

ABSTRACT

Thesis: EYES ON THE PLATTER

Carisa Coburn Pineda, Master's of Fine Arts, 2003

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Eyes on the Platter describes thirteen years of Lucia Landaverde's life after her arrival in Los Angeles as an undocumented immigrant from El Salvador. Lucia's struggles and joys are revealed through the intermingling of narrative scenes and prayers to Saint Lucy her patron saint and namesake. It is the ambition of the novel-in-progress to divulge Lucia's interiority through her relationship to Saint Lucy. The novel also aspires to examine social, cultural and political issues within the Latino community of Los Angeles in the late 1970's and 1980's. The dichotomy of the public versus the domestic sphere within the urban landscape was also considered in the writing of the narrative. Concepts about the body are also present within the text.

EYES ON THE PLATTER

by

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For my muse
and for Marbin

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Chapter One

December 1976

Santa Lucia, Remember me? Soy Yo, Lucia Landaverde, tu tocaya. Today is your feast day and my birthday, Lucia. Remember, we are linked. From the moment my mother named me in your honor, thirty years ago, I have reached out to you each year on this date. Now I will need you more than ever; I will need you every day.

When I got to Tijuana I bought your prayer card with prayers in English and Spanish. It is often hard to find your image, I think because people do not like it, but it was waiting for me in color: your face with rose cheeks and blackened out sockets as you hold up your blue eyes like shiny marbles on a silver platter . I promise to carry it with me in my wallet because I have heard from others that you can make money appear in times of need.

Lucia removed a tightly folded piece of paper from a man's wallet. She rubbed the tips of her fingers across three separate hundred-dollar bills *only this is left over, after having saved for a year.* Lucia tucked the bills deeply into the wallet. She unfolded the piece of paper and held it in the palm of her right hand; Carmencita, back in El Salvador had given her the address. With her other hand she pressed the prayer card between her thumb and index finger.

You have been with me, keeping me tucked away safely in dark places.

Lucia had crossed from El Salvador to Guatemala and then through Mexico by bus. She had paid a coyote in Tijuana \$1000 dollars, a premium price, to drive her in his car across the border and then to L.A, not packed in a container through the desert for \$500. Everything went well. Lucia had clutched another woman's ID in her hand as they waited in line at the border entry. INS agents wearing large dark sunglasses, hovering like desert birds, the coyote's foot softly tapping the gas pedal as each car moved forward softly muttering "La Migra chingada" under his breath. They were not stopped. They were waved on through. Soon, they were in San Diego. Two hours later, they were in Los Angeles with buildings sprouting out from the ground. The car came to a quick stop at a corner, "But this is not the address!" Lucia had insisted

"You said Pico Union; I've brought you to the corner of Pico and Union. I'm not a taxi."

This city of angels is very large, nowhere for me to tuck away and hide. I do not know where to begin. It is dark and it is late. The light from the lamppost shines down on me. All I can do is stare at your card, press my thumb into it, repeat your prayer, and ask you to light my way. Illuminate me Santa Lucia. Iluminame con la luz, que Dios te ha brindado. I do not wish to be blind to the darkness of evil and sin. I want to see with your eyes. You accepted Jesus while his footsteps were still fresh and warm on the ground. Santa Lucia, with your bravery you endured torture by those that repudiated your faith in Him. You defended your virginity and All Powerful and Ever living God restored your

vision after pagans had ripped out your eyes and pierced your throat with knives. Grant me strength so that I may surpass difficult times in my life. Santa Lucia, virgin and martyr, please listen to my prayers and petitions.



Cement surrounded Lucia; she could not see the horizon. Cement streets, cement buildings-tall and short, freeway overpasses, as if a giant cement truck had poured the entire city from one batch. She remembered as a child, running through a newly poured sidewalk, leaving the imprints of her feet locked in time. She wondered if they were still there.

She glanced into the pockets of space and saw an occasional palm tree amongst the two story apartment buildings. Neon signs read Almacenes Magaly, Cindy's Salon. Other signs were painted right onto the façade of windowless squat edifices: Parches Para Llantas, La Barata, El Payasito. Lucia stared down at her sky blue pigskin suitcase and pushed it with her feet. She looked at her watch; the glass had cracked. She had not changed it to match L.A. time.

A glimpse of white caught the corner of her eye. A dark-skinned woman in a white dress was crossing the street at the corner. Lucia quickly un-crumpled the piece of paper she held in her hand and began approaching the woman. "Perdone Señora, but I am looking for this address," showing the woman the paper.

“Oh, that is far away, about eight blocks.”

“Gracias.”

Lucia had crossed three countries; another eight blocks did not seem significant. She lifted the suitcase up with her left arm, shifting her weight to her right hip and began to walk.

Santa Lucia, I do not like the way things are looking at all. It is night but it is not dark enough. I wish it were darker; I would feel safer. There are too many lights; they are cloudy lights, dirty, so the night is gray instead of black. People stand in doorways and alleys, looking strange. A silver car keeps driving past me, four bald heads with crazy black eyes, staring. Promise me Lucia that nothing bad will happen. How many more blocks? My feet feel like they are going to squish out of my shoes. I see the moon, Lucia, a cloud just uncovered it and it is now glowing. Is it meant to guide me Lucia? Meant to light my way?

There was white paint peeling off the door. Lucia hesitated, but knocked anyway. Her feet were swollen from the walk; it had been 10 blocks instead of eight. A vaguely familiar face appeared at the door.

“Ricardo Molina?”

The man stared back, “Si.”

“Soy Lucia Landaverde, Flora Estela and Esteban’s granddaughter. Carmencita from the hair salon gave me your address before I left.”

“Oh, si. Now I recognize you! Elmer’s girlfriend.” He grasped her hand, “You came all by yourself? Does Elmer know you’re here?”

“Yes, I came by myself. Elmer does not know I am here, but I will seek him out when the time is right. He asked me to come, you know.”

“Come in,” he picked up her suitcase. “You can stay here as long as you need to and we will help you get settled, have a seat, you must be exhausted. Daniela! Look who is here! Lucy, from *el barrio*.”

Daniela emerged from another room, most likely the kitchen. She wiped her hands on her apron, “Lucy, is it really you?” Daniela kissed Lucia on the cheek.

She looked as thin and well-kept as Lucia remembered-her hair half up and half down held by a pretty plastic pearl clip.

“It’s been four years since we saw you. Hasn’t it Lucia?”

“I haven’t kept track as closely as you have, but that seems right.”

“Yes we came in 1972, right after the so-called election.” Ricardo stated

“Things are worse now.”

“How are you grandparents?” asked Daniela.

“They are getting very old, but my aunt is there to take care of them.”

“You must call them to let them know that you have arrived safely. Here.” Daniela handed Lucia the phone. Lucia sat down on a tan couch covered by thick plastic.

“But it will be expensive”

“I insist.”

“God bless you.”

“011 then 503 then the number.”

“Alo?” The voice sounded distant; there was an echo, as though she were speaking from a cave.

“Tita?”

“Lucy?”

“Si.”

Tita’s voice crackled. “Donde estas?”

“Los Angeles.”

“Gracias a Dios. Con Elmer?” She sounded out of breath.

“No, los Molina. Dile a Papito que lo quiero mucho. Y a Tia tambien.”

“Que Dios te acompañe, hija.”

“A ti también Tita.”

You will rescue my grace from the torment of the ocean. Lucia curled into a ball on the Molina's sofa and sang her favorite church tunes softly, clinging to her rosary: Tú, has venido a la orilla, no has buscado ni a sabios ni a ricos. Tan sólo quieres que yo te siga. Señor, me has mirado a los ojos, sonriendo has dicho mi nombre. En la arena he dejado mi barca: junto a Ti buscaré otro mar. Tú, sabes bien lo que tengo, en mi barca no hay oro ni espada, tan sólo redes y mi trabajo. Tú, necesitas mis manos, mi cansancio que a otros descansen, amor que quiera seguir amando. Tú, pescador de otros lagos, ansia eterna de hombres que esperan. Junto a ti buscare otro mar.

Lord, when you came to the seashore, you weren't seeking the wise or the wealthy, but only asking that I might follow. O Lord, in my eyes you were gazing, kindly smiling, my name you were saying; all I treasure I have left on the sand there; close to you I will find other seas. Lord, you knew what my boat carried: neither money, nor weapons for fighting, but nets for fishing, my daily labor. Lord, have you need of my labor, hands for service, a heart made for loving, my arms for lifting the poor and the broke. Lord, send me where you would have me, to a village, or heart of a city; I will remember that you are with me. Close to you I will find other seas.¹



Ricardo took Lucia down Alvarado Street to a 1-hour photo next to a Pollo Campero restaurant.

“We need a mica for the lady, but not a cheap one, a good one.”

“\$100.”

“Ricardo? That’s too....”

“Shh. Let me talk to him.”

“I have brought you three other people. I don’t have to, you know. There are other places I can go. Right outside your shop one guy is selling ID’s for \$20 to college kids. You do good work, but \$100 is too much for this lady and I don’t have to bring anyone back.”

“Okay, okay, \$50, but only cause she’s a lady. When you become a lawyer Mr. Molina, you better not forget me, eh? I’ll throw in a social at no cost.”

“I never forget a favor.”

“Okay Señorita, sit down, smile. Pull your hair out of your face.”

The flash went off.

“Regrese en una hora.”

“Lucy, lets get something to eat, and we’ll come back.”

They went next door to the Pollo Campero, it looked just like the ones in San Salvador. Ricardo ordered a Rotisserie chicken and Lucia ordered hers fried. They ate their chicken with corn tortillas and sipped Pepsi, wiping the juices with thin yellow napkins.

“I’m working right now as a paralegal. I’m going to become an immigration lawyer one day. Daniela and I received asylum as a result of the assassination attempt. It won’t be that easy for you. We’ll take things one step at a time. I’ll have to do some reading, we might be able to work out a work permit if we find you an employer that is willing to sponsor you; there’s also talk of amnesty for those that are already here, after all, they do want our taxes, but it will take time before that gets passed. The ID is just for safety right now, in case of a raid. You’ll also be able to move around more easily.”

“So much formality, paperwork here, paperwork there, but I will do what I need to. A lawyer, that is impressive and ambitious. I didn’t come here with such ambitions. I don’t even know why I came. It wasn’t just Elmer, it was...”

“The I.D should be almost ready.”

They returned to the photo shop and the man emerged from the back room holding the plastic card, “Even the DMV wouldn’t be able to tell this one’s a fake,” he handed it to Lucia along with a what looked like a blue business card.

Lucia looked the id over and then wrinkled her face.

“What’s wrong?”

“The date. December 17, that’s today’s date, that’s not my birthday. You have to change it, my birthday and my Saint’s day is the 13th!”

“It’s done already and it’s a fake anyway, it doesn’t matter.”

“But...”

“Trust me Lucia, let it go. This is how it must be done. When we get you your real one we’ll make sure the date is right.”



Lucia, I recognize that I have broken the laws of this country, I've crossed a line drawn by men. I never broke a law in my life before and it feels like it is a sin. Help me to understand what is right and what is wrong Lucia, because I don't know anymore. I just want to live life.

“How has it been for you, these past four years here?” Lucia asked Daniela as they washed and dried dishes together in the kitchen.

“We've been very fortunate. Having political asylum has allowed us so much more freedom than most that come. Because our situation was so public, we were able to come with documentation of the threats. Not everyone is so lucky, some come seeking asylum like us, they too have barely missed bullets in their heads, but they have no proof and they are not granted asylum. Others, like you, come for different reasons, whatever anyone's reasons the community here is very supportive. More are coming everyday. We're doing well here and we feel safe.”

“You were lucky you left when you did. Everyone that knew you was so relieved that you had already left when those students were killed at the Miss Universe protest last year. We all knew Ricardo would have been out there speaking out for the poor while everyone else turned their television to see the glittery dresses.”

“There isn’t much coverage here about what goes on there, but we try to stay in tune. Our family sends us newspapers, but we get them a week late and we know that they don’t necessarily tell the truth. Ricardo would have been at that protest. I am glad that we are here instead. After all, the way things are going there, his ideals would have mattered little to anyone if he were in a body bag.

“All Ricardo ever wanted was to be a good university student, to learn, to make things better and then to teach others. He wasn’t a communist or a revolutionary; he would never hurt anyone. We hope to achieve things here. I miss home, but we’ve closed that door.”

“What do you want out of your life here?”

“All that matters to me right now is that we are alive and safe. Ricardo’s career is moving forward and I’m doing well with my Mary Kay sales. I’m second in sales in my region. One day I would like us to buy a house, to own something in the world”

“Daniela! Lucia!” Ricardo burst in.”

“What’s going on Ricardo?”

“I just found out Freedom House has just changed El Salvador’s standing from ‘free’ to ‘partly free’.”

“What does that mean? I don’t understand. Why is that important?”

“It is a ranking that describes different countries’ political status. It is significant in more than one way. It means things are getting far worse, but it also means other countries are beginning to take notice. Even though we are here, you, me, and Daniela, the story continues in El Salvador as our story continues

here. There may be few of us Guanacos here in Los Angeles now, but more will come. Those that can make it will come and I will be ready to assist them once I get my law degree.”

“That’s very noble of you. It is good to have a purpose and plans in your life.”

“What about you, Lucia?” Daniela asked. “What brought you here? What do you want for your new life?”

“I just knew that it would be best to leave; Elmer asked me to come, so it seemed like a good idea to leave all the instability behind and follow a road where I can make decisions for myself. I don’t know what these decisions are or what it is I want, but at least here I can move freely toward something, without worry of it being taken away.”

Christmas was always Lucia’s favorite holiday perhaps because it was so close to her birthday and Santa Lucia’s feast day. People were also in such bright spirits during that time. Ricardo had bought a small artificial tree and the three of them sat around it eating tamales that Daniela had ordered from a lady.

“Look at the time, it’s almost ten o’clock, we need to get going if we’re going to make it to la misa del gallo. Are you ready ladies?”

“Oh Lucy, you will like the church where we are taking you. We go there on special occasions,” said Daniela.

After what seemed like a long car ride; they arrived at a plaza. There were Christmas lights strewn everywhere; families walked arm in arm laughing and

eating. Lucia heard church bells as they walked past stalls of food and vendors of Mexican crafts. The sound of the bells became louder and louder until the two white domes of the colonial style church appeared glowing brightly against the dark night sky.

“It is beautiful.

“This place is called Placita Olvera; the shops, food, and history are Mexican, but it still makes me think of being back home.”

“The vendors in the plaza remind me of weekend mercados,” Lucia agreed.

Lucia crossed herself with holy water as she entered the church. They had arrived early; the rich dark brown pews were empty. Lucia walked down the aisle and genuflected and the altar. She liked sitting in the front for mass. She kneeled.

Oh Lord, I'm sorry I have missed mass in some weeks, but it has not been because of lack of faith. I know I should not make excuses, but I have not missed mass because I've woken up late or just didn't get the urge to go. There have been moments I haven't known what day of the week it is. I'm learning how to navigate here. The churches are not footsteps away like they are in El Salvador, nor do they have mass every hour on the hour, especially mass in Spanish.

Lucia lifted her head and turned around; the church was filling up, mass was about to begin.

You must believe me oh Lord; you must sense how I love the feelings inside me when I am here at mass, your presence everywhere, especially today on

this most holy day. I can close my eyes and float in empty dark space as I move forward toward a wonderful glow. On my knees I feel alone in the universe, alone as I pay homage to you. The priest's voice sounds like it comes from above, its timbre a holy song. As the crowd recites the communal prayers, our voice is one. The gestures: kneeling, standing, sitting, praying, singing, listening, they are beautiful, they make me feel intoxicated by your grace. When I receive the host I am joyful, father, son and Holy Spirit: bread, body, and essence. I leave the church refreshed, convinced that you are with me and that I can endure any hardship.

The mass ended just after midnight. They bought churros and savored the sweet treat on their walk back to the car. When they arrived at the apartment they took out the baby Jesus and placed it under the tree with the rest of the nativity scene. Daniela and Ricardo exchanged gifts. Ricardo gave Daniela a gold bracelet and she gave him the 10 Exitos de Juan Gabriel long play.

“Lucy, we got you these shoes, the ones you brought with you were nearly destroyed.”

“Ricardo, Daniela, you shouldn't have gotten me anything. You've been so kind. You've done too much.”

“Don't be silly Lucy.”

“I didn't get you anything, but I hope that next Christmas things will be different and I can demonstrate my gratitude.”

“I’ve bought some wine, let me get it and we’ll make a toast,” Ricardo went toward the kitchen and filled three glasses of red wine. “To past acquaintances that have become friends of the present and future.”

“Salud!”

“Merry Christmas.”

Chapter Two

1977

Daniela took Lucia to an apartment complex nearby. She was friends with the manager woman named Maru who arranged a one bedroom apartment for \$200 a month for Lucia. The rent for the month of January was due up front; it would leave Lucia practically penniless, but she had insisted to Daniela that she would be on her own by first of the year. They met with the manager and exchanged the key of the apartment for the cash.

“Let me introduce you to a friend of mine who will be your neighbor”. They walked up the steps to the second floor and knocked on the door that was directly next to Lucia’s new apartment. A woman, dark-skinned, slightly overweight, about Lucia’s age opened the door.

“Rosario, this is Lucia. You will be neighbors.”

“Hola,” answered Rosario quickly then looked down at her flip flop clad feet.

“Nice to meet you.”

“Lucia just came from El Salvador. That is where Rosario is from too.”

Rosario looked up, “Do you want to come in?”

“Yes, thank you.”

The walls of the apartment were covered by wallpaper with large pink roses. The linoleum floor was shiny and smelled like lemon. An elaborate gold mirror hung in the living room and there was a statue of a baby Rotweiler that stared at Lucia.

“You have many nice things.”

“Thank you, one of the ladies in the building sells many of the things from a catalogue. She also sells Tupperware.”

“Rosario is friends with many people.”

Lucy had trouble believing that such a shy woman could be as social as Daniela claimed.

“We were going to go to the Pic&Save to buy some pots and pans and things for Lucia’s new apartment.”

“Do you have a mattress?”

“No.”

“I have an extra one you can have, it’s small.”

“Thank you; that would be wonderful.”

“It’s in the closet over there,” she said pointing to the back room.

“Between the three of us I think we can probably get it into Lucia’s apartment,” said Daniela.

They stood up and walked into the back bedroom. Rosario opened a closet door; the belly of the mattress pressed out. Daniela began to yank it from the middle.

“Be careful, it will fall on you!”

She stumbled backwards, but Rosario broke Daniela’s fall and Lucia grabbed the mattress, holding it straight up. The top part began to topple.

“Quickly, put it on its side.”

“I’ll take the back, Rosario take the middle, and Daniela, you can lead us.”

They maneuvered the mattress around the door of the bedroom. It looked like a snake moving through a maze. The women stopped to catch their breath when they made it to the living room. Daniela flung the front door open and they pushed and pulled the mattress through. They stopped again in front of the apartment. Daniela leaned over the railing and saw a few men watching them and laughing, “We have to give it one large shove and it’ll be in the apartment,” she stated.

“Uno, dos, tres!”

Rosario yelped as she hit her behind against the doorknob. Once the mattress was inside, they slid it across the empty apartment. Dust rose as it moved across floor. They pushed it up against a corner in the bedroom and all three women collapsed on top of it exhausted, but laughing.



At the Pic & Save Lucia purchased pots and pans, a bar of soap, shampoo by Mennen, a tall candle encased in glass with a sticker of the Virgin Mary, a mop, a broom, and a large bottle of Clorox. She recognized many Mexican and South American brands; almost everything was in Spanish; she was grateful that the store was near her home.

Lucy returned to her apartment and placed the pots, pans and broom in the kitchen space which was part of the living room and consisted of a sink, a half size refrigerator and a mini gas stove. While putting away the soap and shampoo, she noticed that she would have to do a deep cleaning of the bathtub with the

Clorox. Until then, she would have to use her chanclas in the shower. Lucy situated the candle of the Virgin next to the mattress in her bedroom; the mattress took up most of the room. Rosario had given her extra bedclothes. Although the apartment was small, Lucia had never had that much space to herself. This is mine, she thought, it is empty, but it is mine, at least for the next month.

Santa Lucia, Can you feel my knees against the cold floor of my bedroom, their caps becoming flat, my elbows digging into my bedspread, burning? The lit candle on the floor is a sign of respect and thanksgivings to you because you like Maria are a virgin and I could not find a candle with your face. You have provided me with shelter and with friends that have quickly become family.

“I know a woman; she can get you a job,” Daniela said, “She works for the Merry Maids and gets jobs for people on the side for a lower price than the company. No papers needed.”

“You have been so kind; you know so many people.”

“Others helped us when we were new; you will do the same.”

“I will never know how to get around.”

“You will do as you need to, one day at a time.”

“The woman found different houses for you.”

“Will I start right away?”

“The day after tomorrow.”

“Gracias a Dios.”

Cleanliness is next to Godliness, Donde hay orden está Dios. I am on a righteous path Lucia. I give you thanks, but I also ask you to you honor my petitions and help me do well tomorrow.

A beam of light shining through the bedroom window suddenly awoke Lucia. She sat up into the light which glowed from the outside lamppost. Her body shifted back into the darkness as she lifted herself from the mattress. She thought about needing material to make curtains to shield her from the light and block people from looking in. The floor was icy on her bare feet; at some point she hoped she could buy pieces of carpet to cover and insulate the floor. Lucia's pigskin suitcase lay open on the ground; her clothes were folded into tight clean squares, I will need hangers. She shook out the wrinkles in her blouse as best she could. *When will I have money for an iron and so many other things, not luxuries, necessities?* Lucia took her blouse into the bathroom while she showered so that the steam would help with the wrinkles; in less than half an hour she was a dressed, not as neatly as she wished, but she felt presentable in her black skirt, green satin blouse, and black flats.

Daniela had told Lucia that Northridge, the location of her first house, was very far. She arrived at the bus stop, repeating the directions Daniela had given her, "At the Pico Union bus stop get on the bus going toward Westlake, get off at the Westlake/Wilshire stop, switch to the 140 in and switch again to the 278 toward Northridge.

She approached a woman at the first bus stop, “Por favor, I must go to Northridge. I have these directions, but I am afraid I will forget or not know how to get back.”

“Your directions are correct. Don’t worry, you’ll find your way. Here, take this with you,” she said, handing Lucia a pamphlet, “this is the bus schedule for the major lines. Whenever you have doubts call the number on the back, the one in our language and it will give you exact directions to the place you are going.”

“Dios te bendiga, thank you for your graciousness.”

“Que Dios la acompañe.”

Lucia sat at the edge of her seat for the entire ride. She feared missing her transfer. She got off at the designated stop and sighed in relief when she saw the correct bus number and color approaching the curb. She got on, sat down. It was early in the morning, but people buzzed about in uniforms and laborers’ clothes. Those who wore suits and worked in offices were still sleeping. Lucia relaxed, the first transition had gone well and she felt more confident about getting to where she was going. As the bus stood waiting for straggling customers, Lucia looked out the window and saw a white pick up truck with half a dozen brown skinned men in the cab; they wore cowboy hats. She saw another group of similar looking men standing in a corner, a van approached the group, the driver leaned out the window holding up three fingers; the men stumbled over each other as they tried to get in the van. The bus pulled away from the curb.

Lucia thought about the buses in El Salvador; they were multicolored and sometimes tilted more toward one side than the other. The buses in L.A. were blue and white and all looked the same except many had big black swirls of graffiti on the windows. The Molina's had told Lucy that cholos were responsible for the graffiti; they called it tagging. There was tagging all over the Pico Union neighborhood, on benches, store windows, and walls. It was meant to mark territory; Lucia didn't like the tagging, it was ugly and dirty. She thought it was silly for there to be tagging on buses, buses were not stationary; they could never truly mark anyone's territory.

