like to tell her.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Edgard Alexis Amaro Martinez grew up between Newark, New Jersey and Puerto Rico. His working-class upbringing was as simple and challenging as could be expected. From a very early age he developed an affinity for languages and literature as well as deep appreciation for different cultures. His multi-racial and multi-cultural neighborhood in Newark influenced heavily his eventual views on politics and society. At the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras, he settled for a degree in business administration which opened the doors to the corporate world. Unfortunately, cubicles and deadlines were never really in his plans. He returned to the University of Puerto Rico and earned a graduate degree in translation studies. However, shortly after he earned his degree, he felt the need to leave a mark in the world. He decided to move to Dallas and begin a career as an educator working at inner city schools. He has been teaching for fourteen years. In 2008 he decided it was time to retake his academic endeavors and began doctoral studies at The University of Texas at Dallas. After a long and at times tortuous journey, this portion of his life's tale may, hopefully, soon come to an end.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Edgard Alexis Amaro-Martínez

ACADEMIC INFORMATION and QUALIFICATIONS

Ph.D. in Humanities

University of Texas at Dallas 2020

Specialize in U.S. policy in Latin America and Latin American and Latinx literature.

M.A. in Translation

University of Puerto Rico 2006

B.A. in Business Administration

Major in Marketing

University of Puerto Rico 1995

CERTIFICATIONS

Languages Other Than English - Spanish

Bilingual Education Supplemental-Spanish (EC-4)

English as a Second Language Supplemental (EC-12)

Generalist (EC-4)

EMPLOYMENT

Bilingual Teacher, August 2019 – Present

Dallas Independent School District

Dallas, TX

- Plan and teach each subject area using a wide variety of teaching aids.
- Utilize motivational strategies to engage students in active learning.
- Compliment curriculum with technology-based instruction whenever possible.
- Differentiate instruction according to various student's needs.
- Develop lessons with district mission in mind, aligned to district and state instructional goals and objectives and subject area.
- Monitor and assessed student learning and retention.

- Keep accurate records of student information, compiled, maintained, and filed all reports, records, and other documents required by the school and district.
- Present subject matter according to guidelines established by Texas Education Agency.
- Develop a “one-on-one” core curriculum to enhance students’ fundamental learning processes.
- Prepare students for the next grade level advancement by utilizing critical thinking processes, with an emphasis on next level educational development.

Substitute Teacher, December 2018 – August 2019

Department of Defense Education Activity

San Juan, PR

- Substitute Teacher at Antilles Middle School

Bilingual Teacher, August 2018 – November 2018

Dallas Independent School District

Dallas, TX

- Planned and taught each subject area using a wide variety of teaching aids.
- Implemented motivational strategies to engage students in active learning.
- Complimented curriculum with technology-based instruction whenever possible. Differentiated instruction according to various student’s needs.
- Developed lessons with district mission in mind, aligned to district and state instructional goals and objectives and subject area.
- Monitored and assessed student learning.
- Kept accurate records of student information; compiled, maintained, and filed all reports, records, and other documents required by the school and district.
- Presented subject matter according to guidelines established by Texas Education Agency.

Substitute Teacher, April 2015 – August 2018

Dallas Independent School District

Dallas, TX

- Substituted for all grades (k-high school) and worked with students of diverse backgrounds.

Instructor of Rhetoric, August 2014 to May 2017

University of Texas at Dallas

Dallas, TX

- Lectured on academic research and writing.
- Maintained weekly conferencing office hours.
- Offered individualized instruction to struggling students.
- Assessed student progress.
- Maintained student grades and records according to university policy.

Bilingual Teacher, August 2006 to June 2014

Dallas Independent School District

Dallas, TX

- Planned and taught each subject area using a wide variety of teaching aids.
- Implemented motivational strategies to engage students in active learning.
- Utilized tech based instructional teaching methodologies to enhance student curriculum.
- Differentiated instruction according to various student's needs.
- Developed lessons with district mission in mind, aligned to district and state instructional goals and objectives and subject area.
- Monitored and assessed student learning.
- Kept accurate records of student information; compiled, maintained, and filed all reports, records, and other documents required by the school and district.

- Presented subject matter according to guidelines established by Texas Education Agency.

Human Resources Assistant Administrator, Dec. 1995 to May 2006

American Eagle/Executive Airlines

San Juan, PR

- Interviewed potential candidates.
- Conducted orientation for new hires.
- Assisted employees with benefits issues.
- Prepared monthly billing reports.
- Investigated company policy violations.
- Reported results of investigations verbally and in writing.
- Maintained constant and effective communication with employees, administrators, and headquarters-based personnel.
- Processed weekly payroll for over two hundred employees.

OTHER PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Language Instructor 1995

Berlitz Languages Inc.

San Juan, PR

- Lectured on the use of English and Spanish in business settings.

SKILLS

- Bilingual (English/Spanish)
- Proficient in MS Word, Excel, Power Point

ORGANIZATIONS

Sigma Tau Delta

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Areas of Specialization: U.S. Foreign Relations, U.S. Relations with Latin America, The United States since 1945, The American Experience in Vietnam & Iraq

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Areas of Specialization: Creative writing fiction, countercultural literature, 20th century American Literature, and Chicano Literature

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