

TALES OF A FRIJOLERA

BY

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Abstract: A coming of age story about the struggles a young girl faces as she negotiates childhood fears and threats to the foundation of everything she knows, her family.

To My Family

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Stories

Two weeks ago, Mom told us we were moving as soon as the school year ended. Just us, she said. Not Dad. We were moving in with her mom and Dad was leaving. He was going to look for work in a bigger city. When he found something, he'd send for us.

So every day after school for the last week we've been packing. Well, mostly Mom and the big kids. Xavier, Lena, and Mario sort, stack, and pack the things Mom tells them to and me and Tino stay out of their way like Mom tells us to. We each still have a few outfits in our drawers and the pots and skillets Mom uses the most are still in the cupboards with a set of cups and plates and some silverware. They won't be packed until the last day along with the towels and cleaning supplies.

Our rooms were the first to be sorted so we've been pretty bored without any of our things to entertain us. That's why Mom's agreed to let our cousins, James and Andy, and Diego and Cristi, come over tonight. Aunt Filia said it was okay for James and Andy to walk home from school with Xavier, Lena, and Mario. And Aunt Rita is dropping Diego and Cristi off after dinner. We've never had everyone over at the same time. But since we're moving this weekend and the house is already empty – we sold most of our furniture at the garage sale last weekend so Dad would have traveling money – there's room. The older kids are going to sleep out in the living room. Lena on the couch. The guys on the floor. And me and Cristi are going to be in mine and Lena's room and Tino and Diego are going to get the boys' room.

And even though the big kids have told us we can't bother them, that we can't be in the living room with them, we're going to. Usually when James and Andy spend the night, they all

hang out on the porch until Mom tells them it's time to come in. And then they kick me and Tino out of the living room even if we're watching T.V.

They don't want me around when they're talking because they all say I have a big mouth. And Lena's always yelling something at me about tact. But it's not like I go to their school anyway so I hardly ever know who they're talking about. I mean, when Andy is teasing Mario about some girl named Erica that likes him and all I have to go on is that she's got braces and messed up hair, she becomes Erica with the messed up hair and teeth. And when I remind them of funny things like that when they're talking and I hear a name I know, they get all upset like I'm the one who said it in the first place. But that's how it works around here. People get upset when you remind them of things they say.

And I'm not allowed to listen to their stories anymore either ever since I couldn't sleep without the light on because I thought I heard La Llorona knocking outside my bedroom window after Andy took his turn the last time they stayed. But since Mom said they could come over, me and Tino have been telling Diego and Cristi that the big kids are going to tell scary stories when it gets late. How they always do it when they get together with the cousins. And how some of the stories are so scary they probably won't be able to sleep. And whenever they ask us what stories, all chicken-like, we say we can't tell them, but they'll see, they're really scary. And we act like we've heard them all before. So now we have to be wherever the big kids are.

I just hope Diego and Cristi don't do anything to embarrass us. Then the big kids really won't let us hang out with them.

For example, Cristi's always scared. Scared of the dark. Scared of ghosts. Scared of bugs. Even though she won't admit it. She'll just follow too close, practically stepping on my

heels when I get up to leave. It doesn't even matter if I'm going to the bathroom. If it's dark, if there's a chance there could be something in the dark, real or not, she won't be left behind.

Like when we play Survivor. She tries to hide with other people all the time. It wouldn't be so bad if she actually acted as a lookout, but when she sees the hunter coming she starts making all kinds of noise and then runs for it. So me, Tino, and Diego usually try to ditch her. And when she's been the hunter one too many times because she hides right next to the base or any kind of light, she gets mad and says someone's cheating. Mostly Diego. And then Diego calls her stupid and says she'd know if he was going inside because she hides right next to the porch because she's so chicken. And then she calls him a toothpick and a nerd and he calls her a hippopotamus and tells her not to sit on him and then she says she's going to break him in half and it usually ends with him shaking his fist at her, telling her "One day Cristina, to the moon!"

It's always the same when they fight. And they fight a lot. About everything. And me and Tino just listen and try not to laugh when Diego tells Cristi not to sit on him. It's not even that she's big. Diego's just so tall and skinny. And the fact that I can see his bones move under his skin means he'd have no chance if she pinned him down. But whenever Diego acts like he's punching Cristi into orbit with his stick arm, we start rolling. He holds his fist in the air and his whole arm shakes. We all know he won't because they're not allowed to hit each other. But we also know he would if he could.

And I don't know if it's because Cristi's scared Diego might actually hit her or because she knows he makes her look stupid when she hears me and Tino laughing at what he says, but whenever Diego's standing there, his whole body tight and twitching, she always does the same thing. She says she didn't want to play anyway and walks away. And we know she's going to tell.

Then we hear our mom or their mom yelling our names. Diego gets in trouble for picking on her and me and Tino get in trouble for laughing at her. And then Diego and Cristi don't get to spend the night or we don't because Aunt Rita's rule is she doesn't reward bad behavior.

So I hope nothing happens tonight to make Aunt Rita decide Diego and Cristi don't deserve to spend the night after all or the big kids decide they don't want to be anywhere around us.

"There they are" Mom says.

The big kids are at the corner across the street and James and Andy are with them. I wave, but they don't look in our direction until they're almost even with us. Xavier points in the direction of the creek and Mom nods her head.

They usually hang out at school when the final bell rings, but Dad told them a couple days ago that they could make some money if they found enough crawdads and night crawlers since fishing's good right now. Plus, it's where all the older kids in the neighborhood hang out when they're not playing a pickup game down at the school.

I knew they'd be home before Mom was done with dinner so I'm not surprised when they come through the back door as Mom is making the last row of tortillas. Lena swipes a warm tortilla off the counter and passes me in the doorway before Mario even pulls the butter out of the fridge. She loves butter so I follow her. When she takes the phone into our room and shuts the door, I know it's something major. She's talking with her best friend Rosie because she didn't even bother to say hi. She just started talking. And I hear a name I didn't expect to. Evangeline.

Whenever the rest of us were lining up in the empty parking lot to divide teams for tag or kickball, Evangeline would walk along the sidewalk. Shuffling through the grass and dirt with her nice shoes and lace socks. Staying close. Because everyone knows what can happen when young ladies are by themselves.

She'd make her way over to the shade tree and wrap both arms as far around the trunk as she could. Lean back, look up, and spin. Circle after circle after circle. Balancing with two arms that never met. Only stopping to fix her skirt or smooth her dress. Sometimes she'd run her hands along the trunk. Along the branches and leaves. And she'd move her lips and nod her head like she was talking.

I talked to her once. Under her tree. I came up behind her from the parking lot. She froze and then tore the leaf she was touching from the branch. Keeping her back to me, she circled her side of the tree, tearing more.

"I can tell you anything" she said, smashing the leaves between her hands. "I can read their lines. What do you want to know" she asked, turning towards me when I didn't say anything. She kept her head down, looking at her hands. "Want to know what you're having for lunch?"

She searched through the leaves like they were playing cards. "Sandwiches."

"What else do you want to know? I can tell you anything." She looked at me, waiting. I could feel my eyes drying but I didn't blink and her perfect almond eyes with their thick black lashes didn't either. They just stared. Holding me still. She finally looked past me at the clearing parking lot.

Her shoulders pinched in like they always do and she dropped the leaves between us. She walked around them, around the trunk of the tree, and headed home. When I saw she wasn't going to look back, I touched a leaf with the tip of my shoe. There wasn't anything on it.

As I'm leaning against the hallway wall trying to figure out why Lena's talking about her since I don't think they've even ever talked, Lena opens the door. This time when she passes me, she gives me a dirty look. Her lips tucking in at the corners because she knows I was listening.

Ashamed that she knows I was spying on her again, but not enough not to see what's going on, I follow her out to the front porch. She squeezes in between Xavier and Mario on the swing. James is leaning against the railing and Andy's sitting on the top step.

They stop talking when I come outside and all give each other a look. So I walk down the porch steps and out into the yard a little bit, making sure I'm still close enough I can hear everything they say. They're more interested in talking than worrying about what I'm doing so I don't bother to pretend I'm doing anything.

They're talking about Evangeline. How none of them really know her. How she kind of keeps to herself. Xavier, James, and Andy keep ending their statements with question marks and turning to Lena and Mario. Probably because Lena's a girl and Mario's the youngest, but they both shake their heads and say they don't know her.

"I know her" I say, moving towards the porch as they give each other that look again. Like I never know what I'm talking about. "Evangeline, right? The girl who's always hugging trees? Yeah. I know her." I stop at the bottom step. "I even talked to her once" I say, just to knock the disbelieving looks off their face. "I did."

They start closing their circle. Andy is moving up the porch when I say “maybe she has aids or something.”

Andy stops and turns around and now he’s staring at me just like everyone else is. No one says anything. Their faces just change. Like I’ve said the stupidest thing they’ve ever heard. But Mario has an ugly look on his face. The one he gets when he’s about to lose his temper. His eyes disappearing under his eyebrows because he’s squinting them so much. And even though I’ve heard kids tell each other the same thing at school when they’re talking about kids who have no friends, I know I shouldn’t have said it.

“Shut up” Mario says, his voice fighting to stay even. “Why are you always so stupid?” His question sounds more like a fact. And now everyone gives me dirty looks before they turn around and go inside.

Mom keeps raising her eyebrows at dinner, but no one’s saying anything. I’ve stayed away from them. Trying to blend in with the walls. Not talking. It doesn’t matter anyway because no one’s even noticing me. Not even Tino and he probably doesn’t even know why. He just knows that everyone else isn’t.

When Mom sees me peeking through the blinds, spying on everyone on the porch after dinner, she starts asking questions. I shrug my shoulders and tell her nothing happened. It doesn’t matter. Mom’s had enough so she tells me to go outside and play.

I try to scoot past them on the porch, making sure not to touch anyone. My motions all overly dramatic so maybe they’ll feel sorry for me and say I can sit with them. But still, no one acts like they see me. So I walk out to the yard and kick at the grass covering the sidewalk, trying not to look like I’m listening or want to be part of their circle. James and Andy have

picked back up whatever it was they were arguing about when they heard me open the screen door.

“I heard she ran away.”

“No way.”

“Then what?”

“Maybe someone took her.”

I peek around when James says someone and see the bushes bordering our yard are looking bigger. I can't see through them anymore. I turn towards the porch and see the light's on. James is leaning in to everyone around him. They're all sitting around the swing now. Even Xavier's moved off the railing. I take a couple steps toward the porch, keeping my back to them and my eyes on the bushes, which are looking a lot thicker and darker now.

They're laughing and then they stop. I look over my shoulder to see what's happened and they see me and start laughing again. I bend down like I'm looking at something and pretty soon they start talking about Evangeline again. How no one's seen her at school lately. They argue about if she ran away and all decide she doesn't have the guts. And then they start talking about how crazy she is. How she always watches everyone from the trees and looks away whenever they catch her staring. How she never talks at school. Even when the teachers call on her. How even her name is weird. Evangeline.

“She probably got taken when she was talking to trees” says Tino. And even though no one laughs except him, I notice they don't give him dirty looks. Then Lena points out that someone would have said something if she had gotten taken. That it would have been on the news. That parents would have been asking questions like when the last time we saw her was.

“Not if it was La Llorona” Andy says. And then I know they’re done talking about it. Or at least the boys are. Everyone’s quiet, waiting for Andy to start. And I wonder if I should start moving towards the porch or not because it’s as bad as if Andy had turned off the bathroom light and said Bloody Mary three times into the mirror. He said La Llorona’s name. She’d been called.

I look up and down the street, breath stuck in my chest, checking. I don’t see her coming down the street and decide I don’t care if they think I’m chicken. I am. I run to the porch, waiting to see her coming out of the bushes, floating across the yard. Her torn, dripping, dirty white dress. Her long, tangled hair covering everything but her red eyes. Her reaching for me with soggy, green grey hands and muddy, broken nails. When I’m positive the air I feel on my neck is her breathing behind me, I jump onto the bottom step. I know she’s just beyond the yellow porch light, waiting for me to forget she’s there.

No one laughs as I stumble up the steps. Lena pats the spot next to her on the swing. Mario scoots over so I can fit. And as I get myself ready to listen to Andy’s story again, telling myself it’s just a story, it didn’t really happen, she’s not real, I’m glad Diego and Cristi haven’t shown up yet. And hoping Andy won’t give all the details this time as he tells us how he saw her floating up the street one night, coming from the direction of the creek. How he ran to the porch. How she called his name when he reached for the front door. How when he turned to look, she was crossing into his yard. How he couldn’t move or speak. How she was reaching for him. How if Aunt Filia hadn’t said his name, complaining about something he had forgotten to do, breaking the spell, she would have taken him. How when he looked out the window, doubting it had happened, she was staring in at him, blood running from her eyes. Crying because she wanted a child.

When he's done giving every single detail, everyone looks over their shoulder as they stretch their arms and backs. I'm hunched over, smashing my arms into my crossed legs, waiting to hear her whisper my name. My voice doesn't sound right, too low, too dry, when I say "I thought she had to be next to an ocean or a river or a creek." And even though I know she's not real, and Mom's told me she's not real, I can't stop myself from thinking that Evangeline doesn't live next to the creek like we do. She's on the other side of the school.

"All she needs is water" says Andy. "Long as they're big enough, puddles will work if she really wants you."

I keep hearing something soft and fast like steps. I know she floats but look towards the yard anyway. I can't see past the light.

Lena puts her hand on my knee and the sound stops. The knocking.

Mario bumps me with his shoulder and whispers "She can't come into the light."

When Aunt Rita shows up with Diego and Cristi, their sleeping bags rolled up in their arms with their change of clothes and whatever else they brought in the backpacks they're wearing, we all stand up to greet them.

"What are you all doing?" asks Aunt Rita. "Uh huh" she says to our chorus of nothings. "Well. Let me go in and say hi to my sister."

Me and Tino follow her inside so we can show Diego and Cristi where they're sleeping and fill them in on the plan to hang out with the big kids tonight while Mom and Aunt Rita head to the kitchen. Once they've put their stuff in our rooms, I look at both of them in the hallway before we get to the living room. "They might not want to tell stories with you guys here" I say.

