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LET THE CHILDREN COME TO ME

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2002

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

My thesis, a collection of personal essays, explores my parents' affinity towards their native Colombia and how this connection to their homeland, through their faith and their customs, affected my definition of self.

When I think about my parents' emigration from Colombia to the States, I picture the illustrations in the Bible I had as a child: the couple running from Sodom and Gomorra, running away from the place they had always known and holding on to each other. My parents, like the couple in the Bible, were in the middle of nowhere when they first set foot on the cold, concrete streets of New York City. In the Bible, the man knew he was in a better place, the cities left behind him becoming more and more of a distant memory. The next picture showed a statue of salt in the shape of the woman. The woman had turned back.

Shortly after they married in Colombia, my mother looked forward to a future in another country. She urged my father to seek a better life for them in the United States. My father was the one who couldn't help but look behind him, despite the consequences.

The thesis chapters explore such issues as the consequences of leaving home; the impact of my father's incarceration upon his Catholic faith and upon the family; how travel to Colombia with my parents revealed new aspects of their personalities and beliefs; and my own efforts to understand and meditate upon my multicultural heritage and surroundings.

To Carlos Andres, Octavio, and Yolanda

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PREFACE

When I think about my parents' emigration from Colombia to the States, I picture the illustrations in the Bible I had as a child: the couple running from Sodom and Gomorra, running away from the place they had always known and holding on to each other. The couple could count on no one else as they ran. My parents, like the couple in the Bible, were in the middle of nowhere when they first set foot on the cold, concrete streets of New York City. They were in a field devoid of all vegetation.

In the Bible, the man knew he was in a better place, the cities left behind him engulfed in bright orange and red flames and becoming more and more of a distant memory with each step forward he took. He eyed the heavens anxiously, searching for answers, placing his full faith in the goodness of the Lord to provide for them in their uncertain future. Yet his eyes also revealed fear. Fear that his loved one would do the forbidden and turn back.

The next picture showed a statue of salt in the shape of the woman. The man, with body still in running position, was running away from the statue and looking ahead. He looked to the heavens, his furrowed brows and frown signaling his dread for what lay ahead.

The woman had turned back.

In my parents' case, the situation was reversed. Shortly after they married in Colombia, my mother looked forward to a future in another country. She urged my father to look beyond what they currently had and imagine a better life for them in the United States.

I could envision my mother's life before I was born, through the stories she told about that time. She said that her mother was the only one who could convince her to marry my father, as she was afraid to make the life long commitment. My mother was that close to her mother. I could imagine my mother's emptiness as she bid farewell to her friend and confidante when her mother departed for *Los Estados Unidos* permanently.

My father was the one who couldn't help but look behind him, despite the painful consequences. He left his own figurative statue of salt in his mother's house, in the form of a room devoted to him--his clothes and his furniture, his private space. This room contained a boxy twin bed, with a stow away bed underneath. When visiting Colombia, he slept by himself in that room, on the top bed. Such a bed for a married man seemed like a denouncement of everything, and everyone Dad belonged to back in Miami. In Colombia, he returned to a simpler time in his life, a time before he was a husband, a father, and a provider for a family.

In Colombia, my father became the son. Many times, he would disappear from my sight at my grandmother's house. After exhausting all my resources to find him, I chastised myself for once again forgetting to look for him in the first place I should have searched--the balcony. There he was, his massive frame resting on an old, rickety stool, side by side with my grandmother. From

behind, they very much resembled each other: their backs hunched and their thin white hair covering their heads. I seldom interrupted them, since I knew my father would call me over if he wanted me to join them in their daily sittings. He rarely did.

Abuelita Mercedes, my mother's mother, left two years before my parents decided to leave Colombia and even though my mother didn't admit to it, I knew *Abuelita* had much to do with my parents' decision to emigrate to the States.

My mother's brother, *Tio* Raul, had sent for my grandmother after he settled in New York. My father told me that Mom's nostalgia over her mother grew into the impetus necessary for her to run away from the only home she had ever known--Colombia. She needed to be close to her mother, Mercedes. For my mother, Mercedes was the only person who made anywhere seem like home--even a distant country with an unfamiliar language and culture.

Until the age of six, I lived in a neighborhood just down the road from my grandmother's house in Miami. When I was six years old, my family and I moved into her neighborhood and never left it. Even though my mother was a two minute walk away from her mother's house, they visited and talked on the phone daily, as if they hadn't seen each other in months. I could see how the concept of home for my mother didn't have to do with a place but a state of being close--mentally and physically--to her mother. I never saw my mother gab to my father the way she did with my grandmother. Nor could anyone make her face light up the way it did when my grandmother stopped by to visit. Mercedes gave my mother a joy that no one else could.

Throughout my childhood, my father spent most of each year in Miami planning for our next trip to Colombia. He bought our plane tickets months in advance, saying they were less expensive; but I knew this tangible receipt also helped him get through the rest of the year with the certainty that we would go back to that place he never really wanted to leave.

While going to my grandmother's house in Colombia meant nothing more than a yearly visit for my mother, siblings, and me, to my father it signaled a return to the first place he called home. A return to times of more prosperity when everyone and everything was not only within arm's reach but already in his arms. As a newlywed in Colombia, my father had his new wife and newborn son to provide for, and in keeping with the traditional macho view of the way things should be, enjoyed every minute of it. He was his own boss as the entrepreneur of a successful plastics factory. He provided a good living for his family and was a respected business man. Life in Medellin, Colombia was good to my father.

My mother once confessed to me, when I was old enough to understand, that their life as newlyweds was indeed harmonious, because she, like most new wives, was too concerned with creating the idyllic married life to stand up to my father whenever they disagreed on something. "That would come later," she joked, and winked at me.

As a newlywed and family man, he couldn't have chosen a better neighbor, his mother and two older sisters. They had raised my father together since his father died shortly after my father was born.

It wasn't long however, before my father realized that my mother didn't share his happiness. Dad began to feel the pressure of giving my mother the same contentment he felt at having his mother close by, even if that meant he would have to sacrifice everything he had worked for in the process.

In Miami, life for my father was about working and waiting. During the weekdays, Dad awoke early to get to his blue collar job on time. He switched jobs throughout the years--dishwashing, carpet cleaning, and general hotel maintenance--though they all required intensive labor. Gone were the days of wearing suits and ties to work and telling people what to do. Now he just waited for his orders. All the while, his deteriorating knees became weaker from eight-hour days of moving and lifting.

During the weekends, my mother, siblings, and I tried to get my father to join us in outings and get together that my mother's family members had organized--a trip to the beach, a birthday celebration, or First Communion parties.

We took turns going into my father's room and asking him to accompany us, since none of us wanted to face the constant rejection. More often than not, Dad dismissed us. "Go, have fun. I'm just going to stay here and catch up on the news," he'd say. He watched the Colombian news channel every chance he got.

We exited the room defeated and silent as he fixed his attention on the Colombian news channel. The news footage was always the same: thin Colombian soldiers running through the jungles and hiding behind mountain cliffs while shooting incessantly at the invisible enemy as the caption read, “The never-ending war against the *guerilla*.” Or a *secuestrado* being videotaped as he told his family that he was doing okay and asking the government to make concessions with the leftist groups so that he and the other hostages could be released sooner. Regardless of whether he had seen the same footage at midday, Dad didn’t like to be interrupted when watching these news, grim as they were, as if this was all he had of Colombia for the time being.

I often heard my mother declare to her friends, “I think you can make a life for yourself anywhere as long as your family is with you.”

She must have repeated these words to herself as a mantra to rationalize her fateful decision to leave for the U.S. in 1969. It must not have been easy for my mother to convince my father to pack up their hard earned possessions in Colombia and make a life from scratch in the bitter cold winters of New York. But after taking a short vacation that year to *Nueva Jersey* to visit her mother, my mother was hooked.

My *Tio* Raul had managed to find her a temporary job cleaning houses during her month long stay. After weeks of scrubbing bathtubs for rich Jewish women, Mom had realized that living over there would require hard work. When Mom returned to Colombia however, these were not the memories she brought back with her. Instead, she recalled her days off, when she and her

mother were once again together and catching the sights in New York's downtown. She recalled the time she saw a blender displayed on a storefront and realized she had made enough money to buy such a modern, elaborate, and, by her standards, luxurious gadget.

My mother once explained her fascination with the U.S. to me in the way she knew best, by saying: "The United States is like a weird tasting gum Andrea. You may not like the taste that much but for some reason, you just keep chewing."

Mom returned to Colombia with her brand-new blender, determined to show my father how many modern things you could purchase with American *dolares*. I can imagine her talking to my father from their kitchen, as she made him his favorite fruit juices in her new blender, telling him about how easy it was to find a job over there even if you didn't know English and how the tallest building in Medellin looked like a shack compared to the skyscrapers that decorated the New York City skyline.

Mom had a way of making everything seem so perfect and positive; it was hard to disagree with her. I'm sure my father also found it impossible to continue disagreeing after months of my mom's insistence that he go see for himself just how well he could do in *Los Estados Unidos*.

With much the same persistence she used to convince my father to move, my mother made sure to keep his ties with his family alive in between his seasonal visits to Colombia. While Dad focused mainly on planning his trip to Colombia throughout the year, Mom believed it was

equally as important to keep in touch with his family through phone calls and letters. On a random day, she'd pick up the phone and call his mother and sisters in Colombia to make sure he spoke to them. She wrote them lengthy letters and sent them school pictures of my siblings and me.

She even made me write them letters, connecting me from an early age to that place and culture that seemed so far away yet increasingly familiar as the days and years passed.

CHAPTER ONE: LET THE CHILDREN COME TO ME

I can't remember the exact moment my father was picked up and taken away. I was six years old. One minute he was home and the next, he was gone.

Nor can I remember exactly where we were when my mother told my sister, Ale, and me that *Papi* had gone off to the military, even though I know it was just a couple of days after he went missing. She probably decided it was best to say something before we started questioning his whereabouts. Maybe she mentioned it while tucking us into our twin beds in the room we shared in our Miami Lakes home. Perhaps she took advantage of our exhaustion to deliver the news. Whatever the circumstances, I don't remember it causing a stir.