Lucia's second transfer stop was approaching; she pulled herself up and moved toward the back door as the bus slowed. Once it stopped, the bus let out a loud huff and the doors opened. Lucia got out; she would not feel settled until she was on the final bus. As she waited at the bus stop, she observed a young man perhaps in his twenties. He looked strange to her; his head was shaved and he wore a hairnet. His complexion was lighter than hers, but she knew he was Latino; most the Latinos she had met so far outside the Pico Union area were of Mexican descent. The young man's mustache was thick and he had a sharp scar down the side of his cheek. What caught her eye the most was a tattoo of the Virgen de Guadalupe on his arm. She stared at it and wondered what it meant to him. She wondered if this was one of the cholos the Molina's talked about. Lucia's bus finally arrived, it felt easy now, it would be a long ride, she had been told. She looked back at the young man; he wasn't getting on her bus. He smiled at her; he looked like he hadn't smiled in months.

Lucia made sure she got another window seat. The bus got on the freeway; it felt like it was going too fast. Traffic was heavy in both directions. Lucia stared at cars switching places with each other across several lanes. *Gracias Santa Lucia for ensuring that I am going in the correct direction.* She felt entranced by the cars for several minutes. Lucia became aware that she had been holding the pamphlet the woman at the first bus stop had given her. She began trying to memorize the different schedules; she knew that if she memorized it she could move around the way the other passengers did. The speed of the bus changed and Lucia watched it exit from the freeway and begin to maneuver itself through city streets. A number of people got off when it stopped at a strip mall. She had been told that the bus would go into the neighborhood where she would meet a lady. The bus made a left at a busy intersection and the scenery changed. Lucia had never seen such large houses; they all looked identical. She wondered how the grass could be so green and think in the middle of the desert valley. She had never seen such a bright color of green. The flowers in the yards looked perfect. Lucia loved flowers, but those looked too perfect to be real, like silk or even wax. Her heart began to beat rapidly, like the heart of a hummingbird when she realized her final stop was approaching. She saw a woman in a grey sweat suit with blonde hair and black sunglasses waiting by the stop. She guessed this was her employer. *Blessed Virgin, angels and saints, thanks be to you that I have made my journey safely.*

“Hello, you must be Lucia.” The woman was sweating, “Forgive me, I just finished my daily run.”

“Si. Soy Lucy” she wondered why the woman tortured her body by running, wasn’t walking through life exercise enough?

“We’re about a block away from the house. Now isn’t that convenient?”

Lucia nodded, she watched Mrs. Masterson’ gestures to try to pick clues to confirm that she understood what Mrs. Masterson was saying.

“Slow. English, muy poquito.”

“I’m sorry; I’ll try to be clearer.”

Lucia noticed that Mrs. Masterson did not in fact speak slower to her, only louder, but that was okay with Lucia, she felt she was learning English quickly; she didn’t need to catch every word to connect with what people were saying. For a year before coming to Los Angeles, Lucia had watched many movies in English to see if she could absorb the language. She had learned many words and some phrases, but she knew that there were many layers to language and she might never grasp them all.

As they walked toward the house, Lucia stared at the sidewalk; it was even, there were no cracks, nowhere to get your shoe caught and trip and fall like in her neighborhood. The grass in all the yards was moist from sprinklers set to timers, not like the dusty small patches that her friends here in L.A and in El Salvador tried to tame and force to bloom. And when they did bloom, they looked different. Tita would pick up plants and flowers from anywhere and stick

them in her garden to grow wherever they pleased. She would make *injertos* and create many new kinds of roses.

Lucia liked the tended gardens she saw around her, as she walked with Mrs. Masterson. Could I have this one day? She wondered. Too soon to have these thoughts, *forgive me father, I shall not covet my neighbor's goods*, but these are not my neighbors.

“Here we are, the one with the red door.”

Lucia made note of the red door, she didn't want to embarrass herself and walk into the wrong house; they all looked so much alike. She liked the red door; it was one way to make a home unique, a color she would have chosen herself.

They entered the home and paused at the foyer. Lucia stared up at the wonderfully high ceilings. Two skylights let in heavenly wafts of clarity. Lucia noticed a wine colored leather briefcase near the front door, if I had a house like this, she thought, I would never leave.

“To the left we have the sitting room, the baby grand gets so dusty; I hardly play anymore,” Lucia followed Mrs. Masterson' slim manicured hand as she pointed to the shiny black piano.

“Here we have the dining room,” she pointed to the furniture oil sitting on top of the table, “I'll need you to polish”, Lucia nodded.

“The living room is just straight ahead, it probably gets the most use; the vacuum is right in the corner, understand?”

“Si.”

“Now we have the kitchen.”

Lucia tried to keep her mouth from dropping wide open.

“Big.”

“I know! Isn’t it wonderful!”

The kitchen was almost the same size as Lucia’s apartment.

“We have catered parties every other week or so, so the kitchen can get a little crusty. See that bucket, those are the cleaning supplies.”

Lucia peeked into the bucket; she didn’t recognize any of the brands.

“No cloro?”

“Cloro? I’m not sure what you mean? Clorox?”

“Si, si!”

“Yes, there’s some in the laundry room, right at the end of the kitchen.

Now let me show you upstairs. That’s where the bedrooms are. No one occupies the other three, so you’ll only have to make our bed, but make sure you vacuum and dust the others. Oh, will you look at the time; I have go fight the traffic. I won’t be back in time to see you out, but my husband will. So, I’ll see you next week.”

Lucia felt very small after Mrs. Masterson left her alone in the big house. Ok, I have to get into a schedule; only eight hours to do all of this, every minute must be counted, *ay Diosito*. She went into laundry room, she was thankful that Daniela had taken her to the Laundromat just the other day and had shown her how to operate the machines. While those wash, I can do other things. She went upstairs because it bothered her that the bed was unmade. It was an enormous bed; Lucia didn’t know they made them that large. She almost had to jump a little

to get the comforter positioned just right. The master bathroom was connected to the main bedroom. Lucia picked up damp towels from the floor and hung them. She dried the water splashes on the bathroom counter and sponged down the toothpaste stains in the sink. She surveyed the calcified tile in the bathroom and decided to declare war on it with the bleach next week, today she would merely do surface work and get acquainted with the chores.

Satisfied at having converted the dank bathroom to a dry fresh room, she returned downstairs to vacuum the entire first floor. She weaved around large clunky sofas and end tables, with a feather duster in her left hand she reached up into corners catching cobwebs. The first load was done washing so she transferred it to the dryer and put in another load. She climbed the stairs with the vacuum only to discover that Mrs. Masterson kept a second vacuum in a hall closet upstairs. Oh well, perhaps this will help me tighten the softness in my arms. After she finished vacuuming upstairs, she heard the dryer go off and ran back down to remove and fold all of the clothes; several items needed ironing, so she pressed those while the load in the washer completed its final cycle. Her eyes kept jumping around, surveying all the different tasks that were still unfinished and it was already 10:00 a.m., Mr. Masterson would arrive at 4:00 .

The dishes! She still hadn't done the dishes. I must be careful with these, they must be expensive, she admired the intricate crystal glasses and colorful china, I'll bet these are for daily use and they have even nicer ones for special occasions. I remember how proud Tita was of her fancy china that was given to her on her wedding by the relative that was related to the president. Oh, how

angry Tita had been at Abuelito when he broke one of the plates because he refused to wash a regular plate to eat his tamal! And on another occasion he had had too many beers and broke a saucer while trying to pour himself a cup of coffee to sober up. *Ay Diosito, please protect them; I must save some money so that I can call them and send them something.*

She dried each piece separately, but efficiently. After finishing, she looked down at her feet and realized that her shoes were sticking to the floor. She wondered how long it had been since the floor had been mopped. It took her some time to find the mop; it looked like it had never been used. She placed her entire upper body force into the mop as she moved it across the kitchen floor, intermittently submerging it into the soapy bucket, gently so that the grey water wouldn't spill out. She could see her reflection once she had finished mopping, and she was pleased with her work. The last load of the laundry completed its drying cycle; she pulled the clothes out, shaking wrinkles out. There were many men's shirts in the second load and she looked around the laundry room finally finding the starch spray. She wished she could have a washer and dryer of her own; things would be so much easier, she wouldn't have to plan her outings to the Laundromat, save all her quarters, only to have to come back home to iron everything. The kitchen clock read 1:45. Her stomach growled; it was time for a quick break. She removed a tall glass from the cupboard and filled it with water from the sink. She went to the refrigerator to search for ice because there were droplets of perspiration over her brow from the hot ironing. But the refrigerator looked very different than those she had seen before. It was black and it had two

doors that swung out. The door on the left was colder so Lucia knew that that was the freezer, but she did not find any ice inside. She closed the door and then saw that there was a contraption on the left door of the refrigerator with a picture of ice. Oh, like what they use in restaurants she thought, although she had never used one before, she had only seen them. She placed her glass and pushed forward the way she had seen the servers do in restaurants. The refrigerator roared and an avalanche of ice came forward and falling onto the floor. Some ice fell into the glass and water splashed everywhere, the ice kept coming and coming and it took Lucia several seconds to realize that she had not stopped pushing the plank forward, the noise had overwhelmed her. She knelt down to pick up the long pointy ice cubes with her bare fingers. After she released the cubes into the sink, the pads of her fingertips burned and begged for the touch of ice again. She retrieved paper towels and stooped toward the floor, kneeling right into an arctic puddle. The cold water numbed her knee as she watched a circle of water gradually spread through the paper towel. She dropped each towel onto the floor gently until the water had been entirely absorbed and the floor was dry.

The grandfather clock in the foyer rang twice; Lucia had not noticed it until that moment, even though it had rung at every hour. She collected herself, filled the glass with water from the tap, sat down at the kitchen table and slowly sipped the water. When she was finished, she took the duster to the sitting room. She sat down at the grand piano, thinking of how nice it would be to be able to play. Dust rose from the ivory keys as the feathers of the duster danced lightly over them. More than once Lucia dropped her hand across the keys and jumped

back, startled by the sound. She smoothed every inch of the piano over with a soft rag, removing the gray shield that had kept it from shining at its best. She admired a glass table in the center of the sitting room and wished she could have such an attractive impractical piece of furniture, purely decorative. After removing dust from picture frames, crystal knick-knacks, and tucked away corners, she moved across to the dining room where she would remain for the final hour of her work day.

When Mr. Masterson arrived, he found Lucia sitting at the dining room table, polishing the shine back into the woodwork.

“Oh, hello, you must be the new girl...Oh, I mean lady, you looked younger from behind.”

“Soy Lucy.” While she could understand day-to-day conversations fairly easily, when she tried to speak English the words got tangled so much in her mouth that she found that people understood her better when she spoke in Spanish with a confident tone, as if telling them, ‘you can do it, you can understand me’.

“Well, the dining room sure looks nice.”

Lucia smiled at the approval in his voice. She watched him slowly move toward the kitchen, looking around, inspecting. Her calm turned to anxiety as he paced around the kitchen and stopped and stared at the dress shirts hanging by the door to the laundry room; perhaps he had wished for her to hang them in the bedroom.

“I’ll be right with you; I just have to check on something Lucy.”

Mr. Masterson picked up the kitchen phone and dialed his wife's work number.

"Hi Janie...No nothing's wrong...in fact, the place has never looked better. You won't believe this, but she starched my shirts...I know...I was thinking, we should probably pay her today...I guess I hadn't thought about that...You're right, she may not come back if we do. Oh, when you see this place, you'll definitely want her to come back...All right, I'll try to get that across...Ok, see you later, bu-bye."

"Ok Lucy, nice job. See you next week, same time, and, we'll get you paid then. How's that sound?"

"Proxima semana" Lucia gestured with her finger toward to right to indicate time passing, "misma hora," she pointed to 7:30 a.m. on her watch.

"Yes, yes, Si."

"Adios."

"Bye-bye now. See you soon."

Lucia removed her shoes when she returned to her apartment. She placed them in her closet and walked barefoot across the linoleum to the sink. Lucia filled her kettle with water, lit the burner with a match, and placed the kettle over the newly formed blue flame. She picked up her phone and called the bus schedule number that the kind lady at the bus stop had suggested. A computerized voice dictated the directions and Lucia wrote them down with clear

and skinny letters. Once again, she would need to take several buses her second day of work. She pressed zero to speak to a representative.

“Gracias por llamar a RTD. Como puedo servirle?”

“I must take many busses everyday and I have very little money right now. I don’t know what to do.”

“RTD prides itself in its effective service and low cost. For customers such as you we have a special frequent rider card. For \$20 dollars a month you may ride as many times as you need to on any line across Los Angeles County, Orange County and San Bernardino County.”

“Yes, that is very convenient, but I don’t want all of my money to disappear.”

“I know it sounds like a lot, but on average each trip will cost you less than a dollar. You will save far more than if you paid separately for each ride. Imagine that you are stranded at 2 o’clock in the morning without a cent in your pocket; if you had a bus pass you would be able to find your way home. You can purchase one at your nearest supermarket.”

“Yes, I see, thank you,” Lucia hung up the phone and sighed.

The kettle whistled and Lucia’s shoulders softened. She blew out the burner and let the kettle sit as she went into her bathroom. She filled a bucket halfway with cold water. She returned to the kitchen and carried the kettle to the bathroom; she sat on the toilet seat and began pouring the boiling water into the bucket. Steam rose from the contact between both waters and Lucia breathed in the dampness, allowing droplets to form on her face. The kettle was still too hot

to set down in the bathroom and the water in the bucket also needed to cool down, so Lucia returned to the kettle to the stove. She checked the funds she had under the mattress, she had \$40 left. She removed a \$20 bill and placed it in her wallet for the next morning and sighed again. Lucia walked back to the bathroom, sat down, and tested the water with her fingertip. She lifted her feet up and submerged them into the bucket causing the water level to rise. As the heat rose from her toes to her mid-calf, Lucia leaned back and rested her head against the tiled wall. She pressed her cheek against the cold tile and closed her eyes.

A chill ran up Lucia's calf, she jolted and spilled water onto the floor. She tried to stand up, but wavered and remembered that she had not eaten all day. Placing her hand on the sink for support she reached for a hand towel and dried her feet. She went into her room and put on green flip flops she had bought for \$0.79. It embarrassed her, but she didn't know what else to do, so she went next door and knocked on Rosario's door.

“Hola.”

“Hola Rosario. I don't want to be a bother, but I thought maybe you might want some company and I was also wondering if you might have something to eat. I forgot to eat all day.”

“Please come in. I was just frying some fish and I should have plenty left over. I always make enough for two in case my husband comes home. I never really know what day of the week he will be home. Most of the time I throw food away. I would love it if I could share it with someone.”

“Fried fish is one of my favorite things to eat.”

“I love anything that comes from the sea. I could eat mariscos every day.”

“I’ll have to make you ceviche sometime, once I get settled.”

“Oh, you are making my mouth water. Let me finish up so that we can eat.”

Lucia followed Rosario into the kitchen. There was also a pot of rice and a pot of beans on the stove.

“On that top cupboard there are some plates. Do you mind reaching them?”

“Oh, these are nice, what pretty pink flowers,” she turned the plate over, “And they are Correlle, calidad.”

“They were a wedding present from Los Molina.”

“Those two are such kind people. How did you meet them?”

“Before they moved to where they are now, they used to live in this complex. You met Maru, the manager. Well, she was my roommate at the time.”

“The fish smells delicious.”

“I can’t believe you haven’t eaten all day. I would pass out.”

“I practically did.”

“Do you want a Pepsi?”

“Yes, thank you.”

The women sat down at the table, a clear plastic table covering protected the wood. Lucia enjoyed pressing her fork into the golden crust covering the filet. Each morsel melted into her mouth and she followed it with a gulp of sweet Pepsi.

“When did you come here?”

“Four years ago.”

“What brought you here?”

“I was 22 at the time. I came for a vacation. I had been saving money for it since my quinceañera. Finally I had enough money; I was stayed with a lady my mama knew. I ended up staying for good and working at a clothing store. I moved in with Maru. I met Esteban and we got married.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

“It was the best thing for me, but I miss my parents a lot. Would you like to see some pictures?”

“I’d love to.”

Lucia removed the plates from the table and took them to the sink. Rosario giddily went into her bedroom and emerged with a pale blue cloth photo album. They sat down on the couch.

“This is me right before I came here at Tesoro beach.”

“Oh that is such a nice beach; I used to love to go there. What part of El Salvador are you from?”

“San Salvador. You?”

“Chalatenango.”

“I can’t believe it’s only been four years and I’ve already lost my figure. Look how cute I looked in a bathing suit. I don’t even want to know what will happen when I have baby.”

“Who is that cute young man in the background?”

“That was my boyfriend, but shhh, I told my husband he was my cousin,” they giggled.

She turned the page, “This is my husband.”

“Oh, how handsome!”

Lucia was surprised at the contrast in Rosario and Esteban’s appearance. He was very tall and slim; light skinned, and reminded her of Travolta. Rosario was shorter than Lucia, curvy, with dark skin, and very curly hair.

“I know I am so lucky.”

“Is he from El Salvador too?”

“No, he was born here in L.A, but his family came from the Northern part of Mexico, he does a lot of business there.”

“What did you do before you came?”

“I worked at a beauty salon, cutting hair, dyeing, giving permanents.”

“Really? How come you don’t work at a salon here? I’ve seen plenty.”

“I was really bad at it; I burned someone’s hair with the chemicals once.”

They laughed, “What did you do?”

“I worked at a super market. I lived at home with my grandparents and aunt. I started saving money in a can for something special, I wasn’t sure what. I dated this man, younger. He came out here, to Los Angeles and wrote me letters. When he came back to visit, we were in the park and he whispered in my ear to come and live with him. Here I am, but I haven’t looked for him yet, so I must have come for another reason.”

“You should call him. I’m sure he would be happy to see you. You’ve come from so far away; it’s so romantic.”

“I don’t know. Don’t you think he might be scared because I came so far? I want to be established first, so he doesn’t think I came only for him; that would be dangerous. I should have written him first, but I woke up one day and I just had this impulse to leave, so I made arrangements and I left.”

“You should see him; it’s only natural.”

“Okay, you’re right. I’ll go this weekend. I should go sleep now. I have to go to a different house tomorrow.”

“Will you come to dinner again tomorrow night?”

“That is so kind of you. It would be wonderful. Such a big help. I have so little right now.”

“Buenas noches, Lucia.”

“Sueña con los Angelitos.”

The following morning Lucia got up extra early to purchase her bus pass. She worried as she handed over the \$20 bill to the sales clerk, but Rosario had invited her for dinner, and she knew that she would get paid soon. Plus, she was to spend part of the weekend with the Molina’s, so if she needed anything she would be supported, but she did not like feeling dependent on anybody. That would be over soon. Once she started adding to her stash of money instead taking away from it she would stand firmly on the ground.

Examining a Los Angeles map, she had learned that the location of her second home was entirely in the opposite direction of the previous home. The place was called Redondo Beach; she imagined that it would be a lovely place with a name like that. The only problem was that the trip would take her an hour and forty five minutes each way. It had taken her one hour to get to Northridge the day before and that had seemed like a very long time. But she would see more of Los Angeles County and that would be good for her.

Lucia boarded her first bus. The schedule had said that her first ride would only last five minutes so she sat on the front seat to ensure a seamless transfer. After waiting for ten minutes at the stop, her second bus arrived. As she looked out the window Lucia wondered what her employers in Redondo Beach would be like. She was pleased with the Masterson's. They seemed like pleasant people. Half an hour after having boarded, the bus arrived at Lucia's final transfer point. She got off and waited for the last bus of her trip. When it arrived she boarded and made sure to get a window seat; the ride would be one hour long.

Santa Lucia, Los Angeles is endless. Ricardo explained to me that it is many communities all within one large county. Some of the communities are their own cities. Cities within one big city, like those dolls, the painted ones that all fit into one another. Los Angeles. The Angels. Ciudad de Los Angeles. City of angels. I wonder why they named it that. Is it for all the guardian angels watching over everyone? Like my mama and papa? Or is it named after La Virgen de Los Angeles? Either way it is good to live within a city with such holy ties. Except what does that mean for El Salvador, The Savior. Named for Christ.

In the last few years it has felt like El Salvador has been far from God floating farther and farther away with each day.

Redondo Beach was very nice, a charming little city by the ocean. Although she had come to work, Lucia felt satisfaction in knowing that she could board a bus and arrive at the beach. The Glassell's lived in a modern looking condominium with a view of the ocean not far from the marina. Lucia rode in the elevator to the 8th floor and rang the doorbell. A young, extremely thin, dark haired woman opened the door.

"She's here!"

A man joined the dark haired woman in the foyer.

"Soy Lucia, la maid. Mister y Misses Glassell?"

"Yes, come in. I'm Mary; this is my husband Dean."

"We won't normally be able to meet you in the mornings. We're usually out the door to work by now." Dean added.

"Okay."

"Yes, here's our key."

"Five dollars an hour. How does that sound?"

"Si."

"Is it okay if I make the check out to 'cash'?"

"Okay."

"Here you go; this month's check, \$160. We'll leave a check out on the table the first week of each month."

"Thank you."

“Alright, well that settles it. Nice meeting you, Lucy did you say?”

“Si, Lucy.”

“Take care now, by-bye.”

Santa Lucia, this is a blessing I had not been expecting. Although my journey to this home is lengthy, my patience has paid off in more than one way. I have a paycheck Lucia and although it is for a small amount in this country, it is the paycheck of a middle class educated person in El Salvador. And this home is much smaller than the Masterson's, much less difficult to manage, not as exhausting, and with a view of the ocean. They will be easy employees to deal with, but I doubt I'll form connections with them like I might with employers I would see more regularly. With just this one home I have almost enough for the rent. That is good. Thanks to you.

Lucia visited three more houses during her first week, one on each day. Fortunately the remainder of the homes were closer, one in Glendale, another in La Canada, and the last one in Sierra Madre. Each night after work Rosario had waited for her with dinner. At first Lucia felt embarrassed to be eating someone else's food night, but Rosario made her forget. Once she got settled, things would change. She would have Rosario over at her apartment.

When Lucia arrived at home after work on Friday she felt relief; she had earned her weekend. Her plan was to see Elmer on Saturday. On Sunday she would go to mass with Daniela and Ricardo.

Lucia's knuckles turned white from gripping the iron railing of the staircase. She released her tense hold and lifted her hand to brush her hair out of her face. She could smell the metal on her fingers. Her heart felt like a bird pushing through her chest. She reached the top of the stairs and without giving it any more thought, knocked.

Elmer opened the door. He was wearing a white v-neck t-shirt that showed his black chest hair. When he saw Lucia, he twisted his mouth in the shape of a question and furrowed his brow, "Lucia, you came," he said in a voice that sounded almost fearful, "I didn't really think...."

"Yes, you wrote me and said I should come, and remember our last night?"

"Yes, uh, right now is not good, I...don't really have time to talk, I have to go to work and I'm running late, but... I am happy you are here. Where are you staying? I promise.... I will come see you soon."

"Come in Lucy, how did it go? What did he say? Sit down; let me get you some fruit punch."

"Ay Rosario, I'm not sure how it went."

Rosario handed Lucia a glass full of bright red punch; the taste was super sweet on the tip of her tongue, just how she liked it.

"What do you mean, you're not sure?"

"Well, he seemed surprised."

"Of course, anyone would be surprised. Surprises are good."

“Yes, but more like frightened and surprised.”

“Oh.”

“He said he was busy, that he was on his way to work and he was running late.”

“Well then that explains everything. It was just a bad time. Imagine if someone came to you just before you were leaving for your work, you wouldn't have time to say hello either. That must be it.”

“I gave him my address and phone number, he said he would come by or call.”

“Don't worry, it probably just didn't sink in and since he was in a hurry he didn't have time to act happy. I'm sure he will call soon and give you the greeting you deserve.”

