Mis Mentiras, Poemas, y Memorias:

A Collection of
Stories, Poems, and Memories

by

Victor Benavides

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Dedication

To my father, Rubén Benavides, thank you for showing me how to be a storyteller and for setting an example of what it means to create, to imagine, and to bring stories to life. Some of these pages carry echoes of you, both in memory and imagination.

To my mother, Margarita Benavides, thank you for your support, your encouragement, and the steady presence that shaped my voice and my path. Your influence lives quietly within these stories as well.

This book carries pieces of you both in every page, and I love you both very much.

A mi padre, Rubén Benavides, gracias por enseñarme a ser narrador y por darme el ejemplo de lo que significa crear, imaginar y dar vida a las historias. Algunas de estas páginas llevan ecos de ti, tanto en la memoria como en la imaginación.

A mi madre, Margarita Benavides, gracias por tu apoyo, tu aliento y la presencia constante que formó mi voz y mi camino. Tu influencia también vive silenciosamente dentro de estas historias.

Este libro lleva partes de ustedes en cada página, y los amo mucho a los dos.

About the Author



Victor Luis Benavides was born in Harlingen, Texas, and raised in Olmito, Texas, where much of his sense of place and storytelling first took shape.

He earned his Bachelor of Business Administration in Management from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in 2017, followed by a Master of Business Administration in 2019, and a Master of English Studies in 2025.

His writing has appeared in *Boundless: The Anthology of the Rio Grande Valley International Poetry Festival* (2025, 2026) and *Tales from the Vault, Volume 3* by Story Sanctum Publishing.

He is a Professor of English in the Rio Grande Valley, where his work with students continues to shape his approach to language, storytelling, and expression. He has been dedicated to helping students discover the transformative power of language. He believes that words are more than a means of communication—they are tools for growth, empowerment, and the pursuit of one's dreams. In the classroom, he encourages students to find their own voices and embrace the art of expression.

This is his first book—a collection that reflects his interest in blending fiction, memory, and emotion across multiple forms.

Author's Note

This book is a collection of short stories, poems, and memories. Each piece exists in its own space, but all of them are tied together by the same thread: my life. The title of my book is in Spanish, even though most of the book is written in English, and it stands as a reminder of the importance of balance, identity, and cultural connection.

This is my first book, and in many ways, it feels like a beginning I've been carrying for nearly twenty years since I first started writing. I wanted to create something that reflects the way life feels to me: fragmented, layered, and constantly shifting between expectations and the truth. These literary works became a space where I could gather those pieces of myself—the stories I've lived, the ones I've reshaped, and the emotions that stayed with me long enough to be written down. More than anything, I wrote this book because I felt the need to place these experiences somewhere outside of myself, hoping they might resonate with someone else.

My short stories—the ones I like to call my *mentiras*—live somewhere between truth and fiction. Within these stories are real moments, real emotions, and real people, shaped by fiction and embellished. I think that's what gives them their weight. Even when they lean fully into fiction, they carry something true, something from me. Because of that, they feel like they are real in their own way, and maybe that's enough. These stories have always been entertaining to me and I hope they are to you too.

The poems are my thoughts, emotions, and impressions shaped into words. Like everything else in this book, they come from a need to express myself, to feel

something fully, and to make sense of the world in the only way I know how.

The life stories are different. Those are mine, as they happened, or at least as I remember them. They come from moments I've lived, things I've felt, and memories I've carried with me. I included them in this book because I believe in the quiet power of recognition—the moment when you read something and find connection. If even one person finds comfort in these memories, or maybe even a laugh, then these pages have done their job.

More than anything, I want this book to move you. To let you see pieces of yourself or perhaps understand someone else a little more. Not perfect reflections, but honest ones.

I hope you find something that stays with you here.

Above all, I hope you enjoy *mis mentiras*, and everything else in between.

Thank you.

— Victor Benavides, June 2026

Acknowledgments of Previously Published Work

Some pieces in this collection were previously published in other works.

"Swells" was published by Flowersong Press in *Boundless 2026: The Anthology of the Rio Grande Valley International Poetry Festival*, and "El Valor De Dos Personas" appeared in *Boundless 2025: The Anthology of the Rio Grande Valley International Poetry Festival.*

The short story "Carrier the Fisherman" was published by *Story Sanctum Publishing* in 2025 and included in *Tales from the Vault, Volume 3* that same year.

I am deeply grateful to these publications for first giving these pieces a home, and for allowing me to include them in this collection.

A special thank you to Krin Van Tatenhove and Eduardo Vidaurre for their support and for helping bring these works into the world.

Mis Mentiras

My Stories

A Prisoner of Time

There is a blinding flash of light. John finds himself lying on the ground in a grassy field, face up towards the storm clouds overhead as lightning flashes across the sky. He sits up and begins to look around. He sees nothing but woodland trees and green grass all around him. There is a pressure on his left forearm and he feels tremendous pain coming from his wrist.

He pulls the sleeve up on his brown leather bomber jacket to find that a device has been attached to his arm. A dirty hardened mix of copper and steel that is hot to the touch with a screen interface displaying a language that he has never seen before. An electrical smell of fried circuits fills the air. He tries to slip it off his wrist, but after many attempts, he realizes that he cannot remove it. As he looks towards the edges of the device he sees the truth— it has been surgically attached to his forearm, bolted into the bones.

John begins to panic, but then stops and takes a moment to breathe. He tries to remember his name, where he is and what he is doing here.

As his hearing becomes clearer, he hears sirens coming from all around him. At that moment, he begins to see people running from the tree line towards him. People holding their children in arms, some carrying suitcases and luggage.

A man grabs John by the shoulders and pulls him to his feet, yelling in French, “Les Nazis arrivent! Les Nazis arrivent!”

John understands the man and begins to run with him, not knowing what is happening.

"The Nazis? What does he mean by this? What is going on? How do I know French?" John thinks to himself.

Gunshots crack past them, snapping through the air. As he continues to run, he sees a young girl crying, leaning over her dead mother. John grabs her and carries her in his arms as they continue to run. John and the people, running for their lives, make it past a clearing and at that moment, several bright lights flash towards them. Vehicles pull up all around them with Nazi soldiers. They are surrounded and begin to gather in a cluster. John puts the girl down and hides her by grabbing her and placing her behind him.

A Nazi soldier looks directly at John.

"Sie da! Was trägst du?"

John responds with, "Ein Nazi-Mörder."

John thinks to himself, "Ok, so I speak German too. How do I know German?"

The soldier, offended by John's retort, smirks and makes his way towards him. The soldier pulls his luger from the holster and presses it against John's temple. John immediately disarms him, turns his back towards him and places him in a chokehold, with his own luger to his head.

"Put your guns down! Legt eure Waffen nieder!" John yells at the other Nazi soldiers.

For a moment there is silence, then all the soldiers begin to laugh.

John then points the gun towards a Nazi soldier standing across from him and shoots him in the leg.

The laughter stops abruptly.

John immediately brings the luger back to the temple of the soldier he has locked in a chokehold. He starts to feel an intense blinding pain surge through his head. He looks down, disoriented, and lets out an agonizing yell.

The surrounding soldiers and people do not know what is happening. John throws the soldier to the side as he falls to his knees. He looks up and finds a soldier with a gun in hand, pulling the hammer back and pointing it at his head.

The device on John's wrist begins to emit a whirling noise, the pain becoming unbearable, and just as the soldier is about to pull the trigger, John is blinded by a powerful white light. A gunshot rings out as John loses consciousness and the flash of light takes him.

———

John wakes up. He is laid out on the floor in a bright room made of glass emitting a white light from all the walls, floor, and roof. He sees a man sitting on a chair with a file in hand who begins to speak.

"Welcome back, John,"

"John? Is that my name? Who are you?" John begins to realize that once again he has no idea where he is.

"The calibration we ran before the jump misfired," says the mysterious man. "It sent you to the wrong point in time and you swapped places with another traveler who was meant to go to Nazi occupied France during World War II. That's on me. That wasn't your assignment, John. I'm sorry."

John looks at his arm to see the device is in charging mode, emitting a battery symbol =, on the screen's

interface. The man continues speaking. “There are a few things that you and I need to talk about. Don’t worry, we’re making the corrections needed to reduce the side effects of your trips. Once it’s fixed, your memory should start coming back to you.”

The man pulls an injection needle off the table. John focuses on the man and every one of his features. His overgrown mustache, his bushy eyebrows, trying to remember if he has ever seen him before.

“First off,” says the man, “there are a few things we need to talk about. It has been over a year now since you started your jumps and of course they wanted me to talk to you about your attempts at suicide.”

“Suicide? I’ve tried killing myself?”

“For the majority of the year, yes you have.”

The man then points at a wall and a screen appears showing various clips of John attempting suicide, and every one of them shows that he succeeded.

The screen shuts off and through the reflection of the glass an ominous silhouette can be seen through the doorway. John then brings his attention back to the man in the room.

“That is obviously AI generated or deep faked,” says John. “I died hundreds of times, yet I’m still here? Make it make sense.”

“Every attempt you made on your own life, you were successful, but with the power of time travel, they can catch you and stop you from making the attempt before it happens.”

The man in the chair shifts his gaze to the doorway, a quiet signal. The ominous figure standing there understands—and walks away without a word.

"Time travel?" says John.

"Yes, you have died hundreds of times, and they have stopped you every single time. They just travel back to a few minutes before you make the attempt and pull you from the timeline before you do it."

"Who's they?"

"Those that built this prison. I know you've been trying to escape for some time now and believe me I too wanna leave this place, but unfortunately we're stuck here. And trying to kill yourself doesn't work, at least not in here. Believe me, I've tried."

John looks incredibly puzzled and starts his line of questioning. "Where am I and who are you?"

"We've been through this so many times before, but here we go again. My name is Rick, and your name is John. I have been your handler for over a year now. We have met many times and we have had this conversation many times before and you are in a place where time and space have been folded. I guess you can say that you're in the place between space and time where time and space do not matter."

John looks at the needle Rick has in his hand.

"I know you better than you know yourself right now," Rick continues. Your full name is John Davis and you have several degrees, including a PhD. in history. You know several different languages. You served. You were married once and your wife died. Does any of this ring a bell?"

At that moment, John sees an image of his wife in his head as he closes his eyes from the pain.

“Jennifer, her name was Jennifer,” says John.

“Yes, that was her name. That’s the first thing you always remember when you come back.”

John closes his eyes again and sees an image of Jennifer in a wedding dress, then an image of her in a hospital bed, then a casket.

“She died," John says quietly.

More memories start coming back. He sees Rick in some of them, and he even begins to see his many attempts at suicide as he tried to leave the time prison.

Rick then speaks, “Y te acuerdas de mi?”

John looks up at Rick, nods, and pulls up his sleeve.

“It’s all coming back to you now, isn’t it, amigo? I always found it weird that your memory gets all messed up when you jump but you can still understand different languages.”

Rick gently injects John in the arm near his wrist.

“Before I forget, here are your things.” Rick hands John a satchel.

John looks through the satchel and finds various objects. A 1980’s Walkman, a Luger pistol from WWII, a journal, cash from different decades, credit cards, a flashlight, a digital camera, and other items from different periods in time.

“These are the things you take with you on your travels,” says Rick.

John turns on the digital camera and pictures appear on the small screen. Photos of major historical moments in time appear. One image shows a crowd of people packed

tightly against the concrete barrier, hammers raised, hands reaching through the cracks as gray slabs crumble under pressure. Faces are lit with disbelief and celebration as people climb over what once divided them. The next image is a skyline fractured by smoke and fire, thick black clouds pouring into the sky as onlookers stand frozen below, some running, others staring upward in silence and shock. Another image of an endless river of people filling the National Mall, stretching far into the distance, a dense sea of humanity standing shoulder to shoulder in unified stillness and purpose. Finally, a photo of the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas, Texas: a stark, sunlit building facade, ordinary and quiet, framed against a street frozen in time, the kind of place that looks unchanged—except for what history has tied to it. But one image stands out above the rest.

It's a picture of Gabriella's Cafe, a place John and his wife would frequent, and inside the cafe is Jennifer sitting at the cafe bar. He starts to remember how she would dress and how she always wore her favorite brown corduroy jacket. John cannot understand the reason why he would take the photo. His memory is still shaken and fuzzy.

"Once you're charged up, they're going to send you back out," says Rick.

"Send me back out? Why?"

"Who knows why they do what they do. Just like you, I'm a prisoner here. You're either a traveler or a keeper, and I'm the keeper. My job is to just watch over you, the traveler."

In an instant, the entire room turns from white to blue and a pinging sound can be heard coming from the device on John's wrist.

"You're fully charged and you're about to jump! Quickly gather your things!"

John grabs his things, places them in the satchel, and slings the satchel over his arm. He rolls his sleeve back down. The device begins to make a whirling sound.

Rick is now yelling to be heard over the sound of the device.

"Just remember, wherever you end up, they sent you there for a reason. Something changed and you need to change it back or fix it. Remember, they will keep sending you to the same place in time until you fix it."

"Fix what?!" yells John as the sound gets louder.

Numbers and letters begin to emit from the device and in a brilliant flash of light, John is transported to another time.

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John wakes up in a field in the middle of a park. He gets up slowly and walks towards the park entrance. Something about the park feels familiar but he can't place why. Just then, he spots Gabriella's Cafe across the street. He looks over and sees Jennifer waiting for someone to show up.

Another flood of memories comes back to him.

He remembers now the years they spent together, how the doctors always told him that if they had caught it on time, they could have saved her. He also remembers that this is their second date together. But he also remembers that he was late and she scolded him for it. Without

hesitation he rushes over to the other side of the street and makes his way into the cafe.

Jennifer spots him as he rushes in. John pauses and looks at her in disbelief that she's actually here. That she is alive. He makes his way up to her, grabs her, and passionately kisses her in front of all the patrons.