I know Cristi thinks I'm lying, maybe even about the whole thing, because she's getting her proud, shoulders back, chest out, chin up look and I know if I don't do something quick she's going to tell. I don't know what. But she's always telling something.

"They probably think your mom will get after them if you get scared." I raise my eyebrows and stare both of them down. We all know it's true. Aunt Rita doesn't even let them watch PGs unless she's seen them first.

A bright red is creeping up Cristi's neck. And Diego's eyebrows are almost touching. They're probably thinking about how they're ruining what was going to be the best part of the sleep over and they lower their heads, so I lay out my plan. We start heading to the porch but everyone's moved inside and is hanging out in the living room on the pile of blankets on the floor. They've picked back up where they left off. Xavier's telling Mom's witch story.

Me, Tino, Diego, and Cristi look at each other and sit down just off the blanket, trying not to draw too much attention to ourselves. Xavier shakes his head. "This isn't going to be good" he says and everyone starts laughing at us. Then he goes back to the story and I can tell he's adding a lot of suspense to it because Diego and Cristi haven't heard it before. By the time he gets to the part where he's getting ready to pass the old lady on the street since he's made it his own, Cristi's already got her knees up to her chest and is plugging her ears with her fingers. But she's playing it off like she's just resting her head in her hands.

I motion for her to listen, mouthing listen as slowly as I can while pulling my finger away from my head. She sees me and gives me a tight shake of her head so no else sees. I shrug my shoulders and go back to listening. With each story, James' mailman and Mario's donkey lady that was originally Dad's, Cristi's eyes are getting bigger and bigger but she's not making any move to get up and leave. Probably because she's scared of being by herself in mine and Lena's

room. And Tino and Diego don't look like they're even thinking about going to bed yet. They keep elbowing each other when a good part's getting ready to come up and trying to scare each other by tapping each other's shoulders from behind. And Mom went to bed a little after Aunt Rita left when it was still James' turn. So even though I feel bad for Cristi, she has to keep sitting here if she doesn't want to be by herself because I don't want to miss Lena's turn. She never tells the same story and hers are always the scariest.

Lena says she had a dream when we first moved into this house.

That in her dream she woke up in the middle of the night and heard Mom crying in the kitchen. So she got out of bed and started walking towards Mom's voice. Then she heard Mom talking and she stopped. She couldn't make out what Mom was saying. But the way she was talking made her think Mom was pleading or begging with someone. She stayed where she was against the hallway wall thinking maybe Mom and Dad were arguing again.

But it was different this time. Mom's voice. She sounded scared. Lena knew something wasn't right but she didn't want to see what it was. She was too scared. She wanted to go back to her room. But she heard Mom crying again, so she made herself start walking towards the kitchen. When she got closer, she heard a voice over Mom's crying. It was deep. And dark.

She didn't know who it was or what he was saying but when he was done talking Mom started. And she knew that the words she couldn't make out before was Mom pleading. This time, she could hear what Mom was saying. Mom was begging for our lives. She was telling someone, a man, to take her instead. To please spare her children. To take her.

Lena stopped just inside the end of the hallway. Too scared to go any further. And wondered if he had already killed Dad or if there was more than just him in the house. She knew she had to see who it was so she leaned forward but the dividing glass wall between the dining

room and the kitchen was in her way. All she could see were shapes behind the thick, square glass panes. But what she saw made her start crying. Mom was kneeling in front of the Devil, her hands out in supplication, begging him to take her.

It's quiet when Lena finishes. Almost like we're all waiting for her to keep going. When she doesn't, we all seem to sit back at the same time. Tino's rubbing his chin on his chest and then his right shoulder. His nervous twitch. And Diego's about to make his unsure face because he's already tilting his head to the right. And though I didn't think it was possible since she's had the same electrocuted look all night, Cristi's eyes are practically halfway out of her head.

As I unwind my legs and arms to look around the room, making sure there's nothing in the shadows, in the corners, I wonder why no one's asking Lena how she knew it was the Devil if she couldn't see because of the glass wall. Then I remember that sometimes I know things in my dreams that I wouldn't know otherwise. And that sometimes my dreams come true. That when it happened the first time Mom called it *déjà vu*.

I try not to freak out since Lena's dream was just a dream because we're moving this weekend. But I say a quick prayer anyway. That God will protect us from the Devil. And that the Devil will never come for us or take Mom. I'm two lines into the Our Father when I hear James say "Grandma saw the Devil in church. No, it's true. Grandma came to our house after it happened and told Mom about it. Grandma was alone, saying the rosary, when she felt something behind her."

And that's all I need to hear. I smash my ears as tight as I can and it sounds the same as when I'm taking a bath. The far rumble. But it's getting closer the harder I push because I can still hear James' voice even though I can't make out what he's saying. Stories are one thing.

Mom seeing witches walk up trees. Dad seeing the donkey lady when he was in the navy. La Llorona and Bloody Mary. I know they're not really real. But dreams that could come true and the Devil in church? That stuff is real. And Grandma doesn't lie because she always says "God sees everything."

So as I sit there wishing James would hurry up and finish before anyone notices I'm being a chicken, I wonder how the Devil can go into a church. How he can go into God's house. And what he wanted with Grandma. I want to know what happened. What he looks like, sounds like, and said. And especially what Grandma did to get away. But I can't listen. So I focus on the rumbling. On the black inside my closed eyelids and the white dots and spirals popping up. And push thoughts of the Devil away.

Knots

Me and Cristi are waiting for Diego to finish up in the bathroom. She's carrying her overnight bag and I have one of Lena's old t-shirts and my toothbrush. I'm still kind of jumpy and catch myself looking up and down the hallway when Cristi's not looking.

Diego comes out, says good night, and heads off to the boys' room. At least he's not being all obnoxious like Tino. Tino kept scratching at the bedroom door when we were getting our things together.

Cristi pulls out a long, pink nightgown I've seen before and a thin robe to go over it I haven't. I put on my oversized t-shirt and brush my teeth. As I reach for the door, she asks me if I'll wait for her. So I sit on the lid of the toilet and watch her brush her hair and put it in a braid. She offers her brush to me when she's done.

My hair's curly and tangled and always has big knots underneath because I wear a ponytail all day every day. Because it's too long and can't be brushed. Only combed when it's wet. I shake my head and get up, thinking she's done. When she starts rubbing sweet smelling lotion on her hands and arms, I open the door and leave.

We've laid out the pillows and blankets and sleeping bag, but we can't fall asleep because we're too scared. So we're taking turns coming up with something to talk about and yawning in between, so nothing's really being said. I feel myself getting heavy, my head falling further into the pillow, my body sinking, when Cristi asks "So why are you guys moving?"

I don't answer right away. I consider acting like I'm asleep and not answering at all, but then she repeats the question. A little louder this time, just in case I had started falling asleep. I don't know what Mom's told her family or what Aunt Rita's told Diego and Cristi but Cristi

probably knows something or else she wouldn't have asked for more details. I don't think Mom would have told her family about the phone calls and the threats to throw us out, but she must have told Grandma something about why we needed to stay at her house instead of our own while Dad looked for a job somewhere else. So maybe she did tell her we needed to move out. Maybe she told Grandma we couldn't afford it anymore with Dad traveling. That we needed the extra money for his gas and food and motel rooms since that's the reason we had to sell everything in the first place. And if she told Grandma then maybe Grandma told Aunt Rita.

So Aunt Rita probably did tell Cristi something and told her not to say anything about it. That's how it always works in Mom's family. Everybody always knows what's going on, but no one says anything. The adults just look sorry for you and talk in a soft voice if it's really bad.

And the way Cristi asked all slow like she knew she shouldn't but she couldn't stop herself makes me think she does know. But Cristi wouldn't understand us needing to sell everything we could so there was a little bit of extra money because she always has nice things. Even the things Aunt Rita gets at garage sales look brand new. Like they've never been worn before or played with before. And since it's just Diego and Cristi, they don't have to wear hand me downs that are too big and too small and faded and torn. Aunt Rita can afford to buy things just for them.

"Oh" I say in a voice steady and honest and light, like I'm happy to tell her something she doesn't already know, "my dad wants to find work somewhere else. He says there aren't enough opportunities here for his line of work and he heard about jobs that will pay him a lot more for what he does in other cities. Bigger cities. So he's going to check them out and when he gets hired he's going to get a house and send for us. That way, when we get there, we have a

house ready for us to live in. Furniture and everything. That's why we sold all our stuff. Because we won't need it where we're going."

I'm listening, waiting for her to say something or ask something. But she doesn't. So I don't know if she believes me or not. For the first time tonight, I'm glad it's so dark in the room. "And I don't know if you know or not. Maybe your mom said something about it."

She moves just a tiny bit. Smoothing her robe.

"But we're going to live with Grandma because my mom wants to spend as much time with her as possible before we leave the state. You know, because we don't know when we'll be able to come back and visit. So we need to spend the time we have left here with her."

She doesn't say anything. Not even "oh." And she doesn't move. Not even to nod her head.

So I turn on my side. Away from her.

Her robe is warm and I know it's going to make me hot and itchy.

I fold myself tighter, trying not to kick her.

Birds

We waited for Dad to send for us.

He'd call after dinner and talk to everyone in order. Mom, Xavier, Lena, Mario, me, Tino, and then Mom again. And after he'd answer the same questions five times in a row, about his motel room, what he ate, what he did, where he went, and what Texas looked like, Tino would pass the phone to Mom while everyone else went back to what they were doing before. I'd stay in the doorway, trying to figure out if Mom's "ohs" outnumbered her "hmms" and "wells."

After a week, the only question I asked was "How are you?" And once Mom started hanging up before Grandma finished the dishes, I stopped asking her if he found a job yet. Then Dad only called Sundays after Mass and there was more to say. How me and Tino cleaned Grandma's bushes in the front yard by pulling the wood like cocoons off and squeezing their green worms out onto the sidewalk. How Uncle Cencio put us in the basket on his bike and drove us up and down alleys and through car washes. How we wouldn't play tag with one of the kids we met because he smelled like pickles and had warts all over his fingers.

Pretty soon, no one talked anymore about Dad finding a job or moving away. The big kids took off in the mornings with cousins and friends and went swimming until it was time for dinner. And me and Tino stayed outside all day and most of the night. Playing, walking the neighborhood, buying candy at Tilton's. At night we'd catch lightning bugs. I'd smear their tips on my nails and ears so they'd glow and Tino would smash them into his palms and chase me, trying to put them in my hair.

It was after I started thinking we weren't moving after all, that Dad would just come back and find a job here, that Mom said one night while we were eating "Dad found a job working at an air force base." I looked around the table and saw forks floating halfway between mouths and plates. No one ate and no one said anything. Not even Grandma.

"Electrical" Mom said. "He sounds excited." And then she put a forkful of sopa in her mouth.

When still no one said anything. Not even to ask where he got his job or when we'd be moving, Mom said "He starts in a week. He'll look for a place for us to live after his first paycheck." She tried to sound happy, pushing her voice across the table. But I knew she was upset too because she still didn't tell us where we were going.

Mom quit her job and went back to spending all her time with Grandma. And then they went through all the cardboard boxes we'd stacked in the garage when we moved in. With the mindset that we could only take what would fit in the trunk, they looked through boxes in the mornings before it got hot.

Mom threw some of it away. Like our old school work and other papers she'd kept. And some she gave away. Like toys, games, and clothes. Things the big kids wouldn't wear anymore that were still too big for me and Tino. Or things we wouldn't need. Like our coats and boots since Dad had told her it didn't get cold in Texas. Lena's things were set aside for the few girls in our family to look through. And Xavier's and Mario's things went to James and Andy. Mine and Tino's went to the church.

Mom and Grandma took turns telling us that some kids didn't have anything, not even shoes, and that we had more than we needed and had to give to the less fortunate whenever we complained about donating the few things we had saved from the garage sale we'd had when

Dad first left. And even though I knew I couldn't take my books or movies, I had tried to make a deal with Mom when I saw her putting most of my games and dolls in the donation pile. That I got to keep half. But she didn't budge. Instead, she told me that I hadn't played with them since we'd been at Grandma's so they must not have been that important to me. That we were taking what we needed, not what we wanted. And when her and Grandma kicked me out of the garage because I wouldn't stop bothering them about it, I realized I should've just done what Tino did. Take what I wanted and hid it under my shirt.

Our last week there had been amazing. The cousins were over every day with all of Mom's sisters visiting at some point. Mom and her sisters would sit in the kitchen with Grandma. Cooking, folding clothes, cleaning. And reminding each other about things they had forgotten. Aunt Filia and Mom comparing how they make mole, what they use and how much, turned into Grandma telling about the time Uncle Matt out ate Uncle Gabe twelve enchiladas to nine and how she kept rolling them, waiting for them to get sick. Washing dishes turned into Aunt Rita telling about the time her and Mom were taking a bath in the kitchen and Uncle Joe and his friends walked in. How Mom had jumped out of the tin tub, grabbed the towel, and run from the room, leaving Aunt Rita to chase after her, holding onto a corner of the towel, her butt bare for all to see. Each time, they laughed until they couldn't catch their breath, their laughs getting higher and higher until they disappeared, leaving them shaking and tearing in silence.

Dad had come at night, after I had already fallen asleep. And we were leaving before we were ready. The seven of us in one car for twelve hours. Dad drove the whole way and Mom, a box of photo albums on her lap, cried for most of it.

She had left her birdbath with Grandma. She'd painted peonies, zinnias, and day lilies on it and placed it just outside Grandma's dining room windows. So when Grandma sat at the table preparing meals, folding clothes, and sewing, resting the purple black knots in her legs, she could see the birds' playing and hear them calling and think of Mom. "When you hear the birds, I'm thinking of you" Mom told Grandma as she got in the car. They were both crying when we pulled away from the curb.

Enemies

Our house is big. Like Dad had told us it would be.

Lena has her own room. And it's just Xavier and Mario in theirs. Me and Tino are back to sharing, but this time we have bunk beds. But I don't sleep like I did. I just lie in bed, listening.

To Tino moving until he's still. And then I listen to his breathing. And to the front door since mine and Tino's room is divided from the living room by huge, sliding, broken blinds. When you walk through the front door, you walk into our empty living room and can see our bedroom. That's why Mom's always yelling at us to keep it clean. And it's also why I always listen for the front door to jiggle. And to the windows. To see if anyone's trying to lift one.

