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*The Distance Between Us, Young  
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*A Dream  
Called Home*

A MEMOIR

Reyna Grande

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## Author's Note

To write *A Dream Called Home*, I relied on my memories and the memories of many of the people who appear in this book. I researched facts when I could, and many of the people I write about read, fact-checked, and approved the content. With the exception of a few events, the story is told in the order it happened. The names of some people in this book have been changed to protect their privacy. There are no composite characters or events, though for the sake of the narrative arc and character development, some people and events were omitted.

*To Diana,  
for being there when I needed saving.*

*To Cory,  
for being there when I no longer needed to be saved.*

All immigrants are artists because they create  
a life, a future, from nothing but a dream.

—PATRICIA ENGEL

*Book One*

TWICE THE GIRL  
I USED TO BE

1     EVERY MINUTE THAT went by, another mile separated me from my family. We drove north on I-5, and I felt divided in half, like this highway I was on—one side going north, the other going south. Half of me wanted to turn back, to stay in Los Angeles and fight for my family—my father, my mother, my sisters and brothers—stay by their side even though our relationship was in ruins. The city fell farther and farther behind me, the smog blanketing the buildings as if Los Angeles were already wrapped in the haze of memory.

2     The other half of me faced north with excitement, optimistic despite my fears. I was transferring to the University of California, Santa Cruz, leaving to pursue the wild dream of becoming the first in my family to earn a university degree. *The key to the American Dream will soon be mine*, I told myself. This was no small feat for a former undocumented immigrant from Mexico. I felt proud to have made it this far.

3     Then I remembered my father's betrayal, and my optimism disappeared. Though I left of my own accord, I suddenly felt as if I had been exiled from Los Angeles. No longer wanted or needed.

4     My boyfriend looked at me and said the words I was desperate to hear, "Your father is very proud of you. He told me so." I was grateful that he was doing the driving. If I had been at the wheel, I would have turned back.

5 Edwin had been accepted at California State University, Monterey Bay, which was about an hour south of Santa Cruz. I had met him at Pasadena City College earlier in the year, right before my father and stepmother decided to end their marriage. Throughout the past months, I had been by my father's side supporting him through the chaotic separation in any way I could. I even considered staying in L.A. to help him get his life back in order once the divorce was final.

6 My father, a maintenance worker with a third-grade education, spoke little English. Eleven years earlier, when I was nine years old, he had returned to Mexico to bring my older siblings and me back with him to the United States to give us a better life. My older sister, brother, and I took our father's divorce as an opportunity to show him that his sacrifice had paid off. We spoke the language of this country. We had an American education. We could handle ourselves with the police and in court. We knew how to look out for him so he wouldn't end up with nothing.

7 Then, my father asked my stepmother to reconsider their divorce, and she did, but with one condition—she didn't want us around. So, after months of standing by him and giving him our support, my father banned Mago, Carlos, and me from his life. I had packed up my bags and left his house, and the next day, my stepmother moved back in and gave my bedroom to her son and daughter-in-law. I went to stay with my PCC professor Diana Savas, for the second time since I had met her.

8 "Try to understand him," Edwin said. "He knew you were leaving at the end of the summer. He didn't want to be alone once you left."

"I could have stayed with him."

"For how long? One day you'll move out and get married. Have your own family. You wouldn't stay with him forever. He knew that. Besides, he didn't want to hold you back."

"He could have stood up for us the way we stood up for him," I said a few minutes later. "It didn't have to be a choice between his

wife or his children. Why can't there be room for us in his life, too? Now he's just like my mother."