John then comes to the realization that he may have made a terrible mistake and changed the future. He just looks upon her and wonders to himself whether or not he should tell her. Tell her he's from the future. Tell her everything.

However, he realizes that him even being there in that very moment with her could cause some problems in the future.

Before making any matters worse, he excuses himself to the restroom and leaves through the back of the cafe.

John sneaks out through the back and walks to the front of the building to watch his younger self rush into the cafe. He can hear Jennifer tell the younger version of John, "You clean up well."

John just watches through the window and begins to tear up. He touches the glass and starts to think out loud. "That's why the photo was in my camera. It was a reminder that even now, at this place in time, it's already too late. But what if I can find you at an earlier period in time? Maybe then I can…"

The device on John's arm begins to whirl, interrupting his thought. He watches Jennifer from the window with the younger version of himself.

"There must be a way to save you."

John slowly walks away from the window and towards the alleyway. He fixes his jacket, collar, and satchel, now determined with purpose.

Although a prisoner of time itself, he knows now what he must do.

He must try to find a way to save her.

A brilliant flash of white light can be seen in the alleyway as John makes his jump.

Carrier the Fisherman

I remember running through the forest of endless trees, skylight breaking through the branches and falling leaves. My rifle, an M1 Garand at my side, whipping back and forth with every jump and step I took through the uneven terrain. I run and run ‘til suddenly there's a clearing. Clouds charged overhead as a storm was brewing. I was out in the open knowing full well the enemy was near and around me. I run with no real destination, just this idea that anywhere I go is better than where I was coming from. I see a young boy being trampled by the others as they all try to escape the horror that we are trying to leave behind. I pick him up and carry him in my arms and I continue running. This frail boy in my arms, with his teddy bear clutched in his small fist, cold and on the brink of being lifeless. He stares at me with his bright blue eyes, reflecting in them the storm above us. We make our run to the tree line ahead and as we got closer and closer we realize that the enemy is already there, waiting for us to arrive. They surround us at all sides. I put the boy behind me and use myself as his own personal shield. It was at this moment I hear a shot. I look down at the quarter sized hole in my chest and fall to my death, the wind and feeling of life knocked out of me, and the last thing I see is a teddy bear falling from the endless trees and falling leaves.

I feel the rain at my back and I wake up in a frantic panic alone. I turn to my side and take a deep gasping breath. My chest feels tight and I’m in pain. I see the quarter-sized hole left in my chest. Smoke is still rising from the wound and no blood is spilling out of me. I do my best to cover it. I'm in

disbelief of what is happening to me. Am I dead? Is this hell? I see the bodies that lay all around me. Including the boy I carried in my arms. I crawl over to him, his body still cold like before, reuniting him with his teddy bear and I begin to feel a mix of anger, desperation and sorrow.

After a while of laying with the dead, watching the rain fall from the dark clouded skies, I ask myself, "Can I still stand?" I use the fence post next to me. I cling to every edge to force myself up. Splinters and barbed wire cut at my skin. I inhale the smell of death, copper and gunpowder as I force myself to stand. I look around and I notice that I am standing alone. I walk and I keep walking, reaching out into the dark. Just like before, I walk with no destination in mind. Hours pass and I see lights and I find a group of vehicles pull up to my location. I can't see who they are but I assume the worst, and it was at this point, exhausted, that I fell to my knees, accepting what I thought was my fate. I think of nothing and just close my eyes. Then I feel them grab me from my shoulders and lift me from where I am kneeling. They are my soldiers, brothers at arms. They carry me on their truck and I blackout from exhaustion.

I feel soldiers holding me down while we traverse the uneven terrain, and there is someone digging into my chest. I awake slowly from my blackout and as I open my eyes I see the doctor reaching into the wound in my chest with the sharpest pair of pliers I've ever seen. Gunfire is everywhere. I look to my left and see a derelict tank with soldiers' bodies hanging off of it. To my right, I see a soldier grabbing the side of the vehicle while firing off his rifle as every shell falls and lays near my head. I feel a puddle of blood on the tarp near

where my hand laid, the blood of my fallen brothers. That's the last thought I have as I pass out from the pain....

I awake gradually and find myself wrapped and bandaged, in disbelief that I am still here, still alive. I'm still lying in the blood-soaked tarp, soaked in the blood of all my brothers. The doctor comes over and in a callous, matter-of-fact voice, tells me, "We couldn't remove it. If we pull it... you'll bleed out. You don't have very long, son. Make your peace with God because you don't have many days left ahead." I think to myself, "Just a few days left?" At this point, I feel like I should already be dead, and this is just some nightmare.

———

A few months have passed and I'm now back in the states. I find myself in New Orleans, drinking at a bar wondering what I should do with my last days here on earth. I'm overwhelmed by the thought of death. My chest still hurts and I'm angry. Angry that I won't get to live my life. Angry that everyone around me in this bar is just squandering their life, spending it here drinking amongst me, the dead man. I drink and drink until I go numb in the chest. I get up and walk towards the back exit to lean against the brick wall to take a piss. Just then, I hear it. Yelling. Pounding. Breathing. Coming from the basement stairs of the bar I've frequented since I got here. I walk my way down the dark stairs and find a fighter's ring. Everyone is watching and gambling while the men circle each other in the ring. An overwhelming smell of sweat, cigarettes, blood and alcohol envelopes the room. The man in the ring takes out the other in a finishing blow and falls hard. So hard in fact that his breath and the dust from the ring floor shoot out at me. Dust rises from the ring mat as the spotlight makes

it easier to see the particles in the air. The ringleader proclaims the winner and starts to yell, "The next fighter who tries to take on the winning challenger will now receive $50 dollars for the fight, and $300 for the win!" Now, it could've been the liquid courage or maybe my hopeless mindset, but I knew what's coming for me. No matter what, I'm a dead man. I feel I have nothing to lose and I want to feel my anger take on a physical manifestation of my frustrations. I am ready to fight.

The noise around me from the crowd is overwhelming and yet, when I speak, everyone can hear me when I say in a calm and quiet voice, "I'll fight." The surrounding individuals hush and stare at me. The spotlight moves towards my direction and shines over me and the crowd sees just a man, drunk, in wrinkled uniform… and the crowd starts to roar with cheers. They push me up the stage stairs, grabbing my shoulders cheering me on. I climb over the side into the ring and I'm asked to take off my shirt and shoes. I remove my cuffs, take off my shoes and remove my shirt, exposing my bare bandage wrapped chest covered in old blood from the stitches. Everyone goes silent. The ringleader looks me up and down and asks if I really want to do this. I nodded my head in my drunken stupor and he knows better than to ask me this question again. They begin to prep me for the fight, wrapping my calloused hands and knuckles. Some gamblers notice and realize this is not my first fight and begin to change their bets. My opponent is this monstrous being, hairy from knuckles to shoulders and all around the back. He doesn't see me as a pathetic wretch like the others who were betting against me in the audience. Instead he sees me as an obstacle. As someone who is in the way of his survival. I know this look because I've

seen it before and he knows I've seen it too. It was then that I knew, I had the respect of this fighter.

The bell rings. I step to the left then forward! I throw 2 punches: One to the side of his temple, the other towards his chin and in a quick instant, everyone sees him fall. He slams on the mat dizzy and unable to stand. The fighter begins to laugh on the floor as he tries to make his way back up. He then falls over and passes out. The crowd gets quiet from sheer disbelief. All I can hear at this point is the sound of me putting my shirt and shoes back on. I leave the ring and grab my winnings from the ringleader's hands and make my way towards the basement exit.

———

It's been ten years since that fight. It’s hard to imagine a time when I felt I only had days left to live. My chest no longer hurts. I found the love of my life. Inez is stubborn like me and although we couldn't understand a word out of each other, we knew we were made for each other. I started working as a fisherman and she would work cleaning houses. She was a very independent person. She wanted to work and regardless of what I said she would still go to work. I proposed and we married. At first she got cold feet and hid in the chapel restroom, but as always, I went after her. I started yelling through the door, "Inez I love you please come out of there! You know I care about you! We both want this." Of course Inez would respond, “"No quiero casarme contigo si ya no puedo trabajar. Eres un tipo guero que solo quiere atraparme en una vida en la que no tenga independencia". I'll be honest, I didn't understand a word she was saying and she couldn't understand me either, but there I was whispering through the

door. "Look, I believe we both want this. We're crazy about each other. I promise I'll learn Spanish and we will have long and meaningful conversations for the rest of our lives. Will you come out of there Inez? Please?" Inez unlocks the door. Cracks it open. She says, "Voy a seguir trabajando".

I answer, "Yes, trabajarrr" I have no idea what I just agreed to, but we were off to be married.

———

Two years have passed since our marriage. We have a family now. One little girl is named Estella and we have another on the way. We're going to name her Margie. Times are getting tougher and I find myself back at my late night basement activities to make ends meet. My knuckles are calloused from hard work and the many men that have faced me in the ring. Inez often finds blood in the money I leave on the living room counter and we have fights about it from time to time. My arguments now are a little more Spanish fluid. Inez yells, "No puedes apoyarnos así" I learned that if I just say "Si, yo entiendo, te amo" over and over again she will calm down. We know we need to move from this place and find a balance in both our lives and for the lives of our daughters. It was then that we decided to move.

We now live in Point Isabel. My daughter was just born. We have a house now. Although it's not much, Inez and I have made it our home.

I decide to go out on the small wooden boat behind the fence near old William's place to catch our dinner for the day. Inez tells me, “No te tardes” and I respond “Sí, lo entiendo. Te amo Inez, y volveré pronto.” I take the boat out in the water by myself listening to the seagulls fly overhead. The sun is

shining and the clouds are pure white. The sun feels warm on my skin and I take a deep breath of that ocean air. It's been many years since my brush with death and for the first time in a long time I feel complete and driven with purpose. I'm on this little boat fishing, excited to bring what I catch home to my family. I am excited to cook for my wife and daughters. Just then I feel a sharp pain in my chest. The wind and feeling of life being knocked out of me. I feel the scar on my chest. I fall over and the last thing I see is a small wooden boat floating in the waves above the sea.

In Another Life

"In another life?" she said quietly as they both hugged goodbye.

"In another life. Always," he responded with certainty.

He let go of their embrace. However, she lingered a bit longer, and just as he was going to hold her once again, she broke her arms from around him and turned away quickly to dismiss the void left between them.

That's how the dream always ended.

———

He met her at the start of his freshman year in college. They both entered the same elevator. She was dressed all in black, and there he was, dressed in a long sleeve shirt with his sleeves rolled up his arms. The first thing he noticed were her eyes. He was absolutely stunned by the way she looked at him with those beautiful light brown eyes and lashes that moved in the way a butterfly stretches to warm its wings in the sunlight. With just a look, she could level him with her eyes and bring him to his metaphorical knees, and there was a small part in her that instantly recognized this in him all too well.

"Do you know where room 212 is here in Set B?" was the first thing she asked him.

She had her hair up in a certain way that exposed her neckline and hoop earrings. The kind of style that showed her love of rockabilly culture and pin-up models from the 50's. Her dark red lips were the color of wine.

He had no idea where he was at that moment for two reasons. The first being that he was new to the campus, and the second was that he was lost in her.

Without hesitation, he said, “Yes, I know where that is.”

And for the next ten minutes, they aimlessly walked together.

Their first date was a complete disaster. He had taken her to an area of the bay where hermit crabs and other marine life were in abundance. He walked with her, climbing the wild and untamed landscape of jagged rocks while they held hands, just in case she would slip and fall. But that was just an excuse. He just wanted a reason to hold her hand.

Throughout all the excitement, he ended up slipping on one of those wet jagged rocks, slicing his foot with a sharp shard from a broken shell. They cut the date short and made their way back to her house.

She lived with her parents on Lakeway bend. A beautiful two story home with several cars in the driveway. They walked in and made their way towards the kitchen.

“Nurse!” she yelled aloud jokingly.

Her mother entered the living room and followed the trail of blood he left behind leading into the kitchen. As her mother tended to his wound, she opened a bottle of dark wine. It was the only kind of wine she liked, because she always felt that the more bitter the wine was, the stronger it hit. Once he was bandaged, her mother retired for the night and they made their way out to the back patio and sat underneath the moonlight.

“Have you ever heard the story of the sun and the moon?” she asked him.

“No, tell me.”

“It’s a story about how the sun loved the moon so much that he died every night just to let her breathe.”

“In that story does it make any mention of how the sun cut his foot and made an ass of himself?” he said to lessen his embarrassment for falling earlier that day.

She ignored his comment and continued the story.

“The sun would shine upon the Earth bringing so much joy and happiness with his warmth, but deep inside he was lonely, and felt destined to be alone forever. He thought maybe it was because he was too bright, so as the sun grew tired, the moon appeared. Her glow was beyond compare; not even the stars in the sky could rival that glow. Even the stars would watch with wishfulness hoping that one day they could get close to the moon. But she would let no one touch her, not the stars in the sky or even her sun. Untouchable, she would envelop herself in a blanket of darkness throughout the night.”

He listened as she continued.

“Now even though the sun could never reach her, he would still peek out around the Earth to see her, and he would always catch this rare side of her being exposed to his light. He thought to himself, ‘I need to stay bright to keep her glowing and to keep her warm.’ It was then that he realized that he had fallen in love with the moon. He wished to see more of her than those short moments during dusk and dawn. But once again, the moon was untouchable, and she told the sun that they could never be together, not because the moon didn’t love the sun but because she believed in fate. He illuminated the day and she would glow at night and they could never be together. But even after all that, the sun never gave up, and till this day he still uses his light on her. He even stays up a lot longer in the summer in the hopes that one day she will change her mind. Maybe in another life. Right?”