It doesn't matter that I know this house. Each corner, each crack, each buckle. I still smash myself against the wall at night like I did when we first moved here. Trying to hide between it and my mattress. Staying as still as I can. Hoping that if someone or something does come in, they think no one's on top. Trying to figure out if I hear them taking Tino, whether I'll pretend I'm asleep or jump on their back.

I barely move in bed. Even when I'm sleeping. I wake up in the same position, my hair fanned out around me where I placed it and still rolled in my blankets. And if I have to use the bathroom, I'll hold it until someone else gets up since someone always does. Because, here, there are things that come out at night when the lights go off. They crawl on the floors, the counters, the walls. Bugs the size of Dad's thumb.

When someone gets up to use the bathroom, my toes barely touch the cool wooden floors as I hurry to catch them before they turn off the bathroom light. Otherwise, I have to run my

palm over the tiled wall, searching for the light switch, waiting to bump a smooth shell or feel legs crawling over my fingers. And once I find the light, I spot the one or two roaches that scurried out in the brief dark, running behind a shampoo bottle or along the base of the toilet, their wings or legs sticking out once they've crammed themselves into a shadow, and am caught between fear and a need.

When lights are flicked on or they're uncovered, they run across the stove and the counters and into the sink. They hide behind furniture and escape under doors and in cracks along the floors and cupboard drawers, their brown and black bodies squeezing into spaces as thin as a butter knife. And when they crawl onto the ceiling, open their thin, light brown wings, and begin their circling, buzzing, black brown attack, me, Lena, and Mom scream for someone to "Get it! Get it!" Already panicking when we see them crawling up the walls.

So Mom cleans the house twice a day. Sweeping and mopping. And making sure we've picked up clothes and towels and shoes and anything that could be considered a pile of any kind. And she washes the counters and stove and dishes before and after every meal. And all the lights stay on. Every room. Even the hallway. All lit until the last person to go to bed turns them off because even with Mom cleaning and Dad treating for two years, the roaches still haven't gone away.

What is missing are all the friends Mom said I'd make. Instead, I'm stuck with a now enemy just across the street, Joann, and two at school, Richard and Cassandra.

Joann didn't use to be so bad. She would ride her bike over, the plastic tassels ripped off the handle bars in different lengths, and hop off it when she'd almost reached our porch, letting it zigzag to a stop in our bushes. If we didn't hear that or her shoes clopping up the steps and

shuffling over the porch because she never put them on all the way, she'd press her face into the front screen door until someone noticed she was there.

Mom would look towards the direction of the front door and say "She should know better. She's old enough to know better" when we'd ask if we could play with her. So we'd take Mom talking at all about Joann as a yes and run for the door before she could tell us no.

And even though Joann was bossy, she wasn't so bad most of the time. We all got along. Me and Tino and Joann and Billy. We rode our bikes and played tag and kickball. But then she started getting upset when I didn't want to do the same things she did. Like when she wanted just the two of us to hang out like I would spend the day without Tino. Or when she wanted us to walk up and down the next block because she liked a boy who lived there even though she wasn't quite sure where he lived but she was sure he'd come outside when he saw us walking in front of his house.

When it got really bad was when Billy started siding with me and Tino more often and the three of us would talk about what we wanted to do before we even thought about seeing if Joann was at home or wanted to join us. And most of the time she didn't want to when she heard what we wanted to do. She'd rather sit on her porch, talking on the phone and putting on nail polish. And every now and then she'd come over and act like we were still really good friends when my family was outside playing baseball or football or cooking out. She'd hug me and be all happy. Her hands flying everywhere when she talked. Laughing when there was nothing to laugh at. Even though she had stopped talking to me at school.

So though Mom thought Joann should have known better than to ask when Joann asked if she could bring a couple of her things over to sell at our garage sale, Mom didn't say no. And

she didn't think anything of it when she left me outside with Joann to watch everything while she went inside to see if Ruben was still napping.

But when I saw Joann trying on Mom's and Lena's jewelry and not putting it back before she put on another piece I knew it wasn't going to be good. I watched her for a little bit. Playing with Mom's rings. Seeing which fingers they looked best on. Shoving Lena's bangles up her arms and then shimmying them down. But when she moved on to their necklaces, I knew I was going to have to say something. Mom and Lena had hung some from the corners of jewelry boxes and arranged others on the table. I couldn't let her mess them up.

And when I told her that, she grabbed my hair, yanked me by it to the nearest tree, wrapped it around the trunk, and held it in place. When Tino came outside and saw me tied to the tree by my own hair, crying, he grabbed Dad's golf bag and crashed it into Joann's legs. By the time Mom came outside, I was still standing by the tree crying and grabbing my scalp and Tino was keeping the golf bag between him and Joann as she chased him around the yard, screaming. We've been enemies since. Especially after I got punished for starting the whole thing since Mom said it all could have been avoided if I'd told her Joann wasn't my friend anymore.

But things with Richard and Cassandra were never good. They've been my enemies for as long as I've known them. And today wasn't any different from any other school day when they're bored and looking for something to entertain them. And as I think about today, as me and Tino walk home from school. How maybe it would have been different if I was a boy. How I wouldn't have had to put up with Richard and Cassandra teasing me. I get hotter than I already am, feeling all the weight in my backpack as the straps dig into my shoulders. I wipe the sweat

rolling down the side of my face and above my lip. And swish my ponytail from side to side trying to make some breeze to cool my sweaty neck.

“Tino! Wait!” I yell, struggling to yank up the waistband of my skirt since my back pack keeps pushing it down.

“Hurry up. I’d be home already if I didn’t have to wait for you,” he shouts back over his shoulder.

It’s true, but if he says it one more time, I think I might try to strangle him when I catch up with him. I’m taking short careful steps, trying not to make the scuffs on my white dress shoes any worse because they’re my only pair and they have to last till the end of the school year. Since today was picture day, Mom made me dress up while Tino got to wear the same clothes he always does. Shirt, jeans, tennis shoes. The only difference is his shirt has a collar.

“Hurry up or I’m leaving. I’ll just tell Mom you sat down to rest. You’ll get in trouble.”

“You better not!” He’s about five houses ahead of me and not slowing down. I wouldn’t put it past him to leave me behind and then tell Mom when she asks that I was too lazy to keep up. Or that I was complaining about wearing this stupid skirt and these stupid shoes. They were the whole reason Richard and Cassandra were messing with me today.

Most of the time, Mrs. Arnold is really good about keeping an eye on everyone. But today, when Cassandra stopped in front of Bronson’s empty desk, the desk next to mine, and called Richard over, I knew something was going on. I tried not to look at them. Thinking if I didn’t look at them, maybe they’d go away. But they didn’t. Cassandra turned to Richard, leaned close, and whispered something in his ear, covering her mouth with her hand. And Richard started laughing.

Mom tells me to ignore them. That they'll leave me alone if I ignore them. But I know better. Ignoring them never works. It just makes them try harder.

So I sat there. Wishing I was invisible. Knowing Cassandra had said something about me. Knowing they were laughing at me. I had tried to act like I didn't even know they were there. I kept working, running my pencil over the words like I was searching for them, and trying to figure out what they were laughing at. Thinking maybe the safety pin holding my skirt was showing. Or another string had come undone. Or maybe the white out I had put on my shoe to cover the grey had come off already.

What seemed like twenty minutes passed and they still hadn't said anything to me. So I decided to peek at them without them seeing and slip out of my chair and walk to where Mrs. Arnold was sitting at the reading station with some kind of question if they weren't looking. But as soon as I turned towards them I knew it was over. Pretending they weren't there that whole time hadn't worked.

They were looking right at me. And I could tell from Richard's grin they'd been watching me. Probably waiting to see what I was going to do.

I had always heard the other girls giggling and whispering about boys. Saying if a boy really likes you he's mean to you. And when Richard first started making fun of me, my hair, my boniness, I hoped it was true. Thinking how cute and popular he is. But after he made me miserable for half the school year and never said he liked me, I knew it wasn't.

But Cassandra's even worse because she's a girl. She follows Richard around and laughs when he makes fun of people. And she even points out things to make fun of. Things she knows girls get embarrassed about.

"Do you smell that?" Cassandra had asked Richard as she sniffed the air a desk away.

“Yeah, I do smell something. Where do you think it’s coming from?” he asked, putting his nose out in front of him, sniffing around Bronson’s desk.

I had looked around the room. Desperate to make eye contact with someone. Hoping someone would come over and talk to me and then Cassandra and Richard would leave me alone. But either no one had heard them or they didn’t want to get involved. And I couldn’t blame them because who in their right mind draws attention to themselves when someone else is about to get the royal treatment? Yeah, it should be when someone sticks up for someone else, the bully walks away. But it doesn’t always work like that. Especially when no one stands up to Richard. Or Cassandra.

So then Cassandra said “It smells like... What is that? Is it? No. It is. It smells like dog shit. Do you smell it?”

“Yeah. I do. You’re right. It is dog shit. I wonder where it’s coming from.”

“I think it’s coming from over there. By her. I bet you anything it’s her” Cassandra said. “Look how dirty her shoes are.”

And I felt myself burning, my neck and face turning red, my hands starting to sting with sweat. And even though I knew I didn’t stink. Even though I knew I had washed my hair that morning and Lena had helped me fix it. Even though I knew I hadn’t stepped in anything on the way to school or out in the playground. Even though I knew I hadn’t gotten sweaty during P.E., I had slowly lowered my head. Just a tiny bit. Just enough to smell myself.

They laughed at me and then left, leaving me wondering if I really did smell.

I start imagining how it would feel seeing Richard crying on the playground because someone beat him up. Or hearing Cassandra being laughed at by everyone because I showed

them how stupid she is. How then I'd have a story to tell when we're sitting around talking. Like Xavier's and Mario's stories.

They always have one. Like the time they were playing basketball with the Rangel brothers and Mario started running his mouth when him and Xavier started losing. How when Mario's mouth got him in trouble, Xavier had to jump in and fight both Rangels at the same time even though him and Mike were cool. How then Mario started throwing rocks at all three of them and the Rangels took off running. And at some point, it doesn't matter which story it is, Xavier says "Man. I was always paying bills your mouth couldn't." And then Mario says "I was just trying to help you get more action."

And as I'm thinking about the way Dad's proud of Xavier and Mario. The way he laughs at their stories and tells them remember when and then goes into another one. Or tells one of his own. Like the time he got jumped by two boys from school on his way home and he beat them up. How when he got home Grandma already knew what happened because the school had called and she whipped him. And how the nuns whipped him the next day. But that those two boys never messed with him again. No one at school did. And the way he was proud of Tino after the whole Joann thing. I know that if anyone puts their hands on me again, Richard or Cassandra or anyone, I'll have to fight.

"Will you hurry up?" Tino screams, making me stumble.

I catch myself and look up. Surprised by how far we've walked. We're more than halfway home. We're already on the curve in Summit Road.

"I'm leaving you for real. I'm tired of waiting," Tino yells, walking backwards. He's still as far ahead of me as he was earlier.

“You better quit yelling at me like that or I’m going to tell Mom when we get home.”

And Tino slows down. And then he stops.

I look up the road to see what he’s waiting for because I know it’s not me. And from what I can see, nothing seems out of the ordinary. Same parked cars. Same empty yards. But I decide to hurry up. I look at the ground as I walk, trying to find a stick in case there’s a dog.

Fifty feet away, on the other side of the street, is a group of kids. All about the same height. Walking behind a girl named Angel. Everyone knows who she is because she’s two heads taller than the boys in her grade, she’s had boobs since the third grade, and she’s always by herself.

And though I can’t really hear what they’re saying, I know the group of kids is making fun of her. “Tino, we should help her” I say quietly, not really wanting to say the words, but knowing I should. I stand next him, watching the group slowly move farther away.

“No we shouldn’t. She’ll be okay. She’s almost home.”

“Oh yeah? And since when do you know where she lives?”

“Look. Just mind your own business and they’ll leave her alone.”

I know they probably won’t unless something happens that makes them. “I bet you anything she’s crying.”

“So what if she’s crying? I’m not helping her. Besides, they’re not even going our direction. So just mind your own business.” And he starts walking again as the group moves towards the left fork. Leaving me behind like that’s the end of it.

But I don’t care what he says. If they’re still picking on her by the time we catch up to them I’m going to do something. “I’m helping her whether you help me or not.”

“Not” he calls over his shoulder.

Even though they moved to the left and we're going to the right, they still haven't really gone anywhere. It's almost like Angel's just waiting for them to go away. And we're catching up to them fast. I look at my shoes, the way they lift and land, knowing we're getting closer to the group. I wrap and unwrap the straps of my backpack around my fingers trying to figure out what I'm going to do now that I said I was going to do something. And hoping Tino will change his mind.

I decide to look at them. Maybe if they see someone's seeing what they're doing, they'll stop. I know they won't be scared of me. But maybe they'll feel guilty about being caught and stop. And while I'm trying to come up with what to do after that since it probably won't work and feeling more and more like I'm walking on fresh asphalt, I almost run into Tino. He's stopped again.

"It's Richard" he whispers.

I can't stop myself. I look even though he just told me and see Richard. He's one of the six kids walking behind Angel. He's just ahead of us on the other side of the fork but enough so he's facing the opposite direction from where we're headed.

"Walk faster" Tino says, even though I already am.

I give up any thoughts of being brave and helping someone and think how stupid I almost was. Richard already messed with me today and I'm not going to give him another chance. Especially when he's with older kids. I'm trying to keep up with Tino and get as far away from Richard and his friends as possible when I hear them getting louder. I look over my shoulder and see that they're half a block behind us, yelling at Angel from the fork. My heart catches when I realize they're not following her.

“Tino.” He’s ahead of me again. But I don’t want to run to try to catch up to him because they might see me. “Tino” I call a little louder.

“What?”

“Are they coming this way? Are they facing this direction?”

“I don’t know. Just keep walking. And hurry up.” He doesn’t even bother to turn around.

When I don’t hear anything for what seems like a while, I figure it’s safe to peek over my shoulder again. They’re still behind us. About a block now. Still about even with the corner where they were before, but they’ve crossed the street. They’re walking the same way we are.