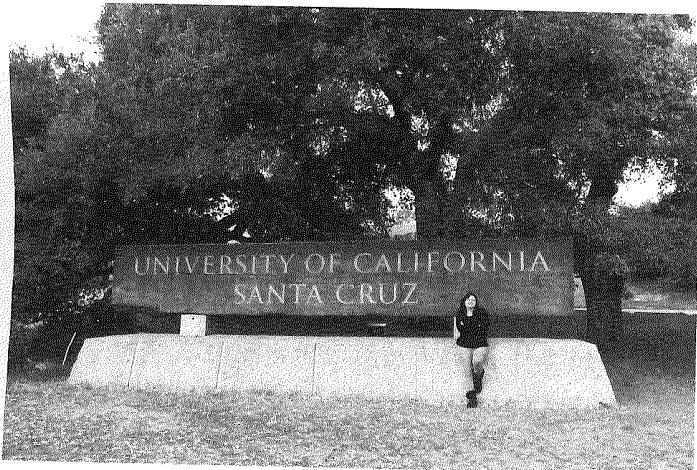
9 When I was seven years old, my father left my mother for my stepmother, and she was never the same. She didn't want to be a mother to us anymore. It was as if when my father divorced her, she in turn divorced her children. She left us again and again in her search for another man to love her. When my father took us to live with him, we only saw her if we made the effort to visit her where she lived with her common-law husband. It hadn't mattered to her if we weren't in her life. My departure to Santa Cruz hadn't made a bit of difference to her. "Ahí nos vemos," she had said when I called her the day before. "See you later" instead of "I love you, take care, call me if you need anything"—the words I had hoped to hear from her.

10 "Parents disappoint us because we set expectations they can never live up to," Edwin said. He had the uncanny ability to know what I was thinking. He squeezed my hand and added, "Reyna, some parents are incapable of love and affection. Don't you think it might be time to lower your expectations?"

11 I looked out the window and didn't reply. My biggest virtue and my biggest flaw was the tenacity with which I clung to my dreams, no matter how futile they might seem to others. The dream of having a true relationship with my parents was the one I had clung to the most because it was the first dream I'd had, and the farthest from my reach.

12 As we finally left the city behind us, my body stretched tight like a rubber band, and I felt a hot, searing pain in my heart until finally something inside me snapped. I was released from the bond to the place where I had come of age, the city that had witnessed my desolation and defeats, my joys and victories. Just like my hometown in Mexico, Los Angeles was now a part of my past.





*Welcome to campus!*

13 That day in September of 1996, we drove into the main entrance of the campus and were greeted by five words carved into a block of wood that was over twenty feet long: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SANTA CRUZ. I jumped out of the car to walk around the entrance sign, trace the huge yellow letters with my fingers, smell the wood into which they were carved, and after each letter had imprinted itself within me, I said to myself the words that needed to be said: "I have arrived."

14 *Higher education is the only way to succeed in this country.* My father had drilled that into us the minute we had arrived in Los Angeles after our third attempt at crossing the border. He had been a tyrant about school, and had even threatened to send us back to Mexico if we didn't come home with perfect attendance and straight As. He believed so strongly in the dream of higher education that he had been completely devastated when Mago and Carlos dropped out of college. Though I had vowed not to do the same, he no longer believed in the dream and had given up on me before I even got my chance. I was determined to prove to him that he had been wrong about me.

15 We drove deeper into the campus, past fields and meadows, the ocean in the distance, and when we came upon the redwoods, I said a silent thank-you to my professor Diana for insisting that I choose UCSC over UCLA, where I had also been accepted. She said that at UCLA I would be one of tens of thousands, whereas UCSC, with fewer than nine thousand students, was much smaller and better for students who were into the arts. She also believed getting out of my comfort zone would help me grow and mature.

16 I had never seen trees so majestic, with bark the color of cinnamon and foliage a deep, lush green. The sky wasn't the pale, washed-out blue of the L.A. sky, but the vibrant, pure blue of a Van Gogh oil painting. I poked my head out the window and took deep gulps of the fresh air that smelled of earth, trees, and ocean, and something else I couldn't name. I became light-headed from the scents, sounds, and colors of my new home.

17 "You made the right choice." Edwin said.