“In another life…” he said quietly while looking at her.

She placed her half-finished glass of wine on the counter and walked her way towards him and laid with him on the pool chaise lounge. Their heads rested together. His body always ran hot and she would always run cold, and as he laid with her, holding her in his arms, he wondered if they were just like the sun and moon and if they would ever be together.

After a few more sips of wine she fell asleep in his arms. He stood up and, even with his recent wound, carried her in his arms to her room. He laid her in bed, and when he was about to step away and leave for the night, she reached out to him, grabbing his hand, and said, “I feel safe when you're with me. Please stay.”

He leaned forward, looked upon her face and with his fingers moved the part in her hair away from her face. She stared back at him, raised her head up and kissed him on the lips.

He placed the blanket over her and sat on the floor beside her bed, holding her hand as she fell asleep.

They would meet up every week, and every night they were together it would always be a bottle of wine with Patsy Cline. Dancing with their hands locked together. There were times when they would go to the beach at night and watch the waves roll in. Moonlight upon them. Watching the small crabs burrow out of the sand. They would sit together looking out at the ocean.

She would point up into the sky. “The moon! Just like the moon in the story.”

A few more weeks went on like this, and then one day, they just stopped seeing each other. He always felt like she was

two different people. At times she could be cold; on other days she would be warm and inviting.

He tried reaching out, but she wouldn't answer. He went so far as to write a letter that was left unanswered.

Months passed and he heard through a family friend that she was in the hospital. He tried to ask how she was doing, but like always, she wouldn't answer. He asked her mother if she was okay and that if there was anything he could do.

Her mother always liked him.

"You know you'll go on to do so many great things," she once told him, her voice warm in a way that felt like permission and a warning at the same time. "You'll find the love of your life."

Then, after a pause, she added, "But now… it's time to let go."

He nodded like he understood what she meant, though he didn't move like someone who did.

He kept asking anyway. Not often, not loudly—just enough that it never fully became silent. How was she doing? Was she eating and sleeping enough? Was she okay?

And her mother, who had learned the shape of his persistence, answered him each time. Not with encouragement, but not with distance either. Just updates. Small, careful truths delivered as if they weighed something fragile. She never told him to stop asking, and so he never did.

A few weeks after her recovery, she decided to see him. He hadn't planned what he would say if he ever saw her again. So when she opened the door, he just stood there for a second, like the months between them hadn't happened—like he had just been there yesterday.

“You came,” she said in a voice that was neither warm nor cold, just measured.

“You asked me to.”

She stepped aside and let him in.

The house was exactly the same. Same smell. Same quiet. Same glasses of wine on the counter. It felt wrong that nothing had changed, when in fact everything between them had. They went to the kitchen.

“I got your letter,” she said, before he could say anything else.

He nodded.

“I didn’t know if you—”

“I read it.” she said.

There was a heavy pause.

“I didn’t think I’d ever be back here,” he said. “With you.”

She looked at him—really looked at him—and something in her expression tightened.

“Don’t,” she said.

He kept a neutral expression on his face.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t act like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you were there.”

That hit harder than he expected.

“I was there,” he said, the words coming quicker. “I kept asking about you. I called. I—”

“If you really cared about me,” she cut in, her voice sharper, “you would’ve been there.”

“I didn’t know where you were—.”

"You should've figured it out," she said, interrupting him.

He stared at her, trying to understand what she wanted him to say. What version of this would make sense to her?

"I tried," he said, quieter now. "You disappeared."

"I didn't disappear," she snapped. "I was dealing with something."

"And I was kept in the dark about it!"

"That's not the point."

"Then what is?"

She stepped closer to him, close enough that he could see the tension in her jaw, the veins in her neck jutting out, the way her hands curled slightly beside her, like she didn't know what to do with them.

"The point is," she said, "you weren't there when I needed you," jabbing her finger into his chest.

"I didn't even know you needed me," he said, and this time there was something in his voice closer to frustration. "You abandoned me! You abandoned us! You left me in the dark. I reached out to you and you ignored me!"

"Exactly."

The word landed between them, final in a way that didn't make any sense.

"When you love someone, and I mean *really* love someone, you do everything to reach them. You didn't fight for me, you didn't fight for us." Her tone was somber, close to a sob.

In that moment, her mother stuck her head through the kitchen doorway, listening in on their conversation. He gave a small shake of his head, a silent plea for her not to say

that he had asked about her all those times. The mother lingered for a beat, then retreated, respecting his wishes.

He let out a breath, shaking his head slightly.

"That doesn't—" he stopped himself, running his hand through his hair. "You don't get to do that. You don't get to shut me out and then blame me for not breaking down the door."

She didn't respond right away. For a second, he thought he had finally gotten through. Then she looked away.

"You always make it about you, you should've tried harder." These words left her mouth.

That did it. Something in him shifted—not anger, not exactly—but something sharper than what he had been holding back this whole time.

"I didn't know how," he said. "You don't tell me anything. You just—" he gestured vaguely, searching for the word "—left. You put your guard up, and then you read a letter months after the fact and you asked me to stop by like nothing happened and you just…."

She looked at him again, and for a second he saw it. Not anger. Not distance. Something softer. Something unsure.

"You were supposed to stay. You were supposed to fight for me" she said quietly.

"I did," he replied. "You're the one who left."

Silence. It stretched longer this time. Neither of them moving, neither of them willing to close the distance again.

Then, as if something in her gave out, she shook her head slightly.

"This is why," she murmured.

"Why what?"

"Why I can't do this."

“Can’t do what?” he asked, even though he already felt the answer coming.

“This,” she said, gesturing between them. “Us.”

He swallowed, his chest tightening in a way he hadn’t let himself feel until then.

“Then why did you call me?” he asked.

She hesitated. And that hesitation was the part that stayed with him.

“I don’t know,” she said finally.

It was the most honest thing she had said. And somehow, it was worse than everything else. Because for a moment, standing there in front of her, he could see it clearly: she didn’t know what she wanted.

That's when her mother entered the kitchen from the other room.

“What is it with you?!” she yelled at her daughter. “For all those months you were in and out of the hospital, he was here. He asked about you constantly. All he ever did was check on you every single day. All he has for you is love, but you’re too stubborn—or too guarded—to see it. Not everything has to be a battle.”

Tears began to run down her face. She didn’t know that he had reached out, that he had always been there, that he had always checked on her, her mother honoring his wishes not to tell her daughter.

She ran up to him and started hitting his chest and face with her fists. Angry at the thought that he went after her, angry at the thought that he loved her even after the way he was treated. What started as anger turned into sadness as her hits turned into an embrace.

They fell slowly to the floor in their embrace.

“I don’t know what you want,” he said with tears falling down his face as he held her.

He grabs her face in his hands, asking her to look at him, and for that brief moment he saw her vulnerability, her willingness to give herself to him. She leaned her forehead against his, close enough that he could feel her breath hesitate between them. Her lips parted slightly, as if she wanted to kiss him, but then tension settled in. Her defenses went back up and she was calloused once again.

She pushed off him, got up off the floor, and walked out of the kitchen leaving him behind. He sat there and stared blankly at the floor before looking up at her mother, tears streaming down her face as she stood in the doorway.

He got up off the floor and made his way to the patio knowing she would be there.

She turned on the music and reached her hand out toward him, tears still streaming down her face, asking in the way she always did for a dance.

They spent the rest of that night together, dancing to Brenda Lee’s *Someday You’ll Want Me to Want You*.

As they danced they conversed,

“I’m sorry, I’m no good for you.” she said as she looked up to him with those brown eyes.

He should’ve left earlier. There was a moment, somewhere between the music and the silence, where he could’ve just walked away, but he felt compelled to stay.

The music ended and the house felt quieter than before, like it was waiting for one of them to say something that would make sense of all of it. But even after the music ended, they just kept dancing.

“I should go,” he said finally.

She nodded.

But she didn't move; she just stood there, grabbing onto his forearms, then his wrists, then his hands. He stepped closer, not all the way, just enough to feel it again—that pull he never quite learned how to ignore.

He gazed upon her with his hopeless heart, and somehow she knew what he was thinking.

"I know," she said.

Her voice was softer now. Not distant. Not sharp. Just tired.

That almost made it worse.

He searched her face for something—anything—that would tell him this wasn't the end. She looked at him, and for a second it felt like she might answer honestly. Instead, she shook her head.

"You're going to be okay," she said.

"That's not what I asked."

"I know."

There it was again—that brief flicker in her expression. Like she was right on the edge of saying something real.

But she didn't. She stepped forward instead and hugged him. It caught him off guard just enough that he hesitated—just for a second—before his arms wrapped around her.

He told himself not to read into it, but he always read into it.

"I'm sorry," she murmured against him.

"For what?" he asked.

She didn't answer.

Of course she didn't.

He tightened his hold slightly, not enough to trap her—just enough to feel like he hadn't already lost her.

He felt it then. That hesitation. The way she stayed just a second longer than she needed to. It was small, but it was enough. Enough to make him think—once again—that maybe this wasn't over. That maybe this time she wouldn't pull away. That maybe all of this meant something more than what she kept reducing it to.

He started to pull back, just slightly, just enough to look at her—and that's when she let go. She stepped back, putting space between them before he could close it again. Something in his chest dropped, sharp and immediate.

"In another life?" she said quietly.

There it was again. That line. That safe place she always went to when things got too real.

He didn't want to respond, but he was suddenly too tired to argue.

"In another life…"

———

It had been ten years since they had last seen each other. At the bar they used to frequent, their song began to play. She froze and looked across the room. There he was, as if he had never left. He had moved on, and she had married, then divorced. Yet despite the years that had passed and the lives they had built apart, fate had brought them together again that night.

At that very moment, she began to realize what she had given up, what she had lost, and, like a tremendous flood, everything came rushing back at once—so suddenly, so

completely—that the man beside her, her date for the night, was forgotten, as she moved past him.

He stood still and she started sprinting toward him, then faster still, until she was running steadfast toward him as the music swelled and played. She threw herself into his arms, and for a moment, he held her—just as he always had. Just like in his recurring dreams, just like the sun longing for his moon.

When she pulled away and held his hands, she noticed it. A wedding ring on his finger.

She looked up at him with a mixed expression of joy and sadness. Tears running down her face.

"I'm so happy for you." she said smiling.

She held onto him just a little longer and whispered in his ear, just as she did before...

"In another life..."

He closed his eyes. There was a time when those words would've meant everything. When he would've held her tighter, believed her, waiting.

"In another life," he said.

Slowly, gently, he took her arms and lowered them from around him. They both looked into each other's eyes with an understanding of what that moment meant for both of them. Then he then turned away, just like she did to him so many times before. A quiet, certain ending.

A final goodbye, from the sun to the moon.

La Vibora

(*The following narrative is inspired by real events but includes fictionalized names, details, and situations to enhance the story. This is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.*)

Does anyone remember Rio Morales? Back in San Antonio, Texas there was a time when his name meant something. When Saturday nights meant families gathered around flickering television sets, waiting for "The Rio Morales Variety Show" to begin. The stage lights, the music, the laughter. It was more than a show, it was a part of our *cultura*.

It was a doorway for many Tejano artists. It was the beginning of everything.

"The Rio Morales Variety Show" would showcase established and up-and-coming Tejano artists and everyone in South Texas, would tune in to watch his show.

Rio had a gift for spotting talent. But more than that, he had a gift for believing in people.

That's how he met Arlene Quintero.

He would work closely with artists and their managers, specifically Arlene Quintero, his best friend. Before she was a manager—before the arguments, before the bitterness—Arlene had been a musician. In the 1970s, she led a band called "Arlene Quintero y Los Disfraces," a group that carried the rhythm of South Texas in every note. But time and ego wore the band down, and by the late 1980s, Arlene walked away from the music industry entirely.

For years, she stayed away. Until her youngest daughter began to sing. Melli Quintero started showing the same passion for music. Melli Quintero was only thirteen the first time she stepped onto Rio's stage. She was small, nervous, her hands trembling at her sides as the lights hit her face. Somewhere in the crowd, Arlene stood with her arms crossed, watching.

"Go ahead," Rio whispered from behind the curtain. "They're already yours."

She sang, and just like that, everything changed.

Arlene and Rio formed a partnership and worked together to help start Melli's career. Success came quickly. Too quickly, some would say. Behind the scenes, Arlene drove her daughter relentlessly.

"Again," she would say, her voice cutting through the room.

Melli's voice cracked on a high note. She swallowed, eyes watering.

"Again!"

Hours passed. Her throat burned. Her body begged for rest.

"I can't—" she started.

Arlene slammed her hand against the piano. "You can!" she said sternly.

From the outside, it looked like discipline. Dedication. The making of a star.

But Rio saw something else.

———

"Arlene was a very difficult person to work with," said Rio in his 2021 interview for Tejano Magazine. "She was a tyrant, a

brutal manager. It didn't matter if it was her own daughter, she would berate her until she got what she wanted. Countless hours of practice to the point where her throat would ache and she would lose her voice, and then she would get mad about that too. She pushed her until there was nothing left, and then she would ask for more."

But this story is not about Melli, if anything it is about Arlene and Rio. Melli would appear regularly on "The Rio Morales Variety Show" and in exchange for the exposure Arlene would give a percentage of sales to Rio. They were business partners according to Arlene, but Rio always considered the Quinteros to be friends. As Melli's popularity grew, so did the problems in the entertainment industry, as well as the tension between Arlene and Rio. As her fame rose, so did the strain. Money began to blur the lines between friendship and business. Contracts replaced handshakes. Conversations turned into arguments—quiet at first, then louder, sharper. No one ever agreed on what finally broke them. Some said it was money. Others said it was pride. But one day, the partnership was over. And just like that, so was the friendship.