I wonder what they’re doing over here because I’ve never seen any of them on the way home before. If they followed Angel from school, if they’re going to the park, or if they know someone who lives around here. And I hope Richard doesn’t know it’s me ahead of him even though he was making fun of my clothes earlier.

When I hear them behind me, their voices and their shoes hitting the street as they run, I don’t turn around and I don’t stop and I don’t walk faster. I tell myself over and over that they’re just racing each other to the park we’ve almost reached, trying to stay calm. And when it sounds like they’re right behind me and about to pass me, Richard yells “Watch out everyone. I smell dog shit. You don’t want to step in it.”

Two boys run past me before they realize everyone else has stopped. They turn around. They don’t go to my school. And they almost look like they could be in middle school because they’re so tall. They start walking back towards the rest of their friends behind me who are already laughing at whatever Richard is doing behind my back. When we get even with each

other the red-headed boy looks over my head, nods, and then starts walking right next to me, backwards. The boy with the bowl cut joins the group walking behind me now.

I stare straight ahead. Trying to ignore the boy next to me and nodding my head to Tino to keep walking when he stops to see what's going on. But the boy keeps putting his head in my way so that I can't see anything but the freckles on his face as he scrunches up his nose like he's smelling something bad.

A shorter red-headed girl who must be his sister comes up on my right. They have the same freckles. She puts her left hand to her nose, pinching it, and starts laughing. They all do. When I hear Richard right behind me, close enough to kick if I tried, my throat tightens. "I knew I smelled dog shit" he barely gets out before he starts laughing again. I try to walk faster to get away from them and to get to where Tino has stopped and is waiting for me. I tell myself they'll leave me alone. That if I don't acknowledge them, if I don't say anything, if I don't show them I'm afraid, they'll leave me alone. Even though I know it's not true. Each time I take a step, the group takes one with me. And makes fun of me. The way I look and the way I smell.

And then Richard steps in front of me, a mean smile on his face, and stops, forcing me to stop since the brother and sister are still on both sides of me. "Know what? I've been watching you walk." Everyone laughs even though he hasn't said anything funny. He pauses and everyone quiets down to hear what he's going to say. He looks at me. Disgusted. And leans towards me, forcing me backwards.

My backpack bumps into something. I turn my head to the side and see a tall, brown-haired boy is standing behind me. I take a step away from him and back towards Richard who hasn't moved.

Richard moves even closer to me.

I hold my breath and my whole body tightens, readying.

“Did you shit yourself?” he whispers. Everyone busts out laughing. “You did didn’t you?”

My throat’s closed. I can’t speak. Or breathe. I try to look around Richard. To see Tino. But I don’t see him anywhere. He’s not where he was. And I can’t believe he left me. And the buzzing in my eardrums is like static on the T.V. when we try to get channels we don’t have. And it’s getting louder. I can’t even hear what they’re saying anymore. All I can think about is Tino leaving me. How he left me. Alone.

“Shut up! Shut up you stupid idiot! Shut up!” The words are out of my mouth before I even know I said them. And Richard’s surprised eyes narrowing and his open mouth closing to a slit let me know he’s not going to let it go. I try not to flinch as he gets in my face. So close I can see a faded mustard stain at the corner of his mouth.

Someone pushes me from the side and I catch myself. But before I can straighten up, the red-headed girl is coming at me again. And this time she grabs me by my long ponytail and shoves me to the curb.

I stumble and land on my hands and knees in someone’s yard. My knees and hands sting. And so do my eyes and nose. I know I need to get up. And I know I should stick up for myself. Push her back or something. But I can’t. I can’t move. And I don’t know what to do. I look up at the brown and tan house in front of me. The bay window. But no one’s there. No one’s looking. I look at the other houses around me. The green one with the two windows in front, the white one with the big glass door, and the tan one with only the screen door closed. No one’s looking. And no one’s coming.

“You leave her alone!” Tino yells and I hear him running up to the group of boys watching me get beat-up, his tennis shoes smacking the asphalt.

I feel my fear leaving and the buzzing quieting. But my eyes are still stinging even though I know Tino didn’t leave me and everything’s going to be fine. That I’ll just pick myself up and we’ll go home and pretend nothing happened.

I stand up in time to see the red-headed boy grab Tino by his backpack and swing him around. Tino tries to gain his footing but he’s thrown into a yard one up from where I’m standing. Next thing I know, Tino’s lying in the grass and he’s not getting up.

Tino’s small for his age. Short and skinny. And he’s getting beat up because of me and my big mouth. For the first time today, I run. I run as fast as I can and before anyone can grab me, I run to where Tino is still under the red-headed boy and Richard. With blurring tears running down my face, I pull the red-headed boy by his hair and yank him off Tino. Then I claw at Richard’s face from behind, my knees in his back. Trying to gouge his eyes because I don’t have any nails to scratch him with.

Richard squirms out from under me and shoves me away from him. I fall backwards onto the grass. Hard. But he backs away from us, wiping his face.

I look at Tino, not sure what’s coming next, and see that Tino isn’t wearing his glasses anymore. They got knocked off. I help him sit up, noticing his shirt is torn at the collar. “Hurry, hurry. We have to find your glasses.”

We’re on all fours running our hands through the grass when I see Richard’s back with the group and they’re all moving towards us. Richard’s in front of everyone and they’re spread out around him. They’re all carrying something now. Some of them have bagged newspapers

and others have sticks that they must have picked up from the nearby yards. They keep looking at each other and walking towards us. Slowly.

They're getting closer. Only about two houses away and we still haven't found Tino's glasses. And I can't think of anything we can do except keep looking because Tino's blind without them. So I stand in front of Tino, facing the group, and watch the kids get closer to us as he keeps searching. And I can't understand what's happening. Or what's going to happen. Whether they look like they're just trying to scare us or if they're really going to hit us.

When Tino yells "I've got 'em" and "Run," it's too late. I can't run that good or that fast in my shoes. And not with my skirt barely hanging on my waist. And from the way they're swinging the bags, I know they're going to run after me this time if I do. Just like they run after Tino when he does.

But he fends off the red-headed boy and the one with the bowl cut with his backpack. Swinging it in front of him, trying to keep them away, Tino quickly moves up the block. And then he runs for it. And they can't catch him because he's too fast from all the years he's played basketball.

And when I see them coming back to where I'm standing in the group's semi circle, Richard directly behind me, I try to clear my mind. I try not to think. Because if I can't think, I can't be afraid. So I focus on the color of Tino's backpack and how the red gets smaller and smaller until it disappears around the corner instead of the heaviness of the papers and the sharpness of the sticks. And when I can't see it anymore, when my throat's almost completely closed and tears are mixed with the sweat running down my face, I focus on the cracks in the asphalt. The way they wind and break and stop. And wonder why they don't have sidewalks here like they did back home.

I walk slowly. Hearing them call me names but not listening. And not flinching when they hit me.

I refuse to notice when they go away.

Words

When we lived on Lemming, a family visited us. An older white couple with a boy about my age. They went into our bedrooms. Opened our closets. Crossed in front of the T.V. we were watching without saying anything or looking at us. And left the back door open as they admired the Chinese plum trees Tino, Ruben, and I greedily waited to harvest, struggling to let the fruit reach their orange gold. And the built-in stone grill we always used as base where we played truths, dares, promises, and repeats.

They liked it. Our house. Even though it was four bedrooms and they only needed two.

And we couldn't afford to buy it. Even with Xavier and Lena working.

So two weeks later we moved to a new house. Where all four boys had to share a room and me and Lena were back together. But once we moved to Bexar, me sleeping with Lena again was the only thing that wasn't different.

The big kids were always gone with work or friends. And Dad wasn't home anymore either. When Dad had been gone before, it was because he was out of town looking for work. But now, he just left. Took off. And we didn't know where he went or when he'd come back. If he was coming right back from running an errand or if he'd be gone overnight or for a few days. And even if Mom wasn't always mad at him, we knew better than to ask about him when he was gone.

They'd been fighting since before we moved. But once we moved that was different, too. Before, they would argue when we were outside. We'd hear them through the screens doors and open windows as we were passing them, about to come in, and know to stay outside a little

longer. Or they'd argue at night. Their voices barely traveling out of the living room or dining room down the hallway. Or escaping under their closed bedroom door.

On Bexar, when Dad came home from wherever he'd gone, Mom would slam things. Doors, drawers, books, pens, lids, whatever she was gripping. And she'd follow him to their bedroom at the end of the hallway and close their door. Then they'd yell like it was just the two of them. Like we weren't home. Like the windows weren't open. Like the neighbors' houses weren't five feet from ours. And when it was finally over, when they were finally done, Dad would leave. Not looking at us as he walked to the front door and backed out of the driveway. And Mom would stay in their room, crying. And then she'd open the door and go back to whatever it was she was doing before. Not talking. Not seeing. Just doing.

If Dad came home that night, they wouldn't talk for days.

If he didn't, it would happen all over again when he did.

So it shouldn't have surprised me when I heard them arguing one night. I think what surprised me was that it was like it was before. They were arguing again, but after we'd all gone to bed. Like it was something we shouldn't hear. And after I listened to it for a little bit, wishing they would stop, it sounded different. It was the same muffled voices hitting the walls. The same anger. But it wasn't both of theirs. Only Mom's.

Only Mom was attacking. Trying to hurt Dad. And when her words broke. When they cracked. When they disappeared. I knew something had happened. And that something was happening.

I crept out of bed and out of the room without waking up Lena and tiptoed across the hallway, stopping in doorways to quiet creaking floor boards. I made my way to the dark living room. To the statue of Jesus hanging on the wall. I knew He was the only one that could fix

whatever had happened and whatever was happening. He was the only one that could make it right.

I looked into the face I hurried by every day. Forgetting until I was in bed on the verge of sleep. His chin resting on His chest. Blood hanging on His brow, streaming His face. His lips cracked open. A sliver of brown iris showing under half-closed lids.

And I prayed. For God to please make them stop fighting. And I listened. To their door opening. To Mom crying. To the vacuum hitting the hall closet door and the ironing board screeching as it was moved aside. To Dad bumping the suitcase on something as he pulled it out of the closet.

I prayed for God to please not let Dad be mad. To make him apologize. And to let Mom forgive Dad. To please let her forgive him again. And I didn't move. Thinking if I stayed still so would they, I pressed myself into the wood floor when I heard them moving through their room. Trying to stop them. To hold them in place. And when I heard drawers sliding, I pressed harder. Not stopping when my elbows and knees and ankles grated against the wood.

But when Dad started down the hallway, his steps getting louder and closer, I couldn't pray anymore. I couldn't think of the words. Words that were strong enough. Powerful enough to make him stay.

When he put his suitcase down to open the front door and the porch light showed him I was there against the wall. Kneeling, seeing, and listening. He looked past me and walked out the door. And I prayed. For my life. For my family's life. Each prayer a promise. Every one better. Every one to be better. And rushed to get them out before Dad drove away. My stretched and blistered heart proof to God they were real. But I still choked on pleases as Dad's car faded from my ears.

Families

Dad didn't come back. I knew he wouldn't when he left that night. Because he had never taken a suitcase with him after a fight. And all Mom said was "Dad got an apartment." Not why. Or what happened. Or what would happen.

And from the way the big kids looked at each other when Mom told us, they knew something me, Tino, and Ruben didn't. But we all knew that our family, our parents, and our time with Dad wasn't going to be the same.

Dad was gone now. He'd moved out. Moved away from us. And that meant we'd only see him every now and then. And, instead, we'd talk to him on the phone like we did when we stayed with Grandma. But unlike then, the big kids didn't talk to Dad when he called. And neither did Mom. And they didn't see him when he came by. Mom would go to her room when she heard his loud, heavy knock on the door. So would the big kids if they were home. All of them locking their bedroom doors behind them in case Dad tried to come in the house and talk to them like he had at first.

Xavier, Lena, and Mario didn't want to hear anything he had to say. Maybe it was because Dad hurt Mom so bad. Maybe it was because they had known Mom and Dad together longer and happier than me, Tino, and Ruben had. They wouldn't go outside to talk with him when he stood on the front porch calling their names. They wouldn't get on the phone when he asked for them. They wouldn't return his phone calls when he left messages.

And Dad didn't even try with Mom. They were finished the night he left. And now Mom acts like he never existed. If one of us says something about Dad, even if it's just what time he's picking us up for the weekend, Mom's face goes blank. Like she's never heard of him.

Never known him. And Dad's does the same when we mention her. So our weekends with Dad have become something we don't talk about. Just like our weeks with Mom. Two separate places. Two separate lives.

And since we aren't old enough to say we're not going and since we don't have jobs to go to or plans with friends like Xavier, Lena, and Mario do, me, Tino, and Ruben go with Dad every other weekend. We wait in the living room on Friday afternoon with our bags packed. Listening for his car so he doesn't have to come up to the house. It doesn't matter that we don't want to go. That we don't want to leave our house. It doesn't matter that there isn't anything to do at Dad's except stay inside because he lives in an apartment. That we can't do what we usually do. That we'd miss Mom and the big kids and our rooms and our things. Because it's Dad's weekend.

So the three of us sit on Dad's couch and eat our own large plate of nachos while we watch rented movies with Dad. Or we eat our nachos at the small circular dining room table while we play cards or Monopoly for hours. And Dad does things he never did when he lived at home. Like make snacks and dinner. And clean and do laundry. But the things we did do at home with Dad, like go outside and play basketball or football or catch, we can't do.

Dad's apartment is one of four in an old, brick building. He lives on the top with a couple I never see on the other side of the walls and a person I've never met beneath the floors. So when we're inside we're quiet. We don't race or chase each other through the hallway and dining room and living room. We don't wrestle on the couch for spots. And we don't talk loud because we can hear Dad's neighbors moving.

We can't play on the back porch because Dad's weight set is out there. We can't play on the back staircase because it rattles. We can't play in the parking lot behind the apartment

building because it belongs to a Chinese restaurant we've never eaten at. And we can't play in the front because there's no yard and it's Broadway.