"You and Diana talked me into it," I said, remembering the long conversations with the two of them about which university I should pick. "But I guess I knew I was meant to be here." I didn't tell them that the name of the university held a special meaning for me. *Santa Cruz*, "the holy cross." My father's full name was Natalio Grande Cruz. His last name literally meant "the big cross," a heavy burden for me that at times was too much to bear.

18 UCSC was divided into small colleges, and since I was majoring in creative writing, I chose to live at Kresge College, where the creative writing program and the Literature Department were located. As a transfer student, I could live in the apartments at Kresge East, which were reserved for juniors, seniors, and graduate students, instead of the dorms in Kresge Proper, where the freshmen and sophomores were housed. I would be sharing a four-bedroom apartment with three other students.

19 After I checked in, we pulled up at the parking lot of Kresge East. As I got out of the car, I remembered sitting around the kitchen

table with Carlos and Mago, listening to our father talk about the future. "Just because we are *ilegales* doesn't mean we cannot dream," he said to us. Thanks to my stepmother's help and my father's determination to legalize our status, our green cards finally arrived in the mail when I was almost fifteen. That day, he had proudly handed each of us those precious cards that, even though they had the words "RESIDENT ALIEN" imprinted on them in accusing blue letters, gave us permission to finally step out of the shadows, to grow and thrive in the light. "I've done my part. The rest is up to you," my father had said.

20 Here in the parking lot, in the middle of the frenzy of move-in day, at the sight of my peers who had arrived with their parents, grandparents, and siblings, I wished my father were at my side. Though in the end he had lost faith that I would get here, he had set the stage for my arrival. My peers had brought their families to celebrate the beginning of their journey as university students. I thought of the Mexican saying *Sin padre ni madre, ni perro que me ladre*. Without a father, without a mother, without a dog to bark at me.

21 I turned away from the families and grabbed my suitcase and backpack from the trunk. *Focus on what you're here to do*. If I did things right, I would one day break the cycle my family had been stuck in for generations—a cycle of poverty, hunger, and lack of education. This was the reason why I was here, and that was all that mattered.

22 Edwin helped me carry my belongings to my apartment—my clothes, some books, and my first computer, purchased on credit from Sears and still in the box.

23 "Are you going to be okay?" he asked as I walked him back to his car.

"Yeah," I said, doing my best to not let him see how frightened I was. Edwin was handling this new stage of his life much better than I was handling mine. He had left home after high school to join the army and had fought in the Gulf War, witnessing unimaginable horrors. As an army vet, he was independent and knew how to take care of himself. I envied him for that, and as I watched him drive away in his Oldsmobile, heading back to Monterey, I wished he would stay to protect me. Instead, I was now completely alone and about to fight my battles on my own.

24 I set out to explore the campus. It was late afternoon, and I didn't have much time before the sun went down. I had heard there was real darkness here, and as a city girl, the thought of the dark frightened me. But as I began to walk, I realized that the darkness was the least of my worries. What I was most afraid of was not knowing how to be a university student, that my community college education hadn't prepared me for the work ahead. I was afraid of not being able to let go of my longing for my family, afraid that the distance that separated us would damage our relationship even more than it already had. I was afraid of having come this far only to fail and have to return to Los Angeles with nothing to show for my college education—no diploma, no job, nothing but a mountain of debt and unfulfilled dreams.

25 I was afraid of not being able to make this new place feel like a real home, a place where I belonged.

26 The university was nestled in the redwoods at the foot of the Santa Cruz Mountains. I found myself immersed in a grove of the world's tallest trees. As I walked across the footbridge that connected Kresge East and Kresge Proper, high aboveground, with a ravine below me and redwood trees all around me, I let out a long, deep sigh, and the tension inside my body eased.

27 The wind rustled the trees and caressed my hair. A family of deer foraged for food in the ravine. I couldn't believe there were deer here. I felt as if I had entered a fairy tale. I came to a meadow by Porter College where I could see the ocean shining blue and streaked with orange as the sun set. I was nine years old when I had first seen the ocean, two months after I arrived in Los Angeles to live with my father. I had been scared to go in because I didn't know how to swim,

so I had held tight to my father's hand, wanting to feel safe and protected. He had promised he wouldn't let go of me. We stood side by side in the water and, at least that day, he had kept his promise.