After attending mass at St. Thomas the Apostle on Pico and Mariposa having given thanks for her blessings, praying for Rosario, and asking for stability in El Salvador, the Molina's took Lucia to Griffith Park. Daniela had packed rice, beans and tortillas. They stopped at a *carnicería* and ordered thick flank steak for a *carne asada*. When they arrived at the large park spread across the foothills of the Santa Monica mountain range, for the first time since she had arrived, Lucia felt as though she had accomplished something. *This is what I have come here for Lucia, to enjoy days like this, places like this, people like this. To earn it and I believe that I have earned it.*

Daniela spread out a blanket across the grass and they made themselves comfortable and chatted about future plans. They were surrounded by many other Latino families enjoying a pleasant Sunday afternoon, children chasing each other in the grass, men kicking around soccer balls, women lounging, couples kissing underneath the shade of trees. They allowed the steak to marinate in a Tupperware container filled with a sauce Daniela had prepared. About an hour later Ricardo took command of the grill and wonderful aromas began emerging from it. They wrapped the meat with tortillas and enjoyed the flavors and sipped on orange Fanta.

“We’ve almost saved enough to buy a home Lucia, isn’t that wonderful?” Ricardo stated.

“Imagine that!”

“It looks like we might have to go far away though, because of there’s nothing really for sale in the neighborhood, and it seems like the further we go out, the better the prices are. But we’ve been waiting for for such a long time that we are willing to go anywhere for it,” added Daniela.

“I can’t imagine not having you close by, but I am pleased for you.”

“But we have a car and that will make it just as easy for us to see each other,” said Ricardo.

“Yes, and I am so close to earning the Mary Kay car, so I can come pick you up and take you places,” added Daniela.

“Your own car, that’s exciting too. I don’t think that I will ever be able to drive. Even if I could ever afford a car I don’t think that I would want to drive. Driving seems scary.”

“I used to think like that too, but now I can easily picture myself behind the wheel of a pink car.”

The sun was beginning to hide and they began to pack up. They walked over to the car and got in. Lucia expected them to start driving down the hill toward home, but instead the car began to climb up the mountain.

“Where are we going?”

“We’re taking you up to the observatory. I think you’ll like it.”

They arrived at the top and walked toward the dome. By then the sun had set entirely. Lucia made her way to the ledge and saw the entire city of Los Angeles spread out in front of her, lights blinking, cars moving. She didn’t know where to focus her gaze and followed large wide avenues until they disappeared from her sight.

Santa Lucia, I have not seen such vastness before. And to think that I have been moving around within it. This city is never still, no matter what day or what hour. I could follow the cars all night; watch them change their direction at any given intersection. I wonder if the decision to make a left or make right comes easily. Is it spontaneous? Will those two cars that are stopped at a light right next to each other ever meet again?

All the bright building lights, they remind me of stars. And the neighborhoods are like glowing planets. Constellations all woven together. If I look hard enough could I see my future in the stars? Like the brujas do? I am a Sagittarius.

I stand above this giant city, looking out to the horizon. There is so much possibility yet I don't know what my next step will be, where I might turn. But you are here to guide me, you will illuminate my path.

Santa Lucia, It has been a week since I saw Elmer; he has not called. Perhaps he is still busy? I did not come so far away to be treated like a stranger. He pulled me here like metal to a magnet, but he is not the only reason I came. Is he? I do not know what to think. In El Salvador he made me believe that I am the special one. I refuse to look for him, but I have this urge. Lucia, give me a sign as to what I should do.



Elmer had three shots of tequila at the bar around the corner before going to see Lucia. He couldn't face her sober. He took long strides. "What did I get myself into?" he thought, "Whispering exaggerations into the ears of an older hard-headed woman. But I love her? NO. I am too young to love just one woman."

He passed a man on the street selling carnations from a yellow bucket.

"I can't go empty handed. She came all this way. What kind of woman comes all this way just because a man tells her that he wants her to?"

“\$5 por la media docena.”

Elmer pulled a five out of his wallet, “She likes red.”

“I like her, she is a pleasant woman, but too passionate, too sentimental, too strong. I’m a ladies’ man, not one lady’s man. I can comfort her. I will comfort her. Maybe someday...”

Elmer had arrived at her apartment. He wasn’t sure what he was going to say, or do. He knocked, Lucia opened; she smiled. He felt a surge of heat in his brain. “Is it the alcohol?”

He couldn’t resist touching her hair, soft coils, so black.

She embraced the flowers, “My favorite.”

Elmer stroked her cheek; it was smooth, glossy. He pushed her hair behind her ear and rubbed his thumb against her earlobe. Lucia tucked her face onto Elmer’s shoulders, closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Elmer moved his hand up and down Lucia’s arm and shoulder. He could feel her tense muscles soften.

“I was beginning to think you did not care.”

“Lucita, it’s okay, I’m here mamita.”

She became limp in his arms as though she were sleeping. He scooped her up and moved her to the bed. He lay next to her and she smiled, revealing a silver tooth. Her black lashes reached out to him forcing him to kiss her. They exchanged kisses while Elmer moved his fingertips across her back and began undoing the buttons down the back of her dress. Being with Lucia felt different than being with other women, it was passionate yet comfortable, but it scared Elmer. After letting him lead, Lucia climbed on top of him until she climaxed

with a sigh and fell asleep. Elmer squeezed Lucia closer to his chest and listened to her deep breaths. He stared at the ceiling, moving from one textured paint drip to the other, looking for an answer to the question that always haunted him whenever he was with her.

Bless me Santa Lucia for I have sinned. I do not believe in going to confession. I stopped going after I confessed a sexual encounter and the priest asked me for detail about the position. I know that being with men is a sin, but it has never stopped me before. We are all allowed our favorite sin aren't we? Am I a whore? God did not intend for me to be a Saint and Martyr like you so it is not necessary for me to be a virgin. Oh, but I must be a good Catholic. Does this mean that I will feel the fires of hell? But I don't know if I truly believe I have done something wrong. It is like telling white lies when you are a child. You know that you must sometimes tell them, yet you are haunted by the guilt, not because you feel remorse, but because you are afraid of frogs coming out of your mouth when you go to communion, like the priest said they would. Your eyes are everywhere and I cannot lie to you. I never feel like you judge me and I am not afraid of you the way I am afraid of God. I do not know why this is, but if I am incorrect in acting this way toward you, please give me a sign Lucy; otherwise you will remain my sister and confidante.

“He came to see me, Rosario, and I slept with him.” They were sitting on Rosario’s couch, waiting for Esteban, Rosario’s husband, to come home. He had

called from a truck stop about an hour south of Los Angeles to announce his arrival.

“Elmer must love you, Lucy. It is romantic.”

“I hope you are right. I am not getting any younger.”

“You are special; there is no reason he shouldn’t love you.”

“I am glad I am finally meeting your husband.”

“He will be glad to meet you. I’ve described you to him and he seems pleased I have a new friend to keep me company.”

“It’s too bad that he is away so much. Sometimes I forget that you are not a single woman.”

“It’s not ideal, but we love each other and that is important. I can’t complain too much about his job because we are doing well for ourselves because of it. Although all I really want right now is to have a child, but we are having difficulty with that because he is gone so much. I tried reading a book that explained women’s fertile times, but it was very complicated.”

“I will pray for you.”

“Thank you. I don’t go to church every Sunday, but I believe.”

“I got to church and I pray a lot, but I’m not very good about following the rules.”

“I’ve never found someone who is.”

“Do you think that it is sinful that I slept with Elmer? Sometimes I don’t know what to think about these things, how to live life and still go to church each Sunday and pretend like I follow church rules.”

“There are different types of sins, sometimes just sitting down and doing nothing is a sin, so I think some sins are worse than others. Hurting other people is definitely a sin, but the other ones aren’t always so clear. I think it is sinful to be with a man when a girl is very young, but once you are a certain age and haven’t married yet why should you be held to the same rules for something that is natural?”

They heard a key enter the doorknob. Rosario bounced with anticipation.

“Esteban!”

He looked just like he did in the pictures Rosario had shown Lucia, tall, thin and handsome.

“Amorcito!” Rosario exclaimed.

“Hola mi chiquita.” He hugged her and lifted her off from the ground.

“Esteban, this is la Lucy. The one I have been telling you about over the phone.”

“Mucho gusto, Esteban Gutierrez a su servicio.”

“It is so nice to finally meet you. I have heard very good things.”

“Likewise.”

The phone rang.

Rosario motioned to pick it up.

“That’s for me. I’ll get it.”

“But you just got home.”

“I’ll get it.”

Esteban left the living room and picked up the telephone in the bedroom and closed the door.

“I’m so glad he’s home. I feel so much more able when he is around.”

“How long will he be home?”

“I don’t know. It varies.”

“I should get going. Leave you too alone.”

“Lucy, we should together, the four of us, you, me, Esteban and Elmer. Oh, I could also invite Ricardo and Daniela.”

“We’ll see.”

“Yes it would be fun.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow Chayito. You have a good night.”

“Buenas noches Lucita.”

Santa Lucia, Elmer has not come to see me for ten days and he has not called. Is this my punishment because I have sinned? How long must I wait? I’ve lost my patience. If patience is a virtue that I must have to get through this, please grant it to me.

Lucia did not wait any longer. She decided she would go see Elmer and walked in long quick strides to the bus stop, her calves burning with each step. She made a fist out of her hand while she sat on the bus and began pounding it slowly into her seat, softly at first until it hurt and she noticed what she was doing. She held her fist with her other hand and tried to fight off the urge. A few

minutes later she felt a pain in her foot and noticed that she had been obsessively tapping it on the floor of the bus. She reproached herself, perhaps she was jumping to conclusions; she would see what Elmer had to say for himself before making any accusations.

Lucia reached the apartment and knocked. A woman, perhaps a few years younger than Lucia, opened the door. At first Lucia thought she had been mistaken and had knocked at the wrong apartment, they all looked the same, but as Lucia glanced past the woman, she could make out Elmer's outline hovering in the background then ducking out of sight. The woman looked embarrassed, the same way a person is embarrassed when the door of a bathroom stall is accidentally flung open.

"I'm sorry," Lucia blurted out, uncomfortable as though she had stared too long at the woman with her skirt hiked up hovering over the toilet.

There was sadness in the woman's eyes, as if saying, "If I had known..."

Lucia walked away. She looked up at the sky, "*Y ahora que?* So what happens now?"

The bus hissed as it stopped in front of Lucia. She pulled herself onto the steps with the metal bar and displayed her bus pass to the driver who nodded his head. This interaction had become part of her routine. She slumped down into a seat; normally she stood upright because she knew good posture gave her a better appearance, but after her exchange with the woman, she did not feel her usual self. Lucia leaned her head against the window.

Santa Lucia, he cannot be the only reason that I came, otherwise I came for nothing. If I have learned anything from all the tragedy at home, it is that you must keep waking up each morning. And this is not a tragedy. Yet I feel queasy inside. It is selfish of me. But it is natural! Even if he is one of the main reasons for my journey, I can change that and discover my hidden reasons for being here, perhaps reasons you have planned for me?

Santa Lucia, God has chosen a different direction for me than I had thought and I must move forward with his calling. Lucy, erase these inconvenient human emotions; they are getting in the way of God's wishes. They do not allow me to remain calm. Rosario tells me, "How can you act as though this man has not hurt you?" She sees the Lucia that is calmed by your holiness with a willingness to forgive. She also sees the proud Lucia that is not willing to admit that a man has done her wrong, but it is that same proud Lucia that fuels the fire. You tell me Santa Lucia, do I need holy water to put out the flames? Or do I need this fire to help me to survive?

Rosario stood in Lucia's living room, pacing. "Both things will be good", she thought. She moved to the bathroom door and pressed her body against it.

"Entra Chayito, hold my hand."

Rosario put her hand on Lucia's shoulder. They stared at the glass vial on the bathroom counter. The liquid turned pink.

Rosario hugged Lucia, "It means yes".

Lucia looked scared at first, her cheeks were pale and her eyes opened wider than Rosario had ever seen them, but Rosario could tell that there was joy behind her fear. Lucia's lips curled into a smile.

Santa Lucia, I may have lost what I believed to have been my dreams, but a life grows inside of me and I must thank you and the lord for such a wonderful gift.

Lucy, I am not a stupid woman; I have lived long enough and seen too much. I have always known not to trust a man completely, but there is something about Elmer that makes me lose my sense. Maybe I have reached an age where I am tired of games; you use a man for company and he uses you for pleasure, but somehow you get pleasure out of the company and he gets company out of the pleasure. You both gain equally and move on to other things in life. This time, I did not want to move on. I wanted a responsible man and a family. Yes, a family. I wanted to believe that Elmer, the most sought after man of my hometown, could give this to me. I should have known better, he is seven years younger than me and he drinks too much. Oh, but his words were like music. I do not know how he did it, maybe it was his words. But he would make me feel like I was the only woman in the entire world. I let my sense go because even though I am hard como una roca, there is a part of me that wants to be loved. I have seen Elmer in his truth. Even so, there is a desperate part of me that craves him and I cannot say that I have it in me to reject him if he were to soothe me again. Despite his

selfishness he is a handsome man. He has a certain charm with women; I am one of many that have fallen for his notions. Except I thought I could change him. He could make me laugh so easily and the boy in him made me feel like I had an eternal friend. Like all the great novellas and movies, he is that dark man that all the ladies love and cannot conquer.

Ay Lucy, I cannot help but feel guilty that I have conceived and Rosario hasn't. Is there anything you can do for her? She has all the requirements: a husband, finances, and time to dedicate to the child. Although I feel blessed that I will be a mother, I do not have any of these things. I have become quite close to Rosario and I know that she will play a maternal role to my child, but can't you grant her a child of her own? They have been trying, but it is hard since he is away so much. She is very excited for me and I believe it is partly because it is something she wants for herself. If it is in your powers Lucy, please help her become pregnant. She has been an angel to me and I only wish the best for her.

†

Virgencita Maria, Santisima Virgen! I pray to you because I need you to be by my side as my child grows inside of me. Although I am not a virgin like you, or like mi patrona Santa Lucia, please have compassion for me as one mother to another. I must be honest, I refuse to confess that it has been a sin to conceive this child, but I hope that you will look past that and hold my hand. I will perform acts of devotion if necessary. Although I have not gone to confession,

every Sunday during the Act of Contrition I pound on my chest as I think of my sins, Por mi culpa, por mi culpa, por mi gran culpa. Your son helped sinners; please find it in your heart to help me. Maria, I am unworthy to receive you, but only say the words and I shall be healed!

Santa Lucia, Rosario has been so good to me. She has special food prepared for me every day after work. She is silly sometimes, making enough food for four people, but she says I must eat a lot so that my baby may grow strong and so that I may have energy as I clean from house to house. I am very hungry when I come home because I cannot eat before I go to work, if I do, the achaques are real strong and I have to clean up after myself in the Masterson's bathroom. But they say that part of the pregnancy will be over soon. I hope so Lucia, if you have any control over it, it is most uncomfortable.

Lucia dialed Elmer's phone number. Her fingers fumbled with the buttons.

"He has a right to know," she had insisted to Rosario, "After all the baby will be his first-born too."

"Haló?"

Lucia took a deep breath, "Elmer, es Lucia."

"Si?"

"You're going to be a father."

There was silence. His breath was short and heavy.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I am sure. I am telling you as a cortesia I can take care of myself.

I ask for nothing from you, except some love for the child.”

“I know you’re strong Lucy, you’ll be okay. I have to go now. I’m glad you told me. I’ll call you.”

Lucy, I know I should not do this. I know all that matters is that the baby is healthy, but I really wish for the baby to be a girl. I want to name her a long pretty name like Araceli or Yessica. I want her to wear pink dresses with bows and poofy sleeves. Her hair will grow long and I can braid it and put clips in it. It’s not just because of the dresses Lucy. I don’t have a man with me, and if I have a boy, how will I know what to teach him? I don’t know manly things. I know it is wrong of me, but I must ask anyway. I know God will do as he pleases and I will accept that.

Her heart pounded as she picked up the phone, but Lucia knew she must tell her family in El Salvador. She felt slightly ashamed, but also joyful.

“Tita.”

“Lucita.”

“Si.”

“How are you mi chiquita?”

“I am well Tita and you?”

“Oh, you know, doing as well as we can.”

“How is Abuelito?”

“He’s pretty strong, as long as he takes his diabetes medicines and doesn’t eat things he shouldn’t.”

“I miss you both and Tia too.”

“And we miss you Lucy, but we are so grateful for the money you have been sending. Most of our money goes to medicines and doctor’s visits, now we can have some for little pleasures.”

“You have lived a long life, you deserve the pleasures.”

“This phone call, it will be expensive.”

“Don’t worry; it is important that I talk to you.”

“What is it Lucy?”

“I don’t want to startle you, but you know how things didn’t turn out with Elmer.”

“Yes.”

“Well, don’t be mad at me, but I am expecting his child.”

“Why would I be mad at you?”

“Because I am missing a piece of the puzzle, I am not married.”

“Lucita, I am so old, nothing surprises me. You are certainly not the first and you won’t be the last. Marriage isn’t for everyone, but that shouldn’t mean a woman shouldn’t have a child. I am happy for you. I wish we were nearer so that I could see you and hold your hand.”

“Thank you Tita.”

“When will the baby be born.”

“September.”

“That is a good month. I will crochet a sweater and send it to you.”

“Oh how I wish you had shown me how to crochet.”

“And for Christmas I’ll make you a tablecloth.”

“How pretty. No one can crochet like you.”

“You’re making me blush.”

“I’m sorry I won’t be sending you any more money.”

“Don’t worry, we’re fine. We still have your Abuelito’s pension and the house has always been paid off. Your tia helps us too. You worry about the baby. You call me as soon as he or she is born.”

“Goodbye Tita.”

“God bless you Lucy.”

Santa Lucia, I went to the church to speak to the priest about the pregnancy. I was afraid at first that he would reprimand severely me for my sins, but he did not and I appreciate that Lucy. He said that God is happy when children come into the world and that although being with Elmer was a sin, it was better that I did not try to prevent the pregnancy or even terminate it. He stressed that I would face hardships since I will have to raise him alone. He told me about a program called WIC that it is there to help women and babies, so I went to the office and made an appointment. Now that I will be leaving work to care for the baby, they will help me put healthy foods into my refrigerator. Rosario has been helping me so much by having dinners for me, but I will be home now and I

should not rely on her so much. Plus I think she uses a little too much salt, I don't mind it so much, but I don't know if it is good for the baby. And I miss my own cooking, it is not humble of me to say so, but I am a very good cook, better than Rosario. Even though I will not be working, I will accomplish things, I will make my apartment a home for the baby, I will build friendships with more of my neighbors and I will learn more English. Don't let me feel guilty Lucia, about staying at home. It is a mother's duty.

“Lucy my dear, you're getting very big. When are you due?”

“Septiembre, Señora Masterson.”

“How will we get along without you?”

“Is okay, Señora Masterson, you be okay.”

“Here, take this,” she said handing Lucia one hundred dollars.

“Gracias. Thank You Miss. You very kind. Dios la bendiga.”

“The new girl starts tomorrow. I know you won't be available for quite some time, but when you are please feel free to call me.”

“Yes Señora Masterson. I call you.”



“Nurse! What do we have?”

“It appeared to be normal labor Doctor, the contractions were far apart, nothing unusual and then she began hemorrhaging, so we called you and now she's unconscious.”

Ave Maria, llena eres de gracia. El Señor es con tigo. Bendita tu eres entre toda las mujeres y bendito sea el fruto de tu vientre, Jesus. Santa Maria, madre de dios, ruega por nosotros los pecadores. Ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte.

Lucy! Are you there? I think I can see you. It is dark, but I feel and see your light. Can your eyes see me? If they can, you know that I need you. The blood is leaving me; I feel it flowing between my legs, hot and cold, hot and cold. The pain is making me numb.

“We’re losing her! The baby too! It’s going to be one or the other!”

“Where is the father?”

“No father.”

“Insurance?”

“Undocumented.”

“She came alone?”

“No, with that woman, over there.”

“Get her out of here; she looks like she’s going to pass out.”

Lucy, you performed a miracle on your mother when she was dying from loss of blood; help me! Save my baby. It’s all I have, but if you must take one of us, take me. I know Rosario would take good care of him if I die.

Lucia awoke; her body felt like it had been ripped apart. She saw Rosario standing over her, with a child in her arms.

“Is this my baby?” she smiled.

“It’s a boy. He is a miracle. They thought he was dead, but he breathed and his heart was beating. I held him first. I hope you don’t mind.”

“It is fate that you held him first; it makes you his second mother.”

Rosario placed the baby on Lucia’s chest, “My life is his.”

“What are you going to name him?”

“I didn’t have any boy names.”

“Daniela and Ricardo are outside. I can call them. Maybe they will help.”

Daniela entered the room and kissed Lucia, “Ricardo is talking to the hospital about legal things and paperwork. Lucy, he is an angel.”

“We don’t know what to name him. Help up us Dani. I only had girls names picked out.”

“Don’t tell Ricardo, but I had a boyfriend once; his name was Antonio. I always loved that name.”

“I like it.” Lucy answered. “And there is a saint, San Antonio, for lost causes. My grandfather used to pray to him to find me a husband.”

“I remember,” said Rosario, “My uncle had a statue of him and would put it upside down and hit him with a belt so that his six daughters would all get married.”

“Did it work?”

“Slowly, but surely.”

“It didn’t work for me, maybe Abuelito should have mistreated the saint like your uncle, Rosario, but that’s okay, San Antonio has blessed me in other ways.”

Santa Lucia, I do not know how to repay you. I will say however many rosaries, but nothing will ever be enough. You saved me and my son. You entered the room and your holiness kept my blood from running out. You blew life into my baby's little body. I dedicate my son to you. Your efforts will not have been in vain. I will make sure he leads an honorable life.

I know I prayed for a girl, but I take that all back. I only said that because of the one I lost, years ago. He was born a boy and that is what God wished for. He is so beautiful. I have named him Antonio because of San Antonio, the patron saint for lost causes. I am a lost cause and maybe he will bring me the luck that I need.

I am most grateful for having my comadre Rosario there with me. She says she did not do anything, that she just stood there praying, but Lucy, she did so much for me. I could not hold him because I was too weak. I would have been alone without her. She was able to give him the loving first touch of a second mother. He is still recovering, so little and weak, but one day he will be tall and strong.

Daniela threw Lucia a baby shower at their new home in West Covina. Many ladies from the neighborhood came. The decorations consisted of pale blue balloons and white streamers. A giant white stork was the centerpiece on the dining table. Rosario held Antonio while Lucia dealt with the gifts.

“Open that one Lucy!” cried Mercedes.

“Oh a basinet. How practical! Thank you, it’s one of the things I needed.”

“I love baby showers!” declared Doña Olga.

“Here, here, open up the big basket one.”

Lucia carefully pulled apart the royal blue cellophane that was wrapped around the basket and set it down on the floor. She began removing the contents of the basket one by one, “Look a bear and little t-shirts and bibs and little towels and bottles. How charming. Thank you Gina.”

After opening presents and playing little games they had coffee and ate cake with thick white frosting that Rosario had ordered.

“I can’t wait till someone else has a baby.”

“That better be you Rosario!”

“Oh I certainly hope so.”

“We should take some pictures.”

“Yes, stand by the stork, Lucy with Antonio.”

“Did you get one of the cake before we cut it? It would be a sin if someone didn’t”

“Don’t worry”, Daniela said, “I got one before the party started.”

“We should get some outside the house, in the yard.”

“Yes that is an excellent idea.”

Each woman posed for a picture outside in the yard holding Antonio. Pictures were also taken of just Lucia and Antonio with Daniela’s roses. Ricardo

arrived and took pictures of all of the ladies together. Gina's husband arrived to drive Mercedes and Doña Olga home.

"Don't forget," Gina yelled out as she stepped into the car, "My Tupperware party is next week; I have some new items to show you."

Santa Lucia, Antonio looks much better since we brought him home from the hospital. He has grown and now has a rosy healthy color. Thank you for blessing him with better health. I am worried about money, Lucy. I have come to rely so much on all my neighbors. I would not survive without them and I ask that you shed eternal blessings on them. I have worked all my life; it is strange to be without a job. I feel lazy, ashamed, and useless. Ricardo helped me apply for welfare because my son is a citizen. I am able to receive money to feed and take care of him. That is why the gringos hate people like me. I have seen reports about in on Univision and La Opinion. It hurts. I may be a mojada, but I do not want to be hated. This is not how I imagined things would be. Maybe it is my fault for being too proud and not forcing Elmer to help. I do not want to force him, I want it to come from him, and if he is not willing to help, then I want him to see that I do not need him. I know I am too proud, but I cannot help it. I am almost too proud to take the welfare, but I know it is best for my child. I do not know when I will return to work. Rosario tells me not to worry, that she will help me, but Lucy I cannot help but worry. I swear Lucy; as soon as I can I will go back to work. I will make sure my son becomes the best citizen this country has ever seen. I will pay back every penny given to me through my Antonio.