So when we're done watching all the movies Dad's rented. When Dad or Tino win Monopoly because they still beat me even though I've been sneaking tens and twenties from the bank and Ruben's still too young to know how to not get suckered when Tino wants to make a trade. Or when the golf tournament Dad's been watching on T.V. is over. Or when we're falling asleep on the couch because that's all there is to do, Dad takes us to play tennis or basketball or hit some golf balls at the park. And when we're worn out and hot, Dad takes us back to his apartment where we're happy to lay on the couch and watch T.V.

But nights are the hardest.

Not because the three of us sleep on the pull-out couch. Its springs poking us in the back and sides when we roll over. And not because we have to close the curtains at night and pretend we don't know or don't hear what's happening just outside on the street. The women walk up and down the block and over to parked cars before it's even dark out. And cars drive by all day. Slowly. Stopping just for a second for someone to run something to them. It's just that at night there's more. More traffic. More women. More guys. More drugs. More squealing tires. More shouting. And more people watching people watching them.

Nights are the hardest because I know Mom's at home. Without us. And without the big kids because they're probably out with friends. They always are on the weekend. She's probably watching T.V. by herself. Or reading. Or sewing something. Just looking for something to keep her busy so she's not lonely.

We'd been going to Dad's for almost two months when Xavier decided to stop by Dad's apartment to finally talk with him. Mom had been telling all of us that what happened between her and Dad didn't change the fact that he was our father. That we had to keep the relationships we'd built with him strong. And I guess Xavier finally decided it was true. So he drove over to Dad's one afternoon, planning to be there when Dad got home from work.

And he was back home half an hour later. Telling Mom in front of all us, in between cursing Dad, that there was a baby stroller on Dad's porch. And when Mom didn't say anything. When she wasn't upset or surprised. When she didn't jump off the couch in anger wanting to hurt Dad back. When she didn't excuse herself, trying to fight back tears that were already falling, and lock herself in her room, I knew she already knew why Dad had moved out. She just hadn't told us. Neither of them had.

They kept letting us think whatever it was we thought had happened between them. Like they had finally just gotten tired of fighting all the time and didn't want to fight anymore. Like maybe they needed a long break from each other. Like Dad was trying to change for Mom. Not that there was a baby. Not that there was another woman. Another family.

And as I sat there, watching the anger in Xavier's and Lena's and Mario's faces and bodies. The way they were standing in the middle of the living room looking around. Looking for someone to hurt, but Dad wasn't there. And the surprise on Tino's and Ruben's faces. And sure mine looked just as surprised and confused, I didn't know who I was more mad at. Dad or Mom. Because of what he did and what she didn't do.

Neither of them said anything. Not once. They let us keep going to Dad's like it was just us. Like his new family wouldn't come by. Like we'd never meet. When we had to. We had to meet at some point. Because he had a new family. He'd moved on.

And even though I had heard what Xavier said and I knew it had to be true because Mom didn't say or do anything the whole time he told us about it, I couldn't believe it was really over – our family. Because now Dad had a new one. He belonged to someone else. A woman who could still have kids. And a baby who would need him. He wasn't ours anymore. There wasn't any fixing what had been done now. There couldn't be. Because there was a baby. He was someone else's Dad. He was going to be someone else's Dad.

I sat on the couch with Tino and Ruben on either side of me, trying to understand that Dad was someone else's now. Someone that needed him more than we did. Someone new and fresh to start all over with. I knew I couldn't ever love his other kid. I couldn't ever think of it as my brother or sister. It was part of Dad's new family. Not mine. Mine was just Mom and Xavier and Lena and Mario and Tino and Ruben now. Not Dad. And not his new baby.

And then Lena started saying just loud enough for me to hear "I knew it. I knew Grandma was right. I knew this was going to happen."

And before I could understand anything besides Lena talking about Mom's mom knowing something, Mom said "Elena" in a slow steady voice. Her warning voice.

But either Lena didn't hear Mom because she was so mad or she didn't want to hear Mom because she was so mad. But the rest of us did and we were all paying attention. Xavier and Mario quit walking around the living room and I stopped biting my nails. So we all heard Lena when she told Mom "Grandma knew. She knew he was going to do this to you. She knew it and you just didn't want to see it."

And like on T.V. when there's a fight between two people and everyone's heads move back and forth between them like they're watching a tennis match, me, Tino, and Ruben all

turned to our right where Mom was sitting on the other couch to see what she was going to do. To say.

Mom looked surprised. Either that Lena was talking about what Grandma knew or maybe that she even knew about it. But then she looked like even she didn't know what Lena was going to say.

"They should know Grandma called his mom" Lena said. Her voice getting louder and screechier. And as I tried to figure out why Lena was calling Grandma Solis his mom instead of Grandma Solis and what happened between Grandma and Grandma Solis, Lena's face started pinching up like she was trying not to cry but was about to. And her arms were out like she was pleading with Mom, but her hands were fists. So all I could think was that she was asking Mom for something, but I didn't know what it was.

"Elena!" Mom said, standing up in front of the couch. Her voice surprised rather than angry. And she looked confused. Her body tilting forward like she was in the middle of taking a step towards Lena but was waiting to see what Lena was going to say. Like she didn't know what was coming next. Like she didn't know what Lena was talking about.

And though I knew Lena was going to pay for it, I didn't want her to stop. I wanted to know why Mom's mom called Dad's mom. And what she said. And so must have Xavier and Mario because usually when Lena's mouth is about to get her in trouble, they step in. They tell her to shut up or knock it off or get in between her and Mom or her and Dad when she's about to go too far. But they both just stood in the middle of the living room, where they'd been since Lena started talking, listening. And Tino and Ruben hadn't moved or said anything since the whole thing started when Xavier walked into the house calling for Mom.

So when Lena started bracing herself, her arms moving to her sides, and Mom didn't move, I held my breath, not wanting to miss anything.

"Grandma knew he was going to do this to you" she told Mom. "She knew he was going to cheat on you again. She knew it." The way she said it like she was begging Mom to admit it was true. Like she wanted Mom to admit Mom knew Dad was going to cheat on her again.

I didn't even have time to get mad at her for wanting Mom to admit it or to wonder when Dad cheated on Mom the first time before she turned to Xavier and Mario and then me and Tino and Ruben and said, "Grandma called Grandma Solis when we were living with her. She begged Grandma Solis to talk to Dad. To tell him to leave Mom alone. To just let her go. That she would take care of us. That"

"Enough!" And then Mom was standing in front of Lena. "That's enough!" Her body pushing Lena backwards. "Don't say another word."

And Lena didn't.

Her body folded into itself and her head tried tucking itself into her chest. Like she was waiting to feel Mom's hand across her face. And when Mom stayed in front of her, promising but not acting, Lena covered her face with her hands, turned around, and walked slowly down the hallway to our room. When the lock clicked, Mom's shoulders lowered, but she didn't turn around. She walked to her room, closed the door, and locked it.

Xavier went out to the back yard and Mario went to their room and closed the door. Me, Tino, and Ruben looked at each other. Raising our eyebrows, asking each other what just happened. And shrugging our shoulders because we didn't know what to do. Dad had a kid with someone else and Mom and Dad were over. Knowing there wasn't anything we could do about it, we quit looking to each other for answers, and pretended to watch T.V.

Dad didn't pick us up that weekend like he was supposed to. And he didn't call to tell us he wasn't coming. And since Mom didn't tell us to pack our bags like she usually has to, she must have talked to him and he must have known to stay away because he hasn't come by. And we haven't heard from him for the last week and a half. Which was fine with me because I didn't want to see him anyway.

And even though today is the start of our next scheduled weekend with him, I don't think he's going to come. And I'm hoping he won't. I still don't want to see him. Especially because it's not a secret anymore that his girlfriend or whatever she is had the baby and now he'll probably make us meet them. And I don't want to. And even though I think the big kids are being pretty mean to Dad when they say they don't have a father anymore, the thought of meeting Dad's new family, or worse, having to be around them all weekend, makes me want to agree.

I'm trying not to think about it, but the more I try not to think about it the more I find myself watching the clock. When five o'clock comes and Mom doesn't say anything about packing our bags, I start to relax. Thinking that Dad knows we don't want to meet his family. That it's not right to make us so soon. But I still get nervous each time the phone rings or I hear a car coming around the house.

Mom's cooking dinner and we're watching T.V. when I hear Dad's car horn. My heart feels like it's lost time and is trying to make up for it as I watch Tino move towards the front door. Before he can even open it to see if it's Dad, I hear the car horn again. Longer. More impatient. And I know it is.

Mom comes into the living room and looks at us. She holds up her hands before we can even start complaining. "It will be okay. You'll be okay" she says, as I throw myself on the

couch like there's no point in living anymore. And even though I'm too old to start crying, I feel the prickle in my eyes. I bury my face in the seat cushion and wonder how Mom and Dad can do this to us. How Dad can think it's okay to make us meet his other family and how Mom can think it's okay to make us go. And I let myself cry for the first time since the night Dad left.

Mom rubs my back and tells Tino and Ruben to go pack their bags. And then she asks Tino to go into my room and pack a few things for me. And I start crying harder. And she just tells me over and over that it will be okay. That I'll be okay. Like saying it will make it true. There's nothing she can do. Nothing she can change. It's Dad's weekend. And Dad's already here. Waiting outside. Honking his horn like we didn't hear him the first time. So I peel myself off the couch, my wet face sticking to the leather, and roll onto my back.

Mom sits on the coffee table in front of me and pushes the loose hair out of my face and tucks it behind my ears. Then wipes the fresh tears seeping out from under my closed eyelids. "Don't cry, honey" she says, pulling me into a sitting position. And she holds me, her warm body covering me, making me stronger. And making me cry harder.

Tino and Ruben give Mom their goodbye kisses and I know I have to go or Dad's going to be mad.

"I love you" Mom says, pulling me off the couch and kissing my cheek.

I mumble that I love her too, willing myself not to cry anymore. But everything she's doing makes me feel sorrier for myself.

"I'll see you on Sunday" Mom says, handing me my backpack. "And you'll be fine. Everything will be fine" I hear one more time as I close the front door behind me.

Dad stops honking the horn when he sees me coming. He's moved on to tapping on the steering wheel as I get in the car. "Why weren't you ready?"

I can't tell him because I didn't think he was going to come since he didn't last weekend. I can't tell him because I didn't want him to come. So I don't answer. And he doesn't ask again.

We don't talk on the drive. Dad doesn't ask what we've been doing. Or how we've been doing. He doesn't apologize. He doesn't tell us about his baby. He doesn't try to explain. He just drives. And I look out the window wishing I could be going anywhere else but to his apartment.

When we pull into the parking lot of the bowling alley, I look at Tino and Ruben, wondering if I missed something when I was inside with Mom. If Dad told them he was taking us bowling. They both look at me and shrug their shoulders like they always do when anything has to do with Dad these days.

"Well. Come on" Dad says, when we don't get out of the car. And he starts crossing the parking lot before we've even closed the car doors.

We get our shoes and our balls and a lane and Dad types our names into the screen. Ruben first, then Tino, then me, then him. After the first couple of frames, things are normal and there's a competition going between Tino and Dad and me and Ruben. We start trying to psyche each other out when our turns come around and Dad asks what we did this week and how the big kids are.

In the eighth frame, I have to tell Dad it's his turn. And when I have to do it again in the ninth, I figure it's because he's ready to go. So after we finish the tenth frame and Dad wins and Tino beats me and Ruben but at least I beat Ruben, I start taking off my shoes and Tino and Ruben follow my lead. Dad sees what we're doing and says "We're playing another round. Ruben, your turn." Then he walks up the steps to the upper level and heads over to the restroom and concession area.

Ruben picks up his ball and throws it and the screen starts a new game. And when it's Dad's turn, he's nowhere around. We wait for him, but it doesn't take that long to get food since they just ask for your name and then say it over the speakers when the food's ready. So after a couple of minutes I tell Tino and Ruben to bowl for him. And when he doesn't come back until it's Tino's turn and he doesn't bring anything with him, nothing to eat or drink, I know something's going on and I automatically think his girlfriend's here. I want to look around to see if I'm right but I don't want Dad to think I'm interested in meeting her. So I don't even bother asking what took him so long.

"Well what do we have here" he says, coming down the steps. "What do we have here." He reaches for his ball and me and Ruben just watch. When he finally looks up and sees that Tino's already at the line he says, "Oh. Alright. Alright" and puts his ball back. Then he stands by the monitor smoothing his shirt and hair instead of sitting in the seat. "There you go, Tino. There you go" he says when Tino knocks down about six pins. And he doesn't stop.

He tries too hard to make it seem like we're having fun. Or like he's having fun. Because he says something every time we bowl. Even if it's a gutter ball. He's too loud, too excited, and too showy. Especially compared to the first game. I watch him faking having fun with us and see he keeps turning to the upper level. Like he's looking for someone. And because I know he's doing it for someone else, I start doubting that we've been having fun. That he's wanted to be here.

After my next turn, I say I have to use the bathroom. On my way there I look around the bowling alley, trying to figure out who Dad's been looking at. I don't see anything out of the ordinary. No woman hanging out behind our lane by herself. Just families and teams and groups of friends bowling. So I figure I'm wrong and maybe Dad's just being that way because

now he knows we know what he did and we've been mad at him. But I can't enjoy bowling like I was and I find myself looking to the upper level behind our lane whenever I get up to get my ball.

When we're more than halfway through the second game, Dad gets up again and says he'll be right back. This time, instead of going to the restroom and concession area, he heads to the entrance. I sit back down, not wanting to see who he's meeting. Who he's going to bring back with him. Who I'm going to have to meet and talk to and act like everything is okay with. I try to focus on Ruben bowling. The way he walks. The pause he takes before he throws the ball. The way it spins to the left. And before I know it, Dad's back.

"Here they are" he says, standing at the top of the steps, his right arm out to us. Showing us. He comes down the first step and there's a woman behind him. She's carrying a baby wrapped in a white blanket against the front of her body so I can't see the baby's face. She's short. Shorter than Mom. And has long, straight, black hair tucked behind one ear and covering part of the other side of her face. She looks young. At least ten years younger than Mom. Even with all her makeup on. And from where I'm sitting, it looks like she's wearing a lot of it.

Dad looks at us. Me and Ruben sitting on one side of the lane, Tino on the other. "Kids. This is my friend Dolores. Say hi."

Tino's and Ruben's mumbled hi mixes with mine.

Dolores' is just as quiet.