28 As I looked at the ocean in the distance, I told myself there was no need to be afraid. I had come this far, despite everything. My family fell apart when we immigrated. We sacrificed so much for a shot at the American Dream, and I would be damned if I didn't make the dream mine. A broken family was the price for me to be here. Back in Mexico the distance between my parents and me had been two thousand miles. In Santa Cruz, the distance was three hundred, but emotionally, we were light-years apart, and this time, I was the one who had migrated north in search of a better life, leaving them all behind.



*Reyna at the Porter Meadow, UCSC*

## 2

1 **W**HEN I RETURNED to my apartment to finish settling in, I found a young woman in the kitchen making herself a sandwich. She was a couple of inches taller than me, maybe five-foot-two, and wore a long-sleeved red plaid shirt and blue jeans. She had very short brown hair, and I thought of the times, back in Mexico, when my evil grandmother had cut my hair like a boy's because it was infested with lice. I knew there was no way my new roommate had little critters running around her scalp.

2 “Hi,” she said. “I’m Carolyn.”

“Reyna,” I replied. I shook her hand, which was soft and warm, and small, like my sister Mago’s.

“Where are you from?” she asked.

3 The question always confused me when asked by a white person. Because I was an immigrant, the question “Where are you from?” made me wonder if I was being asked about the place of my birth, my nationality, my cultural identity, or simply the city where I now lived. It was an innocent question, but it was a question that made me think about my foreignness, a question that made me raise my guard.

4 “I’ve come from L.A., but I’m originally from Mexico,” I said. It was my way of admitting that I wasn’t from here. *Yes, I’m a foreigner, and everything from my brown skin to my accent to my Mexican birth certificate prevents me from laying claim to the U.S. even though I have*

a green card that gives me permission to be here. I couldn't simply say I was from Los Angeles, which might imply I was American born. I wasn't. I was an outsider, and I had to claim that part of me so that no one could make me feel ashamed about being an immigrant. So that later I could say, *I never pretended to be something I was not.*

5 "Cool, cool," Carolyn said. "Well, welcome to Santa Cruz." She offered me half of her sandwich.

"No, thanks," I said, even though I hadn't thought of going grocery shopping before I arrived and had no food to eat. I was embarrassed and suddenly ravenous, but I had just met this white girl and didn't feel comfortable taking food from her. "Well, nice to meet you," I said, eager to get to my room, to be alone, as I had been in the three years since Mago moved out of our father's house and I no longer had her as a roommate, best friend, and protector.

6 But Carolyn wasn't done with me.

"There's a welcome party tonight next door. It's hosted by the residential preceptor so the new students can start getting to know people. You should come."

7 I didn't know what a residential preceptor was, and I was too embarrassed to ask. Besides, I didn't want to go to a party. I wasn't ready to be social, and the thought of going to a party where I knew no one was too much to deal with on my first day in a strange place. I wanted to lock myself within the safety of my room's four walls.

8 "I need to unpack," I said.

"Doesn't everybody?" Carolyn asked, taking a bite out of her sandwich. I could see a piece of avocado peeking through. My stomach growled, and I wondered if she heard it because she added, "There'll be food there."

9 I wanted this place to feel like home, and if it was ever going to, I had to learn to live with these strangers.

10 "Okay," I said. "Let me know when it's time to go."

11 My room was eight feet by ten feet. It had bare white walls and dark blue office carpet. It came with a twin-sized bed, a dresser, and

a desk, all made of oak that matched the furniture in the living room and dining room. The mattress had no sheets, no comforter, no pillow, and I realized now that I had neglected to bring these with me.