Both Arlene and Rio dissolved their partnership as well as their friendship. Melli was the only Quintero family member to stay in touch with Rio. She knew that if it wasn't for his constant support and help she would not be where she was in the music industry. Melli was so close to Rio that she would call him "Tio Rio" which meant "Uncle Rio" in Spanish. She would call him late at night, her voice softer now, older.

"Thank you," she once told him. "For everything."

And Rio believed, despite everything, that some bonds couldn't be broken.

He was wrong…

The Quinteros were musicians and artists and the business side of their musical empire began having logistical issues. From merchandising to bookings, it became a nightmare for the Quinteros to keep up with everything after their separation from Rio Morales.

After many months, Arlene called Rio. Slowly, they began speaking again, but the idea of rekindling their business partnership was never a topic of discussion. One day, in early April of 2001, Rio Morales had a major accident on the 410 loop in San Antonio while making his way to Melli's twentieth birthday. The crash was violent. Metal folded into metal. Glass shattered across asphalt. By the time the sirens faded, Rio was barely conscious.

Of course this accident made the local news. "Host of the Rio Morales Variety Show in Near-Fatal Crash." On his first night in the hospital recuperating from his injuries, he heard a voice near his bedside.

"Are you Rio Morales?" she asked him. Her voice was eager. Too eager.

He turned his head slowly. An orderly stood beside him, smiling wide, unblinking.

"I used to watch your show when I was a little girl," she said quickly. "All the time. You must know a lot of celebrities and famous people! Like Melli Quintero! Oh, I love her. She's incredible!"

Rio forced a polite smile. He was used to this. Fans came with the territory. But something felt off. He could tell that this orderly was an incredibly passionate fan, so much so that she came off as a little unhinged, but what fan-crazy

person isn't? But then the orderly asked a question. "Do you by any chance have Melli's number?" She stepped closer.

There it was. Rio's smile faded slightly.

"I don't have anything with me," he said. "Everything's at home."

Rio would keep most contacts and phone numbers saved in either a little black book or a rolodex. Also he would never give out any of his contact numbers to just anyone, so he lied.

She paused. For a moment, her expression changed. Then she smiled again.

"Oh," she said softly. "That's okay. I just thought I'd ask."

She tilted her head. "Well, my name is Yessenia Olivarez. If you need anything, I'm here."

She lingered a second too long before walking away. Rio watched her go. Something about her stayed with him. Something he couldn't explain.

Later that day, he tucked his small black book of contacts deep into the drawer beside his hospital bed, hidden beneath his folded clothes. Just in case.

When Rio was discharged, the book was gone. He searched everything. The drawer. The floor. His belongings. Nothing.

It had vanished.

Months passed and one day, Rio heard something that made his stomach drop. Yessenia Olivares—the orderly from the hospital—was now working for the Quinteros. Not just working for them. Running their show sets. Handling their business. Handling everything.

It was quite a shock to find that the orderly who worked in the hospital was now the new show manager for Melli Quinteros' business.

Rio didn't hesitate. He called Arlene immediately.

"There's something wrong with her," Rio said. "You need to be careful. She took my contacts. I know she did. She's not who you think she is."

There was a pause on the line. Then Arlene laughed.

"Jealousy doesn't suit you, Rio," she said. "We finally found someone who can handle things, and you can't stand it."

"That's not what this is," Rio insisted.

But Arlene's voice hardened.

"We don't need you anymore. Not you. Not your show."

The line went dead. Rio stared at the phone in his hand. He didn't recognize his friend's voice anymore.

———

In his 2021 interview, Rio recalled warning Arlene that there was something deeply wrong with the woman that stole his contact book. He said she needed to be careful—that Yessenia wasn't just working her way into their business, but into their family.

"Arlene saw it as jealousy," Rio said. "She thought I was speaking out of spite. I remember her telling me, 'We found someone to handle everything, and you can't stand that we don't need you—or your little show.'"

Rio paused.

"That's what hurt the most."

———

He tried reaching Melli. He called. Left messages. Waited. When she finally answered, her tone was distant and careful.

"She's good for us, Tío," Melli said. "You don't understand."

"I do," he said quietly. "More than you think."

But Rio could hear the distance and doubt in her voice, and he realized he had already lost her. He was devastated that his longtime friend would talk to him like that. However, he didn't give up and kept reaching out to Melli. He implored her to watch out and to take care of herself, However, it was already too late. Yessenia had already made a strong bond and friendship with Melli and in the end started believing Yessenia's opinion that her "Tio" was a greedy person jealous of their success.

———

In the final part of his 2021 interview, Rio said, "To this day, I don't understand how this woman—an orderly—became the manager of one of the biggest stars of all time. She slithered her way in like a *víbora*, poisoning them against me, wrapping herself around Melli tighter and tighter until there was no escape."

The name would be everywhere. On every channel. In every headline. People would say it in disbelief. In anger. In mourning.

Yessenia Olivares. *La Vibora*. The woman who had smiled too long. Who had asked too many questions. Who had slithered her way in.

The woman who killed Melli Quintero…

Recognition

I didn't understand why I was a topic of contention for my good friend and his fiancée. He was starting to act as if my existence was the reason for all the problems in their life. His instinct was always to look outside his relationship for something or someone to blame. After all, my existence shouldn't make him this upset.

Keep in mind, I have no designs on his fiancée. If anything, the fact that she and my fiancée have known each other their entire lives—more like sisters than friends—makes the idea unthinkable. Still, I understand where he's coming from. I think to myself, "You see what I see don't you? How your fiancée will look at me from time to time. How sometimes her glances and smiles linger just a little longer than those of someone who thinks of me as nothing more than a friend. How her hug will stay for a few seconds longer after mine ends. You see all of that, don't you?"

But instead I said to him, "If it's a matter of boundaries, then you should talk to her, not me. I never validated those feelings out of respect for our friendship. Although it's not my place to put your mind at ease, this desire, this longing you see in your fiancée, it is not for me.

The times that I caught those glances and smiles have always been when my fiancée and I were together. Dancing without thinking, joking, filling the night with laughter, and that tells me something. Whatever longing you think you see in her, it isn't for me. She isn't looking at me with desire—she's looking at the kind of connection she feels deprived of. She wants to laugh freely, to be herself without holding back,

without fear of being criticized, berated—or worse, put in the "doghouse."

As your once good friend, I can tell you in all sincerity that I always saw her as my fiancée's sister and best friend. That never changed until recently, when she somehow placed me at the center of your conflict, and to this day, I still don't understand why.

It did hurt to hear that my attempts at being friendly were interpreted as something more, and that I had become someone you felt you needed to 'do something about.' What hurts even more is that, instead of addressing it with her, you chose to confront me—validating your suspicions and putting your mind at ease simply because she tends to avoid confrontation.

You only started acting this way after I began working in the same district as her. At the time, I didn't know anyone there, so I reached out to her for support as I was getting settled. But now you've turned that into something more, as if there were intentions behind it. And instead of her correcting that line of thinking or reassuring you, she's directed you toward me—telling you to confront me about the communication we were having. Which only confirms what I already suspected. She didn't want to face it.

She doesn't tell you how she feels. She avoids those conversations, and instead, she puts it on you by telling you to confront me. People don't do that unless they're avoiding something they don't want to face. They do it when they want to dodge the actual truth, something between the two of you that neither of you is willing to say out loud. But whatever that truth is, it isn't me, and it's also not my place to define it for you.

As for why I've been distant, I can explain that clearly. I understand that distance may come across as suspicious, but when I hear that the mention of my name in conversation becomes a reason for arguments or hurt, I don't want to contribute to that dynamic. Especially when it begins to affect the friendship between my fiancée and her best friend, I choose to step back for the sake of both relationships.

After knowing you for years, I've noticed a pattern where frustration gets redirected rather than addressed directly. Something will come up, but the actual concern isn't addressed. Instead, it gets attributed to something else later, and the situation escalates in a different direction.

From my perspective, the core issue seems to be within your relationship, not anything involving me. That's why I stay out of it. I don't want to become a substitute for problems that don't involve me."

———

I thought that would be the end of it. Another unfinished conversation. Another silence without resolution. He left as he always did—silent, carrying the conviction that his suspicions were true.

I stayed at the bench a little longer, replaying everything I said.

That's when I heard her voice behind me.

"You keep telling him that this isn't about you," she said quietly.

Not my fiancée…

His fiancée.

I didn't turn towards her but she continued,

“But you never thought to ask yourself why I never reassured him that there was nothing between us.”

That sentence made me stand and turn to look at her.

“What does that mean?” I said.

She looked at me with a certainty that unsettled me, as if she couldn't believe I was still pretending not to understand.

“I tried,” I said carefully.

“I know,” she replied.

A pause.

“I told him to confront you because I already knew what he would see,” she said.

My stomach tightened slightly.

“And what was he supposed to see?”

Silence settled between us.

“You didn’t imagine it,” she said softly as if she was reading my mind.

My voice lowered without meaning to. I stepped towards her.

“You’re engaged.”

“I know.” she said,

A beat.

“And so are you.”

I should have stepped away. I should have made distance absolute.

She exhaled slowly. Her eyes held mine for a long moment—steady, unflinching, as if waiting for resistance that never came.

Then she closed the distance between us. Not suddenly. Not impulsively. Like something finally completing a motion it had been tracing for far too long. Her hand lingered on my chest, hesitant, like even that much contact was already too much.

Then she kissed me.

The kiss wasn't a rupture. It was a revelation. A quiet acknowledgment of something I had known long before I was willing to admit it. Something that had already been happening in every paused glance, every unfinished sentence, every moment neither of us corrected in time.

When she pulled back, her voice was quiet enough that it felt like it belonged only to that space between us.

“I didn’t come here to ruin anything,” she said.

A pause.

“I came because I wanted to stop pretending that I didn’t already know what this was.”

And at that very moment, I realized, I had stopped pretending too.

Sixty-Five

I thought the pair of angel wings tattooed on my back had been the most painful thing I had ever endured—until that night…

I had worked late, and it must've been about two thirty in the morning. The smell of vomit filled the air as I rushed out of the bar where I was working as a bouncer. The sticky floor kept making that squeaking sound with every step as I walked towards the exit. I grabbed my leather jacket from the coat rack, put it on, and walked outside. The air that night was hot and humid, a temperature known well by Rio Grande Valley residents. As I climbed onto my motorcycle, my leather jacket began to sweat and stick to my skin from the sudden change in temperature between the bar and the humid night air. I strapped on my helmet and started my bike.

As I was riding down the highway, I could see a certain section of the old 77 expressway still using those old-school orange streetlights. I could feel the sixty-five-mile-per-hour breeze enter through my jacket sleeves. The air hitting my body lulled me into a state of relaxation, calming the anxieties I had looming over me about school. Riding at night had become my escape. During the day, I was a student drowning in assignments and expectations, and at night, I was a bouncer watching other people forget their problems with alcohol. The highway was the only place where everything felt quiet. At sixty-five miles per hour, the wind drowned out the noise in my head. Every now and then, I had to change lanes to avoid road gators.

After the lane change, I went over the overpass and as I descended the highway, I saw an uncovered trailer filled with different appliances stranded on the side of the road. Seeing the hazards flashing on the open trailer forced me to switch lanes automatically, away from their direction. I turned to look over at the stranded trailer, then I turned my attention back to the road. I only looked over at that stranded trailer for only a second, and that's all it took. In that split second of inattention, I hit something, and it sent me flying three stories in the air at sixty-five miles per hour. For a moment, the world felt completely silent. The roar of my motorcycle was gone, the wind disappeared, and everything slowed down. The orange streetlights were suddenly level with my eyes, as if the world had tilted sideways. I remember thinking, "*This isn't real.*" But gravity doesn't wait for denial.

I had this view of the patched highway and faded lane lines as I went flying overhead. From the initial impact, to being airborne, to the moment I crashed back to the ground, it took my mind a few seconds to realize what was happening. Everything happened so fast that I didn't fully process it until I was already hurtling toward the ground. The last thing I remember seeing was the road from above. Then I blacked out.

I awoke facing up at the orange lit streetlight. All I felt in that moment was fear, but physically, I felt numb all over. I was scared to move, scared to look at what was left of me at that very moment. I had all these questions running through my head, bringing about my anxiety. *"Should I move? Can anyone see me? Am I bleeding?"*

I slowly lifted my right hand up to my chest and saw my jacket sleeve had been ripped off exposing the skin on my

forearm, grated by the asphalt and broken glass on the highway. However, I felt a small sense of relief when I noticed that I could move my arm and some of my fingers. Without moving my head, and using just my eyes, I could see the distinct orange highway light where the trailer was last seen. I tried looking back at where the stranded trailer was to see if anyone there could help. The trailer was gone. I started asking myself if I had imagined it being there. How could someone witness an accident and just leave?

Slowly, I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone. It had been completely destroyed by the impact. I started to panic, the adrenaline from the accident working its way through me. That "ball in the throat" feeling I get before a test or a breakup hit me harder than ever before. Then I saw headlights crowning over the highway. I began to pray that they would see me.

I ended up looking over towards the side of the highway where there was a culmination of dirt, grass, and motorcycle debris, and I saw a guardian bell resting on the road. Riders hang guardian bells on their bikes to ward off evil spirits on the road. Seeing one there, lying alone in the dirt, felt strange– like a quiet reminder that someone else had once passed through this stretch of highway and made it home. It wasn't mine, but maybe from a previous rider that had the fortune of making it home to his family that night. I began to feel a pain develop behind my eyes and just like before. I passed out.

I slowly started opening my eyes, seeing things in glimpses, as the halogen hospital lights passed over my head while they wheeled me into the hospital. For just a second, I caught myself in the reflection of the glass partitions between the entrance and the main hospital station. The person staring

back at me didn't look like the man who had left the bar hours earlier. My clothes were shredded, my skin torn apart, and my body barely moved. I didn't recognize myself. A mangled body covered in bruises and blood was all I could see before I once again passed out.