Dad's the only loud one. Like nothing is wrong. Like we should be happy to be meeting. "Well. Get up. Introduce yourselves" he says, when we don't say anything else.

We stand up slowly. I nod to Dolores and she gives me a half smile before I lower my head.

“This is Tino” Dad says.

I look up to see what Tino’s going to do. How he’ll treat Dolores. His head is down and Dad and Dolores are still standing where they were. Looking at him. Waiting. When Tino doesn’t say anything, Dad says “Tino plays basketball. He’s pretty good, too.”

But Tino still doesn’t look up or say anything.

Dad turns to Dolores looking kind of irritated. She’s rubbing the baby’s back in circles. She smiles and nods. Then lowers her chin to the baby’s head.

Ruben’s standing in front of me. And when I see Dad turn towards us and the warning look he has on his face, I hope he starts with Ruben since he’s closer. “This is Ruben. He’s the youngest. Tell Dolores what you like to do.” Dad’s voice is irritated at the end. Like Ruben did something wrong. And he’s probably making an apologetic face at Dolores. But I’m smart enough not to look.

But Ruben doesn’t speak.

And I wonder if Dad’s smiling at Dolores. Trying to act like everything’s okay. That we’re just shy.

Because then Dolores says “It’s fine Saulo,” her voice low and quiet. “Really, they’re okay.”

But I barely hear anything after Saulo because I can’t believe she just called him Saulo. No one who knows Dad calls him Saulo. Everyone calls him Sau or Saul. Not Saulo.

And I don’t know if she just stuck up for us or kind of stuck up for us because she wants us to like her or because she’s really nice. And wonder how she can really be nice if she stole Dad from us. If she still wanted to be with him even though she knew he had a family. And even though I don’t want to think it, I wonder if she even knew Dad had a family. Or if Dad lied

to her, too. Like he lied to all of us. But she must have known. She had to have known he had a wife and kids. And she just didn't care.

"This is Daniella" Dolores says. She's standing by the monitor now next to Dad. She looks nervous. The way she keeps running her fingers over the baby's blanket. Her smile that only makes it across half her face before tucking in and down.

And Dad's looking at me, Tino, and Ruben like he'd like to strangle us. He's not even bothering to smile anymore. "Come see your sister."

And for the first time since I thought Dolores might be here, I'm glad she is because I'm not listening to Dad. I'm not going to go ooh and ahhh over his new baby like he wants me to. I'm not going to hug her and kiss her and tell her I love her. I don't even know her. I didn't even know she existed. He didn't even bother to tell us about her. And now, all of a sudden, he wants me to treat her like my sister. Well I'm not going to. Lena's my sister. If Tino and Ruben want to listen to Dad, that's fine. But I'm not going to act like it's okay that Dolores and Daniella are here. And there's nothing Dad can do to make me. And he won't do anything anyway because Dolores is here and he's still trying to impress her.

I look at my shoes. Half red. Half blue. Too long laces. And wait. For Tino or Ruben to walk over to the baby. For Dad to start yelling at us. For Dolores to apologize and leave.

"She's sleeping, anyway" Dolores says before I can even count to thirty. "You can see her when she's awake."

I take that as my sign to keep bowling and move towards the ball return. I look at the screen. "Ruben. Your turn." I know I'm being rude but I'm tired of being expected to behave and tell myself that I shouldn't feel bad. But I can't even pretend to have fun. When it's my turn, I pick my ball up and throw it without even trying to aim. And Tino and Ruben aren't

doing so good anymore, either. And Dad has stopped playing and we're taking turns throwing for him. He's sitting with Dolores on the upper level behind us. His arm's wrapped around Dolores' shoulder as she bounces Daniella. Every now and then I look over at them and Dolores is watching us.

When the tenth frame's over, we take our shoes off and stand by the ball return waiting to head up to the front desk. But Dad's not moving. So Tino and Ruben follow my lead and pick their balls up. We pass by Dad, Dolores, and Daniella and Dad doesn't even look at us. It's Dolores that starts pushing her seat back. We put our balls on the racks and our shoes on the desk and then wait at the entrance for Dad.

He takes his time. Making us wait for at least ten minutes before he's finally ready to leave. This time, as he walks up to us, Dolores is walking next to him. And she's cradling Daniella's head against her shoulder because she's awake now.

My hands start sweating. I know I have to tell Dolores bye. And that Dad expects me to say something about it being nice to meet her. But my throat's tightening up so much I don't even know if I can say anything. And as they get closer, I can't even look at them.

When they reach us, Dad says "Well. Let's go if you're ready." Like he hasn't been upset with us.

We follow him and Dolores out to the parking lot. We get to his car first and me, Tino, and Ruben stop. But Dad and Dolores keep walking. We look at each other. Not sure what to do and then Ruben mumbles bye, so me and Tino tack ours onto his. But Dad and Dolores are already beyond hearing distance. Dolores doesn't even look back. She's probably mad at us. Which means it's going to be rough tonight at Dad's.

When Dad comes back, I get in the car and try to sink down in my seat so he can't see me in the rearview mirror. I'm waiting the whole ride to his apartment for him to start yelling at us but he just sings along to the radio. And since being quiet seems to work, I decide not to say anything for the rest of the night.

We pull into his parking spot under the carport. And then I see headlights pulling into the spot next to us. Dolores is driving. That's why she didn't say bye. Because she was coming over. I should have known that she was going to come over when Dad was acting like everything was okay and she didn't tell us bye. And even though I know I'm pushing it again, I get out of Dad's car and walk up the stairs without even looking at her. I don't understand why she has to be here on our weekend with him. She can spend all the time she wants with Dad. We only see him twice a month. And he didn't even pick us up last time.

I wait for Dad on the back porch, trying to figure out how I can make her leave. How I can make him see that I don't want her around. When he reaches around me and opens the door, I see that's not going to happen. She's not visiting. She's staying. It's their apartment now. Not Dad's. Dad's fish tank that was to the right as soon as you walk in is gone. There's a small black table with a red vase with black swirls on it in its place. And that's just the beginning.

I see every room is different. The kitchen, the dining room, the living room, the bathroom, and even the hallway. Things are missing. Like the fish tank and Dad's oval dining room table and the bean bags. But there are even more new things. Dolores' things. Like the rectangular glass dining room table and matching coffee table and end tables. Like the drapes on the blinds. Like the vases and flowers and mirrors everywhere. And the family photos on the book shelves and the walls. Pictures of Daniella when she was first born. Pictures of Dolores holding Daniella. And pictures of Dolores and Dad. Smiling. Happy. Professional pictures.

I look at all the changes, trying not to stare. Trying not to let Dad and Dolores see me staring because I know they're watching as we walk through the house and put our bags down by the couch. I put my backpack against the wall and sit on the couch, covering my lap with a pillow. Tino sits next to me and Ruben next to him. Ruben finds the remote on the side of his seat cushion and starts flipping channels. I try to focus on the T.V. On the commercials. The scores. The shows and movies. All of them flashing by.

Not on Dolores taking Daniella to Dad's bedroom and coming out without her and then heading to the kitchen and opening up the fridge and cupboards without having to ask Dad where anything is. Not on the fact that Dad probably didn't come for us two weekends ago because Dolores was living here already. That Xavier probably stopped by when she was moving in. And that Dad probably wanted it to be just them that weekend and was going to keep them a secret until we met them tonight.

Dolores calls Dad from the kitchen. A minute later, Dad's walking towards the entertainment center, reaching to turn the T.V. off.

"Are you guys hungry? Are you ready to eat?" Dolores asks from the dining room.

I didn't pay attention when we first came in, but now that she's asking I can smell some kind of meat. And garlic. She cooked before meeting us at the bowling alley. That's probably why she didn't come earlier.

We follow Dad into the kitchen where Dolores has laid out some black plates I've never seen on the counter and uncovered the pans on the stove. She made pork chops and sopa.

When I try to serve the sopa it's mushy and sticks to the plastic serving spoon. And when I sit down at the table and look at it more closely, it's too orange. Not like Mom's. A light orange and fluffy with just enough moisture so it's not dry. I push it around on my plate, not

wanting to even try it. I already know it's going to taste terrible. And when I try to cut the pork chop, I have to tear at it.

I know I can't not eat anything, so I put a small piece of pork chop in my mouth. And chew on it until my jaw hurts and my saliva's made it soft enough to swallow. Deciding Dad can't tell me anything because I tried her food, I put my fork down, finish my drink, and scoot my chair back.

"You're not done" Dad says when I'm about to stand up.

"I'm full."

Dad points his fork at me. "You'll sit there until you're done. You all will."

I look at Tino and Ruben, giving them my Dad's crazy look, and they look down at their plates. They still have as much food to eat as I do.

"Saulo."

"You took the time to cook it. They'll take the time to eat it."

And that's the end of it. Dolores doesn't say anything else.

Dad finishes eating. He puts his plate in the sink and then sits on the love seat, watching boxing. We watch it from the table. Every now and then he looks at us to see if we're still eating. Tino and Ruben finish their pork chops, but neither one of them has eaten the sopa. Meaning it really does taste as bad as I thought it would. All my food is still where it was when Dad made me sit back down.

After Dolores has put the rest of the food away and done the dishes, checking on us the whole time, she walks into the dining room. I'm waiting for her to get after us. To hear the words bad or rotten. Or disrespectful and ungrateful. But she reaches for our plates, ignoring Dad when he starts talking. She says over him "You don't have to eat it if you don't want to.

Go watch T.V.” Not mad or anything. She stacks our plates, takes them to the kitchen, and cleans them into the trash.

We look at each other. Then Dad. He’s gone back to watching T.V. and squeezing a racquetball. We get up and slowly make our way into the living room. We sit back on the couch quietly. Trying not to push our luck. Dad doesn’t even acknowledge us. When Dolores is done washing our dishes, she comes into the living room. She tells Dad she’s going to bed, says good night to us, and goes to Dad’s bedroom. Dad gets up without looking at us, leaves the remote on the seat cushion, and follows her.

We watch T.V. long enough to see nothing’s on and then pull the cushions off the couch and make the bed. I lie between Tino and Ruben, listening to the cars, the whistles, the muffled shouts below, and I think of Mom. How she gives us good night kisses when we go to bed and then again when she finally goes to bed. And I wonder what she’s doing. If she’s in bed yet. Or if she’s watching T.V. or reading.

I hear Dad’s bed creak as someone moves and know that Mom’s at home by herself. Probably lying down in her half-empty bed. That it’s not fair. That it’s not right that Dad was the one who messed everything up and he’s the one who already has someone else to love him. That he’s already moved Dolores in and they’ve already started their new family. That he didn’t have to pay for anything he did.

I want him to see what he’s done. To Mom. To us. I want him to tell Dolores to get out. That he made a mistake. That he can’t do this to us. That he can’t live with her. That he’ll take care of the baby but that he can’t be with her. I want him to be by himself. I want him to be sorry. I want him to hurt like I do. Like we all do. Like everyone except him and Dolores do.

I lie in bed, staring at the ceiling. Trying not to move. Trying not to let the sounds in my throat out. Trying to breathe normally. Lightly. Like I'm sleeping. Because I don't want Tino and Ruben to know I'm still awake. I don't want to talk. And I don't know what to tell them if they ask me what we should do. How we should act towards Dolores. Or Daniella. Or what I think of them.

Reasons

Xavier and Mario moved out when they could afford to. First Xavier. Then Mario a few months later. When they're free, they invite us over to swim in their apartments' pools or Xavier takes us to see a movie and Mario takes us to play putt-putt. And when we spend the night, Xavier makes us imitation cheese sandwiches and Mario serves us huge bowls of cereal.

Lena stayed home for a while. Almost a year and a half. And missed college classes and work because she was watching me, Tino, and Ruben while Mom worked nights and went to school during the day. But Lena refused to be like other women in our family, hearing about others' twenties instead of living them, and finally moved out.

So I took over. Cleaning the house, doing the laundry, and watching Tino and Ruben. And since I'm only a year older than Tino we fight about me telling him what to do. And him listening. Ruben's easier. I've been telling him what to do from the time I was changing his diapers. He's used to me bossing him around. But with Tino, I can't even ask him to switch the clothes over from the washer to the dryer without him yelling something about me not being Mom.

Weekends at Dad's are better for all of us because we fight less. Probably because I don't have to do anything when I'm there. Not even on Saturdays when Dolores cleans. And I don't have to look after Daniella, either, because Dad does that. Or sort of does it. He usually lets Daniella run around the apartment as long as she stays out of Dolores' way when she's cleaning. But Daniella's a good baby. Most of the time she just peeks around the walls at me, Tino, and Ruben. She watches us watch movies or play board games or read or listen to music. Even though she's known us for two years.

One Friday afternoon when me and Mom were folding clothes so we could pack for Dad's, I wasn't really paying attention when she was talking. I was thinking about how I was going to spend most of my weekend reading and finally finish the book I had started the week before. Then she said something about running away.

"I was engaged when we met so we had to run away." She was smoothing out the creases in a pair of jeans.

I knew she had to be talking about her and Dad, and instead of wondering why she was, I couldn't get past the fact she'd never told me. That no one had. And I ended up repeating what she said.

When she nodded, I started asking questions. Like when. To who. What he was like. What happened. How it ended. What Grandma did. But the more questions I asked the more she just shook her head and smiled. And when I was so frustrated I quit asking her for details and went back to sorting socks because I didn't understand why she'd bring it up if she wasn't going to share anything else with me, she said "Just know he was nothing like your Dad and it was the best decision I ever made."

I kissed her cheek and went back to matching. Not knowing what she meant by him, whoever he was, not being anything like Dad. Whether it was good or bad for Dad that they weren't the same. And wondering why she had brought it up but deciding to leave her with her secrets. And understanding exactly what she was saying about it being the best decision she had ever made. Because Mom had hated Dad for a long time after she found out about Maria. But when she was trying to get Xavier and Lena and Mario to start talking to Dad again, she had said if she had a chance to do it all over again she would. That she didn't regret her life with him. That without him, she never would have had all of us.

Three weeks later, we had dinner at Las Palapas. Me, Mom, Tino, and Ruben.