11 The window faced a path that led to the parking lot, and I could see students and their parents carrying their belongings to their apartments. "Do you need anything else?" I heard parents ask their sons and daughters, and I wished I'd had someone to ask me that question. Did those students realize how lucky they were? I imagined myself in their place—at a farewell party showered by relatives with their congratulations and best wishes and I'm-so-proud-of-you's; at the store with my parents shopping for towels, bedding, and new clothes; at the local supermarket walking down the aisles side by side with my parents, pushing a shopping cart loaded with my favorite foods. My stomach growled at the thought.

12 I closed the curtain and began unpacking. I looked at the room, the small, empty closet. *You're alone, yes, but you're here. That's what matters.*

13 I put away my clothes and unpacked my computer. My first big purchase had put me \$2,000 in debt, but for a new university student it was a necessary expense. At PCC, I had used the computer lab, but I knew the workload would be much heavier here. I took out the monitor, the hard drive, and the keyboard, and stared at the cables, wondering where they went, how to make it work.

14 "Ready?" Carolyn said, knocking on my door.

I dropped the cables back on the desk, leaving it for the next day.



15 Dizzy with hunger, I followed Carolyn to the next apartment. She said she was starting her senior year and knew the campus like the back of her hand. I hoped one day I could say the same about my new home. When we approached the door, and I heard the laughter and chatter inside, I felt like running back to my room, but Carolyn was already pushing me into the apartment. She was

so different from me. She went around saying hi to everyone, smiling, cracking jokes, giving people high fives, acting as if she knew them all, even though many were new arrivals like me. She disappeared deeper into the apartment and left me on my own to hide in a corner.

16 Except for two or three brown faces, and some Asians, every person in the apartment was white. I felt hyper-aware of my foreignness, my brownness. In Los Angeles, I hadn't felt like a minority. PCC had a large Latino population, and I had never once felt out of place. I had known that UCSC wasn't as culturally diverse as my old school, but now that I was here, confronted by its whiteness, I wanted to flee. I retreated deeper into the corner.

17 No one in this room had any idea how far I had come to get here. I had never told anyone—except Diana—that twenty-one years before, I had been born in a little shack of sticks and cardboard in my hometown of Iguala, Guerrero, a city only three hours from glittery Acapulco and from the bustling metropolis of Mexico City, but a world away from there. Iguala was a place of shacks and dirt roads, where most homes didn't have running water and electricity was unreliable.

18 Because of the national debt crisis and the devastating peso devaluations, in 1977 my father became part of the biggest wave of emigration ever from Mexico when he left Iguala to look for work in the U.S. My mother followed him two years later. By the time I was five, I no longer had a father or a mother, and the border stood between us, keeping us apart. My siblings and I had been left behind on the wrong side of the border, under the care of my paternal grandmother, Abuela Evila, who more than lived up to her name.

19 My grandmother had never liked my mother, and she transferred her dislike to us, often telling us we might not even be her grandchildren. "Who knows what your mother was doing when no one was looking?" she would often say. Living with her had made the separation from our parents even more unbearable. My grand-

mother spent most of the money our parents sent for us on other things. So, for the most part, my siblings and I were dressed in rags, wore cheap plastic sandals, had lice and tapeworm, and ate nothing but beans and tortillas every day. "What's the point of having parents in El Otro Lado if we are treated like beggars?" we often asked ourselves.

20 My childhood was defined by the fear that my parents might forget me, or worse, replace me with children born in the U.S. Worst of all was the fear that I might never have a home and a real family again. The only thing that sustained me through the dark times was my dream of one day having my parents back in my life.

21 Then my father left my mother for my stepmother. Finding herself all alone in the U.S., my mother returned to Mexico with no husband, no money, nothing to show for her time in El Otro Lado except for the American baby girl in her arms, my sister Betty. She took us out of my evil grandmother's house and we went to live with my sweet maternal grandmother. My siblings and I were elated and relieved to have our mother back, but it wasn't long before we realized that she had changed. All she cared about was finding herself a new husband, and once she did, the family we'd once had was gone.