As quiet nights turned into long days without my father's presence however, I began to wonder why Dad had left and not said farewell. What about his brand new export business, Colservice, that place he went to every morning in his sharp suit and striped tie with my mother, his secretary, in tow? He had only recently managed to start his own business after sixteen years of blue collar work. My mother told me the military needed him so he'd had to leave at the last minute. Luckily, I didn't know enough about how the military worked to question my mother's vague explanation.

Up until my father was taken away, we'd always had the latest toys. My brother had just received a Datsun sports car which he asked for on his sixteenth birthday and my sister and I had

the latest collection of dolls from Rainbow Brite to Cabbage Patch. My mother had nicknamed Ale *Necesito* or “I Need” because she constantly “needed” to have the doll she had seen on TV. I, on the other hand, played only with Michelle, the Cabbage Patch Kid that smelled like chocolate, and a lanky stuffed clown.

My favorite place to play was the room I shared with my sister. It was dark, with one small window through which little sunshine entered. I was happiest inside my room. I enjoyed looking at the Smurf sheets that decorated our twin beds. Each Smurf decorated different areas of the comforter: the only girl Smurf, Smurfette, with her white hat and blond hair; Papa Smurf with his white beard; little Baby Smurf; and Gargoyle with his sinister grin and his cat.

Our one story house was rich with playing areas. My father’s bar was located at the other end of the house, dark enough to lend itself to a good game of hide and seek. The enclosed patio housed the brightly colored parrot. My father liked to stand in front of the parrot and repeat dirty words in Spanish until the animal learned the word and said it back to him. Dad laughed and laughed each time the parrot learned a new word. The parrot’s array of dirty words included *marica* and *cacorro*, terms Dad used only when he told “grown up” jokes to his Colombian friends. I knew, from the context in which Dad used them, that these were derogatory words for Colombians.

He was most proud when he taught the parrot to say “Octo *Hijueputa*.” The first time I heard the parrot call my father a “son of a whore,” I didn’t know whether to laugh or cover my ears. I had learned from an early age that that word was the absolute dirtiest word one Colombian could call

another. Since my father couldn't stop laughing however, I decided it was safe to follow his lead. His laugh was loud and strong and his belly moved up and down. Behind the patio was the pool area, Dad's favorite place to lounge on the weekends.

Mom spent a lot of time in the kitchen maneuvering with our live in maid, Alba. Alba stood over the stovetop cooking our dinners while my mother helped her by getting the ingredients from the cupboard and placing them on the counter. The cupboard and countertop were made of imitation wood, the modern décor of the eighties in Miami.

I often took breaks from playing to visit the pantry, which Mom kept loaded with my favorite snacks: Twinkies, Swiss Rolls, and Pop Tarts.

Weeks after my father's departure, Mom announced we were moving in with her mother, *Abuelita* Mercedes. "To keep her company until *Papi* returns," she explained.

Grandma lived in a small, two story townhouse minutes away. Every available space in her house was reserved for practical use and furniture, leaving only the narrow hallway at the entrance and a small space in the Florida room open for playing. I couldn't imagine my sister and I playing hide and seek in Grandma's small house. And it would be hard to spend hours playing in our upstairs room since we would be sharing a room with my mother and brother.

I looked around the narrow house and wondered how we were going to make it there. At home, my sister and I took our usual spots in front of the low coffee table and rested our bodies in front of the couch to do our homework every weekday evening. The only place for us to do our homework in Grandma's house was on the kitchen countertop, sitting on the uncomfortable backless bar stools.

One day at Grandma's house, I browsed through her pantry, searching for an afternoon snack. I found plain Cheerios and foods that had to be cooked to be eaten like rice and beans. Suddenly, I missed home and realized life was so much sweeter there. I missed frolicking around the different rooms in my house. I missed being able to grab all kinds of snacks from the full pantry at random. And I missed seeing my father come home from work every day.

I closed the pantry door slowly and knew at that moment, I would not be privy to many luxuries for a long time.

We slept in one of Grandma's spare rooms, my brother in one of the full beds, my mom, Ale, and I in the other. We tucked ourselves into our beds every night and bid ourselves good night, *hasta mañana*, as if nothing had really changed, even though it was clear that it had. I snuggled up close to my mother on those nights, unable to go to sleep unless I felt her body pressed close to mine.

In our old home, when I was younger, I couldn't go to sleep in the room I shared with my sister. My mother had tried several times to get me to fall asleep in my bed.

"I'm not going anywhere," she'd whisper in Spanish as she patiently sat on the edge of the bed, waiting for me to stop looking at her and close my eyes in exhaustion

"It's okay, Ale's right here," she'd say a couple of minutes later, as my blinks became fewer and farther.

I'd eventually keep my eyes closed, feigning sleep. After a while, my mother tiptoed away. I didn't call out for her, wanting to make myself believe that I could go to sleep without her. A couple of minutes later however, I'd open my eyes to the terror of the dark, motherless room and whisper to my sister, "Ale, I'm sorry, I can't go to sleep, I'm going to Mom and Dad's room."

She'd call after me as I walked out of the room. "Andre, it's okay, I'm here with you."

"Sorry Ale. I can't," I'd whisper back. I grimaced at her silhouette and scurried out of the room.

In my parents' room, I'd curl up besides my mother in the king sized bed she shared with my father and quickly fell asleep.

In Grandma's house, I suddenly felt out of place and smothered in the bed I shared with my mother and sister. It seemed to me as if we were spending our nights in a temporary hotel room

instead of our new home, with only the basic furniture for sleeping--a night table with an alarm clock and phone, and bare walls.

As we lay in our beds, I questioned both *Mami's* reassurance that all was fine and *Papi's* happy-go-lucky tone in the letters he sent me from the military. Each reassurance and letter comforted me less and less. *Papi* never expressly mentioned that he was in the military and *Mami* had never told me when he was coming back. These thoughts whirled through my head and exhausted me, and I fell asleep.

I was no longer the kid who spent hours swimming back and forth in her backyard pool on the weekends. I was no longer the baby in the pictures who giggled as she made splashes in the half full bath. Every morning in Grandma's house, I was determined to put up a fight when my mother woke me up. When she whispered in my ear, telling me to take a shower, I said no.

My mother smiled at me. But I woke up in a rage that I carried with me as I shuffled to the bathroom. "I'm not taking a shower. I'm not taking a shower," I said.

I didn't utter a word to my mother as we walked side by side to the bus stop. I wasn't used to walking. In our old home, my sister and I simply had to walk up to our mailbox in our front lawn where a private bus would pick us up, our friends eagerly waiting for the Ramirez sisters.

The cars in the busy two way lane raced past my mother and me as we walked up to the bus stop, intensifying my ill humor. No longer did I look in front of me and find houses like my old house, with green gardens and rosebushes decorating the walkways to the front doors. I was surrounded by low income housing, blocks of apartment buildings with dilapidated walls in need of paint jobs.

At the bus stop, my mother said to me, "*Que tenga un buen dia, mi amor.*" Have a good day, my love. I didn't respond. Her smile was forced.

As soon as I sat down in the bus, I cried. I sat by myself, facing the window, partly to conceal my tears from the other kids but most important, to let my mother see me.

As the bus drove by, she smiled and waved frantically at me. I gave her my widest smile possible, stopping my tears in their tracks, and frantically waved back. I wondered if from down there she could see that I was sad too, and why. In those last fleeting seconds of contact with my mother until evening time, I needed her to notice how remorseful I suddenly felt for making her plead with me that morning and every other morning at Grandma's house.

We went to visit my father for the first time soon after he was taken away. As my mother drove on the Florida Turnpike, I stared out the back seat window and watched the palm trees lining the highway flash past me in what seemed like an eternity on the road.

We arrived at a desolate parking lot surrounding a simple square building. The building entrance was preceded by two long rows of stadium benches on both sides of the front doors. An inexplicable calm came over me as I walked past the benches. At that moment, nothing seemed to move but me. There was no drone from the cars in the highway behind us and no activity in the parking lot. I wanted to stop and sit at one of the benches, surrounding myself with that peaceful silence. But I had to keep up with my mother and sister.

We opened the doors and walked into a dimly lit room surrounded by gray chairs. Most of the chairs were occupied with families that mirrored ours: a mother and two or more young children, Hispanic and African-American.

The mothers in the room clutched their purses tightly and kept them close while their children ran around the narrow hall or played with the toys scattered about the room. They all wore the same expression: eyes at half mast and straight lips. Their eyes followed their children's movements, yet they seemed to be staring through them, not at them, to some figure of their imagination.

One by one, each family was called and led out of the waiting area. When our name was called, we were led by one of the security guards through an outside walkway to a smaller building. After going through a series of metal detectors, we entered the visiting area.

It was a large, simple room washed over in beige: beige empty walls, beige wooden round tables, four beige plastic chairs at each table, and beige one piece jumpers on the military men. My family and I looked for a table.

We fidgeted in our chairs, our eyes glued to the back door on the corner of the back wall where the other men were coming through. Upon spotting their families, their grim faces expressed sheer joy. They walked with arms outstretched, ready to embrace their long awaited visitors. No one in my family said a word.

When he finally appeared, Dad wasn't as expressive as the other men. He simply smiled when he saw us and calmly walked over to our table. I hugged my father tightly and held on for a few seconds.

He didn't feel the same. My dad was suddenly half the man I once knew him to be. I could no longer rest my head on his soft round belly when I hugged him. I could wrap my arms around my father's waist; he had lost so much weight. The fabric of my father's uniform shirt felt rough on my face as I embraced him. I missed feeling the soft cotton of his maroon cardigan when I cuddled next to him after his long day of work.

He didn't look the same either. Cheekbones replaced his chubby cheeks, a crop cut replaced his shaggy hair, and he now had a pronounced jaw line. Dad didn't seem as sweet without his characteristic look and weight. Instead, he seemed like a stranger in his brown uniform and shiny black shoes. He noticed me staring at him and smiled meekly. I smiled back.

Dad then turned to my brother and asked him how his new part time job at UPS was going and how he was doing as a freshman in college. Ivan was short with his answers at first. “UPS is okay...and so is school.” But he spoke more about his soccer team. “So *Papi*, did *Mami* tell you I was chosen as the team captain?” Ivan had received a soccer scholarship for college. Dad smiled.

Dad asked Ale about school as well. “School’s good,” she said. But then she went into detail about how she was doing in cheerleading and how much she really enjoyed it. Dad nodded as she spoke but didn’t seem as happy as he did when Ivan spoke about soccer. He didn’t understand my sister’s choice in sport, since cheerleading wasn’t considered a sport in Colombia.