They would later tell me that I hit a black refrigerator that fell out the back of that stranded trailer. When the trailer people saw me hit it, they packed up their things and took off worried that they would be liable for the damages. I had scraped flesh off my back, arms, and legs. I had broken my ribs, arm, leg, and clavicle. The worst pain of all was my knee which was ripped apart upon impact.

Recovery took months, and the scars never fully faded. A year after the accident, I took a long look at myself in the mirror. The accident left me many scars; the highway even took one of my wings. It was scraped off when my body was dragged across the road. The nurses would say that it was an angel's payment for saving me. If that's the case, the angel can keep my wing. I take comfort in knowing that an angel watches over me.

Before that night, the highway was my freedom. Sixty-five miles per hour meant escape from school, from pressure, and from the constant noise in my head. But somewhere between the refrigerator on the road and the asphalt that took my wing, I learned that freedom isn't sixty-five miles per hour. Freedom is getting another chance to embrace all those things I sought to escape.

The Ticktock of the Devil's Clock

"Tick-tick, tick-tock, tick…" went the sound of a broken clock as Martin, the apprentice, worked on the gears.

"Be very careful," said Christopher, the old clockmaker, as he watches how Martin carefully fits the final gears into an old West German wind-up clock. Their shadows twist and stretch across the workshop, flickering in the wavering candlelight. The smell of Earl Grey tea fills the room as the clockmaker pours himself another cup.

"Remember that time escapes us," Christopher says, "no matter whether we rush, or whether we take our time."

Martin smirks. "So we take our time."

Christopher just nods and grabs Martin by his shoulder. Martin was always impatient, trying to rush to finish his projects, but some things you just can't rush. The intricate gears inside the clock being one of them.

"I remember when I first assembled my own clock," says Christopher in a state of nostalgia, thinking back on the day he was first taught how to fix his first clock.

Martin finishes his assembly of the old German clock and begins to wind it by slowly turning the winding peg. Once released, the ticking begins…

"Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock."

"It works!" Martin exclaims enthusiastically.

"That's wonderful my boy! Now, can you set the time?"

Matin looks down, puzzled, and begins to turn the dial forward with his index finger to set the correct time. He then closes the glass latch that covers the face of the clock.

"Very good," says Christopher.

Winded from standing, Christopher makes his way over to the bench chair to sit down. The kettle near the fireplace begins to whistle. Martin grabs the kettle and pours Christopher another cup of tea and brings it to him along with the clock he just assembled. Christopher then begins to inspect it, looking over every detail, admiring the work.

"Well done my boy. Well done."

The clockmaker places the clock on his workbench. He looks around the old shop with its various clocks sitting on shelves and tables, all with small price tags tied on strings.

"I often question why I still work on these old clocks even after all these years. No one buys clocks anymore. No one can even read the face of a clock anymore." says Christopher.

The clockmaker looks around with a sad expression on his face, thinking about how times have changed.

"Every clock in this old building has a story. It has a face, and behind every face lies hours of work inside of them. The labor of hundreds of clockmakers before me," says Christopher

Martin looks at Christopher, pondering why he would bring up something like that?

"Would you like to see the rarest clock in my collection?" asks Christopher.

After years of working in the shop, Christopher had never once mentioned his rarest clock. Martin feels a quiet sense of honor and pride knowing the clockmaker has chosen to share something so valuable with him, something not only rare, but deeply personal.

The apprentice nods and starts looking around the room at every corner of the shop to try to guess which one of

the clocks is the rarest in the collection. Would it be a Cartier? A Rothschild? Christopher notices Martin's curiosity.

“You won't find it here in the shop, my boy. This piece is in the basement.”

Martin has never been to the basement of the old clock shop. He is excited to see what wonders are stored there. His imagination goes wild at the thought of what wonders lay underneath their very feet.

Christopher grabs an old skeleton key hanging from the wall. He then takes a lantern from the workshop shelf. He lights it with a wooden match and the smell of the old lantern oil envelopes the room. He takes the lead and walks towards the basement door.

The door to the basement is made of old wood that has warped over time. He places the key into the keyhole and unlocks the door, hanging the key around his neck. Both Christopher and Martin give the door a forceful push as dust shoots out from the edges of the door where it meets the doorframe. They begin to descend the old staircase covered in cobwebs. The creaking of every step pierces their ears.

Once in the basement, the apprentice looks around at all the clocks on the walls, some of which are covered in old sheets and others placed on various shelves. However, one clock in the center of the room stands out from the rest. It is covered in a black blanket. Christopher looks at his apprentice and asks him to sit on the stool placed in front of the covered clock.

Christopher grabs a corner of the blanket.

“I call this the Devil’s clock.”

Christopher pulls the blanket off so fast that the room is covered in a haze of dust. The streetlight pouring through

the basement windows ignites the particles, turning the air into a shimmering veil of light. Martin looks at the clock and is awestruck. He begins to walk around it, breaking the beams of light, taking in the incredible detail of the clock. The paint itself is a rich color of black he has never seen before. Gold inscriptions line the edges of the doors where the counterweights are set. Crystal clear glass covers both the door and the clock face. Martin can see his astonished face within the reflection of the clear crystal glass.

"The Devil's clock?" Martin asks.

"Yes," says Christopher. "This clock has a very interesting history. I found it in a hidden chamber underneath one of the final Nazi strongholds our platoon took over in 1945. There are certain distinctions about this clock that make it one of the rarest. First, it never needs winding. It resets by itself. Second, the clock's counterweights work their way up then set back down when it resets instead of the other way around like a traditional clock. Lastly, the face of the clock has no numerals, instead, it has symbols etched where the numbers should be, symbols that no one has ever seen before and the dial runs counterclockwise instead of clockwise."

The apprentice sits back down on the stool in silence, in awe of the Devil's clock.

"I've been a clockmaker for sixty years, and not once have I seen another clock like this one," says Christopher.

Martin gets up and walks around the clock once more. He looks at every inch of it and finds that the maintenance door has a keyhole. He runs his thumb over the keyhole.

"Can I open the maintenance door and look inside?" asks Martin.

Martin notices that the crystal glass face of the clock is shimmering like diamonds, beckoning his touch. He reaches out to touch the glass face of the clock.

“Don’t touch it!” exclaims Christopher.

Martin pulls back and sits back down. He has never heard the Clockmaker yell before.

“Apologies for startling you my boy. No, unfortunately, I never did find the key to open it. It is locked for all time, and I believe it should stay that way.”

“Why?" asks Martin.

“This clock is incredibly special, not just for how it works, but for how it….” Christopher pauses and looks at his young apprentice. “I can’t explain it to you, it's just something you have to experience.”

“Experience?” says Martin.

“If only I could show you, but I’m too old.” says Christopher.

Christopher grabs Martin and stands him up in front of the Devil’s clock.

“If you touch the crystal glass, something will happen. Just remember that no matter what you see or hear, it is not real. For you to return, you must touch the crystal glass again. Then, and only then, can you return here.”

Martin is puzzled. He doesn’t understand what the clockmaker is talking about. Christopher grabs his hand and stretches it out towards the clock face.

“When you’re ready, touch the clockface,” says Christopher.

Martin hesitates at first, but then, with his eyes closed, he reaches out. He can hear the awkward ticking of the Devil’s clock as it runs counterclockwise.

“Tock-tick, tock-tock tick, tock-tick.” goes the Devil’s Clock.

Finally, he touches it and hears the ticking begin to change.

“Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock.”

Martin cautiously opens his eyes and looks around the basement room. It feels as if nothing has happened and nothing has changed.

“Nothing has changed,” says Martin.

While stating these words he notices the clock is now running clockwise.

“Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock.”

“The clock is now running correctly!” he exclaims as he turns to Christopher.

Just then, Christopher leaps at Martin and begins to stab him repeatedly with a screwdriver. Martin, shocked and in pain, tries to fight off Christopher and manages to push him off. He looks into Christopher's eyes and sees nothing but blackness. Martin looks down at where he was stabbed, his hands covered in blood as he tries to stop the bleeding. Martin leaned forward from the pain. He looks up at Christopher smiling with malicious intent. At that moment, Martin hears a voice coming from the clock.

“Touch the face of the clock, my boy! Touch the face of the clock!”

Martin reaches out with his bloody hands towards the clock face, touches it, and wakes up in a panic on the basement floor.

“Are you alright my boy?” asks Christopher.

Martin, still shocked and afraid, pushes Christopher away and falls back. He checks his hands and body for blood in a panic, but they're clean. No wounds at all.

Christopher calmly kneels down at the side of his apprentice and says, "Calm down my boy. Whatever you saw, whatever you experienced, it was not real. You went to a place that was not real and then came back."

"It felt pretty real to me!"

Martin stands up and as he makes his way to the staircase, he can hear the clock ticking.

"Tock-tick, tock-tick, tock-tick."

Martin takes that moment to look at the clock and notices once again the dial is now running counterclockwise. He runs upstairs and out of the basement.

Christopher looks back at the clock and follows Martin calmly up the stairs holding the lantern in his hand.

Christopher places the lantern down on the workshop table and grabs the tea kettle and pours a cup of tea for Martin. They both sit quietly at the front of the shop. Martin is hesitant to trust Christopher after experiencing what he endured.

"But it felt so real, I felt the pain," says Martin.

Christopher, concerned for Martin, states, "I once touched the clock as well. I remember seeing my fellow soldiers firing their M1 Garands towards my direction. I remember the feeling of every bullet tearing into my body. The pain was immeasurable. However, once I accidentally touched the face of the clock, I came back and found myself on the floor with no wounds or scars."

Martin looks at his cup of tea, then up at Christopher.

"It wasn't real, my boy. You know I would never do anything to hurt you."

Martin is confused. He feels a sense of comfort in knowing that what he experienced wasn't real, and he knows that Christopher would never do anything to hurt him. But after enduring what he did, it is pretty hard to trust Christopher.

“It wasn’t me,” says Christopher.

As they share this moment in silence, they hear a noise coming from the basement stairwell.

“Tock-tick, Tock-tick, Tock-tick.”

“We forgot to cover it.” says Christopher.

“We need to destroy the clock. It is evil,” says Martin.

“We will do no such thing. Yes, the clock is of a supernatural origin. When we touch the face of the clock, I believe we are transported to a place that mirrors our own. However, this place we travel to, although familiar, is unknown to us. It looks like a mirror representation of our world. Or is it just created to look that way?”

“What do you mean?” asks Martin.

“Is it that our minds go to a place beyond our own comprehension, and because of this, our minds purposefully create the environment we enter when we touch the clock face?” says Christopher.

Martin absorbs everything Christopher is saying. What is the purpose of the Devil’s clock? Who made it? Where did it come from?

“I’ve thought about this for many years now,” says Christopher, “and there are still no answers for where or what that place is on the other side of the glass. All I know is that when we come back, we are whole again, and whatever happens there, doesn't come back here. Which leads me to believe it is not a real place. However, when we are in that

place, anything that happens to us feels just as real as it does here. We still need to discover its secrets. Why was it built? What is that place we travel to through the Devil's clock? We need to find the answers, Martin!"

Martin, still in shock from his experience traveling through the Devil's clock, exclaims, "All I know is that the place we went to was a bad place, where a duplicate of yourself tried to kill me! This clock is not of this Earth, and wherever this clock takes us is pure evil. It needs to be destroyed!"

At that moment, Christopher and Martin hear the front door swing open. A man dressed in a black leather jacket enters the shop and begins to walk up to Christopher and Martin.

"The shop is closed!" exclaims Christopher.

As he walks up, Martin notices the man holding in his left hand a snub-nosed revolver.

"I want you to give me all the cash from the register and the safe," says the man.

Christopher slowly makes his way over to the register and opens it, giving the man what little money he has. The man becomes furious at how little there is.

"Where is the money?!" says the man.

He strikes Christopher in his face with the butt of his gun. Christopher falls to the ground.

"Where's the safe?!" the man exclaims.

Martin runs over to check on Christopher and responds in a forceful tone, "There is no safe!"

In that moment there is an eerie silence. The man begins to hear the Devil's clock ticking from the basement staircase.

"Tock-tick, Tock-tick, Tock-tick."

“Maybe the safe is down there?” says the man.

“There is nothing down there for you,” says Christopher. “You have your money now, just go.”

“No, there must be something of value down there,” says the man as he pulls back the hammer on his gun.

At gunpoint, the man takes both the clockmaker and apprentice downstairs. As they descend the staircase, the man looks over at the uncovered clock in the center of the room. He pushes both Christopher and Martin down to the floor. He inches closer to inspect the clock. He starts dragging his fingers across the inlays of gold and scratches at the seams.

“Is this real gold?” the man asks as he reaches out to try to touch the clock face.

“Don’t touch it!” exclaims Christopher

The man retracts his hand and his attention then goes back to the clockmaker. He walks over to him and hits him once again, striking him this time in the stomach with his fist.

“Shut the fuck up!”

The man makes his way back to the clock and notices the dial is running backwards. At that moment, he touches the glass face and falls to the floor, convulsing. Martin goes to the man's weapon and kicks it away towards the dark corner of the basement.

Christopher stares in fear and starts yelling aloud towards the robber. “Touch the face of the clock! Touch the face of the clock so you can return!”

The man's body begins to contort in unnatural ways. His bones begin to break from the supernatural forces. He lets out a tremendous wailing scream as his body supernaturally gets lifted into the air and thrown against the wall. Then there's nothing but silence.

Christopher and Martin stand still from the shock and stare in disbelief at what they just saw.

"Is he dead? Is he stuck on the other side?" asks Martin.

"I don't know. I have never seen something like this before. To my knowledge, we're the only two people who have ever been to the other side and made it back."