22 Eight years after he had left, my father returned for us and hired a smuggler to sneak Carlos, Mago, and me across the border. I was almost ten when I arrived in Los Angeles to live with my father and his new wife. A year later, my mother returned to the U.S. and lived in downtown Los Angeles with her husband, Betty, and her new baby, my half brother Leo.

23 Both Betty and Leo were American born, and for many years I felt inferior to my younger siblings. Just like I felt inferior to all the students at the party, especially the blond, blue-eyed girls who flipped their hair back and laughed with a confidence I had never had. Too many of them were gathered around the food table, and though I was desperate to get some of the chicken wings and vegetables on the trays, I was too afraid to leave my corner.

24 One of the Latino students spotted me and came over. He walked with a limp and held his right arm at an angle. "Hi. I'm Alfredo," he said. His speech was slurred, and I wondered if he was drunk. But he couldn't be! We were on campus. Alcohol wasn't allowed. Had he already, on his first day, broken the rules?

"Where are you from?" he asked.

25 Coming from a Latino, the question didn't shake me up the way it had with Carolyn. "L.A." I said, this time without any hesitation.

"No kidding? Me, too. I'm from East Los, and you?"

"Highland Park."

"And that there is Jaime," Alfredo said, pointing to the other Latino student in the room. "He's also from L.A. Huntington Park, I think." Jaime waved at me but didn't come over. He was busy chatting with a girl.

26 How crazy that all three of us new Latino students were from L.A. It made me feel better to know that at least Jaime and Alfredo might understand how I was feeling, what I was going through.

27 Alfredo was much older than me. I had turned twenty-one less than two weeks earlier, and he was in his thirties. He told me that when he was eighteen he had gotten beat up by an older man. His attacker was wearing steel-toed boots and had kicked Alfredo in the head several times. "I almost died," he said. Instead, he had sustained a brain injury that affected the right side of his body, which was why he limped and held his right arm at an angle, and why his speech was slurred. I felt embarrassed that I had thought he was drunk.

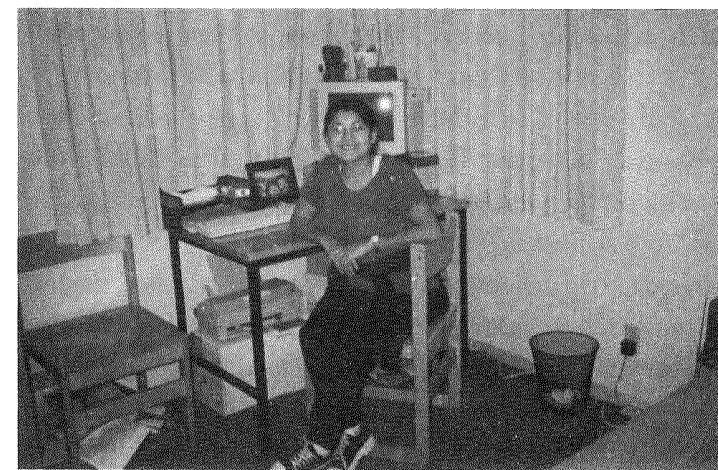
28 "I had to learn how to do everything again," Alfredo said. "How to walk, talk, read, and write." That beating had set him back many years, but he hadn't given up. Finally, at thirty-three, he was here at UCSC, trying to make his dream come true. Just like me.

29 Before he could ask questions about me, I excused myself to grab some food from the table while it wasn't so crowded. I didn't feel alone in the room anymore, and I felt that I should share something about myself with Alfredo, just like he had. Maybe another day I

might be ready to open up to him. I could tell he had come to terms with his past and had managed to move beyond it. I hadn't yet. I was constantly picking at the wounds of my memories and bleeding again, and again. I hadn't yet learned how to allow the scars to form and fade with time.

30 Besides, what would I say to Alfredo? He wouldn't believe me even if I did tell him. My life until now had been a Mexican telenovela. I didn't get kicked in the head with steel-toed boots, but like him, I'd also had to learn how to read and write and speak all over again—in a language that wasn't my own.