Finally, Dad turned to me and asked about school. Unlike my brother and sister, I wasn’t involved in any sports and loved talking about school. I mentioned every important detail about school I could remember. “*Papi*, last week I was named Citizen of the Week and I don’t know if *Mami* already told you, but I got straight A’s on my last report card!” Dad seemed most content when I talked to him about school. He and my mother always reminded us that doing well in school was the best thing we could do to make them proud of us.

Dad’s birthday came only two months after he went away. I wondered how special this birthday could possibly be for him. Birthday cake and gifts were not allowed in the military center.

I wished we could celebrate my father's birthday on a grand scale, like we had done for my fifth birthday, in the family's *finca*, our summer home in Colombia. In one of my birthday pictures, I stared at my giant white birthday cake while surrounded by cousins and friends at a large elegant dining table. My father had named the *finca Villa Alegre* or Joyous Villa and to him, it was just that. *Villa Alegre* had a pool area, three smaller guest *fincas*, a racquet ball court, and a private chapel. It was the first *finca* of its kind, especially with its very own *capilla*.

I never understood why my father had built a small church in our backyard. The family pictures showed him more corpulent, his salt and pepper hair in heavy contrast to his full head of gray years later. He was walking hand in hand with my grandmother, both looking down, as a group of young men followed them, carrying a statue of the Virgin Mary with Baby Jesus in a shrine. A crowd of people, most of whom I couldn't recall, followed the men holding the shrine into the whitewashed chapel.

I was in the far corner of the picture, a couple of steps away from the others who looked down towards the muddy ground or up towards the shrine. I was never told what the special occasion was, just to follow the crowd. In the picture, I was looking up at my father, following him from a distance.

We went to visit my father the Saturday before his first birthday away, just as we'd done every other Saturday since his departure. I knew we were getting close to *Papi's* temporary home

whenever we drove by the Miami Metro Zoo. I fantasized about my mother stopping one day and taking us on a spontaneous trip to the zoo. However, she always drove right past it.

Soon after passing the zoo, I forgot all about it. Saturdays I awoke with one objective: to see my father.

To visit my father on his birthday, I wore the knitted top and skirt set his sister, Aunt Lucy, had made for me, even though the thick fabric wasn't fashionable and guaranteed that my plump body would be sweating in the South Florida sun. This was the least I could do for him since I couldn't bring him an actual gift or cake. He had always greeted us with a smile on the previous visits, told us corny jokes and asked us to tell him good news about our school and extra curricular activities. I wasn't so sure he'd be in such a good mood today.

That day started off like every other Saturday in the visiting area. Dad finally appeared through the door, greeted us, and immediately sat down to listen to the recap of the week in the Ramirez household.

We hadn't chatted for long however, when Dad interrupted the conversation and gave me some coins. "Go to the vending machine and get two of those little chocolate cakes they sell," he said. He winked at me.

Instead of doing as he said, I cocked my head and stared at him. We didn't have the luxury of using the vending machines.

“*Vaya*,” he said.

I did as he said and quickly returned.

“Okay everyone, Andrea has brought us my *torta*,” he said. “Now everyone can sing me my Happy Birthday.”

He winked at me again and I took that as my cue to lead the singing. Gradually, my mother, brother, and sister chimed in for a soft yet soulful rendition of “Happy Birthday.”

As we nibbled on our cakes and continued telling Dad about our week, it seemed that whatever we had endured didn’t matter, just this moment, sitting across from Dad and working on our piece of *torta* from the vending machine.

Dad’s being sent away forced the closing of his business, Colservice. Every detail about his self-operated business was a source of pride for my father, down to the name. Colservice was an import and export business to Colombia. Mom had told me that we moved to Miami Beach right before I was born and lived there until I was around four years old, in a small apartment for the five of us. While in Miami Beach, Dad discovered there was a demand for businesses to cater to the needs of the ever growing Colombian population. Thus, Colservice was born and we moved to our lush suburban home in Miami Lakes.

After my father went away, Colservice was never mentioned again. Not on the phone. Not when we visited. I wrongly assumed that they decided to close it down since it would be too difficult for my mother to manage that giant warehouse by herself. I'd been overwhelmed by the massive warehouse that resembled a giant garage—full of stacked boxes and bustling with workers moving back and forth, lifting boxes, taping boxes, and operating equipment to move the boxes around.

I knew my mother was no longer working at Colservice when she stopped walking through our front door in her silky skirt suits and sassy high heels. Instead, she worked as an assistant manager at a bakery and left for work by four a.m. in jeans and tee shirt, in frazzled curls instead of the blow dried do of months earlier. She came home carrying bakery sandwiches instead of a briefcase.

I anxiously waited for my mother to come home every weekday evening and give my sister and me our sandwiches for dinner. The Cuban sandwiches, with melted cheese and ham on flattened Cuban bread, tasted so delicious to me that I didn't even miss the elaborate home cooked meals Alba had prepared for us in our old home. Mom told us she made them especially for us before leaving from work. I scarfed down my sandwich and thanked her in between bites. She would tell me, "Take your time *Andreita*, that sandwich isn't going anywhere," and we'd laugh.

Mom also brought *pastelitos* for dessert. At first, she would bring different types of *pastelitos*, some with meat, others with guava or cheese, and some with both. After a while, my sister and I had chosen our favorites. Hers was the guava *pastel* and mine was the cheese.

One day, Mom bought home three *pasteles* only--a cheese one, a guava one, and another. After our dinner, Ale grabbed the guava *pastel* and I grabbed the cheese one. After that day, I noticed she only bought home three *pasteles*. One was always cheese, the other guava, and the third one varied. After our sandwiches, Mom, Ale, and I knew the routine. We grabbed our respective *pastel* and talked about our day over the sounds coming from the TV, which remained on throughout the evening.

My father, who used to walk through the door of our Miami Lakes home every weeknight in a suit and tie, now arrived in the form of a weekly letter. I anxiously awaited these letters in which he wrote me *about* me, how he heard that I was named Citizen of the Week, had earned straight A's on my report card, or had placed third in the Spelling Bee and how proud it made him. He ended his letters with "*Dios te bendiga,*" God bless you.

My father wrote in his large straight lettering, reminiscent of his commanding, intimidating personality. This was the father who took us on weekend trips to Disney World, leading the way through the parks by briskly walking in front of us with a park map in hand. This was the father who took center stage every evening in our living room with memorized prayers the rest of us contributed to only by chiming in for the final "Amen."

Each time I wrote him back, I asked him what he did during the day, what his room looked like, and whether he got to go outside. Most of the time my father didn't answer my questions. But it didn't matter. The way he addressed each of his letters to me directly, "Andrea Ramirez," made

me view myself as all grown up, and I secretly thanked him. I cherished the days I received a letter addressed to me, even though I knew who it was from and that once I opened the letter, I would be sure to find the only references to me as *mi amor* or *Andreita*. I stored them in the envelopes in which they came, since these were equally as important.

My name on those envelopes read like some kind of secret code. His letters urged me to continue being a good girl and reminded me that soon we would be together again. Yet my name as the sole addressee on his envelopes told me that even though I was without him and on my own, I had to be strong and accept my destiny, just as he was accepting his. I had to stand strong as Andrea Ramirez.

“*El Papa* wrote a poem,” my mother announced to my sister and me the first time my father sent one about six months after he’d gone away. She had just come back from picking up the mail and sat with my sister and me in the living room. She read the poem out loud:

*En tu nombre Señor hoy me levanto
y te alabo Señor y te bendigo
y doy gracias Señor de tener tanto
cuando puedo hoy vivir y estar contigo.*

After that day, Dad continued to send poems frequently with instructions for my mother to save them. And more and more, the poems talked about God. He wrote about waking up each day and seeing the sacred in the routine. He wrote a prayer to give God thanks for the day which had

passed and the night which awaited. God was the one he questioned and called upon to relieve his sorrow upon missing his family and coping with the rest of his days away.

For as long as I could remember, Dad had gathered the family every night to pray the rosary and several prayers he had memorized, which began with an invocation of the Blessed Virgin or Divine Baby Jesus. Before praying, he closed his eyes and lifted his head. He recited each prayer back to back, so fast that I sometimes missed when he ended one and started the other. Over time, I had memorized some of them and tried to keep up, but it was impossible to utter such complicated religious tongue twisters at the age of five. I couldn't explain what each prayer was exactly about, but I knew Dad was praying to God and the saints to take care of us and help us to be good.

I was glad that my father had taken up poetry. Finally I could understand what my father was talking to God about. His short verses and simpler Spanish words were easier for me to understand than the long, drawn out prayers he uttered when he was home. When I read his poems out loud, I heard his voice and felt as if he was home again, praying to God. In most of his poems however, he wasn't praying to God for us but for himself. I had never heard my father pray for himself so much until I read his poetry.

I knew how my Dad was doing by reading his poems. His darker, gloomier poems showed me how sad he was upon being locked away and galvanized me to write him a sunny letter in which I mustered up every positive detail I could about school, home, and current events. His lighter, more carefree poems put me at ease.

After Dad left, we ended the tradition of nightly prayers. Maybe Mom's long work hours prevented her from gathering us together to pray *el rosario*. Maybe Mom preferred to leave these memories untouched. I felt awkward going to bed without performing our nightly ritual. I started speaking to God on my own every night, as I lay in bed and before going to sleep, asking Him to take care of my father, the way he told me he asked God to take care of me in his letters. I felt I was being a good girl and making my father proud each time I had a one on one conversation with *El Señor*, as my father called God in his poetry.

After one year of being away, Dad seemed to be doing okay. He sent my mother an 8x10 picture of himself with several men wearing identical maroon sweaters and khaki pants. They stood close to each other, their bodies touching, smiling, in a wooden chapel with a humble altar and small cross in the center of the back wall. My father stood in front of them, signaling his place as the leader. "Your father's the director of the church group," my mother said, when she showed me the picture.

By then, my mother, siblings, and I were also in a better situation. We'd moved out of my grandmother's house and into our own townhouse right next door, thanks to my mother's sister who owned it and rented it out to my mother. I finally heard what happened to our old house in Miami Lakes. I overheard my mother tell a friend it had been sold. The news didn't affect me at all however. Our past in the old house seemed distant and it had gotten easier for me to focus on the present and even the future, when my father would return.