Christopher makes his way towards the man, checking for a pulse.

"He's dead."

Martin takes a few steps back and begins to vomit. Suddenly, a strong floral odor fills the basement room.

"We need to call the police," says Christopher,

"How in the hell will we explain what happened to him? His body looks unnatural."

"We need to call the police, let them know what he intended to do. We will tell the police that we tricked the robber. We told the robber that there was a safe in the basement and when he got to the stairs, we pushed him down. That's what we will tell them."

"We're going to tell the cops he fell down the stairs?!" exclaimed Martin. "Look at his body! This is not an injury from a fall! It looks like he was hit by a semi!"

Martin steps back and begins to vomit once again.

"I'm sorry about all of this, my boy." says Christopher.

Both Christopher and Martin climb back up the stairs and close the door to the basement. Christopher grabs the old rotary phone that is sitting next to the register and dials 911.

"Hello operator, we had a robbery attempt here at Clocksworth on the corner of Lewis and Carrier street. We managed to fight off the robber. We led him towards the basement stairs and shut the door behind him, but when we

shut the door, we heard him fall, and since then we have heard nothing. We're afraid that he might be severely injured. Please come over. Thank you."

Christopher hangs up the phone and they both sit in complete silence. Once again, you can hear the Devil's clock ticking from the basement staircase.

"Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock."

"Did you see the face dial of the clock after the robber touched the glass?" asks Christopher. "Was it running clockwise or counterclockwise?"

"I don't know," says Martin.

Just then, they begin to hear rustling down in the basement. The clockmaker and his apprentice made their way to the basement entrance and stood silently beside the door.

"He was dead. You checked his pulse. Nothing should be moving down there," says Martin.

Christopher places his ear against the basement door and hears a light scratching on the other side. He looks down at the doorknob which slowly begins to turn. He grabs it and tries to stop it as the door shakes violently. Martin runs over to help. At that moment Martin pulls the key off Christopher's neck and locks the basement door. They begin to hear a growl coming from the other side of the door.

"When we touch the face of the clock," says Christopher, "we end up on the other side. Then the dial starts turning clockwise. However, when we come back, the clock begins turning counterclockwise. When we left the basement, we didn't check what way the clock dial was turning. If someone dies on the other side, does that leave a way for something to come in? Was the clock running clockwise or counterclockwise? Did we just unintentionally leave the door

open for something to come to our side through the vessel of this robber?"

In an instant, everything went silent. The only sound left was footsteps receding down the staircase, growing fainter with each step.

Christopher, once again, places his ear against the basement door and listens. He can still hear a faint growling.

"What have we done?" says Martin in an unsettling tone.

"Whatever came through," says Christopher, "we need to send it back to the other side."

"I'm not going back in there!" exclaims Martin.

"Listen my boy, if we do not send this thing back to where it came from, we will be unleashing an evil upon this Earth. I must undo what I have done. I'm just sorry I brought you into this."

Martin struggles at the thought of going back down into the basement. "I'm not letting you go back down there by yourself."

"I should've destroyed it years ago," says Christopher. "I must undo this!"

"Then I will join you," says Martin with a fearful sigh. "I'll take the lead, but you stay back. I don't want anything to happen to you."

The clockmaker looks at his apprentice and says, "Good man."

Martin unlocks the basement door and pushes it open. They hear the tick-tock of the Devil's clock once again.

Martin takes the lead with the lantern in hand. The ticking of the Devil's clock grows louder.

"TICK-TOCK, TICK-TOCK, TICK-TOCK."

They descend the basement staircase, reach the bottom, and make their way toward the Devil's clock. They no longer see the body of the robber where it once laid. They look around the room and see nothing but dark shadowy corners. The flame of the lantern begins to flicker, making it harder for them to see. They stand back to back, scouring every dark corner with their eyes. Christopher turns his attention to the clock face and notices that it is running clockwise.

In that instant, the robber jumps from the shadows and attacks.

Martin and the robber both fall to the floor and grapple with one another. The lantern struck the basement floor and burst apart, its flame catching the spilled oil in an instant. The robber is over Martin with his hands around Martin's neck. Christopher grabs the robber in a chokehold and pulls him off of Martin. With one arm wrapped around the robber's neck he begins to reach out towards the face of the Devil's clock with his other arm.

"As soon as I touch the clock," he says to Martin, "the robber and I will all be sent to the other side, and you must destroy the clock."

"No! What if you get trapped there?"

A strange wind suddenly begins to blow in the basement.

"Once we're on the other side, you will destroy the clock!" yells Christopher.

"No! Please!" yells Martin.

"Do not question me! Just please do as I say, I can't hold him any longer. As soon as we're on the other side, destroy the clock!"

Christopher extends his hand out and touches the crystal clock face as both he and the robber collapse to the floor unconscious. Martin immediately goes to the clock with tears in his eyes and pushes it over with all his might.

The Devil's clock tips over and falls to the floor, shattering into many pieces. Glass, wood, gears, springs, coils and all other parts go flying in every direction of the basement. The flames from the broken lantern extinguished at once, as though the basement itself had been stripped of oxygen.

Martin runs over to Christopher and checks to see if he is breathing. He checks for a pulse and feels nothing. There is a serene expression on the clockmaker's face as he lies still on the basement floor.

Martin begins to sob.

Suddenly, Martin hears a gasp come from Christopher. Christopher sits up slowly and opens his eyes.

Martin, weary of what is happening, gets up and takes a few steps back cautiously and grabs a sharp piece of the broken clock and points it towards Christopher, shaking.

"It's alright, it's just me," says Christopher.

Martin, relieved, runs up to his friend and hugs him tightly. Christopher hugs him back.

"It's over,"

The police finally arrive and both the clock maker and apprentice give their statements about what happened. The police then take the body of the robber from the basement and leave the clock shop.

Both Christopher and Martin sit inside the shop in disbelief at what they just endured.

"What did you see when you went to the other side?" asks Martin.

“I saw whatever possessed the robber, its true form.” replies Christopher.

“What did it look like?”

“Evil. Evil incarnate. I will not discuss it any further. This is something that will haunt me forever."

Martin can see that Christopher is still distraught from the ordeal. “Let me go clean up the basement and then we will leave the shop,” he says.

Christopher just nods his head as he looks at the cup of tea, cold, in his hands.

Martin descends the basement steps with a broom in hand and begins to sweep the broken pieces of the clock towards the center of the room. He then grabs the blanket that once covered the clock and tosses it over the entire pile.

As Martin turns away to walk towards the basement stairs, he hears a faint ticking sound coming from underneath the blanket. He turns back to the pile and removes the blanket that covered the broken pieces of the clock, Martin kneels down and searches through the wreckage for the infernal ticking of the Devil's clock. He finds the crystal face of the clock, still ticking… clockwise.

“Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock.”

Martin picks up the piece and looks at it. Within the reflection of the broken crystal glass, he can see a silhouette of Christopher from behind him emerging from the shadows of the basement corners. A loud unearthly growl fills the room.

At that moment, Martin drops the clock piece. The crystal glass scatters everywhere across the basement floor and through Martin’s screams, you could still hear the faint ticking of the Devil’s clock.

“Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick…”

Poemas
Poems

A Teacher's Plight

Teaching the masses with all our might,
Papers piled high, an endless fight.
Still, we stand and hold together,
Though there's no end in sight.

We live and breathe it every day,
A life consumed, no time our own,
What we carry, we tuck away,
So students never face it alone.

El Valor de Dos Personas

Aquí en el Valle,
practicamos los dos idiomas,
Nuestros padres nos dicen,
Que es el valor de dos personas,

We tend to switch
from English to Spanish,
In short conversations,
poems or language,
We speak without thinking,
a pocho type Spanglish,
We tend to speak it proudly,
¿Cómo? - ya lo sabes.

Merry Rows

Merry rows above the waves of an endless sea.
The boat rocks side to side, the motion makes us uneasy.
We long to get off as our heads grow dizzy,
Yet the merry rows continue; the rowers stay busy.

The merry rows continue as we cross open water.
The island's distant shore is what we're chasing after.
We crave solid ground, but the oars push us farther,
Till the merry rows slow as we enter shallow water.

The merry rows have ended; we can go no farther.
The boat now lies abandoned, and the land feels like a bother.
We wish we could still row like we did in open water,
But the merry rows have ended, we miss what they had to offer.

Mis Pajaritos

Cómo nos pasa el tiempo, qué rápido se va,
otoño o primavera, no vuelve nunca más.
Ahí van mis pajaritos, aprendiendo a volar,
con sueños en sus alas, buscando su lugar.

El trabajo de un maestro es enseñar a soltar,
aunque duela en el alma tener que mirar
cómo abren sus alas y empiezan a volar,
dejando en el silencio un eco al despegar.

Antes de que se vayan, les quiero recordar:
el mundo es muy grande, pero pueden brillar.

Y aunque estén muy lejos, más allá del mar,
por siempre en mi vida se van a quedar.

A veces regresan, como vuelve el cantar,
en invierno o verano, los vuelvo a encontrar.
Y aunque pase el tiempo y no sean igual,
en mi corazón siempre… mis pajaritos serán.

My Little Orange Tree

From a seed you came to me,
my little orange tree.
My, how you've grown,
so strong and yet so bold.

You grow your branches out towards me,
my little orange tree.

Seasons change and others show,
autumn leaves and sunsets' gold.
Yet, your leaves stay green.

From the pot that you well know,
to the fields of leisure where you grow,
that endless fruit for us to sow.

And yet, still you stand, as I grow old.
So strong, and yet so bold.
My little orange tree.

Swells

Distant storms create the swells
that reach the ends of all our oceans.
The local winds push them far
and form the waves that swallow us.

The shallow coast is where we'll meet,
where swells become waves that hit the beach.
The swells are formed from afar.
The distance keeps you where you are,
and will forever remain on the beach.

The Rockets Ruin Everything

On the road towards the island,
You will see the water so still,
One world on top of the other,
Reflecting nature's will.

A calm breeze blows,
A frenzy underwater,
But what ruins everything,
Is the rocket's blasting power.

The engines shake the Earth,
From here to Christi's Bay,
They shift the island's tide,
The birds fly away.

The roaring waters come,

The engines break away,
They fall into the ocean,
Bringing nature to decay.

The reefs are all broken,
The Rio Grande's disarray,
I miss those quiet days,
My world has gone away.

The rockets ruin everything,
I have nothing else to say,
X and his rockets,
They just need to go away.

The Turtle's Way

The little green turtle emerges
to greet the new day.

Breaking past the swell,
into the ocean,
where a new adventure awaits.

Don't be sad,
that is just their way.

That little green turtle will return one day
and leave its babies
to do the same.

The Warming Temperatures for Green and Blue

Devastating impact,
upon the weather.
The climates' rising.
The dying embers,
brought the jays of green and blue together.

The weather's rising,
the forest's tremor.
What do they say,
about birds of a feather?
The jays of green and blue remember.

Warming temperatures,
throughout September.
The world's disasters,
are nature's senders.

The world of jays are now and forever,
green and blue, mixed together.

Worth

No one sees your value,
No one sees your worth,
They stop at skin and surface,
Never digging deeper first.

You can stack the money,
The cars, the house, the perks,

Still they look right through you,
Like none of it has worked.

So you change the outside,
Shape yourself to fit their eyes,
Now they say you matter,
Like your worth just came alive.

But it wasn't all the work,
Not the things you earned or proved,
It was always about your image,
How you're always viewed.

And maybe in that moment
You finally understood,
They were never worth your time,
Just empty where they stood.

Memorias
Memories

Cambio con Cositas

Whenever we went anywhere as a family, my father had to wear a suit. We could be driving on the highway in a car with no AC in the middle of summer, and he would still wear his suit. It didn't matter the occasion or where we were going. One time, my father and I went to the local outdoor 77 Flea Market right off the highway in Brownsville, Texas, and he would still be adamant about wearing his suit. There he would be, in 104 degree weather, stopping to talk to everyone that would recognize him from his movies, always in his suit.

As a crowd would gather around him, we kids would walk around listening to the bullhorns off the various food trucks at the flea market. Repeating the same phrase over and over again, "Ricos nachos con limón, mayonesa, chile y queso." The aroma of different foods caressed our noses. The smell of *spiropapas* and other wonderful foods would call to us. At times, the fine powdered dust from being outdoors would hit our faces from the gust of winds that would blow through the flea market openings. Music blared from different vendors and people talked in both English and Spanish. Being products of a mother and father who spoke both languages, we understood every word.

Dad would stay and talk to people for as long as they wanted. He was an entertainer, even in his retirement years. He enjoyed talking to people and having that connection to his community. I remember when we would be out in public and people would come up to him and be so incredibly friendly to him and they would ask him, "Do you remember me?" and my dad would answer, "Of course!" Later on that day, I was

curious to know who dad's friend was and I would ask him. He would say, "*sepa la chingada*" meaning "who in the hell knows" but he wasn't about to make this person feel out of sorts or out of place. He respected everyone and was a friend to all who would take the time to speak to him, even if he didn't remember them so well.

When Dad would be talking to someone at the flea market, sometimes I would run up to him and ask, "Papa, do you have a dollar?" He would reach into his suit pocket and hand me all his change. I was always surprised to see that his change would always come with a few more *cositas* such as screws, bolts, buttons and other little things. Here was my father, handing me change, and I was just left more curious about how or why he would save these things in his pockets. Little did I know, the change with *cositas* were the traces of proof that my father, even though retired at that point in time, was a very hardworking man. We grew up very poor, and those *cositas* were testaments to his sacrifices, illustrating his commitment to his family, emphasizing that he loved us. My father would never let his pride keep him from feeding or taking care of his family. There goes Dad, the famous actor from the movies going to work on someone's car to pay the bills.