Dear Tita and Abuelito,

I am writing to announce the birth of Antonio Landaverde on September 7, 1977, four pounds, nine ounces. I wish I could have called with the news, but I am trying to conserve my finances. He is a beautiful child. I wish you were here to hold him. I wish my mama was alive to see that I have done something good. I pray that one day you will meet him. All these years you have meant so much to me, serving as my parents and grandparents all in one. Give my best to Tia. I've enclosed a picture of my beautiful boy. The photo was taken at a baby shower in front of the Molina's home. They have been so gracious to me and I have made many other friends.

Love,

Lucy

Santa Lucia, We baptized him last Sunday. The baptism took place at the lovely church in Placita Olvera. It was beautiful. He looked like a little brown angel with his long lashes. He did not cry when the priest put water on his head. In El Salvador I had been to so many bautizos where the babies wailed the entire ceremony. I think it is a good sign that he was well behaved. It means that he will be a good child and that his faith will be strong like mine. The Molina's were his Godparents. Ricardo thinks that in a few years I may even be able to be in this country legally. I chose them as Godparents because they are very religious. I know that they will make sure that Antonio's religious needs are met. When they

saw Antonio they started planning a large family, one right after the other, to make up for lost time. I have become closer to Rosario and maybe she should have been Antonio's madrina, but I thought it was important for Antonio's Godparents to be a strong couple. There is nothing wrong with Rosario and her husband, but I barely know him. It is hard for me to even see Rosario as part of a couple. Yes, she relies on her husband a lot for money and decisions of the house, but when I think of her as a person, he is absent. Rosario also thought it was a good idea for them to be the Godparents. She thinks it is good that I am getting help from different friends. She says that we all have special talents that we can offer people. I wish I knew what my special talent is so that I could offer it to all these people that are helping me. Lucy, I hope that one day I can give back what has been given too me. Help me help others Lucy.

A knock at the door interrupted Lucia as she watered her plants. Baby Antonio slept in his crib and was undisturbed by the noise. Lucia straightened the golden picture of *Cristo* before moving toward the door. She knew it wasn't Rosario because she was at the market and would not be back until later. Perhaps it was one of her neighbors paying her and Antonio a respectful visit.

Lucia opened the door and saw that it was Elmer. She gripped the doorknob tightly to steady herself.

“What are you doing here?”

“I've come to meet my son. Ricardo Molina told me about him.”

Lucia stared.

“Well? Are you going to let me in or not?”

Lucia hung onto the door as she opened it wider. She swung on it for a few moments, back and forth even after Elmer had entered. The rocking motion relaxed her. She pushed her body off the door into the open space of the room and asked, “Can I get you some water?”

Elmer looked confused; there was silence, and then he answered, “Yes that would be fine.”

Lucia moved forward, toward the sink. She grasped a glass with intricate orange flowers from the drying rack; she had bought the pattern at a garage sale for 17 cents a piece. She filled the glass just past the top of the row of orange flowers. She did not allow one drop to seep over and carefully handed it to Elmer. He sipped it silently and as he did, Lucia felt words forming in the back of her throat. She tried to squash them as they moved toward her tongue, but she could not stop them as they rolled, “How is your new woman?”

Elmer choked on the water. He coughed and grasped for air, “Went down the wrong way,” he said, embarrassed, trying to regain composure. He grabbed a dishtowel and wiped his mouth.

“Her name is Sylvia. She is well. I think you would like her.”

“There a few people in this world who I do not like. Perhaps if you leave her with a child too, she and I can be friends.”

Elmer laughed nervously, “May I see my first-born?”

“Only if he is awake.”

She moved slowly toward the crib and saw that Antonio's eyes were open. He was reaching up to the mobile above his crib; when he saw Lucia's face he smiled. She lifted him into her arms and bounced him softly. Elmer leaned forward to look at Antonio. As she observed him, Lucia recognized the softness in Elmer's face that she had once trusted. After making sure that he was settled, Lucia handed Antonio carefully to Elmer, making sure Elmer's arms were solid enough to hold him. Elmer smiled when he held Antonio, but Lucia could tell it was not the smile of a father. Anyone that holds a baby, smiles, she concluded.

"I am glad my first child is a boy. Antonio Duran, my name will live forever," he said holding Antonio up high, like a trophy.

"He does not carry your last name; he carries mine, Antonio Landaverde. Isn't that the rule about bastard children?" she said calmly, "I wanted to obey the rules of conduct when I chose my child's last name. Why should my last name die and yours continue when we are not married?"

"What? How do I know if he is mine?" the baby began to look awkward in Elmer's arms.

"Your name is written on the birth certificate, if that makes you feel any better."

"That's just like you Lucia. You're too damn stubborn! Can't you see this is why things don't work out with us? You ask for too much; you're like a man sometimes! That is why I now have a delicate woman."

Antonio began to cry and Lucia quickly took him from Elmer's arms. She pulled him onto her breast and closed her arms around him.

"I may be stubborn, but I have many good traits too, and that is more that I can say for you." Her black eyes looked larger and darker than usual.

"You should go home Elmer," she said quietly, "Come back when you're ready to love your son *sin condiciones*."

Santa Lucia, please, you must guide me. I do not know what to do. I love my son with all my being. He was created through the act of love and with blessings from God. Half of him is Elmer and half of him is me. How can such an imperfect man create such a perfect child? He must not be entirely bad. At times he enrages me and I wish to cast him out of my life and my son's. Yet this cannot be good; a boy should have a father. He does not always enrage me. Sometimes I see tenderness in him. How else could I have loved him? And what of the other women who also love him? Even though I could tell his feelings were not those of a father as he held Antonio, a feeling of hope still swelled in me and I could picture the three of us in bed together, laughing. Lucy, which direction is right? Am I supposed to be angry and distant or forgiving and loving? I don't understand. Am I meant to be a martyr like you? Is righteous to let him dominate me? Will he hurt me if I love him? Bless me with a sign.



Elmer walked briskly out of the apartment complex. As soon as he got onto the sidewalk, he kicked a trashcan. “*Putá!*” he exclaimed. A few scrawny teenagers laughed at him. He needed a drink. He crossed the street and jumped into the liquor store. “That woman castrates me, *me corta los huevos,*” he thought to himself as he brushed his fingertips against the different bottles of vodka.

At first he had been pleased with her. His plans to leave El Salvador to go to Los Angeles were still in order and he genuinely offered her a home as soon as he was settled. He arrived in L.A and met up with his friends. They spent many nights drinking and he remembered he was 23. There were many women in L.A. Lucia was an old maid and belonged with her aunt and uncle in El Salvador, not with him.

He had been paralyzed when he saw her at his doorstep. How could a woman go through the dangers of coming to the United States without the help of a man? And then have a child and be too fucking proud to give him his rightful name? What kind of lunatic does that? What kind of demonic woman tells the world, “Yes, this child is a bastard”?

His eyes focused in on the bottle he wanted; not the cheap stuff that could be used to clean wounds, nor the expensive kind you only bought to celebrate. As he grabbed the neck of the bottle of his choice, a thought drifted into his mind. He tried to kill it, but could not, “that woman scares me.” He could not believe the weakness of his admission and told himself he needed a drink even more than he had thought. He pulled the bottle violently, causing the other bottles on the shelf to collide with one another, clanking loudly, but they did not break.

“*Cuidado!*” yelled the store clerk.

“*Carajo!*” he cursed.

He fixed the bottles slightly and moved toward the cash register. He slammed his money on the counter and grabbed a porno magazine from the rack *Lowrider Lust*: two dark-haired topless girls in the front seat of a dropped Oldsmobile wearing their bangs teased up high. The cashier rolled his eyes, but did not react, he was used to people coming in for quick fixes. He gave him his change, stuffed the bottle in a brown paper bag and handed it to Elmer. As soon as Elmer stepped onto the sidewalk, he took a long swig. He was grateful for the burn.

Santa Lucia, although circumstances are difficult, I am grateful for your blessings. I know that in order to provide for my son in a respectful way, I will have to return to work. The thought of relying only on the charity of others violates my principles. Even so, I cringe at the thought of being apart from my Antonio. It is not like me to have these thoughts, but I am drunk with love for my child. I sing and talk to him and I can tell that he is very smart because his eyes light up and he tries very hard to talk back to me.

I worry that I love him too much. I react violently to small notions. It bothers me severely that he does not like my breast milk! I feel rejected as a mother. He likes the formula much better. I even tried to fool him and put my milk in a bottle, but he could tell right away and spit it out. Is this normal? Have I done something wrong? If I am being too particular, cast away these thoughts,

but if it is an indication of some kind trouble, please Lucy, I beg you to change it for the better.

Santa Lucia, I pray for the health and happiness of Rosario. May you grant her many blessings. She continues to help me endlessly. She loves my boy very much and I can tell he cares for her too. She takes care of him while I take English classes at Belmont High School. It is going well. I am learning quickly. Maybe Welfare is a blessing and not a sign of my weakness. It is allowing me to take good care of my son without getting a penny from his worthless father. It is putting me steps closer to a better life.

Santa Lucia, Elmer returned. Is this your doing? I do not know how to respond to this. I wish you would be more direct in your ways because I am a mere mortal and I cannot interpret the mysterious ways of holy creatures. He came with a present for Antonio and flowers for me. I asked him about Sylvia as he handed me the flowers, and he said that she was aware of his whereabouts, "She understands that I must be involved with my son."

The gift for Antonio was a blue plastic ball with zoo animals inside. When the ball rolls the animals inside move and you can hear soft bells. Antonio can sit up now and the three of us were on the floor playing with the ball. He pushed it away in one strong swoop and was surprised by the tinkling of the bell; his eyes opened up wide and Elmer and I laughed. This is good; I thought to myself, this is good.

I was surprised to learn that Elmer's parents have come to live with him from El Salvador. I remember them as kind and gentle. He said that they are anxious to meet their first grandchild. This brought joy to my heart. I am still skeptical about Elmer himself, but his parents could only bring goodness to Antonio. I agreed that they should meet this weekend.

Lucy, this is wrong of me to ask of you, but please do not tease me with blessings such as these. Sometimes I can be too trusting and this is what has hurt me in the past.

Chapter Three

December 1977

Santa Lucia, today is our special day. Remember, one year ago, you came into my life as a permanent fixture and not the temporary presence you had once been. It has been a year of obstacles, but I have persevered thanks to you, and there have been blessings. But it's not easy Lucia. No, I'm not complaining, but I am being honest with you. Who else can I be honest with? I receive assistance from my friends, welfare, WIC, the church, but there is no money for things like gifts, unexpected emergencies, a better neighborhood, phone calls to El Salvador, haircuts, nice things. And although I am not working, it takes a lot of energy to care for a newborn: the feedings, scrubbing diapers, treating rashes, keeping the apartment clean and healthy. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I am ungrateful, but it is so difficult for me not to feel useless and helpless. I am not moving forward toward anything; I am trying to breathe air and stay above the surface. At times I am depressed. But I am so lucky, not everyone has a saint like you or friends or a child of beauty and goodness. I am better off here than I was in El Salvador with things so tumultuous and the economy almost worthless. Here, when I do work, I can buy nice things, my son has a clearer future, I don't have to feel incarcerated with walls of a home, afraid to come out for various reasons. Right now I have a mixture of emotions, these are difficult times, but when I look at my child I experience a joy I never knew possible. I may be struggling, but doors that were not open for me before are open to me now.

“Happy Birthday Lucy!” exclaimed Rosario when Lucia opened the door of the apartment.

“Thank you Chayo, you remembered.”

“Of course, and Ricardo and Daniela are on their way so we can take you out to dinner. We’re going to El Pulgarcito for some pupusas.”

“Oh that is so nice, I haven’t been out to eat since I was working. Thank you.”

“And afterwards, Daniela is going to have a Mary Kay party and all the neighbor ladies will come and we’ll try on new makeup. Dani and I will get you anything you want. And there will be cake and ice-cream.”

“Oh this is so nice. I’m going to cry, Rosario. Let me get Antonio dressed.”

Santa Lucia, it was good to have dinner at a restaurant. I really like El Pulgarcito; they have the best pupusas, better even than any that I have had in El Salvador. My favorite is la revuelta with pork, cheese and beans stuffed between two tortillas fried tortillas with a little curtido on top. I ate one pupusa right after the other and washed it down with jamaica. Antonio behaved himself very well the entire time; he is such an angel I am so lucky, some children already start showing difficult temperaments at a young age.

Afterward we came over to Rosario’s house where Daniela did her Mary Kay show. Gina, Mercedes, Doña Olga, and Maru came. I got some nice

presents. Gina gave me some Tupperware which I love because it helps me keep organized in the kitchen. Mercedes gave me some nice smelling perfume and Maru gave me fancy soaps. Doña Olga gave me some little figurines, the kind Rosario likes so much. The ladies tried on and bought some things from Daniela. It was so nice to see my face in the mirror again after Daniela had worked on it. Ever since Antonio was born and I stopped working, I haven't worn makeup or really done anything with my hair. It's hard to find a reason to look nice when you are inside, especially knowing you cannot afford new makeup. Daniela and Rosario bought me some things. Daniela helped me choose a good base that will help my skin tone and Rosario got me a soft colored pink lipstick. It made me feel like I had something to look forward to again, Lucy. My Antonio is everything to me, but it was nice to think about myself.

We had cake and ice-cream and the ladies sang to me. I felt good, like it didn't matter that there are all these things missing. It didn't matter that I am having trouble providing for my son. All this didn't matter because for one special afternoon, all that was put aside.

“Rosario, you did such a nice job with the tree. I love the Disney character decorations and the silvery tinsel.”

“Thank you, but didn't Esteban choose a wonderful tree, so tall and green.”

“Yes it's so big; it takes up most of the living room. Where did you get it Esteban?”

“They were selling them at a church and I said I want to get the prettiest biggest tree for mi reina,” he hugged Rosario and she giggled.

“Lucy, you want some eggnog?”

“Yes please.”

“Chayo makes the best, she puts in extra rum.”

“This is good Rosario!”

“It’s my grandma’s recipe. Oh and for dinner I’m making my famous recipe.”

“What is it Rosario? It smells delicious.”

“Its turkey soaked in a beer sauce and then I pull the meat off and make sandwiches with bolillo bread, mustard and mayonnaise.”

“You’ll have to give me the recipe, although I don’t think I could get a whole turkey with my food stamps, I’ll have to wait until I’m working again.”

“It takes a long time to make, but it is worth it.”

Lucia watched Esteban play with Antonio, making silly faces to make him laugh. It made her feel sad to see him because she could tell he had a strong desire and longing to be holding a child of his own. *Santa Lucia, please do what you can.*

“You’re not going to la misa del gallo tonight are you Lucy?” asked Rosario.

“No, it’s too late for Antonio; I’ll go tomorrow to the mid-morning mass.”

“We’ll have to open presents early then.”

“Rosario, please, I hope you didn’t spend too much on gifts. You know I can’t return the favor.”

“Stop being silly Lucy, it’s the baby’s first Christmas.”

“I know and it is so sad, I have nothing to give him this Christmas, but I will make it up to him when he is older. After all, he won’t remember, right?”

“With the presents Esteban and I got him plus the ones all the neighbor ladies got him, he’ll be just fine this Christmas, don’t you worry.”

“You’re going to spoil him.”

“So will you once you go back to work and have more money to spend. Children are meant to be spoiled.”

“Do you hear that Esteban? You just wait until your baby comes along, Rosario will spoil him or her rotten. You won’t stand for that, will you Esteban?”

“Oh, Lucy, Esteban is worse than me. Don’t you see how he treats me, buying me anything I want?”

“When we have a baby I will buy it everything,” confirmed Esteban.

“I can see it now, Antonio and your little one dominating us, ruining our finances.” They laughed.

“Si Dios quiere. If it’s God’s wish,” sighed Esteban pulling Antonio closer to his chest.

“I think the turkey is done cooking.”

“Let me help you put together the sandwiches. Esteban, would you mind feeding Antonio. Here’s his bottle.”

“My pleasure.”

Rosario pulled the large bird out of the oven.

“It’s beautiful Chayo, look how golden and juicy.”

“It’s from the beer marinade.”

“I like beer to drink so I imagine I would like in food too.”

“We can drink some with sandwiches, it will go nicely. I used Tecate beer because it’s less expensive and not as good, but to drink I bought some Coronas.”

“It’s been so long since I had anything to drink and I’m not even breast feeding since Antonio doesn’t like it, but I can’t buy any I guess because they don’t want people on food stamps or WIC to take advantage. It makes sense, but I’m not one of those people that would anyway.”

“Be careful, it’s very hot, maybe we should wait.”

“While it cools we can slice the bolillos and put the mayonnaise and mustard on them.”

“You’re right, why can’t I ever think of things like that. How many do you think you could eat?”

“I don’t want to seem greedy, but I might be able to eat three.”

“Me too! But you just had a baby so you still need a lot of food. But I have no excuse, it’s no wonder nothing fits!”

“It’s no excuse, it’s been four months, I shouldn’t need three large turkey sandwiches.”

“I think you’re looking skinny, skinnier than you should be. I swear the food stamps and the WIC don’t provide you with enough nourishment for you or the boy. If I weren’t feeding you too, you would disappear Lucy.”

“You’re right, I have lost some weight and Antonio is not as large as I would like, so eating three sandwiches should be just fine.”

“Yes, just fine. Three for me, three for you, and four for Esteban. I’ll have enough left over for tomorrow and I can give some to Ricardo and Daniela.”

“I’ve sliced all the bread now pass me the mayonnaise and I’ll start smearing them and you can add the mustard.”

“Make sure you put a lot, it takes very good with a lot of mayonnaise.”

“Of course.”

“I think it’s cooled. I’ll start carving it.”

“Oh Rosario these look amazing. I would have never thought to make sandwiches after roasting a turkey. I would have just eaten the turkey by itself, but this is even better.”

“Esteban, the food’s ready.”

“Antonio’s asleep, what should I do with him?”

“Lay him down on our bed, right in the middle and surround him with pillows so he doesn’t roll off.”

They sat around the table taking large bites of turkey sandwich.

“There’s nothing better than Mexican bolillo bread,” Esteban proclaimed after a hard swallow.

“I buy it all the time at the bakery on the corner.”

“The Coronas go well with the sandwiches.”

“Another excellent Mexican import!”

“Ay Esteban we don’t want to hear how Mexico is better than El Salvador. That gets so old every time.”

“It’s not my fault we have such wonderful things.”

“Oh let him Rosario, he usually has to deal with you and me going on and on about El Salvador.”

“Reina, you’ve outdone yourself this time, the food is excellent. After dinner we’ll open presents.”

“I love presents, giving them and receiving them, it’s so much fun.”

“This time of year is my favorite. Maybe it’s because my birthday is right before Christmas, but I always feel good this time of year. People are always in a good mood and there’s special food to eat.”

“Oh for desert I made flan.”

“Ay Rosario, how decadent.”

After sinking their forks into the gelatin texture of the flan and savoring its sweetness, they congregated around the Christmas tree.

“It’s a shame the baby is sleeping.”

“He’s too little to open them anyway.”

“Well, you can open them for him.”

“Reina, open mine first.”

“I bet it’s real nice Rosario, open it.”

“Oh my goodness Esteban, it’s beautiful, look Lucy it’s a ring with swirls encrusted with diamonds and rubies. Oh Esteban you know my style exactly. Where did you get it?”

“At the jewelry district.”

“Rosario it’s fabulous.”

“Only the best for my Reina. Open the gift we got you, Lucy.”

“This one’s from both of you, you know you shouldn’t have.”

“Hush Lucy and open it.”

She tore the paper and found a blue leather album inside, she opened it and found pictures of Antonio and her at the hospital, arriving at home, pictures of the shower, strands of Antonio’s hair caught between the clear plastic sheets and the adhesive backing.

“This is so touching, all these wonderful memories.”

“The Molina’s asked me to give you this, it goes with our present.”

“Oh my goodness, it’s a camera! It’s wonderful. For special occasions like today, to save the memories forever, to pass them to Antonio.”

“This isn’t much Esteban, but Rosario told me how much you liked it so I baked you some buddin.”

“Thank you Lucy, I do love Salvadoran buddin. If I weren’t so full right now I would have some.”

“Open the gift for Antonio.”

“There’s more?”

“The album’s for you, but it’s not something the baby will enjoy.”

“Oh, it’s a lovely bear. It will be a nice addition to his crib. Thank you.”

“There are more presents for the boy from the neighbors.”

“I think I should get back home, it’s getting late. We can open them tomorrow since it’s really Christmas tomorrow. Rosario, will you help me carry the gifts while I get Antonio?”

“Okay.”

“Thank you for a wonderful Christmas. Goodnight Esteban.”

“Goodnight Lucy.”

Lucia carried Antonio carefully to her apartment and laid him down gently in the crib.

“Rosario, come here. I have something for you.”

“Lucy, you shouldn’t have bought me anything.”

“No, I didn’t buy you anything, but I want you to have this.”

“What is it?”

“Open your palm.”

“Why it’s a gold pendant of an ‘L’.”

“Yes, my grandmother gave it to me on my quinceañera. My mother had gotten it for me when I was a baby and Tita saved it all those years.”

“I can’t accept this, Lucy. It is too meaningful.”

“That’s why I want you to have it. I had wanted a little girl to pass it on to, but instead I was blessed with my Antonio. I want you to keep it because you have done so much for me. You are like a sister I never had. Whenever we are not together you will have it with you. Why are you crying Chayito?”

“I’m crying because no one has ever done anything like this for me and because I don’t ever want to be apart from you Lucita. You don’t know how much joy you bring people and I can’t bear to think of that joy being taken away.”

“Don’t be silly Rosario. I’m not going anywhere and I’m just like everyone else.”

“No Lucy,” she said between whimpers, “you’re not.”

Chapter Four

1978

Lucia rubbed baby cologne on Antonio's soft head and kissed it. She dressed him in a blue sailor outfit she had bought in the children's alley of the garment district. People were already asking if he was a girl since his black eyes were so pretty and his lashes so long. Even though people confused him for a girl Lucia did not want to cut Antonio's hair. She was fond of the black curls that were starting to coil around his ears. She thought that dressing him in bold masculine colors was enough, but people still came up to her and said, "*Que bonita niña*"

She would huff, "Can't you tell he's a handsome boy!"

She hoped Elmer's parents wouldn't comment on his feminine looks.

Lucy took the bus to Elmer's apartment. She knocked on the door and remembered the two other times she had been there and the disappointment she had felt on both occasions. Things have changed a million times over since then, she thought. Elmer opened the door and stepped aside for her to enter. She saw his parents seated in a couch at the end of the room. His mother began to rise out of her seat to greet her, but Lucia stopped her, "No, *Señora Duran*, don't get up, I'll come to you."

"*M'ija*. I am so happy," she said with tears in her eyes. "You bring me my first grandchild, *mi primer nieto*."

As Mrs. Duran said this, Lucia noticed Sylvia shuffling in the background. She is younger than me, thought Lucia, but not by much.

Mrs. Duran placed one hand under Antonio's head and the other stroked Lucia's face, "Look at your grandchild", she said to her husband, "and your lovely *nuera*."

Sylvia left the room when she heard Mrs. Duran call Lucia daughter-in-law.

Poor girl, thought Lucia, none of this is her doing and yet she also feels pain.

Mr. Duran only looked up slightly at Lucia. A glimmer in his eye told her that he recognized her, but he was old and frail and his mind was somewhere else. He was much older than his wife and was fading from cirrhosis.