Even though Ale and I had our own room in our new place, we decided to sleep with my mother in my parents' room. Sharing the same bed for months had brought us closer together physically and emotionally, which helped fill the void of our absent father.

Around the time we moved, I became less convinced that my father was in the military. I didn't know much about the military and how it worked, but his brown uniform and the tight security measures we had to go through to visit him were familiar from TV shows about jail, and I began to contemplate the remote possibility that he could be in such a place. But how? How could my father, the man who had gathered us to pray every night and made sure we had all our homework done, do a bad thing? I debated with myself in my usual introverted way. Little did I know that my extroverted sister was thinking these same things but actually putting two and two together.

I lay on my twin bed in the room I shared with Ale, head at the front of the bed, watching TV.

Ale casually walked into the room and plopped herself on her bed. "Andre," she said softly, "I think *Papi's* in jail."

I immediately sat up.

"Yeah," she said. She looked frightened. "You know how Dad always wears the same one piece brown suit and black shoes when we go visit him? Well, I saw a guy wearing that same outfit in a movie and he was in *jail*." I stared at her blankly, unable to swallow the information she had

just given me. I couldn't disprove her because it all made sense, yet I couldn't put the words jail and *Papi* in one phrase. My eyes watered.

"But don't worry," Ale said. She put her hands on my shoulders. "*Papi's* not a bad guy. He's not in a jail with bars or anything, he's just in a detention center and that's why we get to visit him whenever we want." I nodded to let her know I trusted her as always. I wished she knew why he was being punished though. I knew she didn't know, otherwise she would have told me. If I could just have the missing piece of information, I could be sure that Dad was as benign as I always knew him to be. Ale bounced off her bed and scurried out of the room, leaving me all alone to stare at the T.V. with its talking heads who said everything and nothing to me at the same time.

Seeing how Ale waited until we were alone to break the news, I knew that questions about my dad's whereabouts were not topics we could just casually bring up at the dinner table. No one talked about it. Not my mother, nor my brother who, eleven years older and doing adult things, was a father figure to me. After my father was sent away, he enrolled in college full time, joined the college soccer team, and landed a part-time job at UPS.

I never saw him much except the occasional late night when I managed to stay awake and saw him walk through the front door wearing his brown UPS uniform and toting a large soccer bag. He walked in with his head facing down, the crumpled uniform hanging off his frail body. "*Mami*, what's for dinner?" he asked.

My mother meandered around the kitchen, finally placing a little rice, a small portion of beans, a small piece of meat, and some mixed vegetables on a plate.

Ivan sat at the table and looked over his humble dinner. His face turned sour. “*Mami*, what’s this? Why so little?”

My mother grimaced and spoke softly, “I’m sorry Ivan. Would you like some ham? Can I make you more rice?”

My brother rejected the offers with a nod and slowly finished his plate. He cleared his plate in minutes.

I felt as if questioning my mother about my father would only cause her pain, like the one she obviously felt when my brother questioned her about his dinner. When the time was right, I trusted my parents would explain the details of my father’s time away. Until then, I preferred to be the quiet and unobtrusive bystander.

Since my mom couldn’t read in English and because I loved to read, I read to her every night in her king sized bed. Mostly I read her the Bearstein Bears books. I was drawn to the brother and sister bears’ funny antics and how their parents turned their use of bad judgment into valuable lessons through compassion and love. Each time my mom dozed off, I tapped her softly and asked, “*Mami*, did you get the last part?”

“Sorry, continue *mi amor*,” she said and smiled. I eventually finished the story between continuous taps and nudges at my mother’s shoulder. At seven years old, I didn’t understand that my mother repeatedly dozed off in sheer exhaustion from long days of work and short nights of sleep.

One Saturday night, at a family party in my grandmother’s house, a friend of the family asked my mother to dance. The dining room furniture had been moved to convert the dining room area into a dance floor. I sat on the staircase and watched my mother dance the salsa number with the gentleman. The mirrored walls which surrounded them made the four dancing couples seem like twice as many.

I stared down the gentleman, mad at him for taking my mother away from my side, even if only for an innocent four minute dance. He leaned into her as they danced and whispered something in her ear. She laughed. Then he backed away some and smiled at her as they continued dancing. He leaned in again to tell her something else. Mom giggled again. The music was blaring from the home stereo in one corner of the room. My cousins kept running past me in a fun game of freeze tag. But all I could focus on was my mother and that guy dancing. I wished he would stop trying to make her laugh. I wished he would stop thinking he could take my father’s place.

I couldn’t take it anymore, even though the party had just begun. I stomped up to my mother and the gentleman. “*Mami*, can we go home now? I’m tired,” I said.

My mother released one hand from the gentleman's grasp and patted me on the head. "In a minute, *mi amor*," she said as she kept dancing.

"*Mami*, I'm really tired."

Mom stopped dancing and gave the gentleman a forced smile. "I'm sorry, you know how it is," she said. The gentleman smiled back.

My mother didn't say a word to me as we walked home. But she wasn't mad either. She never was. I knew what I'd done hadn't been right but I didn't think I was wrong either. I just wanted to get ready for bed as quickly as possible and get to one of our favorite activities, reading.

I didn't realize how attached I had become to my mother until the first time I was forced to be without her, on a summer vacation trip to my Aunt Piedad's condo in Medellin. It was our second summer without Dad at home and my mother's sister, Piedad, invited my brother, sister, and me to spend the summer at her home in Colombia, with our cousins.

I happily accepted the offer and soon began preparing for the trip. I had recently received a small black purse as a gift and decided I wouldn't use it until the day of my trip. On the day of the trip, I stuffed useless trinkets into my shiny new purse just to make it seem full, like my mother's, and was the first one who was dressed and ready to go to the airport.

When we arrived at my aunt's condo, I looked around in awe at the many chandeliers, fancy sculptures, and swank furniture. I had never seen anything like it. She lived in a sort of condomansion.

After a long day of traveling, it was time to go to bed. As I lay in my bed, in the stillness of the night and the darkness of the room, reality set in. I was in another continent and neither one of my parents were anywhere nearby. I stared at the ceiling, my mind racing with images of my mother eating her bakery sandwich, getting ready for bed--alone. A headache started to set in as it always did when I tried to fight my tears from coming. Minutes later, I got up and went to the living room, tears welling down my face. My aunt was sitting on the couch and pouted as soon as she saw me while extending her arms. "What's wrong *Andreita*?" she asked.

I wasn't that close to my *Tia Piedad* since she and her family lived in Colombia, but that night, I knew I wouldn't be able to go to sleep without a caressing touch like the ones my mother gave me every night before putting me to bed. I carelessly lay my head on Piedad's lap and told her, between sobs, "My mother told me that if I ever missed her too much while I was here, that I could just pretend like you're her." My aunt, who of all my mother's sisters, resembled her most with her curly black hair and large eyes, smiled at me and said, "She's absolutely right. You could pretend I'm her."

Days after returning home from Colombia, I received a letter from my father which included an elaborate drawing. I stared in wonder at the picture he drew for me, wondering if he had always

been such a good painter and I'd just never known it. Later I found out he had a friend do the painting for him.

The drawing was of my sister and me in front of a giant red and white plane with the word "Avianca" on it, just like the plane we'd flown home on. The plane on the drawing had tiny windows painted on it with the occasional head peaking through some, the faces all smiling at us. My sister and I were also smiling as we walked through a large banner which stood over our heads and had "Welcome Home" painted in yellow. Each of our striped skirt sets, mine orange and Ale's green, were drawn exactly like the outfits we wore to fly home.

I felt sorry for my father since he couldn't be present to see our return. But I was as happy to receive the letter as I was to be home in Miami and back with my mom.

A few weeks later, I received a large manila envelope from my father. I locked myself in the room I shared with my sister, emptied the contents onto my bed, and discovered an assortment of pamphlets about Jesus's life and the parables He told His disciples. I immediately grabbed one, curious to see if it was true I could learn about God through comic strips.

I learned about the Good Samaritan, the day Jesus made 5000 fish out of a loaf of bread, and the parable of the prodigal son. There was also one about the parents who were bringing their children to Jesus for His blessing, but the disciples objected. Jesus turned to them, with His perfect golden waves of hair, chiseled face, blue eyes, and long flowing green robe, and said, "Let the children come to me. Do not stop them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as

these." The next page showed Jesus seated at the front of the temple, the ends of His robe bunched at His feet with two gleeful children on His lap. He smiled at them tenderly.

For the next couple of weeks, I read that pamphlet and gazed at the picture of Jesus with the children every day. Jesus was suddenly my hero for being a defender of the children. I wished to be one of those children sitting on Jesus's lap and caught in the joy of the moment as I looked into His majestic blue eyes and knew that here was Someone who would always protect me and never leave my side. I told myself I would have to thank my father for giving me such a wonderful gift. I would have to tell him how much I had enjoyed it. I knew that would make him happy.

Two years after my father was detained, he was allowed a three day home visit in which he could stay at the house with us. He had been granted this special visitation for good behavior, he told us.

The second day of my father's home visit, he told Ale and me to get ready; we were going for a walk. We hurried upstairs to change into our t-shirts, shorts, and sneakers. My father had never been the walking type and I figured this was his way of ensuring we spent "quality time" before he had to leave again. We were ready to go within five minutes and went downstairs to meet with my father who was dressed in a maroon sweat suit and sneakers. When I saw him in clothes other than his dull brown uniform, I smiled. Dad was indeed home.

It was a hot and muggy day in South Florida. My thighs rubbed together and sweat drops fell off my forehead. But none of this bothered me. I felt as if I was walking on air as we made small talk. Within a few minutes, Dad looked down at Ale, then at me. “*Mis amores*, I want to talk to you about something. I want to explain to you the reason why I was sent to jail.”

Jail. The last time I had heard that word was when Ale had said it. But my father had mentioned it casually.

Dad spent the next half hour explaining why he was found guilty of a crime and sent away. His voice remained calm. He walked slowly, his arms over our shoulders. “Colservice was making me lots of money and I deposited it under several different bank accounts without declaring it,” he said. Dad then explained that he was confused about his rights and his actual crime but his fear of the legal authorities made him extremely nervous. He’d answered questions from the accusing party, the State of Florida, clumsily and without requesting help from his legal counsel. His fear heightened when they mentioned something about convicting my mother and older brother of being involved in his activities.

“That is,” he said and paused, “why I signed a document agreeing to a conviction as long as they agreed not to involve your mother or brother.”