We don't usually get to see a movie and go out for dinner, but I didn't think Mom was buttering us up for anything. But as Tino and Ruben were making themselves sick eating their Macho Burritos, Mom told us she'd met someone. She didn't say what his name was. Or what he looked like. Or where they'd met. Or when. Just that they'd gone for coffee a couple times.

Me, Tino, and Ruben looked at each other, but didn't say anything. There wasn't anything to say. If Mom was mentioning him to us, she had already made up her mind. It was serious. Because Mom had dated since Dad, but not much. And the only reason we knew was because Lena had told us. Not specifics, just that Mom was out if we started asking questions when she was supposed to be home and she wasn't. But Mom had never told us anything about going out on a date with anyone. It was the first time she'd ever talked to us about a man other than Dad.

I sat there wondering who he was. And what he looked like. And hoping she wasn't going to introduce us to him like Dad introduced us to Maria. I picked the shredded chicken out of my flauta and moved it around on my plate. Looking up more and more often to see if a man was walking over to our table. And as I worried about meeting him, I finally understood why she had said what she did when we were folding clothes. There was someone in her life that wasn't Dad and she wanted me to know we were still important to her. The most important things to her.

On the way home, Mom told us Ernesto really wanted to meet us. That maybe we could go for ice-cream or something with him sometime soon. That she'd see when they were both off. And as soon as Mom said his name, my stomach tightened and I remembered Grandma always saying if you think it's too good to be true, it usually is.

Because Grandpa died when Mom was still young. And, according to Lena, Mom's spent the last thirty some years trying to replace him with men who are nothing like him. Like Dad.

Mom said when her and Dad met he used to carry a lead pipe under his car seat. Just in case. And he wouldn't stop harassing her to go out with him. Embarrassing her even where she worked until she finally said yes. And he stayed that way. Dangerous and charming and exciting. And Mom stood by him for twenty years. Even though nothing was ever easy or steady and even after she knew she wasn't the only one.

Maybe because she really believed that when she married him it was until death because of the way she'd been raised. The whole family praying multiple times a day, saying the rosary, attending Mass. Or maybe it was because no one in her family was divorced. Not one of her brothers and sisters. Not one of her many cousins. Or maybe it was because she thought it was best for us kids to have both of our parents whether they fought or not. Or maybe it was because she was scared to be alone because she hadn't left Grandma's home until she started one with Dad. Or maybe it was because she'd never had a full-time job, only working part-time jobs when we needed extra money. Or maybe it was because she truly loved Dad and for her that meant forgiving him almost anything.

I looked out the window and thought about the sacrifices I knew about Mom making for Dad. And the things she had experienced with him. And how she was finally relying on herself. And finally confident. And my stomach twisted into itself at the thought of a man named Ernesto who was probably too good to be true. Because I couldn't think what kind of guy wants to meet his girlfriend's six kids when three of them are already grown and the other three are still going to be around all the time.

Two days later, Ernesto came over for dinner.

Me, Tino, and Ruben sat in the living room, watching T.V., and turned our heads to the door whenever we heard a car. When the phone rang, Mom answered it, said okay, and headed to the door.

I heard the muffler a block away. And then his tires screeching to a stop in front of our house. And I couldn't believe Mom stood on the porch waiting for him to get out of his truck.

Ernesto followed Mom in, wearing a tight, white, short-sleeved shirt, tight, dark jeans, and cowboy boots. He was shorter than Mom by a couple inches. Even with boots on and her wearing flats with her dress instead of heels.

He introduced himself, his voice deep. Like it should belong to someone bigger. And his words ran together. They were fast when they should be slow and stopped when they shouldn't. He held his hand out to each of us.

I couldn't even remember the last time I had shaken someone's hand. Mostly, adults just nodded and I nodded back. So I held out my fingertips. His handshake was solid and slow and too strong for fingertips. But he looked over his shoulder at Mom and smiled and she smiled back at him as he walked to her side. Then he whispered something to her that made her laugh.

What I could hear made me not like him. He called her mama. Something only we called her. And as I followed them into the kitchen, him leading, I couldn't understand why he would call Mom mama. She wasn't his mother or the mother of his kids. Dad hadn't even called Mom mama.

I watched him make his way to the coffee pot and pour two cups. He didn't even look to Mom to ask her where anything was. Just to smile at her as she lifted lids off the pots cooking on the stove, checking the food. He handed her her cup when she was done. And, except for

mama, I couldn't make out what he said because his voice was so low and he jumbled his words. Then Mom followed him out the back door.

I hurried to the kitchen window once he shut the door behind them and peeked through the opening in the curtains. I watched them sitting on the glider under the pecan tree. Him pushing them back and forth as they sipped their coffee and Mom laughing at something he said. Until Tino and Ruben shoved me out of the way.

During dinner, Ernesto sat in my seat, next to Mom. He'd been there before Mom told us it was time to eat. Not wanting to sit anywhere near him and not wanting to make eye contact with him every time I looked up from my plate, I sat at the end of the table. Across from Mom and next to Ruben. And unlike our first meal with Maria, Ernesto didn't try to talk to us to impress Mom. To get us to like him. He didn't ask what grades we were in. What sports we played. What we liked to do. Ernesto didn't ask us anything.

He didn't even talk to us. He talked to Mom. Quietly. Leaning into her. Like everything he said was a secret. Even when he was just telling her that the carne quisada was delicious. Or how she should try adding more jalapenos to it next time. Or searing the tomatoes and peeling their skin before she adds them. Even though she did.

And when Mom talked to us it was about him. Telling us what he did. The highway he was working on. The machinery he drove. And even though she was talking about him, he'd interrupt. He'd turn the conversation so it was just the two of them again. He told her about what happened to him that day at work and what someone did or said and what his ideas were about what they should be doing at work and how things should be run.

And as he talked his voice gnawed into my ears. The way he made himself sound so important. The way he started saying Mama in each sentence. And I could feel the digging in

my temples moving to my stomach, churning the food I was eating. Because all Mom did was nod and smile or tsk and shake her head depending on what her response should be.

And like our first meal with Dolores, I couldn't eat even though I tried to. Every time I put a bite in my mouth, I heard his voice and my jaw would clench so tight, I couldn't chew. So I moved the food around my plate until I couldn't stand listening to him. I scooted my chair out, telling Mom thank you. And he still didn't quit talking. Like I wasn't even there.

Mom looked up. Surprised that I was already done. And when she saw my plate, most of the food still on it, she looked confused. Ernesto quit talking long enough to see what she was looking at and then said, again, like he hadn't already told her enough times, "It's delicious Mama." She looked at him and smiled and he picked back up where he had been before.

I looked at Tino and Ruben and rolled my eyes as I made my way to the trash can. After I placed my plate in the sink, I made my way to the living room. I plopped down on the couch and turned on the T.V., not even looking towards Mom because I knew she expected me to sit back down. I flipped through the channels, thinking how crazy she was if she thought I was going to sit back down at the table and listen to Ernesto talk about how great he was and how he knew everything there was to know about anything. And when Tino sat down next to me and Ruben next to him, I couldn't stop myself from saying "He's an idiot." They both agreed.

The rest of the night we watched T.V. and waited for Ernesto to leave. I tried focusing on what was happening on the screen, but Mom's laughing kept breaking my concentration. And even though I wanted to go to my room and close the door so I didn't have to hear them together, I sat on the couch wondering when he'd finally go home.

I knew Tino and Ruben felt the same way. Tino couldn't find anything to watch. He flipped through channel after channel. And he hates when I do that. And Ruben chewed on the

meaty parts around his fingernails. Every now and then peeking over his shoulder when Mom laughed a little too loud or too long.

At 9:03, when it felt like each drop of blood in my body was about to turn into a boil bubble, I heard chair legs scraping against the floor and hoped my prayers had finally been answered. Ernesto shuffled into the living room, passed in front of the T.V., opened the door, and then looked back at us when he was already outside and said bye. Mom followed him. She put her hand up, telling us to wait as she closed the door behind her. Her eyes were large. Happy. And also like she'd just gotten off a roller coaster.

Not understanding why she was going outside with him again even though they'd already been talking for almost four hours, and unable to believe he had ignored us all night and Mom didn't act like there was anything wrong with that, I went to bed. I laid in the dark, counting and humming into my pillow. Things I hadn't done since I was little. But I couldn't still my mind. All I could think about was Mom with Ernesto. And how she wasn't Mom when she was with him. The way she hung on every word he said. But how she didn't have an opinion about anything or comment on anything he said. How she just listened and agreed. And how she had said we were the most important things to her but she didn't show it. How she didn't tell him about us. Or try to get us involved in their conversations.

And as I thought about sitting at the table and then on the couch all night, listening to him and hoping he'd go home, I realized I sat there not because she would notice if I didn't and be upset with me. But because I was scared she wouldn't notice if I didn't.

Since Ernesto came over for dinner that first night, he's been at the house every single day for the last five months. Usually, because Mom's so busy, he'll stop by in the evenings

before Mom goes to work and have dinner with us. They talk to each other all the time even though we haven't seen her, either. When we get home from school, she's still sleeping because she goes to bed after she gets out of her classes.

If Mom's off from work, he stays overnight. When I called Lena the morning after he had stayed the night for the first time, I went through every detail I could think of. What they did. How they acted. What they talked about.

Lena was upset. She kept saying Mom wasn't thinking straight. That Mom shouldn't have let him stay. But I knew he was going to end up spending the night because each time Mom didn't work he stayed later and later before finally saying something about needing to get home. And Mom never seemed to have a problem with it.

And even though I hate that he spends the night because I feel like I can't leave my room without running into him. And even though Lena said we could spend the night with her if we wanted to if we're uncomfortable, it doesn't work for us to spend the night at hers or Xavier's or Mario's. It's too much of a hassle trying to get us to school in the morning even though they say it's not. Besides, this is my house. I shouldn't have to sleep somewhere else. Or feel like I can't walk around in my pajamas.

And when he stays, in the morning they have their coffee in the dining room and are too loud. Like they're the only ones in the house even though we're still trying to sleep. Talking and laughing like it's nine in the morning instead of six.

On T.V., they always show an extra toothbrush or comb or shampoo bottle when people stay at each other's places on a regular basis. But from what I can see, Ernesto still doesn't have anything here. There's nothing of his on Mom's dresser or in her closet or in her drawers.

But just because he doesn't keep any of his things here doesn't mean he doesn't think our house is his. He has a key and lets himself in whenever he wants. Even when Mom's not home. He stomps through the house with his boots on so we always know where he is. He opens the cupboards and the fridge, helping himself to whatever. And when he leaves, he leaves the front door open and we hear the rubber burning off his tires all the way down the street.

The weekends Mom's off from work are the worst because he doesn't leave. They're in the living room watching T.V. Or in the kitchen cooking. Or in the dining room eating. Or on the glider swinging. They're always together. Always drinking coffee. Always talking.

So me, Tino, and Ruben try to stay away from them. We spend most of our time outside so we don't have to be around him. Playing basketball, riding our bikes, hanging out with kids from the neighborhood. And when it's too hot or too late to be outside or they come outside, we go in and watch T.V. or hang out in our bedrooms. We sit around, talking about how much we hate Francisco. And come up with ways we can get rid of him. And reasons he might leave. Because he has to.

When things first started going bad with Mom and Ernesto, me, Tino, and Ruben would tell Xavier and Lena and Mario about it. But now we don't talk about Mom. Or what she's doing. Or how things are at home. Not with anyone but each other. Xavier and Mario don't want to hear about it. They say Mom's letting Ernesto control her. And seem angrier with Mom than Ernesto. And there's no advice Lena can give that will fix it. She says that it's Mom's life. That Mom's a grown woman. That Mom's made her choice.

And I'm beginning to believe Lena because there isn't anything we haven't already said to Mom. Or anything we haven't already tried to make Mom see.

Mom just doesn't listen when we say Ernesto's not good for her.

Because since he came into her life, she hums all the time. And laughs more than I can remember. A laugh I've never heard. Like bubbles rising and circling. Even the way she moves is lighter and smoother. Like a cat. And I know she loves him because she wraps herself around him when they're together. And how she gives him all she has.

But she doesn't get it back. And either she doesn't mind or she doesn't notice. She doesn't see what the rest of us do. The stink of cigarettes that started outside and has come in. The boot-shaped, dirt mounds he leaves throughout the house. The way he tells her to do things. The power of his anger when she doesn't. Not because she doesn't mean to but because she forgets. The tension when he's around. The solitude when he's not.

And she doesn't notice how defensive she gets when we try to talk to her. How she steels her back and narrows her eyes after they've had a fight. After he yells at her, slams the front door, and peels off in his truck. How there's almost a growling in her throat when we try to ask her why she stays with him after they have a fight. When we try to ask why she lets herself be treated that way.

The first time they fought she went to her bedroom and closed the door. She ignored our knocks and our questions if she was okay. She stayed there until he called. Then walked out the front door without saying anything, got into his truck when he raced up to the curb, and left. They came back hours later. Like nothing had happened. Ernesto calling her Mama and asking if she wanted him to get her anything. And Mom following him around the kitchen with her eyes and making overly dramatic expressions as he talked.

And Mom doesn't listen when we say Ernesto's not good for our family.

Because I can't even get her attention when he's around. I have to talk to her when he goes to the bathroom or to his truck to get something. And then, when he interrupts whatever I'm saying with his "Mama" entering the room before he does, Mom stops talking. And stops listening. She waits to see what he needs.

And he still ignores us. It doesn't matter that we're sitting in the living room when he comes over or when he leaves. Or that he's been eating meals with us for five months. And so does Mom when he's over because he's always by her side. Talking to her. Distracting her.

She doesn't notice that me, Tino, and Ruben only talk in one or two syllables with her. And that she does the same. That we've stopped talking to her unless she asks us a question. And stopped being in the same room they're in. That even if we're watching one of our shows when they sit down in the living room, we leave. That she doesn't say anything about Xavier, Lena, and Mario not coming over anymore or calling because they can't stand to be around Ernesto.

She doesn't notice the surprise and the hurt on our faces when she tells us to be quiet, nothing happened, and to mind our own business. Each word hot and spitting when we ask if she's okay at least once a week.

And I want to think that this isn't Mom. That Mom wouldn't act this way. That it's Ernesto. That it's the power he has over her. Like he's the Devil or something. And I let my imagination wander.