In his suit, of course.

Fyaworks

Around the beginning of December, my siblings and I would look out for the Bargain Book, a free local paper that would be tossed in our yard every week in the hopes that we would find our fyawork (firework) coupons. I say fyawork because that is how we all pronounced it. As kids growing up, we still had that adolescent squeal and accentuation on certain words. Since we would only say the word once or twice a year, it persisted.

Toward the center of the Bargain Book were the coupons, a spread of discounted fireworks. Smoke bombs, jumping jacks, Black Cats, bottle rockets. and a whole lot more.

The day after New Year's Day, I came across a bag of fireworks lying in a ditch near my house. I assumed someone had dropped them there after a long night of celebrating and drinking. Inside the bag were twelve bottle rockets, so I rushed home, grabbed an empty *medio litro* Coca-Cola bottle, and set it up in the center of the street in front of my house. That's when the fun began.

I lit the rockets with a lighter I found in my sister's car. I burned my thumb and index finger when the wind picked up and blew the flame towards my hand. It was always like that. We would never buy the punk made for lighting fireworks so, instead, we would just burn our hands.

Mr. and Mrs. Figueroa, our elderly neighbors that lived across from us, came outside to watch us light them and fire them off. They sat in their vintage 1950s John Salterini wrought iron rocking chairs and watched us have fun.

I placed one of the rockets in the bottle and began to light it. As soon as the sparks flashed from the wick I pulled my hand away so quickly that the bottle fell over and spun around in the same way teenagers would play the game Spin-the-Bottle. When the bottle stopped turning, the rocket was still inside and was facing in the direction of Mr. and Mrs. Figueroa. When I saw that I had placed them both in danger, I rushed over immediately and tried kicking the bottle before it ignited, but I was too late.

The rocket took off and like a guided missile headed straight towards Mr. and Mrs. Figueroa. The rocket flew between them both and got lodged into their planters before igniting and sparking all over the place.

Fortunately, Mr. and Mrs. Figueroa were okay, and neither one was hurt or injured. In classic fashion, we just went back to playing with our fyaworks.

I Love You One, Two, Three and Four

I have this vivid memory of my father and I sitting outside of the Darling Mourser Funeral Home in Brownsville, Texas. We were in his pristine 1995 Buick Roadmaster. I had just parked, and from the passenger seat, in one of the most somber of tones, he told me that the greatest pain he hopes I never know is the loss of a son or daughter. I was sixteen years old at the time and I remember it being the first time I ever saw my father cry.

My father had twenty-three sons and daughters. He was married three times in his lifetime and I am from the third family. In my immediate family, there were seven of us. I was the third of seven. We fortunately spent more time with our father than any of the other siblings from the first and second marriages because he was in his retirement years. Although we all are from different marriages, my half brothers and sisters treated us like their full-blooded siblings. Something I believe to this day, my father instilled in them with the power of a father's love.

Although retired, he was a very active person. He would work on passion projects, investing his time and money into the things that interested him, which in retrospect sounds a lot like me. My father was fifty years old when he married my mother who was twenty at the time. My mom would always joke about how they met saying, "he didn't look fifty".

As I recount this memory I have of my father outside the funeral home, I can only think about how I cannot do the moment justice. I am currently writing about this memory, and it doesn't have as much impact or as much feel as it did in

that moment. I guess that's the case with memories. The more I think about it, I start catching myself changing little parts of the memory to make it more profound. No matter how insignificant it may seem, the smallest changes of any memory take away the most from it. I quote my father, “I hope you never learn of the pain of losing a son or daughter.” As I recall, my father didn’t say this to me in English. He said it in Spanish, “Deseo que nunca sepas el dolor de perder un hijo o una hija”, and it is that very significant difference that made it so profound. It always feels like this is the case when it came to the retelling of stories, memories, or even jokes. My father could tell a joke and it was a hit! However, I could tell the same joke, and somehow I’d butcher it. Dad always had a way with words and people. The same could be said about my brother who was put to rest that day. I still don’t know the pain of losing a son or daughter and I hope I never do. I, however, know the pain of losing a loved one. My father.

I remember being ten years old and all my siblings would surround Dad to tell him, “I love you, Dad” and he would respond with, “I love you one, two, three, and four” while he would point at all his kids surrounding him. We were the type of family that would say it a lot. We were a family of nine living in a three-bedroom wood-framed home. We were poor. Regardless of our financial situation, all of us kids loved Mom and Dad. As kids, we would see it as coming from a loving home, not a poor one.

I was already an adult when my father had his first stroke. His left side was no longer functional and he was much slower when it came to talking or conversations. His stroke had changed him, and the thought of that change in him was something that I mourned and cried about for years. He was

still dad to us, and of course I would go see him and talk, but it just wasn't the same.

Our names would escape him and his memory was foggy and unclear. We would at times have to remind him of who we were. Somedays we would go get breakfast and coffee with him but I would keep the visits short because of how much it broke me to see him like that. At the end of every breakfast, lunch, or dinner I had with my father, I would tell him, "I love you, Dad." And he would always respond with "I love you, one, two, three… and four." That is something he never forgot.

In 2016, my brother Carlos passed away. He was from the first family. Given my father's weak state of health, we as a family—all twenty-something of us—agreed that it was best we didn't break his heart with the news that another son had died before him.

One afternoon, weeks after Carlos's passing, my father said he saw him come and visit him late at night. I just went along with what he said and told him, "I love you, Dad." and he responded with "I love you two, one, two, three and four."

A year after my brother's passing, my father became ill and ended up at the hospital. I remember visiting my father at the hospital after I graduated with my bachelor's degree. I had to remind him of who I was and what I had just accomplished. He was getting worse at this time and would speak in broken sentences. It was getting harder not to break down in front of him, but I would tell myself that I would not ever let him see me like that. I would convince myself that he needed to see me as "okay" or "steady." I just didn't want him to worry about me. I was there in the hospital, in full cap and gown, and I took

his hand and told him, “I love you, Dad.” and he responded with “I… love you… one…two and three”

While attending graduate courses, I got a call from my sister. She told me our dad was getting closer to the end. When I got to the hospital, I could see my father fading. I went up to him, gently took his hand, and said, “I love you, Dad.”

I could see him trying to say the words like he always did, but he couldn’t, and I could see in his eyes that it made him incredibly sad. It was then that I found the strength to carry his words for him. “Don’t worry, Dad, I’ll say it for you… I love you one, two, three and four.”

He smiled.

My father passed away on April 11th, 2018.

I am very fortunate that I got to say goodbye to my father. I believe that with the passing of loved ones we always carry with us the weight of regret. We could be the epitome of a good son or daughter and yet we still feel like what we did for them before their passing was not enough. I’d like to think that because we loved them so much, we only wish that we could’ve done more. My regret was not spending more time with him in those moments when he could tell us he loved us.

The day of my father’s funeral was not at all somber. It was a celebration of life filled with laughter and love. I think even some of us laughed during the service. That wasn’t out of malice though. It's just that we would think of him and either grow melancholy or remember something he did that was funny and laugh. I guess you could say it was us grieving, but honestly, I just think it was Dad’s spirit trying to cheer us up. Of course we cried, but if anything we looked around and saw that we were not alone.

We all hear about time being the only thing we don't get back. But it's not just time; it's those moments, too. Moments that pass us so quickly we don't take them into account in that very moment. We take them for granted, and we let our sorrow, and the fear of pain consume us, and keep us from creating those memories that we will treasure for years to come. Memories that we will eventually start to misremember, and begin to unintentionally take away from them.

Make some unforgettable memories with the time you have here with loved ones and remember to tell them you love them… one, two, three, and four times, while you still can.

Only on Rainy Days

Only on rainy days can I still feel the rain trickling down from the roof onto the corner of my bed, drenching my legs. No matter how thick the quilt, the rain would still get at me. The wind would blow through the walls of our 10x10 foot non-insulated room, and I can feel the freezing cold down my spine. The only real warmth I had were my three siblings that shared the bed with me. When we were kids, we considered anything others would take for granted as a luxury and still, we were the ones looked down upon. For something that we had no control over. For something we didn't choose. At such a young age, there was only so much I could do and yet, I made it my responsibility to do something about it. I would climb the roof to reset the tarp. I would place our torn and tattered clothes into the walls to keep the wind out. I would stuff socks into the void where a doorknob should have been. I told myself, "this is temporary" and that "it won't always be like this."

I'm thirty-six now, and I have the luxuries I wanted as a child. However, when it rains, I can still feel the rain trickling down from the roof onto the corner of my bed, drenching my legs.

The Breaker Box

As I've mentioned in a previous memory, my dad was married three times in his life. We come from his third and final marriage, and we had him during his retirement years. That, however, never stopped him from doing handiwork around the house.

There was one time when the power went out in a section of our little wood-framed home. Instead of calling someone to fix it, my dad decided to take care of it himself. He got his tools together and my job was to hold the flashlight. The only problem was opening the breaker box.

Because of the house's age—and the old wiring—the breaker box had rusted shut.

The more we messed with it—the more we hit it—the louder the sound became. As a kid with a wild imagination, I thought it was electrical wiring arcing, like something out of those old Edison coil demonstrations. Neither of us really knew what it was, but every time we touched the box, the buzzing grew louder and more aggressive.

Then my dad finally forced it open.

That's when we saw it.

A nest of bees had made the breaker box their home.

Thousands of them poured out all at once, swarming and attacking my dad. I remember watching him run back and forth across the yard, swatting wildly, twisting and turning, trying to escape them while I had my flashlight pointed in his direction, the beam of light following him as he ran across the yard.

Later that day, I saw him sitting on the bed, his hands swollen to three times their normal size. My mother took out every single stinger and placed meat tenderizer on the areas where he was stung.

I never understood why my mom thought meat tenderizer was a cure-all for everything. It was always meat tenderizer and aloe vera.

I remember my dad lying in bed after the whole incident in pain, and there he was just laughing away with all of us about what had just happened.

Just one of the many memories I have of my dad. Love you, Dad.

The Brick Wall that Covers the Bay

When I first started my new job as a teacher, I would wake up early each morning and drive to the school just to stand in the parking lot and take in the beautiful scenery. Across the street was a breathtaking bay, with its gleaming waters catching the sunrise as clouds drifted by in shades of pink, yellow, orange, and blue. Each morning felt like a quiet ritual. As many months passed, it became my therapy. I'd look out at that bay and feel completely at peace with myself.

Then one day, the bricks appeared. They began stacking them, one row at a time, until a wall slowly emerged. Eight feet tall, solid and unyielding, with only a narrow opening near the top, maybe five inches high and ten inches wide, just enough to glimpse a sliver of the bay that once felt endless. Most recently, they added mounds of dirt behind the wall covering what was left of the bay view.

I couldn't help feeling as though it was intentional, as though the wall had been built against me. I wonder if those who put it there wanted to keep us from those views, to cut us off from something that once belonged to everyone. Now that beauty, those moments of peace, are reserved only for those who can afford to live behind the wall.

The Corvette We Found in a Ditch

The summers were the most interesting times for us *pobretones*. All we could do for entertainment was go outside and explore the neighborhood, play pretend, and get into some *daños*. Whether it was us looking for fun, or playing games we would invent on the spot, we always found a way to entertain ourselves.

One day as kids, we found an old 90's Power Wheel's brand Corvette thrown in a ditch in a faded color of pink from being out in the sun for many months abandoned. Dario, my younger brother, flipped it over and we placed the youngest at the time, Efrain, in the front seat. We then pushed it home as fast as we could. We could hear Efrain laughing as the Corvette went over a section of the unpaved dirt road under construction, as both Dario's feet and the Corvettes wheels left a trail of dirt and dust blowing in the wind. Dario pushed it faster than the Power Wheels company ever intended that toy car to go. As we ran down the road, we could smell the neighborhood, every house cooking a combination of *sopas* and *carne asadas* mixed with the smell of exhaust when the cars would drive by. I remember the sound of laughter as I recollect this moment. An endless summer of joy when we made the most out of having nothing.

When we got home, we got to work. I found some old buckets of red and white paint that dad used to paint the picnic table and started painting every inch of that Corvette. Once I finished painting the entire car red, Dad took over and painted the white racing stripes. Jorge, our oldest brother, took apart the electrical wiring and repaired the internal

connections. He also found two 12v batteries that belonged to my dad's collection of professional camera battery lights. He attached them to the electric motor, turning both 12 volts batteries into 24 volts.

Unaware of what was about to happen, we placed the youngest, Efrain, in the front seat. As Jorge carried him over and set him inside the toy car, he began explaining the controls. "Now this is the accelerator, and—" Before he could finish his sentence, five-year-old Efrain pressed the pedal and took off. I remember seeing for just a second the plastic tires of the Corvette spin incredibly fast over the newly paved section of the road to gain traction. The Corvette then took off so incredibly fast it was as if we strapped a rocket to the backseat. It took off in a straight line. Efrain, being pushed back from the force of momentum, gripped the plastic steering wheel hard out of sheer fear and adrenaline. We tend to retell and recall this story often, and we tend to exaggerate this moment, saying that Efrain took off in a brilliant flash of red and white while he broke the sound barrier on a 24 volt powered Power Wheel's vehicle. The Corvette, still wet from the impromptu paint job, had streaks of red and white paint running up the hood and sides, exposing the original faded pink color. Jorge started yelling out to Efrain, "Turn! TURN!!" thinking that our 5 year old brother would know what he was talking about. Efrain also didn't know that in order to slow down he needed to let go of the accelerator.

He ended up coming to a stop once he crashed the Corvette into a ditch that sent him flying out into one of the bushes lined up outside our house. We all stood quiet and worried, wondering if we should take off running to avoid punishment from our parents over our *daños*. Efrain began to

laugh uncontrollably from the bushes which sent all of us into a laughing fit. We, of course, didn't learn our lesson the first time and started playing with the toy car till the electric motor burned out and sent the smell of burned electrical wires into our nostrils.