I pulled in closer to my newly lean father. I had heard all I needed to hear. As far as I could tell, he had just made some bad business decisions. I was relieved to have my beliefs about my father confirmed: that he would never do something so blatantly wrong against God, like sell drugs, steal, or hurt anyone.

“So they officially sent me away for money laundering. That is what I was accused of,” he said. He had done something illegal. But he had also come to terms with his wrong doing and had learned from his mistake.

Before we returned home, I wanted to let him know I wasn't upset. “Dad, thanks for the explanation. And thanks for the walk. I really enjoyed it,” I said.

“Bueno *mi amor*,” Dad replied. He smiled, his eyes slightly watery. “I'm glad you enjoyed it.” My mother seemed shocked that I reacted so casually to my father's revelation about why he was sent away. I was shocked that they thought I would have reacted any differently.

She used to tell her sisters, “Andrea walked into the house and her cheeks were as red as tomatoes. She ran up to me, smiling from ear and ear, and said, ‘Mami, guess what! Dad told us everything!’ Then, just like that, she turned around and ran out to play with her sister.”

In one of our final visits with my father, right before he completed his two and a half years away, I was left alone with him at the entrance to the detention center. My mother had accompanied Ale to the restroom. The strong Florida sun stung our faces and my father's thin gray hairs danced in the breeze.

“You know,” Dad said slowly “one of the guys in the church group, a much younger guy, he came up to me and said, ‘Don Octavio, I want to know, if you would do me the favor of explaining to me, what is God? Define Him for me.’” He looked me intensely in the eyes. I smiled at him to show him I enjoyed the story and couldn’t wait to hear the rest. Instead, he said, “*Que es Dios, Andrea?*” I scrambled to provide an intelligent answer. I knew I couldn’t fool my father.

“*Dios es,*” I began. I couldn’t continue. I knew that my father was looking for something more than “the Guy who lives in the sky and rules over everyone and everything.” I knew He was Someone more than that but simply couldn’t put it into words.

“Andrea,” he finally continued. “*Dios es amor.*”

God is love. *That was it?*

“That’s it,” he responded and startled me with his out loud response to my thought. “God is love,” my father repeated. “All that is love is God’s work and is God working for you. All that is not done in love is not a part of God. That’s all you have to remember.”

I heard my mother’s and Ale’s footsteps. I didn’t want this moment to be interrupted. My father had just answered a question I only then realized I had never gotten a straight answer to: What is God?

I became consumed with an overwhelming sense of calm. I was no longer saddened by the fleeting nature of our visits with Dad. Instead I realized that the more and more we visited with him, the more I came away enlightened.

CHAPTER TWO: THE SHATTERED VIEW

When I was in grade school, my father always traveled to Colombia in a suit and tie.

As soon as we arrived at the Medellin airport, taxi drivers flocked to him. As they stood next to him and offered their services, I noticed the disparity. Most were slim men in their middle age, wearing worn polo shirts and faded jeans. My dad exuded wealth and health. He had shiny white hair, light green eyes, naturally rosy cheeks, and a belly that filled his suit nicely.

The competitive taxi drivers each tried to grab onto a piece of luggage to store in his cab. My father's corpulent figure meant that not only did he have money to feed his family, but he had more than enough food to put on the table. In contrast, they worked long hours just to make ends meet. My father's white hair, rosy cheeks, and gray suit translated into one color for them--green. American dollars meant he would be able to tip nicely. So they pursued, each grabbing onto a handle of one of our suitcases and asking my father, "*Señor, lo llevo?*" or "Sir, can we take you?" until my father turned his white head towards the designated one and ordered, "You sir, take us to Medellin please."

My father wanted my sister Ale and me to be neatly dressed when we traveled. My mother primed us from head to toe, securing our hair with plastic clips in the shape of ribbons. We wore identical outfits, except in different colors, like all pairs of little sisters in Colombia. Our clothes were of exceptional quality, made of thick cottons that made us sweat anytime we weren't around air conditioning.

I might wear an aquamarine skirt outfit with alternating light and dark stripes on top and a solid print skirt. Ale's was the same pattern in orange.

These outfits were made by my aunt in Colombia by hand and sent to my mother. Nonetheless, we stood out as foreigners in our full travel regalia as soon as we stepped out of the airport and into the streets of Medellin.

As I got older, my father began to dress more casually to travel to Colombia, but his final destination remained the same—his mother's house. As I became a teenager, my parents simultaneously entered a new phase in their relationship. My father had been released from jail several years back and he and my mom had both secured blue collar and office jobs which gave them just enough money to pay the bills and make occasional visits to Colombia. For reasons unknown to me however, they began traveling to Colombia separately, sometimes inviting me, sometimes going alone.

When I visited Colombia alone with my father, we didn't go much farther than the front steps of my grandmother's house. Visiting his mother was his sole reason for traveling annually to his native home.

My father's mother, *Abuelita* Herminia, lived with her two single daughters: Ines, the nun, and Teresita. Teresita was my grandmother's main caretaker since Ines spent much time away in her convent.

Everyone in the family called Ines *la monjita* or the little nun. She wore a long sleeve cream colored habit with a brown cross stitched in the middle of the chest and a brown head covering. Every time I saw her, *la monjita's* head was covered. I never saw her hair except for the salt and pepper tufts that crept out from underneath the border of her head covering.

When I was younger, *la monjita* wrote me letters which said, "You have to be a good girl for your parents and continue doing well in school like you always have because God smiles upon girls who obey their parents."

At six years old, I'd read those letters and envisioned my aunt as the image of purity, perfection, and devotion. In her letters, my aunt reminded me that "God likes little girls who pray to Him every night" and that "if you are a good girl, God will answer your prayers." I was smitten by her devotion to her "job."

One day I confronted my mom. "*Mami*, I want to be a nun."

I imagined my aunt's life as one of peacefulness and contentment, in convent and prayer sessions. All those letters she had sent me about being obedient to God and staying within His good graces made me believe those values were of utmost importance and I knew I could embrace these values by becoming a nun like her.

When I announced to my mother my desire to be a nun, Mom patted my head and said, "That's great, *mi amor*." Then she shifted her attention to something else, as if she knew this phase

would soon end. And it did. After several more months of school, I began discovering other “careers” and soon enough, was fantasizing about other things I could be when I grew up, like a school teacher.

From stories my father had told me and through observation, I could tell life hadn’t been kind to his other single sister, Teresita. All her siblings had married and were raising families. Even the nun had dedicated her life to the Church. She was married to God, she liked to say.

As for Tere, her only obligation was to a home with a stubborn octogenarian, my grandmother, whose case of progressive Alzheimer’s made it difficult for her to recognize anyone, including Tere, even though she had been at her mother’s side her whole life.

Her look matched her personality--short and terse. Teresita wore her hair short and close to her head with choppy layers of straight hair streaming down the sides. She wore plaid, button down shirts and uniform-like pants which gave her a boxy shape. Her flip flops were knockoffs and exposed her toes au natural. In a city where there were salons on every street corner bustling with clients, my aunt clearly was not concerned with her looks.

Teresita walked, talked, dressed, and even mopped her floors in a brash, authoritative manner. I stayed out of her way while she mopped the floors every morning and kept my distance from her to avoid falling out of her good graces.

Her room was directly across my grandmother's. I only entered it when she invited me in, which was rarely. Nothing drew my attention towards Tere's room. There was no intriguing art decorating her walls, no flashy clothes peaking out from her closet or polka dot heels like the ones which stood out each time my mother opened her closet back home. Her basic room housed a vanity table, a closet, and a bed. In Tere's room, there was only the gray floor, beige walls, brown furniture, and the ivory quilt.

The thin quilt on Tere's bed was probably made by one of her craftswomen sisters. I couldn't imagine her buying a thick, fluffy down comforter to snuggle up to at night, even though she had a secure job in finance and could probably afford it. She didn't think the way my mom did. "Buy yourself nice things because if you don't buy nice things for yourself, no one else will," my mom often said.

Tere didn't pamper herself. Her vanity table only contained a generic brand of hand lotion, a sample perfume, and miniscule figurines. It was a stark contrast to Mom's vanity table littered with perfumes of all different sizes, smells, and shapes. My favorite was the one shaped in the form of a woman's torso. I never smelled it since I couldn't bring myself to grab the risqué bottle. Some of my mother's perfumes were gifts while others she wanted so much that she went out and bought them for herself. Mom always said that shoes and purses were her weakness but I thought fragrances were as well.

My other aunt, the nun, shared a room with my grandma. Their room housed little more than their two twin beds. Each time I looked into their room, I thought it sad that two adults were still sleeping in twin beds.

In my house in Miami, everyone in my family could fit in my parents' king size bed. When I was a little girl, I often slept in my parents' bed, tucked snugly in between the two of them and feeling like I was in the safest place on earth. I marveled at the sheer mass of the bed and seeing how the three of us--myself, my mother, and my 200 pound father--couldn't fill it gave me an overwhelming sense of security.

When I traveled to Colombia with my father as a teenager, staying at my grandmother's house consisted of sleeping, eating, watching the daily news, and praying. No matter what time I awoke, breakfast was served within five minutes. After breakfast, we moved to the sitting room where my grandmother and aunts would thank the Lord through memorized and recited prayers for awaking to another day. My aunts prayed quickly, eyes closed and chins pointing upward. They always had to pray the rosary: *Dios te salve Maria, llena eres de gracia, el Senor es contigo, bendita tu eres entre todas las mujeres y bendito el fruto de tu vientre, Jesus.* They prayed the way my father used to pray before he was taken away to jail. I was glad he didn't pray that way anymore. At home, he recited the poems he had written about God as his new prayers and the simpler language and simple requests of a man asking God to help and protect him appealed more to me than these lofty prayers worshipping Jesus and Mary.

Lunch was served promptly at midday and dinner at five pm. In between lunch and dinnertime, my two aunts spent the whole afternoon in the kitchen preparing the dinner. As I observed them in the kitchen slaving away--stirring, slicing, washing, peeling, frying--I thought about my mother who could whip up a homemade dinner in thirty minutes and wondered why they couldn't do the same. I got my answer when dinner was served. My mother's potato flakes and canned vegetables didn't compare to their homemade potato chips and gourmet salads. My aunts' meals even looked nice, the brown of the meatloaf and gravy complementing the oranges and greens of the sautéed vegetables.