Elmer had left the living room to talk to Sylvia. Mrs. Duran pulled Lucia onto the couch next to her. She cupped Lucia's chin in her hand, "You are a good woman. I know that my son is irresponsible and cannot be trusted!" she said this loudly so Elmer could hear her, "Please know that you can always count on me and I expect to see my grandchild. Sometimes I just want to smack my son on the side of his head, but he is grown and I am tired. That's what happens when you have children too late. I was forty when I had Elmer. You're still young and fresh."

Lucia smiled, she usually felt like she had Antonio later than most women and Señora Duran's caresses pleased her. At least Antonio would have a loving grandmother even if he didn't always have a father.

“Lucia,” Elmer called, “I want you to meet Sylvia.”

Lucia placed Antonio in Mrs. Duran’s lap. She was curious about this other woman. She entered the bedroom; Sylvia sat on the bed.

Lucia spoke, “I believe we’ve met before, but not formally.”

Sylvia nodded and looked at her shoes, “You have a beautiful baby. He looks just like Elmer.

“No, he looks just like me.”

“Yes, that is what I meant, beautiful, like you.”

“Thank you. Perhaps one day you will have a baby too, so that he may have a brother or sister to play with.”

Sylvia looked up at Lucia and smiled. Her eyes brightened and Lucia could tell that Sylvia was pleased with what she had said. Sylvia got up and walked to the living room toward Antonio and Mrs. Duran, “May I hold him?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“Yes, he will make a nice play-mate, a brother, for my future children.” she said as she bounced him lightly.

Santa Lucia, Elmer has not come by or called in over a month. I have known for quite sometime that I cannot trust him, but it angers me anyway. It hurt me when I learned he did not love me enough to choose me over other women, but with the strength you gave me Lucy, I overcame that. However, I cannot and will not ever overcome his lack of love for Antonio. I know that as a

Catholic I must forgive, but I may never be able to. If this is wrong of me Lucy, enlighten me and help me look at the world with innocent eyes.

Ay Lucia, sometimes I feel like Elmer is a train and I am the train tracks. I feel all of his weight and pressure, but like unused train tracks I am afraid that I will be removed.

Santa Lucia, Mrs. Duran has called again asking me to visit with Antonio. Forgive me for being full of pride, but I told her that at this time I am not comfortable visiting since I have not heard from Elmer in so long. She was disappointed, but I think she understood my desires. She said that she hoped that it would not be too long before she could see Antonio again. She said that although she could not force Elmer to see Antonio, she would suggest it to him. How can a kind woman who longs for family ties be the mother of a man who breaks them? You must bless her for her kindness Lucy.

Santa Lucia, I feel guilty. Antonio said his first word, but I am not happy because he didn't say "mama", he said "gato". I got the cat because I thought Antonio would like a special friend, but I did not want the cat to steal his word away from me! Is it wrong for me to have been selfish? Am I being silly? I should be happy that he spoke his first word, right? Lucy, I can't go on like this. I cannot be upset every time he does something different than what I expect. Oh please, don't let these small notions bother me the way they do.

“Daniela, thank you for letting us have Antonio’s first birthday here at your house.”

“Don’t be silly Lucy, he’s our Godson.”

“Dani, your boy Jeronimo is so big now, look at him crawling over there and I can’t believe you’re pregnant again. Soon he’ll be walking. Can you believe Antonio took his first this morning? I had his present wrapped in a box on the floor and instead of crawling up to it he stood up and took one step. He fell down and I caught him. He was about to cry, but then he saw me and Rosario laughing and smiling he began to laugh too.”

“Oh that is such good news.”

“Look at all the children, this is so exciting, all our friends have children now.”

“I invited all the ladies with children that I know.”

“Hi Rosemeri, oh and Gina, Maru, Mercedes, Bibi. Thank you for coming to my boy’s birthday.”

“Ladies, I have a big announcement,” declared Rosario.

“What is it?”

“I’m pregnant!”

“I knew it!” declared Gina, “I sprayed her with my new AVON perfume the other day and she got sick to her stomach.”

“Gracias a Dios!”

“That means all of us have little ones.”

“And only two of us have husbands!”

“Who needs those?” They laughed.

“Let the children go play in the yard, we need to get Chayo some food and start planning for her baby shower.”

“What did Esteban say?”

“I haven’t told him yet. I’m surprising him tonight.”

“You’re going to give him a heart attack.”

“Well it’s about time.”

Santa Lucia, you cannot imagine the joy I felt learning that Rosario is pregnant! I was getting worried. But I knew you would come through for her.

Chapter Five

1979

Lucy, these English classes are helping quite a bit. Now I can understand nearly everything people say. And I have noticed that people understand me better too. Forms are not as confusing either. I will keep going to the classes as long as I can. I have a student ID, which means that my bus pass will now cost me \$10 instead. You can't imagine what a help that is. I'm thinking that once my residency is straightened out, whenever that may be, I might even be able to get a GED.

"Hello?"

"Alo? Misses Mastersong"

"Yes, this is Linda Masterson."

"I am Lucia."

"Lucia? Ah, no I think you have the.....Oh yes, Lucy! How are you, how is the baby? "

"Good. His name Antonio."

"Wonderful, you should bring him by I'd love to meet him. What is he, a year now?"

"Yes, one year, so I am ready for work. Misses Mastersong, you say before I can call when I ready to work again and my Antonio is bigger now and I can work. I need work. No more welfare."

“Oh.....I’m sorry Lucy, but I have another girl working for me now, Monica. And I can’t just let her go. I don’t need two girls either. I wish I could help you. I’m sorry.”

“Oh. I work hard you know.”

“I know Lucy, you’re even better than Monica, but she has a family too and it just wouldn’t be right. I just wouldn’t be able to have two people.....Wait a second!I just remembered, Dad lost his regular maid, she moved back to Guatemala and since then he hasn’t really liked the maid service he’s been using. He says they’re not thorough. Plus, we already trust you.”

“I very honest, Misses Mastersong. I a good Catholic. I no take a bread crumb!”

“Oh yes, I know Lucia. Dad would be very pleased. I must warn you, his house is very big, bigger than mine, so it will be harder work.”

“I promise I work hard for your father.”

“He’ll be thrilled. Oh I’m so glad I remembered. I don’t know how often he’ll need you. I’ll call him right away and I’ll get back to you.”

“Thank you Misses Mastersong, I knew I count on you.”

Gracias Lucia, it is so important to never forget those you have made acquaintance with in the past. And you have kept that door open for me. That Mrs. Mastersong is fine, but she is a little stiff, and she lives far. Her father, he lives closer and maybe he will be warmer to me. This is such a blessing. You are

always there for me; you are like a creature that I carry in my heart. You have these powers. I am good because of you. And people see my goodness, your goodness, so they help me. Thank you for being linked to me. Thank you to God for allowing me to be born on your feast day, otherwise where in the world would I be without you? I cannot bear to think about it.

It was hotter in Burbank than in Lucy's neighborhood that day. She got off at the bus stop at the bottom of the hill just as Mrs. Masterson had instructed. Lucia felt the weight of the sun directly above her and around her as the heat bounced off the concrete. She looked up at the top of the hill and took a long breath as if she were going underwater. Her feet pushed hard into the sidewalk as she began ascending the hill. The crown of her black hair burned as if she were standing an inch away from a high-watt light bulb. She pushed harder and harder, passing one large house and then another. The one at the top of the hill matched the number on her piece of paper. She stopped in front of it, breathing deeply, but not sweating; she rarely sweat. The house was the largest in the neighborhood, very modern, not shaped like Mrs. Masterson's, but with sharp angles, squares, rectangles and triangles. The house's tan walls and dark brown trim blended into the dry rocky mountain background. The yard did not have grass, only dirt, sand, pebbles, some shrubs and a few cacti.

Lucia rang the doorbell, which played a funny tune. An older man with white hair opened the door. He smiled, displaying teeth that seemed too perfect

and too white; the y glared and sparkled in the sun. His eyes were pale-pale blue, almost white, like the blue from the flame on Lucia's gas stove, transparent.

"Ah, you must be Lucy. My daughter has told me so much about you."

"Mister Mastersong?"

"Oh no, that's my daughter's married name. I'm Mr. Stone."

"Mister Estone?"

"Yes, like Rock."

"Oh. Piedra"

"Come in. Come in. You must be melting."

Lucia felt the chill of the air conditioner. The few hairs on her arms prickled, but her head remained hot. "

Well, Lucy, let me show you the kitchen and I'll get you a glass of water."

"Thank you."

"So Linda tells me you have a child."

"Si."

"And what is the child's name?"

"Antonio."

"Oh, little Tony. You'll have to bring him over sometime. I've been begging Linda for some grandkids. You know, I'm not getting any younger and neither is she! She's so busy with her job and her aerobics classes and this and that. I don't think that she and her husband are ever at the same place at the same time. Well, you know how it is, I'm sure it happens to you and your husband too."

“Oh no, no husband.”

“Oh. I see. Well, let me give you the tour of the house and get you that water I’ve been promising.”

Lucia followed Mr. Stone into the kitchen. The appliances, countertop and cupboards were entirely black.

“I keep the glasses in here.” He pulled one from the cupboard and placed it under the icemaker; Lucia remembered her little accident with Mrs. Masterson’s machine and she was relieved she had learned how to operate it. She liked Mr. Stone; she didn’t want to disappoint him. After placing the glass underneath the water dispenser, he handed Lucia the glass of water. Lucia grasped the glass from Mr. Stone’s hand and sipped the water delicately; she felt her body temperature begin to cool evenly.

“Not much to do in this room, just wipe down the countertop, clean the cupboards and run the dishwasher every now and then. I eat out a lot at restaurants or parties and whenever I hold something here I get it catered, so you don’t have to worry.”

They stepped into a sunken room decorated in reddish brown tones, most of the furniture was leather and there was a bar in the corner.

“This is my den. It’s where I take off my shoes and relax. In December, I like to light the fire. I like to keep this room cozy so no need to sterilize it or anything. Just make sure the ashes from my cigar get swept away. I’m a child when it comes to picking up after myself, so all I ask is for you to remove my whisky glass from the end table when I forget.”

“Mrs. Stone?”

“Cancer. Three years ago.”

Lucia walked over to the fireplace mantle and squinted at a picture in a mahogany frame.

“Oh you like my picture? Yes, that one. That’s me and Bob Hope. You know Bob Hope?”

“T.V star?”

“Yes! I’m his manager.”

“What is dat?”

“Oh, I work for him. We go a long way back, he’s my most famous client, the one that’s kept me the busiest. I’ve had a few others, some soap opera stars.”

“Novelas?”

“Yes, like Novelas, but the English ones, the ones that never end, like *As The World Turns*, *Days of Our Lives*.”

“I no understand why then no end.”

Mr. Stone laughed, “No one does either, but it’s good for my clients although I’m getting old, so I stick to Bob mostly, keeps me busy enough. I have parties a lot and guests, so for the rest of the house I would like for you to keep it vacuumed pretty consistently, the bathrooms pretty shiny. There are eleven bedrooms. I’ll probably need you here Mondays and Fridays. Fridays you can get the house ready for the weekend and on Mondays you can clean up anything that’s left behind and get it ready for the week. How does that sound?”

“Mondays and Fridays good, no other houses yet.”

“Well, reserve those days for me.”

“Yes.”

“How much was my daughter paying you?”

“\$5.00 the hour.”

“I’ll make it \$6.00 since the house is bigger. You got papers? Do I need to sign anything?”

“Ah.”

“Oh what do I care? Doesn’t matter anyway. I’ll pay you cash. I know, I know you’re in between things, getting everything worked out. I don’t know the last thing about the INS and I couldn’t give a damn.”

“No worry, Mister Estone. I leave everything where it comes from except for dirt.”

“Good, good. You’ll have to take a set of keys. You may not see me much; I fly around the country a lot, so don’t worry if I’m not here. I’m in and out.”

“Ok Mister Estone, I see you when I see you.”

There was a knock at the door.

“Hi Gina. How are you?”

“Fine and you?”

“Good, come in.”

“Lucy, I have good news for you.”

“What is it Gina?”

“Remember the old couple I work for, Mr. and Mrs. Holmes?”

“Yes, they’re the ones that I helped you with when they had the 50th anniversary party. Are they having another party? I would love to help you and I could use the extra money. I’m starting to get houses again, little by little.”

“That’s what I’m talking about, they have these friends, another old couple that need someone to clean and I recommended you.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful, that means I’ll have a full schedule now. I’m back at the Redondo Beach apartment and I’ve started at a new place in Burbank.”

“The Redondo Beach job is so far.”

“Yes, but it is easy and they took me back.”

“The old couple is in Pasadena.”

“Oh that’s not far at all. Thank you so much Gina, now that I’ll be working again I can buy some AVON from you.”

“I got a new catalog, not of AVON, but of the decorations for your home. There’s candles that smell like vanilla and some figurines.”

“I’ll take a look at it when I get my first paycheck.”

I feel proud again Lucy. Although I hate to leave Antonio with the babysitter, I could not go one without work. I was getting skinny, not being able to eat the way I normally do and I was looking old. Now I can be rosy again. Maybe they will let me take him to the houses sometimes. Right now he is walking around too much, picking things up, but maybe when he is past that stage and can sit quietly.

Oh Lucy, I really like old couple in Pasadena, the Warners. They are so kind. They are there while I clean which will be nice because sometimes I get lonely, especially at the house in Redondo Beach. Their daughter Leslie hired me; she is my age. She lives with them. I didn't know that people did that here like they do in El Salvador. She is a science professor at Caltech the university nearby, very intelligent. They've asked me to bring Antonio, but I am afraid he will break something. Maybe later, I told them. They made me promise. It is so lovely Lucia, he calls her "Mother" and she calls him "Father." They are the only house I will be cooking for. Since they are old they need more help and their apartment is not that big, so I will have the time to do it. It will be nice to cook and care for someone. It is something I do well Lucia, perhaps it is my gift.

Santa Lucia, Pilar was born today! She was tiny which is funny because Rosario got so big we thought the baby would be huge, but it was all just because Rosario thought she had to eat a lot and gained a lot of weight. And I don't think she's going to lose it. I have never seen a man happier than Esteban. He bought an enormous pink bear and balloons and flowers. Everyone in the hospital kept staring. He told everyone he saw about his little girl, even the people in the elevator and the parking lot. I took a picture of him holding her in his arms; she was like a little doll. I am so happy Rosario had a girl so she can dress her in ruffles and she will be like a sister to Antonio. It will be like I had a little girl.

Chapter Six

1982

Ay Lucia, his bronchitis worries me terribly. Each night it brings tears to my eyes when I hear him wheeze. Whenever he coughs it sounds like marbles rattling in his chest. Please cure him Santa Lucia. I beg you. I know you have healing powers. I have tried all sorts of syrups. Finally, I called Tia Esmeralda in El Salvador and she said she sent a sure cure. Please place your powers into this Lucia so that he gets better.

The box arrived on Lucia's doorstep via courier service. Lucia opened the box carefully. The armadillo shell was in tact, wrapped in newspaper. Lucia boiled it and forced Antonio to drink several glasses of the dark soup. It smelled awful.

"No more Mami, yucky."

"It will make you better. You have to drink every last drop."

He is cured Lucia, thanks to your powers and the curative armadillo shell. He is outside right now riding his bicycle.

They were at the mall. Antonio had insisted she buy him a toy.

"No."

She recognized that he was tired and because he was normally a well-behaved child, he often got his way. He began to whimper.

“No. I don’t have any money and you are not being good, even if I had money you would not deserve it.”

He began to cry.

“No! Stop it with this misbehavior. You’re not my son when you ask like this!”

He began to wail from the depth of his chest making a gurgling noise.

“If you don’t stop right now; I will smack your behind.”

Antonio stopped for a second and then as if to test her, raised the volume of his wail to a scream. She picked him up, sat down on the bench, turned him on his belly and brought her hand down sharply on his bottom. His wailing stopped. She propped him back up.

“Don’t ever embarrass me like that again.”

He looked shocked; it wasn’t the first time she had spanked him, but he probably hadn’t expected her to do it in public. She took his hand; the punishment was over and they could continue with their day. A few people glared at her; she stared at them directly in the eyes, they blushed and turned away.

Chapter Seven

1983

Lucia recognized the thin slanted handwriting on the envelope; it was from her aunt.

Lucita,

It pains me to tell you that both Mama and Papa are dead. First, Mama got pneumonia. It filled her chest up so bad her heart stopped. Papa was so depressed that he stopped taking his diabetes medicine and became very ill. He lasted only one night in the hospital. We are all so sad about their passing so soon after each other, but we are grateful that they lived full lives and did not die of the violence that plagues this country. I know this will be hard news for you. I would have called, but the funeral expenses have been great and they have cut the telephone line. They always thought of you as their little girl. Time is chasing all of us. My next birthday will be sixty; I pray that I will see it. Take care of yourself Lucia, and take care of Antonio. Mama and Papa are watching you from heaven.

Esmeralda

“Antonio! They’re dead! My Abuelita and Abuelito who raised me are dead!”

Antonio stared at his mother’s tears, “What did they die of?”

“They were old and old people get sick when it is their time to go. Everyone dies. Some people die young and others die old. My mama and papa died young, so Tita and Abuelito took care of me. Now it was there time to go.”

“If everyone dies, why does it hurt so much?”

“I guess because we never know when someone is going to die; only God does, so we’re never ready and it comes as a horrible surprise.”

“But I don’t want you to die Mami.”

“Oh mi amor, I will be an old lady when I die, just like Tita and Abuelito, don’t cry for me, cry for your Vis-abuela and Vis-abuelo.”

Elmer’s mother encouraged him to see his son. He would ride his new motorcycle to Lucia’s apartment. It made Lucia smile to think that Elmer was developing a fondness for his son. She might not find him suitable as a mate, but this did not mean that he did not have the potential to be a suitable father. Elmer even bought a motorcycle helmet for Antonio.

“Lucy, let me give him a ride.”

“Elmer, it’s too dangerous, he’s too little.”

“Just in the parking lot, not on the road, I’ll go slow. “

“Esta bien.”

Rosario came out of her apartment.

“Look Chayo, Elmer is taking Antonio on the motorcycle.”

“How cute.”

They watched from the first floor balcony as Antonio held on tightly to Elmer's back. Elmer maneuvered the motorcycle at a slow speed. After ten minutes, Elmer stopped and lifted Antonio and removed the helmet.

“Again, again!”

“No, Antonio, more next time.”

“Ok Chayo, now it's your turn.”

“Elmer, you're crazy!”

“Lucy?”

“No.”

“Go on Lucy, I'll stay with Antonio, it'll be fun.”

“Listen to Chayo, Lucy.”

“Ok.”

Lucia ran down the stairs.

“But it won't just be in the parking lot.”

“I'm not scared.”

“Aha! We'll see about that!”

Lucia hiked up her black skirt; her panty hose had an orange tint to them that glistened in the midday sunlight. She put her arms around Elmer. He took off at a high speed and Lucia had to hold on tighter, he was trying to scare her. Lucia felt a rush of adrenaline from having open space on either side of her, but she wasn't worried. After one block he slowed down, disappointed at not having noticeably scared her. He made a left and Lucia saw the MacArthur park lake come into view. From a distance it looked clean and pretty, a small oasis amidst

buildings and smog, but often, dead bodies were fished out. Elmer parked his motorcycle.

“Let’s go sit.”

Lucia followed him, pulling her skirt down. They sat underneath a tree on the grass. A short older man pushing an ice-cream cart and ringing a bell approached him, “Helados, paletas”.

“Do you want one?”

“Si. Gracias.”

“Cual quiere?” the old man pointed to the pictures that were glued to the side of the cart. The images were faded and peeling off. Lucia considered the cartoon characters, fruit popsicles, and éclairs.

“That one,” she pointed to a cone.

The man opened the cart and cold mist poured out. He handed her the paper wrapped cone, her fingertips stiffening at its touch. Elmer chose a paleta shaped like a deformed Mickey Mouse and paid the paletero who walked off to find another couple or a group of children.

Lucia peeled the orange wrapper carefully. Once removed, she licked the chocolate coated vanilla scoop. She had to bite into it because it was stiff from being in the cart. It was good, but not as good as other ice-creams from ice-cream stores, but just what you might need on a warm day in the park.

“Antonio’s second word was chocolate. I don’t think he even likes it that much.”

“Hmm, that is strange. What was his first word?”

“Cat.”

“Does he like cats?”

“Not that much.”

“Are you sure he said these things? Maybe he said other things that sounded like those words.”

“Perhaps. But they both sounded so clear at the time.”

“You know Lucia, it’s over between me and Sylvia.”

“It is?”

“Yes, she was not the one for me.”

“Where is she now?”

“Oh, no need to worry for her; she’ll get on just fine.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Let me spend more time with you and Antonio.”

“Do you think that is wise? You’ve hurt us before and we’re managing just fine without you.”

“Lucia, what harm could it possibly do if I spent more time with my son? You’re always telling me that my son needs more affection from me and when I give it you question it? Don’t be silly Lucia, everything will be fine.”

He took her hand in his; he shoulders softened, “We’ll see what happens, Elmer.”

Elmer got up from the grass, he pulled Lucia up gently and they walked hand in hand to the motorcycle. They drove back slowly this time. When they got to the apartment, they found Antonio on Rosario’s lap.

“Rosario, help me in the kitchen. Elmer is going to be staying for dinner.....Antonio, go play with Elmer, he’s here to visit you.”

They did not have sex that night. Lucia made sure of that. Elmer held her, kissed her, and they slept. In the early hours of the morning, Antonio crawled into bed in between them as he did most mornings with Lucia. The next day Lucia went to the free clinic to begin taking birth control pills. When she told Daniela, Daniela could not understand how Lucia could take those pills, they were sinful, “What about the act,” Lucia said, “you think that’s not a sin?”

The clinic gave Lucia a year’s supply. **They will be good to have, whether Elmer stays or not. I do not have anything to lose.**

Elmer stayed a few nights a week for many weeks and things were pleasant. But he began visiting the bar around the corner and each night he would have one more drink than the night before. Each night his movements became more exaggerated, his breath heavier. Lucia did not say anything.

They plucked your eyes out because you chose it Lucia, and you liked it, the same way I like being with Elmer. Or is it that you tore your own eyes out claiming it was to protect your virginity when it was really something worse than the sin itself.

One hot night, Antonio sat on the floor in his Spiderman under shorts playing with his cars. Lucia rolled meatballs on the counter. The front door flew open and Elmer stumbled forward.

“Elmer! Estás borracho!”

“What do you care?”

“Esa Sylvia es una Puta!”

“What are you talking about?”

“I won’t pay shit!”

“Elmer what’s wrong with you? You sound crazy.”

“That’s why I like you better Lucia.” He moved forward, lost his balance and brought down a ceramic lamp with his extended arm. The shrill sound of the crash sent a chill down Lucia’s spine.

“You don’t ask for anything and you’re a good fuck.”

Lucia winced, gripped the countertop digging her nails into it. Elmer moved toward her and unbuckled his belt. Although he was not a large man, Lucia was much smaller than him, but she stretched her arm out in front of her in hopes to resist his advances. Elmer was angered by her gesture and grabbed her shoulders, pushing her against the wall. Antonio, who had been watching the scene, stood up and took a step forward and began to scream. Interrupted by the high pitched shrieks, Elmer let go of Lucia and turned around to stare at the small child.

“Vete! Go away!” the child demanded, “Tonto!” Antonio picked up a plastic ball and threw it at Elmer it bounced off his knee. He moved forward, closer and closer to his father, screaming, “Vete! Go away Stupid!”

Elmer moved toward Antonio and then went past him, to the front door. At the door, he turned around and faced Lucia, “I never loved that little bastard anyway because I never loved you, Lucia.” The loud slam of the door caused to jump.

Antonio began to shake, choking on his sobs. Lucia ran to him, “You’re so brave, my little prince, you did what I could never do. You saved your Mami. I promise nothing will ever come between us; from now on it will forever be you and me alone. He is nothing to us.”

Antonio was showing Lucia his baseball card collection while they sat on the couch. There was a knock at the door. Lucia got up. She was surprised to see the same face she had seen years ago at Elmer’s apartment, and later when she would visit Elmer’s parents. Sylvia held a baby in her arms and there was a toddler at her feet.