We found so much joy in that Corvette we found in a ditch, but that was just one of our many *daños* we did that summer.

The Ghost Neighbor

Our next door neighbor would constantly be walking up and down the road while smoking her cigarettes. She was in her late sixties. She had this big head of gray hair, and always wore the same shirt over a faded black dress. There she would be, walking down the road enveloped in a cloud of cigarette smoke.

One day, my brother Jorge, the oldest in our immediate family, overheard (or in this case misheard) that our neighbor, the one who was always smoking, had passed away. I don't know exactly where he got this news from, but after hearing it, he needed to find someone to tell so he rushed home. When he got home he found my dad in the front of the house in the 12 inch kiddie pool with the water hose on and a watermelon floating in the pool. Seeing my dad relaxing during these hot summer months, he rushed over to tell him the news.

"¡Papá, no lo vas a creer, se murió la vecina que fuma bastante!"

"Dad you're not going to believe it, the neighbor that's always smoking is dead!"

My dad, shocked by the news, said from the pool. "¡No lo puedo creer!" "I can't believe it!"

Jorge then rushed inside to tell all of us siblings.

"The neighbor lady, the one who was always smoking, she's dead!"

He went from sibling to sibling, telling us of his news, until our mother came home.

"Mom! You're not going to believe it, but the neighbor lady who is always smoking is dead."

My mom took a step back and said, “What are you talking about mijo!? She’s not dead.”

I remember the look on my brother’s face when the truth finally sank in. The moment he realized he had given Dad the wrong information, Jorge took off toward the front of the house to set the record straight.

When he got to the front of the house, he found Dad still in the pool, wide eyed, with a slice of watermelon in his hand in a state of shock staring blankly at the front yard.

“Papa! I was wrong, está viva la vecina. She’s alive!”

Then my dad responded,

“Oh, gracias a Dios, porque la vi pasar justo ahora entre una nube de humo y pensé que estaba viendo su fantasma.”

“Oh, thank God, because I just saw her pass by in a cloud of smoke and I thought it was her ghost.”

This is one of those stories where I just laugh at recounting and retelling and it shows how quick my dad was with his jokes.

The Last Race in the Duster

When I was fifteen years old, the only thing on my mind was having a car. Growing up poor, I didn't have many options. I knew that my only option was to buy a clunker and rebuild it.

One day, my father and I were driving down the road in our old Dodge van and the transmission broke. Transmission fluid could be seen all over the roadway and we both knew right away, it was done for.

My father was talking to a good friend of his, Mr. Perez, about the situation, and without hesitation, Mr. Perez offered to help, "I have a dodge transmission in the back of my house. You take it and it's yours!"

When we got to Mr. Perez's house, we saw various vehicles covered in tarps. He came up to one of the vehicles, uncovered it and there it was, a 1970 Plymouth Duster. A 318 Mopar engine with a 727 torque flight 3-speed automatic transmission. Mr. Perez looked at me and said, "Let me tell you a story about this car."

"It must've been around 1974 or '76. This was in downtown Brownsville on Fronton Street. Back then, a lot of the roads were *calles de caliche*—no pavement, just dust and rock. My friends and I at night would go downtown and we would race. One night, my brother wanted to race, but he didn't have a car. He begged me to borrow mine. At first I told him, 'Hell no.' But he kept asking over and over until I finally said yes with one condition: I'd ride shotgun.

“So we both pull up to the line, my brother driving, me as a passenger, against a 1969 Dodge Charger.

“The light goes green and we take off. We’re keeping pace with the Charger, but little by little, he starts pulling ahead. The Charger makes a turn onto the street, but my brother never played by the rules. Instead of turning on the street, he cuts into an alley just before the street.

“The buildings lined all along the street and from the alleyway, through the openings, we can see the charger matching us in speed. I look at my brother and I can see it on his face—he’s planning to shoot out of the alley, cut the Charger off, make the turn, and steal the race.

“He presses the gas harder. The front end of the Duster lifts as we accelerate. I look ahead and see a refrigerator box in the middle of the alleyway. I yell at my brother to stop. He instead gives it even more gas and pushes the pedal to the floor.

“I don’t take any chances. I grab the shifter and force it from drive to neutral. The transmission disengages and the engine revs high to the point of blowing up. I remember how it whistled and shrieked at the same time. My brother then slammed the brakes stopping inches away from the refrigerator box.

“The charger turns the corner and wins the race. My brother and I begin to argue, we even start giving *cachetadas* to one another. He’s there hitting me for losing the race. I'm hitting him for hitting me back and blowing my engine and we’re just there fighting.

“Meanwhile we start to see the refrigerator box move. We both stop arguing and instead stare in disbelief as the

refrigerator box grows a pair of legs. Two little sets of feet shuffle out from underneath.

"There were two kids in the box, playing Tank. If I hadn't done what I did, we would've killed those poor kids. My brother and I sat there in silence and from that day on we never raced again."

My father and I never took the transmission out of the Duster and I still have it to this day. This story has always stayed with me because it made me understand how much our choices matter. In one split second, everything could've changed. Lives lost, families broken, and a mistake that could never be undone. Hearing that story at fifteen, when all I cared about was getting a car, made me realize that responsibility comes with every decision we make, whether we're ready for it or not.

That Time I Dropped a Glass of Milk

The following is an exaggerated recount and retelling of an old childhood memory and the only reason why I ever tell the story is to make my mother laugh. So here it goes.

When I was about ten years old, I had just come in from outside. I was probably either climbing trees, out playing with the neighborhood kids, or maybe playing games with my siblings. But when I came into the house I had this insatiable thirst, one that would not be quenched with just simply the *manguera* water. No, I needed something colder than that.

So I looked in the fridge and there was this gallon of milk, frozen cold. Keep in mind I'm ten years old at the time and drinking milk with anything was the norm, especially in school where they would serve us a rectangular pizza with a carton of milk and an orange and expect kids to go about their day as if they're not about to have diarrhea after eating a meal like that. But I digress.

I began to pour the gallon of milk into one of those Rudy's BBQ plastic cups they give you. Yes, in my family, we always used plastic cups from different restaurants as drinking cups in our house, even the local gas station cups. They were the best! So, back to the story, as I poured the milk into the Rudy's plastic cup, you could see the gallon expand and contract as the milk flowed out. This meant the jug was tilted so far that the opening was facing downward and couldn't properly "breathe," preventing air from entering the container and causing the milk to pour unevenly. Keep in mind, I was ten and thirsty.

I poured the milk to the brim of the cup and carefully walked around my mother who was in the kitchen washing dishes at the time. Well I must've been too careful because she couldn't hear me and when she turned she bumped into me and that large cup of milk fell to the floor.

At that moment, I looked up at my mother and saw the anger in her eyes, a rage only a few know or understand. I knew I was done for and instead of getting a "talkin to" I decided to run away instead, afraid to face the consequences of dropping a literal half gallon cup of milk on the floor. I remember bolting out the front door, thinking I was in the clear just because I had made it outside. Then I turned, only to see my mother, with a *chancla* in each hand, sprinting down the porch ramp towards me like Robert Patrick's character, the T-1000, chasing down John Connor from *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*

I didn't just stop running when I reached the front yard fence. In my ten year old mind I thought to myself, "If I go past the fence and into the street where all the neighbors are, she won't do anything."

Well, I ran past our front fence and into the street yelling and screaming from the chase and sure enough she kept following me. All the neighbors looked at my mother chasing down her ten year old son. The funny thing was that my mother was gaining on me. She literally ran like a T-1000 and finally caught up to me.

I threw myself to the floor and laid out on my back in the street, blocking each *chanclaso,* covering the areas where she was aiming, but since she had two, one in each hand, she eventually got them in. I remember looking around at all the neighbors watching me get my *chanclasos*. I think the

embarrassment of being publicly reprimanded was way worse than the actual *chanclasos*. After my mom was done, she straightened back up and stepped back away from my mangled/chueco" body. Out of breath and with everyone watching, both *chanclas* in each of her hands said to me, “Now get up and go inside before people think I beat you.”

She always laughs at that ending. Love you, Mom.

Translations

Acuerdas *- Remembering/ to remember*

Amigo *- Friend*

Apoyarnos *– To support*

Cachetadas *- Slaps or hitting*

Calle de caliche *- Dirt road made of sedimentary rock made of calcium carbonate mixed with sand, clay, and gravel*

Carne asada *– Grilled meat; also refers to a social cookout or barbecue gathering*

Casar / Casarse *– To marry / to get married*

Chanclas/ Chanclazos *– Sandals/ spanking with sandals*

Chile *– Chili pepper; can also refer to spice or heat in food*

Chueco *– Crooked*

Como (¿Cómo?) *– What? / How? (depends on tone and context)*

Contigo *– With you*

Cositas *– Little things; imply small items*

Cultura *– Culture*

Daños *– Damages; can imply trouble, mischief, or harm depending on context*

Dicen *– They say*

Disfraces (Los disfraces) *– Costumes*

Entiendo *– I understand*

Güerita *- term of endearment for little blonde girl /fair-skinned girl*

Idiomas *– Languages*

Independencia *– Independence*

La Pulga *– Flea; commonly used to mean flea market*

La víbora *– The snake; a literal snake, or metaphorically to betrayal or danger*

Limón *– Lime (in most Mexican contexts)*

Mayonesa *– Mayonnaise*

Medio Litro *– Half a liter*

Memorias *– Memories; can also mean memoirs*

Mentiras *– Lies; can imply fictional or embellished stories*

Muy bien, güerita *– Very good, blondie/light-skinned girl; can be friendly or teasing*

Nachos *– Tortilla chips with cheese and toppings*

Negocio (En este negocio, no se hacen preguntas, güerita) *– Business; "In this business, we don't ask questions, blondie"*

No te tardes *– Don't take too long*

Nuestros *– Our (plural masculine)*

Padres *– Parents*

Pocho *– A Mexican-American who has lost fluency in Spanish or is culturally Americanized*

Pobretones *– Very poor people; informal, sometimes dismissive or exaggerated*

Poemas *– Poems*

Practicamos *– We practice*

Puedo *– I can / I am able to*

Queso *– Cheese*

Ricos *– Rich or delicious (depending on context)*

Sepa la chingada *– Who the hell knows; vulgar, expresses uncertainty*

Sopas *– Soups; often simple, homemade dishes*

Spiropapas *– Spiral-cut fried potatoes, often served on a stick*

Te amo *– I love you (deep, serious love)*

Trabajar / Trabajando *– To work / working*

Valor de dos personas *– The value of two people*

Volveré pronto *– I'll be back soon*

Ya lo sabes *– You already know*

Poem Translation for *Mis Pajaritos*

Abrir (abren sus alas) – To open (they open their wings)

Alas – Wings

Alma – Soul

Aprendiendo – Learning

Brillar – To shine

Cantar (el cantar) – To sing; "song" or "act of singing" in poetic form

Corazón – Heart (emotional, symbolic center)

Dejar (dejando) – To leave; "leaving"

Despegar – To take off (like a bird or plane)

Dolor / Duela – Pain; "duela" = "it hurts" (subjunctive, emotional tone)

Eco – Echo

Encontrar (encontrar / encontrar) – To find; "encontrar" / "encontrar(se)" = to encounter again

Enseñar – To teach

Estar (estén) – To be (temporary state; "even if they are")

Invierno – Winter

Ir (se va / se vayan) – To go; "it goes," "they leave"

Jamás / Nunca más – Never again

Lejos – Far away

Lugar – Place

Maestro – Teacher

Manguera – Water hose

Mar – Sea / ocean

Mirar – To look / to watch

Mis Mentiras – My lies

Mundo – World

Otoño – Autumn

Pajaritos – Little birds (affectionate/diminutive form)

Pasar (pasa el tiempo) – To pass (time passes)

Permanecer (se van a quedar) – To remain / stay

Poder (pueden) – To be able to / can

Primavera – Spring

Quedarse – To stay / remain

Rápido – Fast / quickly

Recordar – To remember / to remind

Regresar (regresan) – To return

Siempre – Always

Silencio – Silence

Soltar – To let go / release

Sueños – Dreams

Tiempo – Time

Trabajo – Work

Verano – Summer

Volar – To fly

Volver (vuelve / vuelvo) – To return / come back

Key Poetic Phrases (with meaning)

"Cómo nos pasa el tiempo" – How time passes us by

"Qué rápido se va" – How quickly it goes

"No vuelve nunca más" – It never comes back again

"Con sueños en sus alas" – With dreams in their wings

"Buscando su lugar" – Searching for their place

"Enseñar a soltar" – To teach how to let go

"Aunque duela en el alma" – Even if it hurts in the soul

"Dejando en el silencio un eco al despegar" – Leaving an echo in the silence as they take off

“El mundo es muy grande, pero pueden brillar” – The world is very big, but they can shine

“Más allá del mar” – Beyond the sea

“Por siempre en mi vida se van a quedar” – They will remain in my life forever

“Como vuelve el cantar” – Like a song returns

“En mi corazón siempre… mis pajaritos serán” – In my heart, they will always be my little birds

In *Mis Mentiras, Poemas, y Memorias,* Victor Benavides invites readers into a collection of short stories, poems, and personal reflections that explore the spaces between memory, imagination, and truth.

Rooted in the culture of South Texas and the Rio Grande Valley, Benavides blends English and Spanish storytelling traditions to create a collection that is both deeply personal and universally human. The poems reveal intimate emotions and reflections, while the memoir pieces capture the people, moments, and experiences that helped shape the author's life.

Whether you come for the stories, the poetry, or the memories, you will find characters searching for connection, purpose, forgiveness, and belonging.