Dinner in Miami depended on how much my mother was pressed for time. On days when she was especially pressed, we were served such weird concoctions as leftover spaghetti and meat sauce with fresh rice. When Mom didn't have time to make meat, she served us rice with *rollitos de jamon* or deli ham rolls as she liked to call it. We laughed each time Mom served us these quick fix meals but didn't give her a hard time about it. We knew she was just doing the best she could.

Nonetheless, I missed eating my mother's "cuisine" each time we stayed at my grandmother's house in Colombia.

Dinner was followed by the afternoon prayer in which my grandmother and aunts would thank the Lord for living another day. The local news came on at 8 pm, the footage adding a somber tone to an otherwise uneventful day: floods ravaging the already poor regions in the country and

local politicians being accused of corruption. When it finished half an hour later, it was time for bed.

One summer, soon after I turned seventeen, I accompanied my father on another trip to Colombia to visit *Abuelita* Herminia. Soon after we arrived at my grandmother's house, Dad told his mother and sisters that we were taking a day to go see Millo. "*La niña* really wants to see him and visit his parish," he said. Leaving the house to visit Millo was one of few acceptable reasons my father could give to his sisters to leave my grandmother's house. Ines and Teresita also believed that my father's only purpose for visiting Colombia should be to stay with my grandmother. Since my feeble grandmother hadn't gone past her balcony for several years, Dad and I mostly remained housebound when we traveled to visit her.

"Oh of course," Ines replied. "You have to go see it Octo. Millo's working very hard on the building of that church."

To my father's side of the family, but especially to my aunts Ines and Teresita, Cousin Millo was untouchable. He was like God to them--omnipotent, almighty, and all powerful--because he was the only priest in the family.

Millo's new parish was located in Niquia, a tough area of Medellin. As my father drove to Niquia, I could see the gradual transformation of a well maintained city into its neglected outskirts. The city's skyscrapers turned into old, dilapidated buildings. The city parks with their colorful fountains and well groomed children turned into abandoned soccer fields with long grass upon which children in shabby clothes threw a weathered soccer ball around.

From the moment we arrived in Niquia and I set foot on the rocky red gravel that lay before the church, I knew I had left city life far behind. I stood in front of Millo's small, pale church. An imposing gold cross decorated the roof and a life size white statue of the Virgin Mary stood at the entrance. These were the most elegant landmarks of the shanty *barrio*.

"Hello Andreita, how are you?" Millo had come to meet us at the car. He spoke quickly in his high pitched voice.

I smiled at him, trying to figure out what he'd said. Seconds later, I responded. "Oh...Millo...I'm doing well. I'm sorry, it's just that you talk so fast!"

Millo patted my head and laughed. His large white teeth resembled my father's. He towered over my father in both height and girth but they both had the same head full of bright white hair. Millo turned to my father. "Cousin Octo, how's it going? *Que mas?* You look like the man with the broken arm. Did you hear about the guy with the broken arm?"

Millo always had a new joke to share with us. I didn't laugh so much at his jokes as the fact that they were even more vulgar than the dirtiest jokes my father said. Like the one he liked to mention about going to Amsterdam and mistakenly ending up in *la casa de las putas*, a brothel.

To the left of Millo's church stood the local cemetery. I remember thinking how sad it must be to spend the rest of eternity in a place like the Niquia cemetery. This was where Millo's

parishioners would most likely be buried. Dirty white towers littered the weedy ground, each containing several inserts for rudimentary wooden caskets.

To the right of the church, shanty houses were stacked on top of one another, on shaky concrete or wooden ground.

Millo brought us into the church. He stood amidst the pews with his hands on his hips, smiling. The church was simple but immaculately clean. The wooden pews had a fresh glossy coat and the drab gray floor gleamed. The most elegant part of the church was its marble altar.

I tried to listen to Millo as he explained some details about the church but kept getting distracted by the *ranchera* music coming from a nearby house.

In my church in Miami, stained glass windows decorated the walls, showing images of saints and the holy family. Millo's church had large square holes in the walls which allowed for ventilation. I looked out of one of the holes and scanned the makeshift houses to pinpoint where the music was coming from.

It was the house with the open door. In it, a young lady in short shorts and a tank top swayed to the rhythm of the music with a dirty mop. She sang the *ranchera* song word for word as she mopped and danced feverishly over the black and white checkerboard tile. I had only seen this tile design for flooring on businesses which received a lot of traffic, not a residence.

Even though I couldn't hear her, I could tell by the way she opened her mouth to sing that this girl was singing with all her might as if she were on a stage, performing. She seemed to have forgotten that she was only mopping the drab tile in her poor house. The tile looked much cheaper than the pink, glossy tile which decorated my house. As many times as I had mopped the floor in my house however, I had never done so with as much joy as the girl in that house.

On the contrary, I whined each time my father asked me to do the floors in our house. My house, which had air conditioning and a full refrigerator and floors which gleamed. The *ranchera* singer, in her old clothes and rickety concrete house, didn't seem to mind her surroundings and instead seemed content in her superstar world. I felt ashamed for all the times I became disgruntled when my parents asked me to help them around the house, failing to notice that this was the least I could do in exchange for my comfortable lifestyle.

Millo then led us to his office. With a plain wooden table and chair, two chairs for guests, and a couple of cheap frames decorating the concrete walls, his office was as simple as his church.

"Hey, what happened to that frame?" I pointed to the frame with the shattered glass and what appeared to be a hole left by a bullet.

"Oh." Millo giggled. "*Imaginense*. That happened one time while I was sitting at my desk, doing some work. A bullet shot through my window and hit that frame. Needless to say, it was a scary moment. Gangs." Millo giggled again and continued talking to my father about other church business.

The shattered glass window in Millo's office, a tiny slot in the concrete wall, revealed how the bullet had gotten inside.

"Millo, why haven't you fixed the window and the frame yet?" I asked.

"Well, to remind me of how close I came to the eternal glory." Millo laughed loudly in his typical manner of making light of serious topics.

But soon after, Millo looked at me with a straight face. "But also," he continued, "to remind me of what kind of community I'm working with."

This was a side to Millo I hadn't seen. For him to take a job there, in Niquia, in a place where people needed more than what they had to give said a lot about him. To him, being a priest had nothing to do with doing a job. Millo was fulfilling a passion to help others, no matter what the cost.

I admired Millo all the more after that day. Not in the way I admired *Hermana Ines* at six years old though. I was no longer the naïve youngster with a romantic image of religious workers who did little more than sit and pray. Millo had shown me that priests were also warriors sometimes. They literally had to defend themselves and their community for what they believed in. I wanted to be like Millo but not in the same way I had wanted to be a nun several years back when I craved my aunt's calmness and peaceful state. Instead, I was inspired by Millo's hands-on

approach to his faith and mission and sought to project my own faith in a new light: by helping those in need.

Passion was the only answer I could give myself to explain what Millo was doing in a place like Niquia. Niquia was *that* place--a place like those they showed on the news in the States when they talked about the civil war going on in Colombia.

For the first time, I was afraid to be in Colombia. I looked out the shattered glass of Millo's tiny window and saw a ghost town. I thought warring gangs from the *barrio* were suddenly going to appear and get into a fight, setting off guns and sending bullets towards me.

But I was willing to take the risk. I had no interest in driving back to the safety of my grandma's house. I was fine where I was, looking through the shattered glass and absorbing this side of Medellin I knew existed but had never been able to say I had lived. Until now.

On the drive home, I asked my father, "*Papi*, when we visit Colombia next year, can we return to Niquia?"

CHAPTER THREE: THROUGH THEIR EYES

My mother told her family and friends that the reason she liked Miami so much was because, “It was like living in Colombia but with the American system.”

In Miami, my mother had managed to create the kind of home every immigrant craves--a place where the best of the old world and the new could combine to form one.

My mother called the walls of our backyard “el Rincon Paisa,” or The Paisa Corner, a reference to the people from the region of Antioquia in Colombia, where my parents are from. I liked to stand in between these two walls that included everything from a frame of Juan Valdez and his humble donkey to shelves holding mini replicas of *chiveras* or traditional buses from Colombia. I figured that if I stared at and studied these objects long enough, I too could understand what living in Colombia was like and what it felt like to be from a place with such a colorful history.

I stared at Juan, the long reigning and most popular spokesperson for Colombian coffee, and was transported back to that idyllic place so different from my house. The constant drone of the cars zooming past our house suddenly disappeared. Instead, I visualized myself in between those coffee plants breathing in the sharp smell of the coffee bean and hearing nothing more than the birds chirping.

The *Rincon* had mini replicas of *fincas* or haciendas with red roofs and little green plants hanging from the roof’s edges. The tiny bags of coffee, flags, and coffee cups that cluttered the shelves all boldly proclaimed the same three colors--amarillo, azul, y rojo-- (yellow, blue, and red), *el*

tricolor, as I had heard my parents describe them. I wondered what it was like to ride a bus with live chickens and people literally hanging off its sides as it made its way through the lush green mountains and winding bumpy roads which I had only briefly encountered in my short vacations to Colombia.

The majority of my mother's side of the family lived in Miami. Out of the 44 townhouses in my neighborhood, seven belonged to members of my family, including my mother's mother. My mother and her mother, *Abuelita* Mercedes, visited each other every day, in between their long chats on the phone.

We referred to my subdivision, Inglewood, as *Parque Berrio* or Berrio Park, the name of a neighborhood in Medellin. Berrio was also my mother's family name.

Several of my neighbors were Colombian families. When I saw them on the street, they greeted me in Spanish and with the same accent as mine. We saw each other at the Colombian bakery, *Rico Pan*, on Saturday mornings when we ordered an assortment of Colombian breakfast breads, *parva*.

In *Parque Berrio*, my mother would send me to the neighbor's house to ask for whatever she needed to complete the meal that night. My neighbors were a husband and wife, Humberto and Liliana, who had recently moved from Colombia. They would quickly open their door, ask me to come in, and greet me with a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

While she filled my glass with milk, Liliana would ask, “So Andreita, how are you doing in school and how is your family doing? Her straight black hair rested on her back. She had fair skin and a slender frame.

Humberto sat on the couch, fiddling with some gadget. He had an olive complexion and *mestizo* features. He often came to my house to help my mother out with home projects, since my father was a klutz at home repairs.