“Are these your children? I didn’t know...he never said, of course. Come in.”

“His parents told me he came back to you.”

“He is gone now; I will never let him into my life again. I wouldn’t have if I had known he abandoned you. Please, sit down...”

“Your son has grown so much; he is beautiful.”

“Yours are lovely too, the only thing Elmer did right.”

Sylvia smiled.

“Antonio, come here. This little boy is your half brother and the little girl is your half sister.”

“Show the little boy some of your toys. This lady was your father’s wife. Remember how I told you that your father and I were married a long time ago in El Salvador. Well, things did not go well for us and he married Sylvia. Now go play while your Mami talks to Sylvia.”

The children moved to a corner and concentrated on making pancakes out of yellow play dough.

“I’ve come to tell you that you should file for child support. That’s what I’ve done. Elmer hates me for it, but he needs to take responsibility for his children. He deserves to pay for the way he has treated us. Now he’s off talking to some other woman and he probably hasn’t told her about his three children. He told me you had rejected his invitation to the United States. It was so awful, I was so angry at you when I should have been at him.”

“I am glad that you have done what you needed to do, but I don’t need anything from him. I want him out of my life forever.”

“But it is the law.”

“I barely have legal papers.”

“But he is a citizen and he has these rights.”

“I know it may sound unwise, but I am stubborn. I don’t want his help. I don’t need his help. Forcing Elmer to pay is not going to make him a better

father. Elmer never has any money anyway, even if you force him to pay, he may not be able to or he'll find a way out of it."

"You have your reasons, I understand, but your son will lose."

"I am sure you have made the best decision for you and your little ones.

How are you managing?"

"I am with my mother."

"I am glad you came."

"I would like to stay in touch."

"Yes, the children should know each other and play together."

"How did Elmer do this? We are not stupid women."

"We love too much and he can see that. I may have been the first, but you certainly won't be the last."

"But without him we wouldn't have our children."

Ay Santa Lucia!

How is it that the Lord can permit such a tragedy! My chest throbs with many emotions! At times like these doubts creep in and you must SMASH them, Lucia. Keep me calm; Rosario needs me. Such a generous being, never even hurting a cockroach, she does not deserve such pain. There are so many questions. What were these dealings with the devil that cost her husband a bullet in the temple? The funeral was brief, closed casket so that Rosario might move on without people saying, "Did you see the hole in his head, the blood must have

gushed out into the alley in Tijuana?" There is enough talk right without the body being paraded around.

I do not know what to think. What are rumors and what is true? Was he an innocent man caught in the crossfire of the Mexican mafia? Will he go to hell? Rosario refuses to think of him poorly, but Tomás and I have our doubts. I know I should not talk of the dead disrespectfully, so if I am incorrect in my suspicions you must forgive me. Although we will never know the truth, I imagine that Rosario's husband owed something to someone. Who knows what he might have carrying in his troca? All the while we thought he was an innocent hard worker. I do not think that he was evil; I did not know him enough, but I think he was just stupid and got enrollado in some big mess. Ah, just the kind of thing a man would do, get greedy not think twice, and leave a widow and a pretty baby.

Thank the Lord for Tomás. You must bless him forever. I do not know what we would do without him. With each act he fulfills Cristo's golden rule. He helped bring the body from Mexico and discovered that Pilar will be able to have money from the government until she is 18, some kind of security. Chayo and I would have never figured that out ourselves. That will not be enough though because Gerardo left no money. Hopefully any debt that he may have had has been paid with his life. Yes, I know that is horrible to think, but we cannot change what has happened, so we must only hope that the worst has come and the bad has died with him.

Lucy, help us to manage these circumstances. Allow better things to come. Give me strength. I must care for Chayo and Pilar as well as Antonio and

myself. We have very little, four walls for the four of us. How long will things be this way? Will we ever recover? I have so many questions Lucita, so many doubts.

Bless me Lucy for I have sinned. I do not know how long I can stand the four of living like this. You know I love Rosario and Pilar with my whole being, but this apartment is too small. We sleep cramped, Antonio and I in one bed, Pilar and Chayo in the other. I trip over shoes and toys. Every day I pull chunks of Rosario's thick curls out of the shower and the sink. Pilar and Antonio play, but they fight too. Pilar is more spoiled than Antonio and she teases him so much. He pulls her hair, she shrieks, bites him and they both start wailing. Rosario keeps bringing home plants and they grow ten times. The cat cowers in the corner and now she's talking about fish and birds. She puts little miniatures in every little corner, a Dalmatian here a tea set there, water globes over the TV. She even puts little statuettes in the soil of the plants. I appreciate her cooking, but she puts too much salt in the food leaving my mouth like an iguana's. Grant me patience Lucy. I cannot tell her how I feel. Fat tears would roll out of her eyes and my heart crash to the ground and shatter forever. Lucy, we need more space, more money, separate lives. I know I must be patient. These things will come with time, but how long? Can't you help us?

Lucy, Tomas comes by a lot and I know it is because of Pilar. He loves children and he has fallen in love with her. He feels bad for all the difficulties

Rosario has been through. He has helped us very much. He knows that it is too difficult for us to continue living like this. He has proposed to marry Rosario and raise Pilar as his own. At first I was frightened because even though I yearn for space, I am willing to sacrifice if it meant not being able to see Rosario whenever I want to. But Tomas has promised that wherever they go, he will make sure that we are not far apart. Tomas is like Elmer because he is popular with the ladies. This worries me, especially since I don't know how attracted he is to my Rosario. I should not meddle though; that is their personal concern to uncover. Tomas is different from Elmer because he is hard working and giving. He would never hurt a woman the same way that Elmer does. He is the best thing that has happened to us, but I have trouble trusting men these days, you of course know why. I want to trust Tomas and I do, but it does not hurt for me to beg of you, Lucy, on my hands and knees, to protect my Rosario, give her love, comfort and support.

Chapter Eight

1984

It took two hours to get to the beach from Pico Union on the RTD even though it would only take 45 minutes by car, but Lucia could get anywhere on the RTD. Lucia carried a large duffle bag with blankets and towels. Antonio carried a small cooler that was given to them as a Christmas present. Lucia had packed turkey sandwiches and sodas in the cooler. Lucia loved the water, lakes, rivers, and the ocean. Antonio liked pools more.

Lucia, when Pilar was born a girl I had this crazy fantasy that, I one day when they were big, that la Pilar and my Antonio would be boyfriend and girlfriend, but now that we have lived all together in one house I see that they are brother in sister. As if the Holy Spirit created this bond would otherwise be impossible. They have different mothers, they have different fathers, but they are two peas out of one pod, they even look alike. I know the Holy Spirit has done this because I will not have another baby and Rosario will not have one either and children are not meant to be alone. They will have each other as brother and sister longer than Rosario and I will be in this world. It is a true miracle. A miracle only God can create and man can never begin to imagine.

Lucia, 14 stitches! Can you believe it! Please tell me this is the last of it And on the same leg as last time's 10 stitches, except this time he fell on a can and last time it was a piece of glass. Last time they called me at work from the

school and I rushed to the emergency where I found the doctor injecting his giant wound with a needle, Antonio's face look like a ghost's. This time it was a Saturday and we were in the park he tripped and the can sliced his flesh apart. I didn't even have time to pray; I took my white sweater and tied it tight around his leg and caught a taxi to the hospital. The taxi didn't even charge me and even ran a red light to make sure he didn't lose any more blood. The can wound was worse than the glass wound, but the doctor said I was brave and smart when I tied my sweater around it, that he could have lost even more blood. Oh Lucy, just thinking about his wounds and stitches makes every inch of my skin creep. He's had enough emergencies. I don't want him to have anymore scars. After it was all over he asked me, "Mami do you think this will scar?" Lucia, the wound is at least an inch deep and five inches long, of course it will scar forever, so I showed him my scar on my knee, the one shaped like a hanger that I got when I fell out of the tree in El Salvador. He thought it was a funny scar and forgot about his stitches.



Lucy tugged on Antonio's arm; he dragged his feet as she pulled. "It is a big day Tonio; we must go to the party for Tomas and Chayo's wedding."

"I don't want to go. It's boring, for old people."

"*Malcriado!* Don't talk back to me!"

He tucked his chin into his chest, but continued to follow her lead as she rushed out of the apartment complex.

Ricardo Molina leaned across the passenger seat to open the door as Lucia approached the car, “Hola Antonio.”

Antonio didn’t say anything.

“Don’t be rude Antonio.”

“Hola.”

“Such a timid greeting, how come mi’jo?”

“He wanted to stay with Lita his niñera, he’s friends with her boy; he has an ATARI,” she turned from Ricardo to Antonio, “but today is Chayito’s wedding party and he’s like *her son*,” she faced Ricardo again.

“*Es una lastima* , a shame that the wedding had to be civil on account of Tomas’s divorce.”

“*Si, pero* they are going to be just fine, a nice solid family.”

“Yes, Tomas loves children and he can’t get to be with his real ones that much because of his ex-wife, *ay, que loca!*”

The scenery changed from apartment buildings to houses as they entered East L.A. One of Tomas’s friends from work was hosting the party, the dirt and grass of his front and back *yarda* had been removed and cemented for *carne asadas* and parties. Ricardo parked and hopped out of the car to open the door for Lucia.

“*Que caballero*,” she smiled favorably.

Ricardo opened the door for Antonio and gave him a big pat on the back, “*Que tal campeon?*”

Lucia smoothed the wrinkles out of her red silk dress and tightened the bow around her waist; the tighter she pulled the more it hid the fact that her torso, waist and hips were all one. It also helped to hide the soft rolls that were becoming more and more evident with each day. She had blow dried her hair like Farah Fawcett's and had painted her fingernails and toenails red. She grabbed Antonio's hand and followed Ricardo to the back of the house where other guests mingled. She caught a glimpse of Daniela and the kids.

Rosario caught sight of Lucia and ran toward her, throwing her body onto Lucia nearly toppling her over. Lucia steadied herself and then laughed realizing that Rosario had probably already had two or three drinks. She was never expressive unless she had help along the way. Lucia was in a celebratory mood herself, it wasn't everyday that her best friend got married. She walked over to the drink table and picked up a *Corona*, everyone cheered. Antonio had found Federico, Tomas's nephew and they began kicking a yellow playground ball back and forth. Tomas bounced Pilar up and down in his lap, occasionally sipping on a glass of water; he had given up drinking after the death of his brother. Smoke from the grill carried the savory smell of meat and spices throughout. Paper plates were being passed around along with a basket of *tortillas*. *Merengue* burst out of the stereo system that had been moved outside for the occasion. Guests were beginning to get up and dance, especially as the flow of alcohol increased.

Daniela snapped pictures with their fancy new camera, barely finishing one roll of film before she was replacing it with another. Tomás's brother moved around the crowd with his with his brand new Polaroid camera, waving each

photo up and down for several seconds before being able to show it off. Another camera's flashcubes kept going off. Several pictures were taken of Rosario and Lucia sitting in plastic chairs, side by side, each with a drink in their hand, both women looking sleepily tipsy. Rosario's grin was enormous, almost as large as her brown curly hair. Lucia's black waves of hair frame her face and her almost-Asian eyes weighed down by thick black lashes appear to be closed in every shot because she is smiling.

The sky turned orange, then pink, then purple and finally the color of gunmetal. Lights began to appear one by one and the party continued. Rosario and Lucia's sleepy mood turned to hyperactivity with a few more drinks. They got up and began dancing and twirling each other around. Antonio emerged from the house where he and Federico had discovered the TV when he heard his mother's distinctive voice as she shrieked and laughed. He had never seen her drunk. He turned to Federico, "My mom is acting funny."

Lucia never made her bed at home; she always saved her energy for the other houses. This was the only household chore she neglected. But she made sure Antonio made his own little bed. She taught him how to pull the sheets tightly and to never leave a crease. She made sure that he made his bed every day. She taught Antonio how to fold shirts in rectangles. The apartment was so gray that it seemed that no matter how hard she tried she could never make it shine. The people she worked for never liked it when she used Clorox bleach for

cleaning. “How can you stand that smell Lucia”, but she knew this was the only true way to get things clean.

He likes these little books; they have gold bindings and they make him smile. I never had books when I was little. I don't have books now. No one ever taught me I should love them and through him I see that this has been a loss.

Chapter Nine

1985

When Lucia picked Antonio up from the babysitter's house, she was shocked to find a greenish-blue bruise on one side of his forehead.

“Que le paso?” she asked Florencia, trying to keep accusation out her voice.

“Asi vino de la escuela.” Lucia decided she would ask Antonio about the incident when they got home that way he would not be inclined to hide anything. It was typical for boys to get bumps and scratches from their games and Antonio was prone to getting hurt, so perhaps there was not reason to be concerned, but Lucia knew something was wrong when Antonio walked all the way home from the bus stop with his chin to his chest. When they got home, Lucia sat Antonio down on the sofa and kneeled on the floor so that she was at his eye level.

“Que paso mijo?” she saw fear in his eyes and tears began to form at the rim of his lower lids spilling over his long lashes.

“Who did this to you?”

His lip began to tremble.

“I'm not going to be mad at you.”

“My teacher, la maestra,” he spurted between sobs.

Lucia's eye grew wide, “Tell me everything,” she said as she began slamming her hand against the linoleum floor without realizing she was doing so.

“To keep us quiet she grabs us by the hair and bangs our heads against the desk, but this time she was really angry and it hurt a lot.”

Lucia stood up and began walking back and forth across the room. She felt like a lion she and Antonio had seen at the zoo, pacing back and forth, looking beyond the bars past the gaze of the people. Her hand hurt from having repeatedly slammed it against the floor and she held her fingers in her other hand. She saw Antonio curled into the corner of the couch. She rushed to him and pulled him toward her chest, “Mi chiquito, mi pobre chiquito. Maldita mujer. She kissed his long wavy locks which were damp from her and his tears.

“Miss Warner.”

“Yes.”

“This is Lucia.”

“Hi Lucia. Everything okay?”

“I’m going to be late today. But I stay later”

“Oh?”

“Antonio has problem at school.”

“I hope it’s nothing serious. He’s not in trouble is he? He’s such a good boy I can’t imagine.”

“No, no. He’s been good. I have a emergency meeting.”

“Ok, Lucia. I hope everything goes well. Tell Tony I say hello. Mom and Dad just can’t wait until he’s on vacation so that you can bring him. You know how lonesome they get while I’m at work all day.”

“Tell Misses Warner I come at 10:00.”

“Okay. Bye now.”

“Vamos Antonio. I’m going to school with you.” He reached out for her extended hand and he squeezed it tighter than usual. It was difficult for him to keep up with her pace as they walked to the school. About one block before reaching the school, Lucia saw two cholos: one in his late thirties wearing a hair net despite his bald head. He wore denim shorts that came down to his mid -calf and his white socks were pulled up. The other cholo was a teenager wearing a baby blue long sleeved button down shirt and khaki pants. The shirt was two sizes too big with only the first button buttoned. The older cholo handed the teenager a plastic Ziploc bag with white powder inside as the teenager handed him a wad of wrinkled bills. The teenager’s arm movement revealed a bulge in his front pocket which Lucia recognized to be a gun. Lucia wished she could pull her hair out in self-punishment: How could she let Antonio walk to school alone every day? There was no school bus to take him. She would have to speak to her employers, tell them about the white powder in the Ziploc bag, the guns, the dirty gutters. Or she could arrange something with Rosario or the other neighbors. Her attention shifted to the events of the previous day as they approached the school. A sea of children poured from the street into the building, children unaccompanied by parents, children unaware of cars honking trying to get by. An elderly crossing card looked like he was suffocating in the flood of children. Lucia’s heart began to race with each step that she took and she could feel the heat of her rage spreading through her body. Even inside the building the children did not appear to be contained and Lucia’s head pounded from the noise,

from her anger, from her guilt. They reached Antonio's classroom and Lucia pushed the door open violently. It crashed against a book case, knocking over a yellow plastic tub. There was Mrs. Hedges, sitting at her desk as though it were a throne, her yellowing papery skin, blue hair and pointy nose. She jumped out of her chair.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“Desgraciada! Look what you've done to mi hijo!” Lucia pointed at his swollen bruise.

Mrs. Hedges backed up against the blackboard. Lucia moved toward Mrs. Hedges' desk and pounded her palms onto it loudly. The sting on her flat hands almost felt like a relief.

“Loca! I work hard todo los dias para mi y para mi hijo to come home to see he is not safe in school. Bruja. This is not correcto. You think I'm stupid? Because my English is no good? Vas a ver. You will see!”

“I've been teaching 35 years and these children, they're out of control. They need discipline!”

A crowd had gathered in the hallway. Mr. Molinos the assistant principal rushed in.

Mrs. Hedges raised her voice, “These children need discipline. They need to be put in their place,” her pale eyes looked possessed, but vacant, not alive like Lucia's lack shiny orbs. “I've been teaching 35 years! No one, certainly no parent of these children can tell me how to do my job!”

“Ms. Landaverde, please come with me so that we may speak in my office. It’s best not to make a scene.”

“Una escena? What about yesterday, la escena con mi hijo? And the other children? Si nadie lo vio, ni ocurrio? Is that how it is? If no one sees it, it didn’t happen?”

“I understand your concerns. I’d like to address them in public.”

“Esta bien. Fine.”

Lucia glared at Ms Hedges as she walked out of the classroom. She took Antonio’s hand and followed Mr. Molinos. Once seated, he asked, “What is the matter Dona Landaverde?”

“Are you blind? Esta ciego?” she pointed at Antonio’s face, “How could you permit this comportamiento?”

“Dona Landaverde. I understand your anger. I recognize that Mrs. Hedges is old fashioned. She’s been at this school longer than you or I have been alive, when these kinds of things were common. There’s nothing I can do. It is out of my hands. Not only is she tenured, but we have a shortage and she is more qualified than many of the teachers we do have. She’ll be retiring next year and she’s the only teacher that gets any respect from the children.”

“Respeto?” Eso no es respeto, that’s not respect, eso es miedo, fear. Only I have the right to lay a hand on my child and I only would do so under extreme circumstances. Children make noise, it’s normal.”

“One complaint is not enough for me to present a case to the district. No one witnessed it. The only thing that was witnessed was your outburst.”

“I won’t leave this office until you do something for me and my son.”

“This is highly irregular and I would prefer not to, but perhaps we can move your son to another classroom.”

“Esta bien.”

“As I said, this is highly irregular, I can’t just move kids around from class to class midyear every time a parent complains, our test scores are suffering already, but I will do it this time.”

“Esta bien, but I will have my ears and eyes peeled and if I ever see anything else I won’t be quiet. Yo no le tengo miedo a nada o nadie. I’m not afraid of anything or anyone.”

Payday made Lucia stand tall. The second payday of every month was the one time she could pay for luxuries. She would be frugal and plan and not spend a cent on anything extra until then. The first stop on payday would always be the National Bank. Her heels click clacked on the pavement as she pulled on Antonio’s arm for him to walk faster. She pulled the glass door open and confidently click clacked her way to the counter.

“Hola senora, como puedo ayudarla?”

“Quiero hacer un deposito,”

“Cual es su cuenta?”

“A629832 en nombre de Antonio y Lucia Landaverde.”

“Para cuanto es el deposito?”

“\$20 cash.”

“Gracias por su patrocinaje, aqui esta su recibo y una chupa para el nino.”

Lucia handed Antonio the lollipop, it was grape, his favorite.

“This money will one day be for you, Tonio, to pay for UCLA.”

Antonio’s small, but heavy body pressed against Lucia’s side, “I’m bored Mami,” he whined, “I want to go home,” his breath left a mist on the glass of the cosmetics counter that Lucia inspected arduously.

“Mami wants to buy something, Tonio, Mami bought you a G.I Joe this morning because you are a good boy, but if you complain again, Mami won’t think you’re a good boy anymore and next pay day I won’t buy you anything.”

Antonio was reminded of the toy in his corduroy pants’ pocket; he dropped to the floor, pulled it out, wrapped his arm around Lucia’s leg and began fighting imaginary enemies.

“Hi Miss, how may I help you?”

“I want a little makeup and some creams for my face.”

“Have you used Clinique before?”

“Oh yes. I like a lot. Is less expensive than other makeups, but nice, not bad like pharmacy makeups.”

“Yes! We pride ourselves on our affordability and quality! What did you have in mind?”

“ Nice red lipstick.”

“Oh, I’m so pleased you said that. We have some lovely pure reds that would flatter your complexion. Look at this one, it’s called ‘Passion’.”

“Yes, red is my favorite.”

“As well it should be.”

“How much?”

“Eleven dollars.”

Lucia sighed.

“Oh, but look at the richness in the color and it’s so smooth, it glides right on. The same kind of lipstick would cost you \$22 at Channel and the Mary Kay version would be crusty. Here, try it on.”

Lucia loved the way it glossed right onto her lips, making them look plumper. She placed her hand on Antonio’s head; he was still mesmerized by the G.I Joe, but looked up at her touch.

“M’ijo, what do you think?”

“Mami, you look beautiful.”

She turned to the clerk, “I take it.”

“Can I interest you in some base?”

“I don’t know, I don’t use that much.”

“You have a lovely complexion, no wrinkles at all, but we all have our stubborn uneven areas, lets try this shade,” Lucia looked closer at the woman’s skin, pale, thin, loose and it made her laugh a little inside that this woman was selling makeup and wrinkle reducing creams.

The woman smoothed some of the base onto Lucia’s face and handed her the mirror.

“Oh, no, no. Too dark,” Lucia wrinkled her face.

“Are you sure? I think it’s just fine.”

“No, I not that dark.”

“Well, the shade below that seems to light, it’s called ‘flesh’.”

“No, no, then I a gray ghost. I no want any.” She furrowed her brow.

“Ok, well what else can I help you find?”

“I need something good; I no care the price, for these.” She pointed the edge of her lips.

“Oh you’re going to love our day and night firming moisturizer. It works magic! Here, try some.”

“Yes, I like!”

“\$23 for the moisturizer.”

“I take.”

“You have beautiful eyes, I can’t even see your pupils they’re so black.”

“If I could, I take them out for you to borrow.”

The lady blurted out a little half laugh and tilted her head as if trying to figure out Lucia’s words through her accent.

“Hmm,” Puzzled, she decided to let it go, she figured she had misunderstood or that it was some untranslatable figure of speech, “Will that be all?”

“Yes.”

“\$34 plus tax.”

“Cash.”

“Now don’t tell anyone. I’m not supposed to do this, the gift with purchase doesn’t start until next week, but I got some early samples so here you go.”

“What a pretty present. Thank You.” Lucia rubbed her thumb across the smooth flaming pink plastic purse, “This I’ll give to my friend Rosario for her to put her monies.” She opened and inspected the contents. She pulled out the periwinkle blue tissue paper and folded it into little squares and saved it for future wrapping paper. She would keep the perfume for herself and give the gold eye shadow to Daniela. Rosario would also like the navy eyeliner and the mascara.

“Now it’s been a pleasure helping you find these products. You come back and buy from me and I promise to give you special discount and samples. Oh you know what would be fun! Come back when you have a party to go to and I’ll do your makeup!”

“Yes I definitely come back, to you only though. I come back on shopping day when I need something else. I come downtown to go shop. I go to the alleys for clothes and shoes. For him I go to the children’s alley, see” she lifted two thin green plastic bags. “Now we go to lunch to Cliftons.”

“Oh that’s nice. I never go to the garment district even though it’s right around the corner. I hear there are great deals, but I get a nice employee discount here and we’re supposed to only wear clothes we buy here, so I don’t usually shop anywhere else,” she bent down, “Here, I’m not supposed to do this either, but here’s a big bag with handles for your other purchases, it’ll make it easier to carry, those plastic bags are cutting the circulation on your fingers.”

“Oh thank you.”

“My name is Gina.”

“Lucy. This is Antonio.”

“I’ve always liked the name Lucy, it sounds like happy notes from a piano.”

“Antonio, Saluda a la senora.”