I think how maybe it's like when I was younger and started rubbing Mom's belly, talking to her stomach every day like there was a baby in it. And how she'd laugh while I did it, thinking I was crazy. How she didn't believe me until the doctor told her Ruben was in there. And then she told everyone some kind of sixth sense had tuned me into something no one could

have known. Something even she hadn't known, and it was her body. And I want it to be the same now as it was then. Me knowing something about Mom's life that even she doesn't know because of a sixth sense I have.

I think about how everything's so messed up again in our family. And that it started with Ernesto. That I knew I was right to be suspicious when Mom met a man named Ernesto who didn't seem to care that she had all kinds of kids since he wanted to meet us so bad.

And how when I first met Francisco, it didn't feel right because he's everything Mom has always been attracted to. Dark, muscular, and young. He even has Grandpa's mustache. The kind she used to ask Dad to grow out but he never did. And the things she told us he did during dinner that first night are all things she remembers about her dad. How he liked to build and fix things and garden and work all day. Just like Grandpa. How he struggled in Mexico before making his life here. Just like Grandpa.

And when I think about how I've felt since he's been in our house. And how what we had with Mom before he came along is missing now. How we don't sit with each other, talking, relaxing, and watching shows. How we don't go into her room to wake her up for work and lie down on her bed, visiting until she absolutely has to get up or she'll be late. I want to be able to say that I know, as Grandma knew thirty years before, that I've met the Devil. And imagine that maybe Lena's dream really came true. That maybe the Devil did come for us and Mom made a deal with him to take her instead. That that's the reason Ernesto's come into our life and I don't recognize who she is anymore.

But Grandma, who raised Mom and taught her everything she knows, was able to spot the Devil, which would mean that Mom probably could too. Maybe the difference between them is that when Grandma saw the Devil she was in church, praying, and that Mom hasn't been to

church regularly in years, ever since her and Dad got divorced. And now that she's dating Ernesto, she doesn't go at all. And I keep in mind that it took Mom twenty years to recognize Dad for who he is. And that it's the Devil's job to go undetected. To make people think he doesn't exist.

I'd heard friends talk of evil coming in the form of ojo when a toy broke or an ice-cream cone fell because someone wanted it. When someone got sick or hurt because someone was jealous of them or wishing evil upon them. How the only ways to cleanse it are with holy water or rubbing raw eggs over parts of the body. And with chants and prayers. But I've never believed. And if you don't believe it won't work. And sometimes it doesn't even work when you do. And I didn't listen when James was telling the story of Grandma and the Devil. I didn't hear what Grandma did to make him leave. Or how she got away.

And even though I'd like to think Ernesto is the Devil because he's managed to do what I think the Devil does. And even though I blame him for everything, I can't convince myself that he's the Devil. Because I realize that even though Mom was different after Dad. That she was stronger. Ernesto doesn't have some unknown power over her.

She's not so blind that she doesn't notice he's not good for her or for our family. It's just that it's like it was with Dad. Whatever Ernesto's giving her is enough. So she doesn't mind. And she won't listen and won't see until he asks for too much. Just like Dad.

Sacrifices

I'm in my room on my bed listening to music when I hear Mom yell down the hallway that she's leaving for work. I roll off my bed and hurry into the living room.

Tino and Ruben are lying on the couches watching T.V.

The front door is open and I hear Mom's car running. Ernesto's outside waiting while Mom looks over the front room, making sure she hasn't forgotten anything. She's pushing the screen door open when I reach her.

I give her a quick kiss on her cheek. "Love you. Have a good night."

"Mmmhmm. You guys behave. See you tomorrow." She's half in the house, half out, and closing the door behind her when she stops. She peeks back in. "About your birthday. It's not a good idea for your dad to come over." And before I can respond, she closes the door.

I open the door and step out onto the porch, but they're already at the end of the driveway, backing out onto the street.

"What was that about" Tino asks as I close and lock the door. He's turned the T.V. down.

"Mom said Dad can't come over for my birthday dinner."

Ruben sits up. "Why not?"

"Probably because of Ernie." I draw out the name we use for him when we're talking to each other.

"That's stupid" Tino says. Now he's sitting up, too. "What are you gonna do?"

"Don't know. I already told Dad about it."

Tino looks at me and then Ruben. His eyebrows raise.

Ruben shrugs his shoulders. “Maybe you could have two birthdays.”

And even though I know it’s not Ruben’s fault, I can feel myself getting irritated with him. “Why should I have to have two birthdays?”

Ruben shrugs his shoulders again.

I look at him and narrow my eyes. “So what? Just because of Ernie I should have two birthdays now? Because he doesn’t like Dad I should change what I’ve always done? What if he doesn’t want Xavier, or Lena, or Mario here, either? Or what if they don’t even want to come because he’s here? Should I have three birthdays? One for us, one for Dad, and one for them?”

“Shut up” Tino says. “Now you’re being stupid.” And he turns the T.V. up louder than it was before.

“Whatever.” I stomp down the hallway and slam my bedroom door. I lie back down and punch my pillow a couple times. “I. Hate. Him. I hate him. I hate him. I hate him.” And even though I just said what I’m always thinking, I don’t feel better. I’m even more upset.

I pull my blue suitcase out of my closet and open it. I find the old film container I filled with holy water two weeks ago and decide to put crosses on the front and back and bedroom doors. And sprinkle some over everyone’s beds. Each time, saying an Our Father and a Hail Mary.

When Tino sees what I’m doing to the front door he shakes his head at me and goes back to watching T.V.

So does Ruben. But he must hear their bedroom door creaking because he enters their room as I’m trying to make a cross on his bed. He stands next to me. Seeing what I’m doing.

I’m barely jerking the container so that only small drops will fall on his sheet. But I pour more than I drip. And the wet area looks nothing like a cross.

“Come on. You just ruined my sheet.” Ruben’s trying to wipe the puddle up by smearing it. “What are you doing?”

“Cleansing the house.”

He looks at me like I’m an idiot.

“I’m getting rid of the bad energy in here.” And I throw some water in his direction to make a point.

He starts wiping the drops off his legs and shoes. “You’re crazy. And you’re putting new sheets on my bed.”

And even though I’m feeling holy because I’ve been praying, I can’t stop myself. “I don’t know what you’re crying about. Holy water won’t stain your sheets like you do.”

I run from the room before he can touch me and slam Mom’s bedroom door behind me.

I look around at her clean room. Her floor and bed are clear. And her closet and drawers are closed. I start splashing holy water everywhere. On her bed. On her dresser. In her closet. Even the crucifixes she has hanging on her walls. Each time praying that this will work. That all the bad things in our lives will go away. Especially Ernesto.

I’ve been unable to think about anything else since last night.

Mrs. Aguirre called my name twice before I knew she was talking to me. And when Laura asked me what was wrong with me today at lunch I told her nothing. Because even though she’s my best friend and knows I can’t stand Ernesto, I still can’t tell her that I’m hoping in some weird way Ernesto’s evil enough to be affected by holy water.

About a block from home I really start hoping that Ernesto isn’t there because I know I need to talk to Mom about Dad coming over. And if Ernesto’s there it’s not going to be good.

As I round our backyard fence I see his truck parked half in the driveway, half in the yard. And it's one more thing I can't stand about him. He can't even park right when he knows Mom's trying to grow grass there.

My chest is tight as I walk up the porch steps. I can't believe he's still here. I know I heard Father John say that God answers the prayers he hears in secret. Or something like that. And though deep down I didn't think the holy water would work, I still hoped God might answer my prayers and Ernesto wouldn't be here when I talked to Mom about Dad. Mom won't even acknowledge Dad exists when Ernesto's around.

The screen is open and I can hear their voices in the kitchen. I put my backpack in my room, hoping that blessing the house last night and having God in every space of our house will start affecting me soon. I need to be calm when I'm talking to Mom. And whenever I'm around Ernesto, I'm anything but calm.

They're sitting at the dining room table when I walk in the kitchen. Mom's facing me, but she doesn't look up. She's focused on Ernesto, who's sitting with his back to me.

I walk to the table and wait next to it. In between them.

Mom glances at me and turns her head back to Ernesto. She doesn't even smile so I know she's trying to avoid me. And Ernesto keeps talking.

“Mom.”

She holds her hand up.

So I wait a little longer. But Ernesto didn't even pause when she motioned to me. And he's not acting like he's going to stop anytime soon.

“Mom.”

She shakes her head. Slightly. Letting me know not to interrupt. And Ernesto still doesn't stop talking. He doesn't even turn to look at me.

I cross my arms. "I need to talk to you."

"In a bit. We're talking."

But I refuse to be ignored. I stand next to them, watching Mom trying to act like I'm not standing there staring at her. Her eyes keep darting all over Ernesto's face and she stops encouraging him to continue by nodding her head. After a couple minutes, she shakes her head and smiles apologetically at him. She looks at me. "What do you need? What is so important that you can't wait five minutes?"

"My birthday dinner."

Mom's face changes. Her face scrunches in on itself and I see lines I didn't know were there around her puckered lips and between her eyebrows. "We're not discussing it right now" she says, turning back to Ernesto.

But Ernesto's not talking. He's looking at the keys in his right hand as he runs his fingers over them and he's shaking his head.

Not caring that Ernesto doesn't approve of my behavior, I stay where I am.

Mom looks like she doesn't know what Ernesto wants her to do. She's looking back and forth between the keys in his hand and his shaking head, looking worried. She sighs and sets her shoulders. "What about your birthday dinner?"

And even though my throat tightens at the thought of what I'm about to do, seeing the look on Ernesto's face, seeing him squirm the way he's making Mom squirm right now, is too much to pass up. "I already invited Dad. He's coming."

Ernesto goes still. He looks up. A sneer on his face. And stares at Mom.

Mom looks at me. Her face hard. “We’ll discuss this later.”

“Why? Because he’s here? Because he won’t like it? He’s the reason you said Dad can’t come. What do I care what he likes?” I know I’ve messed up as soon as it comes out of my mouth.

Mom curls forward, not even looking between me and Ernesto anymore. She’s staring at me. Her eyes slits. “Go to your room. I’ll talk to you later.”

I look at Ernesto. His chin in the air pointed away from me. And think about calling him every name I’ve ever wanted to. “Why can’t I just talk to you? Why does he have to be here when we talk?” I try to keep my shaking voice steady. “Why does he always have to be here?”

Mom’s face goes blank. There’s no emotion. No acknowledgement that I’m there.

“He’s gonna keep being here. Cause he’s always here.” I get louder the more she ignores me. “So when are you going to talk to me later?” I mock her.

Mom’s voice is quiet. But I can hear each vowel longer than the last. “Go to your room.”

“Why can’t you just listen? Just listen to me.” I want to tell her what I practiced. That it’s not fair that Dad can’t come over now. That it’s my birthday. That I should be able to celebrate it with my dad. With my family. With people I love.

Ernesto pushes his chair back, spreads his legs wide, and folds his arms over his pushed out chest. But I’m not giving him the satisfaction of looking in his direction. It’s like he doesn’t exist.

And for once, Mom doesn’t look at him, either. Again, she’s quiet. Careful. “I said. Go. To your room.”

“It’s not fair. Everything’s about him. Everything.” I try to get the words out before the tears filling my eyes fall. “You don’t even care about us anymore.”

Mom’s face is splotched and Ernesto’s whole body flexes with anger.

But I don’t care. I stare right at him. Not blinking. Not backing down. “I hate you. I’ll always hate you.” I stand there, waiting for him to look at me. Daring him to say something. To do something. When neither of them do, I turn my back to them. And see Tino and Ruben in the doorway. Their eyes huge with disbelief, but looking ready if I need them.

I walk slowly. My back straight. And make it to the hallway before I feel the tears I’ve been holding slide down my face. I lock my door. And sit in my closet. Smashing myself against the wall. Disappearing behind the clothes.

Tino and Ruben tap on my door. Whispering. Asking if I’m okay. Telling me to open up.

They stop and I hear the front door slam. Like it always does when Ernesto leaves. His truck tears down the street and I wonder if Mom’s with him. Or if she’s walking to my room.

“They’re gone” Tino says into the door. His voice quiet. And unsure.

I don’t answer. I focus on the clothes. The softness and the coolness of them. Because I don’t know what’s going to happen now. What Mom’s going to do.

“Well. I’m here. You know. If you want to talk.”

“You sure you’re okay?” Ruben asks.

The floor boards creak as they shift their weight. They leave when I don’t answer or open the door.

I push myself into the clothes. Into the shoes digging in my legs. Into the boxes pinching my back. Wishing Mom never met Ernesto. Wishing he would fall off an overpass. Or get

struck by a passing car. Or that another worker wouldn't see him when they were backing up a vehicle. And when I think how upset Mom would be, I think about how she deserves to be upset because of what she's doing to us. That it's just like Lena said. Mom's not even thinking of us. She's just thinking of herself right now.

And even though Lena's told me what Mom has sacrificed for us, and I see the sacrifices she's still making, it's not okay. It's not okay for her to tear our family apart again. And a part of me hates her for doing it.

I unfold myself and lie on the bed, pulling my pillow towards me. I know I can't go back. I can't not say what I said. I can't not feel what I do. I squeeze my pillow, thinking of what's coming. How at the very least, Mom's going to ignore me even more than she does now. And how things won't ever be like they were until he's not around anymore. And knowing that that won't happen. Because Mom won't choose to be without him. He'll have to leave her like Dad did.

And as I imagine Mom being without Ernesto, of him leaving her and all the ways that might happen, I realize that my anger towards him and Mom has poisoned me. I'm not obeying my mother. I'm not honoring her. Instead, I'm yelling at her and hating her and wishing her pain. And I know that I have to let it go. That I have to accept Mom's choices.

But I can't. I can't accept Ernesto. And how Mom is when she's with him. Not when I'm living here. Not when I have to deal with it every day. I have to live for myself, too.

And as I say my nightly prayer, thanking God for all He's given me and He's allowed me and asking Him to forgive my sins and guide my life, I wonder if living with Dad is the answer. Dad's talked about it with me and Tino and Ruben before. How him and Dolores want to get a house now that Daniella's getting older. How they'll have extra room. That we're welcome to

live with them if we want. I decide to ask Dad about it tomorrow. Maybe living with him is the right thing to do.