I would wait at the entrance to their kitchen quietly. I never knew what new information to share with them, since they talked to my parents on the sidewalk on a daily basis.

I would leave Liliana and Humberto’s house with a full glass of milk even though I had only asked for half. They always gave me more than what I asked for.

Their house looked much like mine. Small and large porcelains decorated the living room tables. They were probably from Colombia, like the ones my mother had brought when she moved to the States.

The only times my mother got angry at me was when I accidentally broke one of the porcelains while running inside the house. She didn’t hit me, but glared at me until I walked away slowly, tears running down my face and an overwhelming sense of guilt consuming me. My mother repaired one of the porcelains I broke, a large statue of a peasant woman. The broken parts, which my mother had carefully glued together, were easily distinguishable. That porcelain

statue had been in my house for as long as I could remember. I thought it weird that my mother had decided to salvage the statue, considering she had said before that something broken shouldn't be saved.

Our tight knit subdivision seemed like a splitting image of daily life in Colombia. At times, it was difficult for me to reconcile why my mother had decided to make a life for herself in the States even though her traditions, her actions, and her mind set often transported her to Colombia.

This was Colombia. Spontaneous. My mom and I could leave our quiet apartment, grab a taxi, and be surrounded by sights, sounds, and friendly faces within five minutes or less. This was Colombia when I traveled alone with my mother.

In Colombia, Mom was giddier than usual. Everything about her glowed: her bubbly personality, her healthy, shiny hair, her perfect makeup. As much as she talked about all the opportunities she and her family had been afforded in the U.S., she seemed to enjoy the opportunities given to her whenever she traveled to her native home even more. She made an appointment to visit the corner salon at least once a week, ensuring that her hair would be done throughout her stay.

Perhaps her frequent trips to the salon in Colombia were a way of silencing her critics back home in Miami--my father, siblings, and me. My sister especially, pointed out whenever my mother's

hair looked unruly. “*Mami,*” she said, “What’s up with that hair?” Sometimes Ale commented in Spanish but sometimes she did it in English, to make sure my mother wasn’t in on the joke and making it even funnier for the rest of us.

Mom snapped back. “I know you’re talking about me. Think I don’t understand?” she said in her thick accent. She continued in Spanish, “I don’t care. I’m sporting the Tina Turner look.” We laughed some more.

In Miami, Mom didn’t have much time for herself. She woke up at 5:30 am, woke the rest of the family, prepared dinner, and tidied up the house before she left for work. She worked as a title clerk in an auto tag agency in Hialeah. Her work space was cramped and her computer was old and slow. Nonetheless, she used it to full capacity to deal with impatient customers from open to close. She understood people’s unwillingness to run boring and tedious car errands, so despite their grumbling, greeted them with a smile and bid them farewell by saying “Have a nice day” in Spanish. Mom quickly became popular in Mendez Auto Tag Agency as “the nice lady from Colombia” and much to the other employees’ chagrin, gained loyal customers who refused service unless it came from Yolanda.

Around six pm, Mom came home and had a homemade dinner on the table soon after. Dinner always consisted of “*sopa y seco*” or soup and dry foods. “Your father likes to have both,” she had explained to me once when I questioned her about why we always ate soup at dinnertime. Not that I minded. I loved the soups my mother prepared, from cream of tomato and cream of onion to plantain soup.

No matter how late I stayed up, my mother was always the last one to retire for the night. I worried about her for staying up so late and getting up so early but every time I asked her when she was going to sleep, she replied, “In just a minute. I’m going to drink my coffee and then go to bed.” Mom was the only person I knew who drank coffee and became drowsy.

But in Colombia, Mom wore bright, colorful clothes, clothes she didn’t wear in Miami. The old drab t-shirt and sweatpants she changed into when she arrived from work never traveled with her. Instead, they remained on the hook behind her bathroom door in Miami, where she placed them every night before changing into her pajamas.

In Medellin, my mother had also left something else--the part of her life which consisted of hard work, long days and longer evenings, and the woman who was nothing more than a mother and wife--on that same hook behind her bathroom door in Miami.

Besides visiting her friends and members of her family, my mother and I also made time to visit my father’s side of the family when we traveled to Colombia. We visited my grandmother and single aunts sparingly, preferring to spend more time with the more “scandalous” members of my father’s family, who admired the flamboyant side of my mother that blossomed in Colombia. My single aunts, who like most of their siblings, had lean, tall bodies, often commented on my short mother’s fluctuating weight.

“Yoly, you’ve put on some weight, right?” Aunt Teresita said, hands on her hips.

Minutes later, my nun aunt commented on my mother's bouffant hairdo or the numerous bracelets that rode up her wrists and onto her arms. My nun aunt, who dressed only in habit and headdress, thought my mother's exclamatory fashion statements were not what God considered appropriate for a wife and mother of three. "That new hair color you have Yolanda, it's quite...colorful." *La monjita* laughed as she took a step back, studied my mother's bright red hair, and stared her down.

"Do you like it? I wanted to do something different," she said, as always. She patted her head and asked, "So how are *you* doing?"

I could never figure out whether my aunts' comments upset my mother or flew over her head. Perhaps she never took them personally since my aunts were generally critical of everyone. I watched my mother in awe as she casually responded to them and finally understood the meaning of one of her favorite sayings: "In life, you very much have to play the clown."

The members of my father's side of the family who we visited and enjoyed the most were *Tio* Luis's children and their families.

Luis's oldest daughter, Gloria, frequented her pool as religiously as my single aunts attended Sunday mass. She didn't attend church often but her glowing tan indicated that she lay out by her pool religiously.

Luz was the bohemian daughter in the family. Her hair was long, shaggy, and loose just like the sweaters she wore. She did not like to be considered religious. Rather, she referred to herself as spiritual.

Luis Jr. and his wife seemed pretty ordinary at first glance but once I had interacted with them long enough, I realized there was nothing average about their excessive drinking.

The youngest, Leon, was the calmest of the four, but rumor had it that his weakness, even as a married man, was for women.

Their children, my second cousins, also seemed to have a more liberal lifestyle, probably because they took after their parents. Going to Colombia with my mother meant spending more time with Luis's grandchildren who were closer in age to me than their parents, my cousins. I hung out most often with my second cousin Monica.

On my first trip to Medellin as an adult, I vowed to be more in sync with the city's fashion trends and wear my trendiest clothes everywhere I went, even downtown.

On another visit to Colombia with my mother, when I was 18, my cousin invited me to go downtown with her. I wore a pair of my sexiest casual jeans. They were tight on my legs and rode low on my waist.

Downtown Medellin was swarming with people looking for a bargain. Street vendors were selling everything from ice cream to imitation sunglasses and Barbie dolls and there were blocks of tiny stores selling items for much less than retail price. The bustle of consumers, beggars, street vendors, and cars made for a boisterous and active downtown.

As my cousin Monica and I walked along, greasy middle aged mechanics from the nearby tire shops heckled and whistled at us. I was convinced that the catcalling was due to my form fitting Bongo jeans. Not that I particularly enjoyed being whistled at by men my father's age, but I figured that if they were looking, more guys my age would look too.

We arrived at a sector in downtown called *el hueco* or "The Hole." Shortly after we arrived, I realized why the place had been named that way. I entered *el hueco* through a narrow door that led me to a corridor so long I couldn't see the other side. This corridor was riddled with tiny stores on both sides and salespeople who stood in the doors. As I walked through the corridor, they peeked their heads out, greeting me with "*A la orden senorita,*" or "At your service m'am." It was difficult for me to decline their services repeatedly, since they seemed so hospitable and willing to help.

We scanned *el hueco* for stores that carried the infamous Brazilian cut jeans so popular among Medellin's teen girls. Finally we caught a young saleswoman wearing the jeans we were looking for. She invited us into her store and showed us different styles. Then she led me to the makeshift fitting room, a small curtain in the corner. She asked me what size I wore and after telling her I didn't know, stared me down and handed me a pair of jeans in a size eight. I took

the jeans, even though I was sure that size would be too small on me since Moni wore a size six and her legs were about as meaty as my arms. Too embarrassed to say anything however and harboring the hope that perhaps they would actually fit, I decided to try on the jeans. They went up half way.

“Moni, these don’t fit,” I said as I placed the pants on the top of the curtain. Seconds later, a hand reached through the curtain with a pair of jeans.

“Okay, try on this size,” the saleswoman said.

I took the jeans and looked at the size on the tag. Size ten. *Okay, please let these fit and save me any further embarrassment*, I thought. I managed to get them up to my waist but there was no way I could zip them up. I slowly took them off, trying to delay the inevitable moment in which I would have to say these wouldn’t fit and hope they carried a size twelve. Medellin girls, like my cousin, were petite.

“Moni?”

“*Q’hubo*,” she responded. What’s up?

“These don’t fit either.” I placed the pants over the curtain again and listened intently to the ensuing conversation between the sales girl and Moni.

“M’am, these don’t fit her either.”

“No? Oh well, here is a pair in twelve but this is the biggest size I have so I hope they fit her.”

I cringed at the statement, glad to be behind the curtain. The hand reached over again and I quickly took the third pair of jeans from her, anxious to try them on. These jeans fit. However, there was another problem.

“Uh, Monica?” I slowly opened the curtain, exposing the jeans which sat fairly low on my waist.

“Those look great!” she said.

“But don’t you think these are way too low?” I couldn’t help but think that one wrong move and I could expose my butt crack.

“No way. Oh come on. You need to change your jeans already,” Moni responded and placed her hand on her naked hip, between her midriff and her low jeans.

“Okay, lemme take another look at them.” I closed the curtain and looked into the full length mirror.

Moni was right. My jeans and these jeans were on opposite sides of the fashion spectrum. My Bongos fell just short of my belly button. These jeans ended where my torso began. My Bongos were snug on my legs. These jeans were made out of a stretch material, hugging much more leg.

I had never thought of flaunting my body the way these jeans did. My abs, even though they weren't washboard, were certainly exposed but with the right top, I could camouflage my lack of tone. Furthermore, these jeans elongated my torso, giving me an overall slimming effect. And the pant legs were surprisingly long. That is when I realized why Medellin girls loved platforms. These pants legs with the right platforms would make my legs appear even longer.

I flung the curtain open, scanned the room for the sales girl and as soon as I saw her, said, "I'll take them...got any others?"