Antonio stretched his hand up as far as it could reach. Gina reached down to grasp it.

“What a gentleman.”

“I see you again Gina.”

“I look forward to it Lucy, Bye, bye Antonio. Enjoy your lunch at Clifton’s, it’s a great place.”

“Hurry mami, tengo hambre.”

“Si, si ya vamos, Cliftons’ is just down the street.”



The line at Clifton’s was long as usual. There were many Latino families waiting in line or enjoying their food in the booths, but among them were also many gray-haired men in gray suits on their lunch breaks from their gray offices in gray tall buildings on Bunker Hill.

Lucia took one orange plastic tray for her and one for Antonio. The trays were still damp from the industrial washing machine. Antonio pushed his tray along the metal railing. He reached for a warm plate, placed it on the tray and

grabbed a round warm roll. He pinched three balls of butter with a set of little metal tongs from a dish with ice cubes. Lucia helped herself to a roll as well. As they moved forward in the line, Antonio pressed his face close to the sneeze guard, creating shapes on the plexiglass with the moisture of his breath. He took a side of mashed potatoes with gravy and a white bowl full of yellow corn. . Lucia chose mashed potatoes and green beans for herself. Antonio's eyes grew wide as he saw the spaghetti and meatballs entrée and eagerly added it to his tray. Lucia chose steamed trout, but also picked fried shrimp as an extra side for another dollar. At the beverage station Antonio began to reach for Coca Cola.

“No! Leche. Remember our rule Antonio, no Coca Cola unless you've had three glasses of milk.”

Antonio didn't mind; he liked Coca Cola, but he also liked the smooth creamy rich taste of whole milk and he liked doing as his mother said. Lucia chose pink lemonade. Lucia handed the cashier a twenty-dollar bill and got seven dollars back in change.

Antonio could barely balance his tray of food, but he held his arms up in sturdy fashion and placed the tray on the table. Lucia scooted into the booth across from Antonio. They both began to eagerly savor their food. Lucia watched Antonio eat. It pleased her that his cheeks were getting plumper. She wanted him to be strong, not thin and weak like he was when he was a baby. Back then, she was not able to provide, but now she could feed him seafood that would feed his brain, milk that would feed his bones, and sweets that would feed his belly and heart.



Sometimes, instead of going to Clifton's on paydays, Lucia would go to the Central Market. She would buy the better vegetables there, the bigger fruits, fish complete with eyeballs, a chicken whose head would be cut off while they waited, causing Antonio to cringe. Lucia would buy nuts and dried fruits for snacks. Their favorite stop at the market was the fruit juice stand. "Una batido en leche, de banano y mango para el nino, y uno en agua de papaya y fresa para mi." Lucia yelled over the sound of blenders. Their drinks would be served to them in tall frosted plastic glasses and placed on the tiled counter. They would sit on red stools with the stuffing pouring out. It would take Antonio a long time to drink his because it was thick from the milk; Lucia could suck hers down quickly because it was only fruit juice and water, but she wouldn't. She would take little deliberate sips, savoring each one on the tip of her tongue. Then, Antonio and Lucia would finish their drinks together and head out of the market. They would take Angel's Flight up to Bunker Hill and catch a bus back home. At home, Lucia would make soup out of the fish. It was Antonio's least favorite dish because the eye of the fish always stared at Antonio as it floated and bobbed up and down in the dark broth.

On Tuesdays, Lucia did not go to work until the afternoon and she would walk Antonio to school. They would stop by a donut shop and buy hot donuts

that they would eat on the way there. The sugar melted in their mouths. These moments were precious to Lucia, her favorite mornings of every week.

Lucy, I worry at times that he is cursed. He has so much bad luck. I was talking about it to the lady in apartment number 15, you know, the one with white hair, and she said I should go to a bruja. I checked and was told that many of them are Catholic, so it should be okay. I told Rosario and she thinks I am crazy, that even if this bruja is Catholic it's never good to mess with the occult.

The sky was clear; there were only a few clouds. Lucia and Antonio walked down Alvarado. They passed a man selling flags from many nations. Some lay neatly across the sidewalk held down by rocks, other hung vertically from a chain link fence. A gust of dry hot wind brought the red, green, white and periwinkle colors to life against the backdrop of the downtown skyline. On the following corner was a Taqueria painted yellow and orange lettering, “Abierto 24 horas” “Mariscos: Pulpo, Ceviche, Tilapia.” “Pollo Frito, Chorizo, Carnitas, Chicharron.” “Jugos frescos en agua o leche.”

Lucia’s pace was quick; there was urgency with each step. The 2 inch heels of her blue pumps made a rhythmic clacking sound against the pavement. Antonio moved his feet quickly to keep up. Lucia stopped abruptly; Antonio almost tripped. “Aqui esta, we’re here.” The sign read “Farmacia y Botanica Tres Reyes.”

Antonio looked up at Lucia, unsure as to why they had stopped.

They entered the small store and were struck by a wave of conflicting smells, some sweet, some smoky, some acrid. A young woman in a white lab coat stood behind a glass counter filled with pills, soaps, lotions, herbs, candles. Behind her were shelves full of more pills and herbs. Signs read “Tenemos Tiburon”, “Unas de gato”, “shampoo de tuna”, “Pierda peso con pastillas de lecitina”, “jarabe con codeina”.

Lucia approached the counter, “I have a ten o’clock appointment.”

“She’s with her previous appointment and should be done shortly.

Meanwhile, can I help you find anything?”

Lucia moved to one of the cases that displayed religious articles, “Do you have a San Martin de Porres candle?”

“No, but we have this,” she handed Lucia an 8X10 poster of the black saint, “hang it behind your bedroom door, it will protect you.”

“I’ll take it.” While the young woman in the lab coat set aside the poster, a tiny woman, less than five feet tall, emerged from behind a black curtain. Behind her, a young woman in her twenties repeated, “Gracias, gracias.”

“You’re welcome. My daughter will handle the payment.”

Lucia approached the small woman. Antonio stared at the woman’s two gray long braids.

“Buenas tardes.”

“Buenas.”

“Pase adelante,” she lifted the curtain for Lucia. Antonio came reluctantly.

Behind the black curtain was a tiny room with no windows. Lit candles gave the room a glow. In the far right corner there was a sink.

“Please sit.”

There was only one chair. Lucia sat and Antonio stood behind her with his chin on her shoulder.

“What brings you here?”

“I’m concerned about the boy.”

Antonio lifted up his head.

“I have a bad feeling, like something terrible is going to happen to him.”

“Why?”

“I feel it in my stomach. And he gets hurt often. Sometimes there is something strange in his eyes.”

“Hmmm.” The little lady got up and scuffled to the corner of the room near the sink. She returned to the center of the room where Lucia sat with an egg in her hand.

“This is a very special egg. It comes from a chicken that was present when the Virgen appeared in my pueblo.”

She took the egg and began stroking Antonio’s face with it. Antonio was paralyzed with fear of this strange woman. He couldn’t understand why his mother had brought him. The woman returned to the sink, she moved things around while Antonio and Lucia waited. She returned with a porcelain bowl which she placed on the table. She cracked the egg and released it into the bowl. Lucia gasped; the yolk was black. Antonio’s eyes widened.

“It is just as I suspected. The devil has infiltrated and placed evil juices in him.”

“No!”

“I’m afraid so.”

“How?”

“El Diablo has many ways. Perhaps he was born with it.”

“His father!”

“Yes, yes in all likelihood. He is not a straight man?”

“As crooked as they come. Dios mio!”

“The egg never lies.”

“What will this mean for him?”

“A storm cloud will follow him for the rest of his life. There will be bumps along the way. He may also die before his 15th year. Or, he may live a long time and inflict evil upon the world.”

“What can I do?”

“You can pray and protect him. Buy the Nino of Atocha candle, it is very powerful. And he must always wear gold jewelry on him to protect him. Now our time is up. Please pay for the consultation and examination and any other products at the counter.”

Lucia grabbed Antonio’s hand. She paid a total of \$40 for the services, the poster of San Martin de Porres, the candle, and a bag full of vitamin E capsules. They stepped outside of the cavernous Botanica into the white light of midday. Lucia felt out of breath as the images of the black yolk, Antonio’s scars

and Elmer's evil grin flashed through her mind. Antonio looked up at his mother for comfort, but his eyes were blinded by the sun. He felt the gray skin of his scalp burning from the heat and he wondered whether that's what hell would feel like, a blunt heat all over his body.

Santa Lucia this is awful, although it is as I had expected. Please you must protect him. Punish me instead. I would sacrifice myself for him to ensure his happiness and safety.

After the incident with the egg yolk, Lucia felt it was necessary for God's presence to surround Antonio. She bought him a gold chain to wear around his neck. Each night she prayed the rosary at his bedside. He didn't like it; he said the rosary scared him, but this was more reason for her to continue. She encouraged Antonio to become an altar boy and he agreed. His grades had always been strong in CCD and he was well-liked by church administrators. He had always been afraid of the occult, especially the devil, but after the yolk incident, his fears increased. Many nights he dreamed that he was the devil and he would wake up sweating and screaming. Lucia would jump out of bed and cool his feverish face with holy water. It was worse after they had watched the Exorcist one night at Tomas and Rosario's house. When she saw him shaking on the sofa she gave him sips of her beer to see if it would make him fall asleep, but it didn't help and he couldn't keep his eyes off the image of the girl's spinning head.

Lucia and Antonio walked down Alvarado, peering in shop windows that displayed women's clothes. The prices were pinned to the clothes, written on note cards in black magic marker using stenciled numbers. On the floor of the display window were men's wallets, toy's, and a blender. A disheveled man approached Lucia, he was Latino, in his 50's, but Lucia got the impression that he was not an immigrant.

“Miss, can I have a dollar?”

Lucia looked at the man's eyes. She could not imagine what awful circumstance this man must have experienced that would bring him to such a low point. Lucia dug through her purse and handed him a dollar. She was pleased that she was teaching Antonio to help others the way Christ had. The man walked away without having said thank you and disappeared around the corner. Lucia looked at her watch, they would need to head home; Rosario and Tomas were expecting them later in the afternoon. The correct RTD bus was approaching, so Lucia took Antonio's hand and they prepared to board it. Out of the corner of her eye Lucia saw the man she had given a dollar to pull always in a Lincoln Town car.

“Antonio! Look!”

Hot tears formed in Lucia's eyes. The doors of the bus swung open. Lucia clutched the railing and sat down in the first seat she found. She covered her eyes with her hand. “Never again Antonio, I will never give money to a person I don't know.”

Chapter Ten

1986



The phone rang. Antonio picked it up. “Hello?”

Lucia looked up from the kitchen. ‘

“Oh, Hi Mrs. Granados. Yes, she’s here. A little. Si Espanol es mejor.”

Antonio covered the receiver with his hand, “Mami, es mi maestra.”

Lucia wiped her hands on her apron; she gave Antonio a serious glance.

He shrugged his shoulders and handed her the phone.

“Alo?”

“Senora Landaverde?”

“Ella habla.”

“Soy la maestro de Antonio.”

“En que puedo ayudarla?”

“Quisiera hablar con usted en privado. Quizas el viernes?”

“Tengo trabajo, pero puedo pedir permiso si es importante. Espero que no sea algo grave?”

“No, no es nada malo. A las cuatro y media?”

“Esta bien.”

Lucia, please don't let Mrs. Granados notice that I only finished 6th grade. I know my math well, the adding subtracting and fractions. I'm learning English, but I speak a very proper Spanish, much more proper and advanced than Mrs.

Granados, but she has been to high-school and college and has learned many subjects. I will wear a nice dress.

“Please come in Senora Landaverde. It’s nice to see you.”

“Igualmente.”

“Have a seat.”

“Gracias.”

“I’ve asked you to come today to discuss Antonio’s performance.”

Ay Virgencita, he’s getting bad notes.

“As you may recall, when he was in kindergarten he was with Mrs. Williams and you requested that he be removed. When he was in Mrs. Williams’ class he was part of a 100% English immersion program, as you know, that was not going well, there were some communication difficulties between Mrs. Williams and the children.”

“Esa bruja!”

“Please Mrs. Landaverde, I know how difficult that was, but as I was saying, he was transferred into my classroom which was a dual immersion program and he was learning concepts in Spanish while working on his English skills. I moved to teaching first grade, so I’ve had the pleasure of having your son another year in a program where he has been immersed $\frac{3}{4}$ into English. This gradual immersion has proven to be very successful with your son. Recently Antonio and his classmates took a standardized test that measured his ability to

acquire information and also tested knowledge in certain areas. Your son scored particularly high.”

Lucia, smiled, ‘Gracias Virgencita’.

“In the area of acquisition he scored in the top national average, especially in the analytical portion which is logic, math, abstract concepts of science. His verbal acquisition was above average nationally. In terms of knowledge, he is up to speed with children nationally in science and math concepts. His verbal is not at the national average, but this is to be expected given his recent immersion. Now these scores are quite good nationally, but this is LAUSD. Mrs. Landaverde your son is gifted and I want to discuss his options with you to best meet his very special needs.”

“Son buenas noticias.”

“Yes, it’s very good news. Whenever testing comes around the teachers get very upset, the scores are always low, we’re asked to implement all these methods, so it’s always such a pleasure to have success stories.”

“He is very dedicated.”

“Yes, I can tell he has a strong work ethic and we definitely want to maintain that. Many children if they are not challenged in school become bored and disinterested. Also, I’m going to be very frank, LAUSD schools are not as strong as they should be and it could be very easy for your son to miss out on the education he deserves. His performance on this test is the first step. It qualifies him for a special program for gifted children where he will be in a classroom with others who have been selected for the program. The classes are smaller and will

be taught by a very well educated teacher. Each grade has one gifted classroom and this continues through junior high. For high school there are magnets and special college level courses. If he stays on this path it will ensure that he is college bound with a world of opportunity.”

“This is my dream.”

“In order to keep him in the right path you and Mr. Landaverde must be involved in all educational aspects.”

“Solo yo, su papa no...”

“My mistake, you’ve done an excellent job. Now, if you agree to have him in this program he’ll start and the beginning of next school year.”

“Si.”

“Congratulations Mrs. Landaverde.”

Lucia took bus to the swap meet instead of going directly home. She passed stands selling jeans, watches, boom boxes. She found a toy stand and glanced amongst round balls, many GI Joes both real and rip-offs. Her eyes fell on the perfect gift, it was in a perfect cream colored plastic case open, revealing a plastic stethoscope, a blood pressure pump, a thermometer and a fake syringe. “Yes, I want that,” she stood tall, proud, smiling. She paid ten dollars, no donuts or other treats for this week, but that was okay because this would last much longer than the sugar in his tummy.

When she got to Rosario’s, Antonio saw her and jumped up to hug her.

“In school, they say he is a genius!”

“I knew it! He’s brighter than my Pilar”

“But she is so cute with her curls and big black eyes. Like a little doll, una muñequita.”

“Our children are so special.”

“Antonio, I have a present for you.”

Antonio became excited when he heard there was a gift for him. They went next door to their apartment. She pulled out the Doctor’s kit.

“Gracias Mami.”

“Senora Alvarado dices que eres muy inteligente y que vas a poder hacer lo que quisieras, hasta puedes ser Doctor!”

He took the stethoscope and placed the ear pieces in his ears. He reached over and placed it on Lucia’s soft chest, over her heart.

“Estas muy enferma, te tengo que dar una inyeccion,” he took the syringe and injected it into he arm. Lucia laughed loudly, Antonio and Lucia laughed together.

The neighbor’s child and Antonio played outside the apartment building while Lucia washed dishes. She kept the door open and occasionally glanced to make sure they didn’t wander. She could hear them crashing their big yellow Tonka trucks and yelling, “Vroom, Vroom!” metal against metal and making screeching noises like breaks. “Tonio! You knocked mine over!” the neighbor boy yelled angrily.

“That’s cause I’m stronger, you’re a wus!”

Lucia shut off the faucet, dried her hands on her apron and began to walk toward the door to break up their argument. As she got close to the door she saw a flash of yellow and heard Antonio wail. She lunged out the door and found Antonio on the ground with blood gushing from a wound just below his eye.

“Malcriado! Mal educado!” Lucia screamed at the neighbor boy who ran away. Lucia balled up her pale blue apron and placed it on Antonio’s face soaking up the rust colored blood. Antonio was unconscious. She scooped him up into her arms, his legs dangled as ran from the apartment complex. Her calves hurt from her brisk pace and Antonio’s weight. 2 blocks later she pushed through the doors of La Clinica Para La Familia.

“My son is bleeding badly!” she told the receptionist, a girl no older than 20 with black lipstick, blue mascara and long curly black hair. She pressed an intercom button with a hot pink press-on nail, “Dr. Bradley, we have a minor emergency.”

A young male doctor took Antonio from Lucia, “Thank You Maria,” he said to the receptionist as he carried Antonio and lead Lucia to an examination room. Maria answered him by smacking her gum.

Lucia immediately felt safer with Antonio in the doctor’s arms, “The neighbor boy through a Tonka trunk at him,” They entered a small room. The doctor lay Antonio down and began dressing the wound. He applied some gel, “This will help stop the bleeding,” he said to Lucia. He took some gauze and formed a bandage.

“A Tonka truck, you say. They ought to make those things out of plastic. Now wonder he passed out; that must have hurt like the dickens. He patted Antonio’s cheeks and his eyes opened sleepily.

“You alright sport?”

He nodded.

“You’re really lucky it was below the eye. The gash is too small to stitch up, but it was deep enough that he’ll have a scar, no doubt.”

“Scar, on his face.” She sounded concerned.

“Shouldn’t be too big, about a centimeter. It’ll look like a chicken pock.”

“Oh, he already has two of those,” she pointed to one in the middle of his forehead and another on his opposite cheek.

“Don’t worry, he’ll look manly and he’ll have stories to tell.”

Antonio was still dazed, the last thing he remembered was the heavy truck coming toward his face and the numbing pain. His cheek stung and he got scared when he saw his mother’s bloodied apron.

“He buddy, don’t worry. It’s all over, here,” he handed him a red lollipop.

“Thanks.”

“How much?” Lucia looked at her feet.

“I’m a volunteer, so the service itself does not cost anything, but we appreciate any assistance for maintenance.”

Lucia looked up into Dr. Bradley’s eyes, “There should be more people like you, more places like this. No one asks for sickness or emergencies, but then you always have to pay so much.”

“Yeah I wish I could get more of my colleagues to give their time. I work at UCLA medical.”

“You’re a Bruin!” Antonio perked up.

“That’s right, baby blue and gold.”

“I want to go to school there.”

“Study hard and be good in school and you’ll get in no problem.”

“He wants to be a doctor like you. Right Antonio?”

He nodded.

“A doctor that’s smart and helps people.”

“Well, good luck to you son, but for now stay away from the Tonka trucks.”

“From now on no more playing with the neighbor’s boy and I’m going to get rid of those terrible trucks.”

“No I won’t play with Alfredo again, but do we have to get rid of the trucks.”

Dr. Bradley laughed.

“Here, Ms...”

“Landaverde.”

“Ms. Landaverde, here are some brochures in Spanish about your son’s medical rights, he’s eligible for MediCal, you should look into it for any future emergencies or even just regular well-visits. Many hospitals accept it and their facilities offer far more than we can offer you here.”

“Yes, I know about the MediCal, I take good care of my son, but this was a emergency.”

“I understand. Your son is lucky to have a mom like you.”

“I am lucky to have him.”

During the summer Lucia would take Antonio with her to all the houses. She no longer worked at the home in Redondo Beach because the Warner’s had asked her to come another day during the week. Antonio enjoyed spending time at the Warner’ house the most. Mrs. Warner would give him cookies and they would watch Days of Our Lives together. Mrs. Warner would bring Antonio up to date on what he had missed during the school year. The Warners made Lucia think about her own grandparents and so she took extra care when cleaning. After a few years of observing Leslie, the Warner’s daughter, Lucia began to suspect that she had not married because she did not like men. Mr. and Mrs. Warner seemed troubled that their only daughter had never married. The way they looked at Antonio told Lucia that one of their greatest wishes had been to have grandchildren. Mr. Stone and the Warner’ had assisted Lucia in acquiring her work permit which put her on the road toward permanent residence by sponsoring her. The amnesty of 1986 had put Lucia in a much better position, but there were still many steps to be taken; the Warner and Mr. Stone had written letters stating that she was strong employee worthy of permanent residence.

Mr. Stone was rarely in his home, but when he was he would play cards with Antonio. Mr. Stone had many trinkets that he would show Antonio. Antonio

really enjoyed Mr. Stone's marble collection. He kept the collection in a large fish bowl. Antonio loved the large ones with creamy blue swirls. He would play with them on the carpet while Lucia washed clothes or mopped. One day, Antonio thought to himself, 'there are so many, Mr. Stone would not mind', so he took the large blue one with the creamy swirl in it and put it in his windbreaker pocket. One the way home from Mr. Stone's, Lucia reached into Antonio's jacket pocket to warm her hand. She felt the marble and pulled it out, "De donde cojiste esto? Where did you get this?" she demanded.

"Mr. Stone tiene muchas, he has so many."

"Nino malcriado, robar es un pecado! Stealing is a sin!"

She reached for his hand and slapped it. Lucia and Antonio both felt the burn on each of their hands and in their chests. Despite feeling remorseful for striking him, Lucia continued her lecture; she was horrified that he had taken something from her employer's home. "Do not ever take even a piece of paper from any of the houses where I work. These people trust me and they are kind to me and you. Next week you apologize to Mr. Stone and return the marble."

I ride the bus and I observe things Lucy. People do strange things in public. I may have never had money Lucia, but I've always had manners. I taught Antonio to use his right and not his left. Don't point, I've repeated, and they are pies not patas, patas are for animals. But people bite their nails down until there is hardly any left, right next to me and across from me they put their

fingers in ears and noses even when people are watching. I've always been a lady. I am proper.

Chapter Eleven

1987

Sometimes when life is complicated and challenging you don't bother to have dreams for yourself. You move through each day, you feel a certain satisfaction when bills are paid and you reserve your dreams for another day, or even for others, your children, your friends. It may be sad and people may look down at me for saying it, but dreams are a luxury.

Lucy, Thank you for helping me to have the courage to grab the man's hand who was reaching in our window to rob us. I held onto it hard. I bet the man was scared out of his mind not knowing what held his hand so strongly. Thank you for taking my fear away and giving it to the man. I am fortunate to have been blessed with a strong body and heart. Nothing scares me. Who knows, that hand may have been the hand of Richard Ramirez, the night stalker. My boy is not strong like me. I told him to hold the hand while I called the cops, but he refused. Maybe I've spoiled him too much, or maybe he's not ready to face hands reaching through windows. In any case, thank you for keeping the man from stealing my jewels; you know how hard I've worked for them and how much I like them.

Chapter Twelve

1988

Dear Lucy,

Please help me save enough money to buy my boy Nintendo. I was able to do it once, but the other day when we were out; they broke into our house and stole it. I don't want to spoil him, but he was so sad when he saw that it was gone. The first time I gave it to him his black eyes lit up and he was so happy. He enjoyed it so much after school and with his friends. Why do the poor rob the poor? I have nothing, no more than that idiot who stole from us. I work so hard for someone, maybe even a neighbor, to take it away from my son. Oh Lucy, what's done is done; just help me save the money for a second Nintendo.

She had seen him at the bus stop many times and they had chatted occasionally. "Hey bonita, I'd like to take you out to dinner."

He was ugly, thought Lucia, but she could not remember the last time she had been taken out to dinner by a man.

"Estan bien. Cuando?"

"Friday. We can go to La Marisqueria. I'll meet you there at 8:00."

Lucia smiled.

Lucia wore a black dress. She didn't usually wear black; it made her think of funerals. But she liked this dress because it made her look slimmer. The

dress had a giant white flower pinned to the shoulder. She matched the white flower with white shoes that had black bows on the tips. While glancing at herself in the mirror she sprayed herself with perfume. She felt a little ridiculous going on a date at 42, but at the same time being asked on a date at 42 felt like an accomplishment. She decided it was good because it meant that she did not look 42.