Gloria, one of *Tio* Luis's children, was one of my mother's biggest fans. Each time she saw my mother, she fiddled with her bracelets and after commenting on how many she had, said, "Where can I get them, they're fabulous!"

I once heard that "Intelligent people speak about ideas, mediocre people speak about places, and ignorant people speak about people." If this saying is true, then Luis's family, my mother, and I belonged to the lower echelons of society because as soon as my mother entered Gloria's house, Gloria would ask her to share everything about anyone they mutually knew.

My mother would embellish the truth to whatever degree was necessary to keep Luis's daughters chuckling and pouring her steaming cups of Colombian coffee, her weakness. She talked about my brother's eccentric taste in clothing, my sister's bossy attitude, and even my father's short temper. I was sure that if I weren't in the room, I would also be an object of ridicule. These

were the type of gossip sessions in which my mother said, “*las unicas buenas somos nosotros.*” Everyone is fair game except for us.

My mother resembled a sitting Buddha in the middle of Gloria’s living room. She was short and plump, with long necklaces and colorful clothing. Gloria asked about a family friend.

“Oh, last I heard about her was...” The mother’s gold bangles made a click clack sound as they crashed against each other. She made exaggerated hand gestures as she told a gossipy story.

But no visit to Gloria’s house was complete without my mom’s spiel on the wonders of *Los Estados Unidos*. All it took was for someone to mention another tragic situation that was all too common in Colombia--a child who had been kidnapped; a family member who wasn’t able to pay for her child’s tuition that year. Mom found a way to bring it all full circle so that eventually, she ended up uttering the same words as the year before. I had heard her “and the moral of the story” talk so many times that I even knew which phrases she was going to use before she said them.

So when Gloria referred to a recent tragedy in Colombia, my mother topped her gossip.

“And this is why I say,” she said slowly, nodding her head, and making hand gestures. She looked like a conductor leading her orchestra. “Colombians say all these bad things about the United States but the point is, my children wouldn’t have half the opportunities they have now were it not for that country.”

Gloria and my other cousins nodded in chorus like devout followers who were absorbing the great teachings of their master. Mom continued.

“Imaginense. Ivan got a full paid soccer scholarship to attend a private college. Ale was given grants to attend college too. And this one?” She looked at me and I mentally kicked myself for not making a run to the bathroom earlier.

Mom pulled back one of her fleshy fingers with each point she made. “She’s in the Honors College at her school.” Index finger pulled back.

“She lives in a dorm. Paid.” Middle finger pulled back.

“Tuition. Paid.” Ring finger pulled back.

“Expenses. Paid.” She had reached her pinkie but kept talking.

My cheeks were burning with a combination of rage and embarrassment. Even though she was telling them the truth, I always thought Mom’s bragging made her sound arrogant, as if her children were the only ones who had accomplished anything. The zealous followers looked at me and smiled.

“Mami, okay, enough already,” I said.

“Eeehhh! Why shouldn’t I be able to brag about my kids? I’m proud of you guys!”

Mom was unstoppable. She took small sips of her coffee and talked in between the sips.

The summer I turned eighteen and accompanied my mother to Colombia, we also visited three of her long time friends, *Dona Matilde* and her two widowed daughters.

We caught a taxi to get to *Dona Matilde*’s house. The taxi driver greeted us with the customary, “*Buenas tardes*,” good afternoon, and quickly accelerated, speeding down the bumpy streets. The traditional Colombian music, *vallenato*, blared from the stereo. All four car windows were down, causing the wind to hit my face from all directions.

As I sat in the taxi cab, I noticed how much graffiti decorated many of the concrete walls in Medellin, walls separating the residential areas from the public streets and the remnants of abandoned buildings. I started reading the graffiti, expecting it to be much like the one I had seen in Miami--big bubble letters with messages of teenage love or a goofy street name the artist had given himself. While there were messages of love sprinkled around the city, most of the graffiti transmitted other feelings such as anger, injustice, hope, and other sentiments about the state of the country. I read phrases such as, “*Muerte a los guerilleros*,” death to the guerillas, and “Imagine a war which no one goes to.”

As Mom and I traveled throughout the city, I found myself missing life in Colombia even though I had never lived there. But perhaps my desire to know what that was like was strong enough to develop the nostalgia. Or perhaps my nostalgia was a product of my mother's sheer joy when she and I found ourselves back in her homeland. As if her memories were vivid and cherished enough to become my own.

WRITING LIFE ESSAY

I first explored the genre of literary nonfiction in my first undergraduate nonfiction writing class with Dr. Jocelyn Bartkevicius. Even though I had read works of nonfiction before (*The Diary of Anne Frank* comes to mind), I had never given a thought to the specifics of this genre and how it differed from the others. Soon after learning the difference between literary nonfiction and the other genres of writing, I became instantly drawn to it. It was difficult for me to create a world with place, characters, and plots as fiction requires and I struggled with brevity as an art form in poetry. I was initially drawn to nonfiction for the opportunity to craft a story that in a way, already existed since it had already happened.

For my first nonfiction writing assignment, I decided to write about firewater or *Aguardiente*, the national alcoholic beverage in Colombia, and how it is a staple of daily life in my Colombian culture. While writing this story, I learned one of my first lessons in nonfiction writing: writing for me is as much about the discoveries that take place during the writing process as it is about crafting and building upon a preconceived topic or theme.

My intention was for my story to have a humorous tone to it: I would talk about my first encounter with *Aguardiente*, how it led to my first time getting drunk, and how I could always seem to recall its presence throughout my life. Throughout the writing process however, my alcoholic uncle came to mind and I knew my story about this drink would not be complete unless I delved into how *Aguardiente* has turned him into an addict for many years, impacting his family in sad and negative ways.

Upon working on my first story, I also came to another conclusion: writing from memory can turn into a tedious and complicated process. As a writer, I felt a sense of obligation to my impending audience of readers. I did not want to betray them with facts in my story that I could not verify as 100% accurate. This is why I greatly benefited from reading two books in Jocelyn's class which touched upon the topic of memory and nonfiction writing, *The Business of Memory: The Art of Remembering in an Age of Forgetting* edited by Charles Baxter and Jill Ker Conway's *When Memory Speaks: Reflections on Autobiography*. Through these books, I learned that truth based on memory is indeed subjective, but that a memoir should primarily be defined as a story based on a person's recollections of the facts. Ker Conway states, "But it is the sequencing and interpretation of the information we recall that the forms and tropes of culture take effect. And it is the examination and interrogation of that sequencing and interpretation that constitute the craft of the autobiographer" (178). Baxter points out, "[Nonfiction writers'] particular interest in memory and the effect of turning something private into a public event is filtered through literary-rather than purely scientific, psychoanalytic, sociological, and commercial-sensibilities" (IV).

Thus began my journey as a nonfiction writer. Now, many years later, I still find nonfiction to be my genre of preference in my writing and reading. While working on my master's thesis in nonfiction, I've tried to read works that would provide me with a more thorough historical background in the genre, among them, works by St. Augustine, Montaigne, Emerson, Thoreau, and Wolfe. Another one of these writers was John Ruskin. In his book *Modern Painters*, Ruskin states that a person can derive pleasure from a work of art by "the perception of faithfulness in a statement of facts by the thing produced" (9). I found Ruskin's point to be applicable to any

work of art, be it a painting, a memoir, or a personal essay. To me, art often attempts to convey what I believe are the artist's truths about the world.

This realization has helped me to be honest about the stories that I tell, specifically the first chapter in my thesis. In my first chapter, I write about the impact that my father's incarceration had on me. Even though many might think this would be a traumatic and difficult time in my life, I discovered, as I wrote, that it was actually a time of maturity and positive growth for me. With Ruskin's words in mind, I allowed myself to write what I knew to be true about how this experience shaped me.

When I consider the evolution in my writing and the changes in my life that have led me to change my thesis so dramatically throughout the years, I think of the saying, "You must kiss many frogs before you find your prince." I consider my initial thesis drafts to be the "frogs" in my writing. My initial thesis drafts focused much on my early childhood and the concept of growing up in a multicultural setting. However, I often encountered trouble when telling the stories of my childhood by attempting not to delve into a time in my life when my father was away in prison.

I struggled with writing about this experience for quite some time, even before working on my thesis chapters. I knew this was a story I needed to tell for myself but faced what many writers also face: a sense that I would infringe on a loved one's privacy by revealing the impact this person's life had on mine.

After many more thesis drafts and finding clever ways to mask this revelatory and significant part of my life, I came to the point where I could not afford to protect my father any longer. Doing so was only making it harder for me to be truthful to myself and others in my writing. This is when I decided to confront my father about the idea of writing on my reaction to his time away. I explained to my father that this was a story I felt I needed to tell and, surprisingly, he respected my intuition enough to grant me his blessing and trust that I would portray him respectfully in my writing.

In the first pages of her book, *Silent Dancing*, Ortiz Cofer provides me with a lesson on how to show, rather than tell, my readers about the multicultural world I live in through concrete examples of my daily life. She talks about the *cuentos* or morality tales which the elder women in her family told her. Ortiz Cofer describes the *cuentos* as “stories that became a part of my subconscious as I grew up in two worlds” (15). Ortiz Cofer’s pressure to represent both cultures was in many ways created and heightened by her parents’ beliefs and behaviors. Her father believed his family would be more accepted in the States if they behaved like Americans, yet her mother could not adapt to the American way of life and thus sought to keep her ties with Puerto Rican culture strong. Ortiz Cofer writes, “Though Father preferred that we do our grocery shopping at the supermarket..., my mother insisted that she could cook only with products whose labels she could read, and so,...I accompanied her and my little brother to *La Bodega*” (91).

In her second memoir, *Cherry*, Mary Karr employs an informal, familiar voice which hints at the kind of town she was raised in. Karr veers away from a more traditional style of memoir writing

with prose containing humorous lines of local vernacular, sayings, and even obscenities. For instance, Karr's father's blue collar background is evident through his use of slang and obscenities, "Suddenly, I can picture Daddy saying, 'Ain't you got a case of the sweet ass!'" (Karr 85). Karr showed me how to create a balance in the tone of my writings by infusing lighter, more humorous scenes into those requiring more seriousness and exploration. Furthermore, her works guided me in learning how to transition between fond and hurtful memories.

Being able to write about my father's incarceration contributed greatly to my evolution as a writer. I was able to write with the surety of knowing the stories I wanted to tell and most importantly, about my transformation truthfully and without constraints.

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