Lucy, why must women be attracted to men? Men are dirty; they allow grease in their hair, grime around their necks, and dirt in their untrimmed fingernails. I even see these nasty habits in my Antonio, no matter how much I keep after him.

Despite all these nasty habits, a short skinny man with a funny mustache takes me out for one seafood dinner and I got to bed with him. It had been so many years since I had done anything like that Lucy, since Elmer. But I think I always knew it might happen; I didn't just keep taking the birth control pills because they kept my periods on schedule.

In the morning, when Antonio's key slipped into the lock after staying the night at the neighbor boy's house, I told him the man was my friend. Tonio pretended not to see him and went straight to his Nintendo. The man left. Oh dear Lucy, I hope I haven't damaged him for life.

The tickets to Disney had been expensive, but Lucy had felt that they had the right like any family, to go. Tomas drove; they had packed sandwiches in

a cooler. This was the second time Lucia had brought Antonio. They had gone when he was a small boy and Lucia wore the Mickey Mouse sweatshirt she had bought during their last visit. It had been on sale because it was after Christmas and it was red, but since red was her favorite color it did not bother her that Mickey wore a Santa hat. Antonio loved Space Mountain, but Lucia did not ride it because she heard it was frightening. Antonio rode it with Tomas's older son, Roger who was spending the weekend with his dad. Antonio enjoyed Star Tours; he rode it three times. Lucia did not mind riding that one; she rode it the first time. Lucia mostly enjoyed the shows and her favorite was the 3 dimensional movie with Michael Jackson. She liked Michael Jackson and had one of his records at home. Antonio liked him too and she enjoyed sharing that with him. They were at Disney until it was dark. Toward the end of the evening Lucia bought herself, Pilar, Rosario, and Antonio an ice-cream. She paid more than she usually would and used up the last of her money for the day; she would have to be careful during the next two weeks, but they were in Disney and that's how much things cost and it was okay because you felt good about yourself. They were almost at the exit of the park; they didn't bother stopping at the stores with stuffed animals because Pilar would definitely want a giant one and Rosario and Pilar could easily convince Tomas to pull out his credit card which was reserved for emergencies only. As the Disney lights sparkled above, Antonio's ice-cream fell to the ground and splattered on the pavement. The look on Antonio's face crushed Lucia. She didn't have money to buy him another and Pilar already

began making fun of him for dropping it and tauntingly licked hers slowly.

He didn't cry because he was getting older and crying was for sissies. *Why*

Lucia? It's something small, but it hurts so much.

Chapter Thirteen

1989

“Chayito, do you have any cough medicine?”

“No, I don’t have any; your throat is still hurting?”

“I can’t seem to fight this cold.”

“You should go to the doctor, they’ll prescribe that syrup with codeine and that will take care of it for sure.”

“I never get sick.”

“You’ve been working hard, it’s normal to get sick.”

Lucia went back to the clinic after the cough medicine had not made her better and instead had given her diarrhea.

“The medicine should’ve taken care of your symptoms. We’ll run some blood and urine tests to see if it’s something that requires a little more care.”

The medical assistant drew Lucy’s blood.

“Come back on Friday and we should have the results back.”

“What do you think it is Doctor?”

“We’ve noticed that you’ve lost some weight which could be a result of a thyroid condition. The thyroid is in the back of your throat and it is responsible for the production of hormones. If the thyroid starts acting up it can cause you to lose weight and will also produce a nodule in the back of your throat which could explain the pain you’re feeling. It is a very treatable condition. It could also be mononucleosis or anemia. Well see.”

“Doctor, Ms. Landaverde is here for her results.”

“Please come with me. Ms. Landaverde.”

Lucia followed the medical assistant into an office.

“Have a seat; someone will be with you shortly.”

Lucy, if I have this thyroid thing I hope that the medicines won't be expensive.

Lucia recognized the doctor from before, but a second doctor followed him as well as a woman in a navy suit.

“Hi Ms. Landaverde, how have you been feeling?”

“Similar.”

“Yes.” He turned and looked at the second doctor who nodded his head.

“We have a couple of questions for you. I hope you don't mind.”

“Ok.”

“Have you ever used drugs?”

“No!”

“Have you recently had an operation when they gave you blood afterwards?”

“No.”

“Do you have many sexual partners?”

“What?”

“Doctor, please be sensitive,” said the woman in the navy suit.

“I know these are very private questions, but the questions are important for medical reasons.”

“I don’t understand. I have not had very many men, maybe 6 in my entire life, but I am 41 years old.”

“Did you practice safe sex?”

“I took the pills the clinic gave me. I can’t possibly be pregnant?”

“Have any of these men been homosexual or drug users?”

“What does this have to do with my throat? Do you have my results?”

The doctor tapped his foot nervously. “I don’t know how to say this Ms. Landaverde, but you tested positive for HIV.”

“I don’t understand, what is this disease? I thought you said it was my throat and hormones.”

“I’m sorry, the test came out negative for the thyroid condition, we ran other tests and the HIV test came out positive.”

“What does this mean?”

“Your body’s self defense will no longer work the way it used to and unfortunately there is no cure, but there are drugs that can help prolong life and we hope that eventually there will be more drugs that will allow people to live long lives. Right now you are still in good health and we want you to stay that way so that you don’t develop AIDS which is what people die from.”

“Are you sure it was my blood you tested, not someone else’s?”

“I’m sorry.”

“This can’t be. Like you said, SIDA is for drug addicts, prostitutes, homosexuals. No one told me I had to worry.”

“Ms. Hernandez is a counselor, she will be talking to you about what to expect and what kinds of resources there are for people in your situation.”

“No entiendo. I don’t understand. How could this happen to me? I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“I’m sorry about the difficult news, Ms. Landaverde. You’ve done nothing wrong. There are special programs and financial help. We want you to lead a productive life”

“My son. I can’t get sick and die.”

“The first step is to tell any sexual partners you have been with recently so that they know they have come into contact with the disease.”

“Only one, it must have been him that gave this to me and he is gone.”

“The medications are very expensive. There are organizations that can help you. I can submit your name; put you on the waitlist to receive their services.”

“What are the chances that I can just go on living the way that I am living?”

“It is very important that you seek medical attention so that you can go on living the way you are for as long as possible.”

“I will do exactly as the doctors say. What are the chances that they will find a cure for this soon to go away?”

“It is everyone’s hope that this day will come, but I can’t say whether it will come as soon as we would like.”

“This is horrible.”

“Do you have someone that will be supportive?”

“I must go. Yes, please put my name on the waiting list. Tell them that I am poor, a single mother and that I will need a miracle.”

No, no, this can't be right Lucia.



Virgencita,

I forget to talk to you. Maybe you have forgotten me. I’m Chayito, Rosario. I cannot take this Virgencita. It hurts me too much. She is like a precious rose and I don’t want her to go away, the most beautiful of flowers, delicate, but with strong thorns that allow her to defend herself. She is amazing. I am lucky to have been in her presence. I understand that God wants her with him, but it is not fair. You cannot allow this. The pain is unbearable. Let her stay.

I never used to even take an aspirin for a headache, Lucia now I take all these pills; the other patients call them cocktails. I don't even remember having headaches before this and now my entire body is falling apart. I take the drugs because they give me the promise of days to come. I know that

eventually they won't be enough, but each day that they give me is one more day with my son.

I feel like I've been kicked right in the side of the stomach, the way one kicks a stray dog. Lucy, I don't want to lose my faith, but I am finding it harder and harder. Oh, but I am working hard not to lose my faith. Every night I read the Footprints poem; Rosario gave it to me. I don't know who wrote it; I thought it came from the bible, but I looked for it and never found it. I read it to Antonio. He probably wonders why I've become obsessed with its message, but he has strong faith, so perhaps it doesn't seem strange to him. I read it for him, so that when my illness begins to show, and after... after I have gone, he will still have his faith to carry him through.

Lucy, I had a dream that Antonio could not recognize me. That he had erased me from his mind. He was a grown man and my face was like any other stranger's. I could see in his mind and he remembered me, but my face was a blur. Oh Lucy, this scares me. I don't want to become an afterthought in his mind.

There were bad days and there were worse days. One morning, she vomited for twenty minutes. She saw herself in the mirror, her skin was gray, she had lost most of her hair and there was a ripe red blister above her mouth. There was no cure, no matter how many rosaries she prayed she was still

going to die. She sat on the corner of her bed and stared at her statue of Maria.

Por que me has abandonado? Why have you forsaken me? Maria llena eres de gracia. Mirame a los ojos, look me in the eyes. Is it because I didn't have more babies? Because I was taking those pills? The ones Antonio found and I told him they were vitamins when he was little. If I would have had all those babies would you have spared me of this disease? This puta disease. We've lied and told him I have cancer, but he is not stupid and one day he will look back on his dead mother and remember that I died a whore. Una puta. Perdoname Virgencita, forgive me my dear virgin. I don't know what I am saying. I am possessed by the devil. What if the devil is inside my Antonio? The egg with the black yolk. The devil has entered our lives. Por que me has abandonado? Why have you forsaken me? When I needed you the most you did not carry me, you did not carry my son. It will be worse once I am gone. The nightmare will continue for my son. Why punish him? Because he is a bastard? He suffered, died and was buried. On the third day he rose again in fulfillment of the scriptures.

That was how Antonio found her Bubbling, staring at the statue . When she saw him, standing in the doorway she grabbed his shoulders, “Tengo Sida! I have AIDS.”

Antonio stared at her eyes.

“No, I am lying! Don't believe me. Estoy mintiendo! I have cancer.”

Antonio ran out of the apartment to Tomas and Rosario's. He pounded on the door. "Something is wrong with my mom. She is scaring me. Hurry, she is acting strange!"

Tomas and Rosario ran out and found her pacing back and forth in her bedroom. "Rosario, reso este rosario para ti," she dangled the rosary in front of Rosario's face then wrapped it around her own neck. Rosario grabbed Antonio and tried to cover his eyes, but he had seen everything. Tomas moved toward her. Lucia dropped the rosary and stepped on it. She flailed her arms wildly.

"Virgen Puta!" she screamed.

Tomas called for an ambulance, "447 Rampart. My close friend is trying to harm herself, please hurry."

Tomas closed the door, but they could still hear Lucia's screams. Rosario held Antonio close to her chest. She wept without tears coming out of her eyes. They heard the siren come closer and closer; it was a strange feeling to hear it so close without fading away. The police arrived before the paramedics. Neighbors came out of their houses.

"Don't worry Sir, the ambulance is on its way, it's standard practice for Fire, Police and EMT's to be paged in an emergency that way the emergency is tended to as soon as possible."

"She's in the room. I tried talking to her, but..."

"What's her name?"

"Lucy."

They heard a crash.

The police officer moved toward the door, he opened it slowly. She had broken the statue of the Virgin Mary. A piece of the Virgin's pale blue robe lay next to a small pool of blood. There was a gash in the palm of the same hand that held the pink rosary. Blood dripped from her hand to her elbow.

"Hi Lucy. Relax, it's okay. Help is on the way to take care of your hand."

"Why are you here? I've done nothing wrong."

"We're worried about you. We want to talk to you; make sure you're okay. We don't want you to hurt yourself again."

"I'm sorry." Tears rolled down Lucia's cheeks and she was quiet. She looked at the broken statue of the Virgin and back at the police officer, her eyes wide.

The paramedics finally arrived. "She's in here," the police officer's partner spoke, "she's cut and bleeding, she was in hysterics but seems to be subdued now."

"Antonio! Go downstairs with Pilar," Tomas had not realized that the boy was witnessing everything, "I need to talk to these men and women."

Rosario had locked herself in the bathroom. Antonio started to leave the apartment. When he was out of site, Tomas approached both paramedics and officers.

"I'm sorry, I should've said this before, but the boy was in the room and it did not look as though you were going to touch her. She has AIDS."

"Is she an addict?"

“No. She’s just like you and me except the stress of knowing she’s going to die is getting to her.”

“Get your gloves, she’s positive. Let’s get that hand cleaned up, take her vital signs and give her a tranquilizer.”

Tomas, the police and the paramedics had not realized that Antonio had never left the apartment. He stood in the doorway of her bedroom watching Tomas pace back and forth as the paramedics dressed Lucia’s wound. He had believed his mother when she had insisted that it was cancer, that she was lying about having AIDS, but Tomas’s warning to the paramedics rang over and over in his head.

The hospital released Lucy after having sedated her and letting her sleep. When Tomas, Rosario, and Antonio went to pick her up she looked ashamed. She kept her eyes on her hands.

“Tonio, those things I said, they were lies, I was crazy, your mother is crazy,” she could not look him in the eyes.

Antonio looked up at Tomas and Rosario.

“It’s the cancer,” Tomas explained. Rosario nodded.

The doctor pulled Tomas aside, “It’s not good. Her health is declining rapidly. She knows it and the proximity to death has depressed her. Her anxiety is very high. You must try to keep her comfortable, stress free. These pills should calm her nerves.”

“How long?”

“It’s hard to say. Six months, maybe. She’ll be in and out of the hospital until the end.”

They wheeled Lucia out and drove her home. She sank into the couch as Rosario and Tomas sat down across from her.

“Lucy, these living arrangements are not working; this separate apartment is not safe and even with all of the help we cannot afford it.”

“But there’s no room in your house.”

“We can find someone to help and maybe you can stay with them.”

“Well, Mercedes from the old building has kept offering to help and she has a spare room.”

“Rosario, maybe you can talk to her.”

“Lucia, have you talked to Antonio about what is going to happen afterwards? We need to start making arrangements for his guardianship. We want to take him, but this is your decision and his.”

“I will talk to him.”

“Antonio, you know that I am very sick. I want to know whether you want to live with Tomas and Rosario or with your Godparents. I want you to decide.”

“But Mom, you’re going to get better, you’re not going to die.”

“Of course we are all praying that I will get better, but if I die, who do you want to live with? It’s a big decision and I want you to make it so that you will be comfortable wherever you go.”

“I want to live with Chayo, Tomas and Pilar.”

“Good, then that’s what we’ll do.”

“But you’re not going to die, Mom.”

“I think I am. That’s why I want to make sure you’re okay.”

Lucy, Me estoy volviendo loca. I've lost my mind. With everyday it gets worse. I don't know the things I do or say. Too much to worry about. I've failed as a mother. Before I knew I was going to die, I used to tell him I wanted to put a rock on his head to keep him from growing. When you are this close to death you change the way you see things. I used to think that Antonio belonged to me. I smothered him, doting on him, but I was also strict, I was his father. Now I see him different. He doesn't belong to me. I can't take him with me. He belongs to the world. He was my little bird. I think in my states of madness I've told him things I shouldn't have. I don't know why I've said these things. Maybe when I am crazy I am living the truth. I think with my gut when I am crazy, not with my head, but both times with my heart. It's my head that can't agree with what's right. I feel ashamed when I see fear in his eyes as he looks into mine. He tells me that I'm not going to die, that everything will be well, that he has been reading that people survive cancer every day. Behind the surface of his eyes I think I can see that he knows it is not cancer and that he knows that I am going to die, but does not want to believe it. He is in pain, I am in pain, but my body is wasting away and after I'm gone there will be no pain for me, but I will leave him with nothing but pain. I feel guilt for leaving him with Chayo and Tomas. They will

take care of him, but it is such a burden to leave a life in someone's hands. I cannot think about that; I have enough guilt. After I am gone they will pretend that they are a solid family for his sake, but I know that they will not be able to give him them a mother's love and their children will always come first. I always heard about that thing called stress and I always thought it was a condition only the rich experience, but when I think about the mistakes in my life and how they have brought me to this point, I lose control and sit in a corner hugging my legs in a tight ball and I weep. I used to be fearless now I am afraid of the world, I am afraid of dying. My boy is turning into a man and I am weeping like a child experiencing a temper tantrum like a naughty child, yes Lucia I am having these fits in response to my Father.

This is a test isn't it Lucy? And then God will perform a miracle or maybe you will. Saints have power to do that. I feel betrayed. My life has been no vacation. But I found moments where I could laugh and smile. Simple moments. Moments others take for granted: the flavor of food, a song on the radio or record player, providing for my son. Life has been no vacation, but I have been happier than many people. Isn't this what God wants? Then why am I being punished in this way? Why must God take me in such a horrid manner, the life being sucked out of me? God works in mysterious ways, they say, but this can't be good for the child. He will never say, God took my mother and that was necessary. He might think God wanted me with him, but why would God want me Lucy? My work can't be done?. What has been my purpose? To have my boy for 13 years only to

give him up for others to finish the job? Yes, I have many friends, but some will forget after years pass. Even Antonio won't think of me each and every day for the rest of his life. Knowing that I will die is like mourning, but I'm alive and I'm mourning for myself and those that I will leave behind. It's crazy inside my head Lucy. And I was always a calm one, never subject to fits or anxiety or stress. Every moment feels different, I weep quietly at times, other times I scream, then I resign myself. There is no right way is there? Am I failing this test? But I refuse to go to hell. I have not been bad enough.

Lucy, Sometimes when you love something or someone too much and your heart only beats for that, God takes it away from you because God becomes jealous. Is that why this is happening to me? Is it because I love my boy too much and he loves me too much. Can you tell God that maybe he's wrong? Maybe he thinks that my love for my son is sinful. Tell him that there is nothing dirty about our love. I am poor and can't afford a place that has rooms. We have to live with what we have. I can't tell him no when he wants to sleep in my bed when he is lonely or scared and knows that I'm dying. Lucy, tell God he is making a mistake. I know God put me on this earth to be a mother because that is what I do best. This was meant for someone else.

Antonio moved in with Tomas and Rosario not only because of space, but they wanted him to become accustomed to living with them so that the transition would be easier. Lucia moved in with Mercedes. Lucia did not noticed at first,

but after a month, it became evident that Mercedes served Lucia's meals on the same plate with the same set of utensils at each meal. Mercedes' tone of voice made Lucia tired, she would yell across the room, "Now don't forget to take your medicine.....you didn't eat a bite...are you getting enough sleep....you'll make yourself sick..." Lucia would lock herself in her room so that she would not bother anyone or be bothered.

Lucia, my friend is making me feel like a leper. I know I am no longer strong enough to work, but I am not dead yet and she makes me feel like a child, 'Lucia don't get up, you'll catch cold air. Don't lift a finger. Why are you making the beds? In your condition.....' I have good days and I have bad days and on my good days I want to still feel alive, forget that I am sick and maybe do things that people take for granted. Go to the grocery store, make dinner for my son. She almost takes pleasure out of seeing me sick; I can't take it any longer, I am too proud for this.

"Chayo, she was upset at me the other night for boiling water and washing a glass. It makes me sick to my stomach. If I stay here any longer she'll start digging my grave for me."

Tomas arrived an hour after Lucia had called Rosario.

"Mercedes, I'm sorry, but I think Lucy will be better off on her own. She's not comfortable here."

“I don’t understand, she’s very delicate right now and I feel I am best suited to care for her.”

“You have been a huge help to us Mercedes, but we have found some assistance that will allow Lucy to keep her own apartment. She needs her own space. No arguing.”

Mercedes’ bottom lip curled up.

“Mercedes, thank you for taking me in, but I want my last days to be as normal as possible. Maybe you’re right, I will die sooner, but at least I won’t spend my last days locked in a room and I will have my dignity.”

They gathered Lucia’s things into Tomas’ red truck. As they pulled away, Tomas said, “Your misfortune made her feel better about herself. That’s wrong. I’m glad we got you out of there. I don’t care what she thinks of me, she can tell the whole neighborhood I’m an asshole.”

Lucy, Estoy cansada. I am exhausted. Worthless. Me duele la cabeza. My head is throbbing. Little metal plates being hammered. Mis ojos arden. My eyes burn from the pain in my head and things are blurred. Light feels like flames. Like flashbulbs from the sun. My chest feels tight; it hurts to breathe, a knife tearing layers of tissue.

Lucy, the days that I am not in the hospital, Antonio comes from Rosario and Tomas’ apartment and stays with me. He sleeps in my bed every night. On some levels he understands I am going to die, on others he does not. At first I

said no, that he could not sleep with me, that it was unnatural for a boy that is becoming a man, but he was so hurt and he looked just like he did when he was tiny and afraid to sleep alone. He asks me to hold him the way I did when he was small. The fevers cause nightmares and my skin hurts. In the middle of the night I wake up to him shaking me, “Mami, Mami, What’s wrong? You’re whimpering.”

“They’re my quejidos, don’t pay attention, it’s from the fever.”

He helps me with my medicine. He’s learned how to use the catheter in my arm and inject the IV. No, don’t worry, he doesn’t touch the skin, he injects the needle into the plastic tube, the medicine goes through the tube, and into the machine that’s attached to me.

The whimpering while I am sleeping has increased and it frightens him. He leans over me and says, “Mami, shh, shh. Mami,”

He is still bringing home A’s. It is not right for a child to go through this. Other boys worry about sports and games. He worries about these things too, but his future is uncertain, the only thing that is certain is that I am going to die.

“Mami, I promise that I will go to UCLA and I will become a Doctor and I will take care of sick people,” he tells me this when he can see that the pain I am feeling is unbearable and for a moment I forget about the pain and I smile, “I will find a cure for cancer.”

“You promise Tonio?”

“I promise.”

In the mornings, Lucia would walk Antonio to school, even though he was old enough to go to school by himself. His baby fat was turning into height very quickly and Lucia was certain that he would be a tall, handsome man with many of her and his father's best features. She would walk by his side and feel like he was growing while she was shrinking. Carlos, Tomas' brother would pick Antonio up at the end of the day because Lucia would be too tired in the afternoons. At first Antonio was jealous, but he quickly realized that Carlos was keeping his mother company during the difficult hours of the day. He had no romantic feelings toward Lucia, he was simply helping her while trying to keep himself distracted so that he would not fall off the wagon yet again. Whenever Tomas would pick Antonio up from school, he knew that it meant his mother was back in the hospital.

If this hadn't happened I would one day be wearing a grey suit in the high school office. My English by then would be almost perfect. There would be talk of university with the counselors, UCLA, scholarships, many open doors for him. The teachers would see me as a model parent, one the new immigrant parents could look up to. Look at Ms. Landaverde, all that she has done all by herself raising this fine young man. If you model herself after her you too will see success with your child. But I won't be there to see these things. They will be impressed by him, but they won't know how or why.

Lucy, I awoke to Elmer's face looking down at me. He came, to pay his respects I suppose. Ricardo had told him that the end is near.

Lucy, I know that it Christmas is coming because there are decorations in the hospital and faces of friends that I recognize leave me poinsettias. I don't know how many days away it is, but each hour seems so difficult to me that I am unsure if I will make it. I want to make it to Christmas ; I want to celebrate it with my son. But I don't have a gift for him.

I have laid my life down for him. God is taking me instead of him so that he may live and conquer. I have accomplished all I could ever accomplish. There is nothing left for me to do.

Lucy, remember me? It's me, Santa Lucia, your namesake. I remember you always, because we are linked. Did you know that our special day recently passed? My feast day and your birthday. Don't be afraid

Sleepy. I cannot keep my eyes open. I am trying because I think it's bad if I don't. I can almost see the rivers of a dream. I'm slipping, slipping right out of someone's arms, but that's not right because I'm lying. If I am lying down and my eyes are closed why am I so sleepy? Falling, I am being pulled into the bed, eaten, devoured. But then I rise and I am floating. It is so hot. No, no it's cold. I'm sweating. What if it's blood? Pain, it hurts just to be lying, sleeping. Pain, it

*hurts, that cannot be good. Weak, like I can't hold onto air. Where is my son?
Why can't I see him? I'm losing my site. I am losing my sight. There is a black
cave. My eyes are burning; colors are blurring, it's darker. All I see is black—
no I don't see anything at all. My name is Lucy. I have to let go. If I'm strong
I'll let go. It would be a sin to hold on. I'm through with sins. Have I forgotten
anything? No, I was careful even as I was being eaten. It is in God's plan. Soy
yo, Lucia. It's me Lucia. Remember me? I am Lucia. So yo. It's me. Soy Lucia.
I am. Soy. Santa Lucia.*

Works Cited

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