31 When the party was over and I walked back to my apartment, I was glad I had gone with Carolyn. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have had a full belly, and I wouldn't have made a new friend and heard his story. Alfredo was a survivor, and his resilience inspired me.



*Reyna in her student apartment, UCSC, 1996*

# 3

1      **T**HE NEXT MORNING, with my stomach growling again, I walked to the Kresge Food Co-op, a little store where Carolyn said I could buy a few things to eat. I tossed the name around in my head as I walked there, wondering what a co-op was.

2      I asked a few people for directions until I found it tucked into the rear side of some dorms near the Maintenance Department. The co-op was just a small room with shelves and containers of things I didn't recognize. Plastic bins labeled for granola and oats, barley, couscous, quinoa, wheat germ, and wild rice. In the fridge, I saw something called tofu, soy milk, and deli meat that claimed to be meatless, things I had never eaten in my life or even known existed.

3      The girl at the cash register sat on a stool staring at me. She had the strangest hair I had ever seen. When I first saw her, I thought she had snakes for hair, like Medusa. But as I made my way closer to the counter, pretending to be interested in a bag of peas with something called wasabi, I studied her from the corner of my eye and wondered if she had ever brushed her hair, because the strands had twisted and formed into what looked like dirty brown ropes. The girl had piercings in her nose, left eyelid, and lower lip; she wore a tattered multicolored dress, and yet she looked at me as if *I* were the weird one in this place.

4      “Are you a member?” she asked.  
“A member of what?”

"Of the co-op, obviously."

5 I didn't know if I had to be a member to make a purchase. All I knew was that whatever they had in here, except for the bananas and apples, looked like something from another planet. I wanted corn tortillas and rice and pinto beans. I wanted some pan dulce and bolillos, a can of jalapeños and chipotle, a bag of fideo, and frozen tamales if freshly steamed ones weren't available. I wanted a container of Chocolate Abuelita, a package of pineapple barritas, a bag of chicharrones, and a bottle of hot sauce to go with it. I wanted green mangos and jicama and a shaker of chili powder to sprinkle on them. I wanted comfort food. I wanted something I would know how to cook or eat.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I shouldn't have come."



6 After eating some chocolate chip cookies from the vending machine, I walked across the campus to the bookstore. I was taken aback by the hundreds of books on the shelves. I had my required reading list, and I hoped the money I had from my financial aid package would be enough. As much as I tried not to pay attention to the parents, I watched them help their children find their books. "I read that when I was in college, too," I heard a mother tell her daughter as they leafed through a book together.

7 I would never hear such a thing from my own parents. With my father's third-grade education, and my mother barely managing to finish sixth grade at seventeen years old, the day I started junior high school I had surpassed my parents in terms of education. I never had a parent help me with homework, tell me about the books they had read in school, or go book shopping with me. The few times my father went to my school for teacher-parent conferences, my siblings and I had to translate what the teachers said. My school experiences hadn't been something I could share with either of my parents.

8 I had had enough of the textbook section, so I moved on to school apparel. Hanging on racks and displayed on shelves were T-shirts, sweaters, sweatpants, jackets, socks, hats—all imprinted with the school mascot: the banana slug. The slug had round eyeglasses on and was reading Plato. In the background were the words FIAT SLUG—"Let There Be Slug." Of all things, I thought as I ran my fingers over a T-shirt, a slug as a mascot, a slimy, spineless yellow creature that crawls on the ground and can be easily stepped on. Reading the history of UCSC, I had learned that the original mascot had been a sea lion, but the students had protested and fought for the mascot to become a banana slug to honor the spirit of Santa Cruz as a place that embraces peace, loves the environment, and celebrates its counterculture ideology.

9 I held the school T-shirt in my hand. Even though I wanted it, I put it back on the rack. I couldn't afford it. I had enough money for only the most essential textbooks. The rest I would have to borrow from the library.

10 As I was about to make my way back to the textbook section, I caught sight of a few parents admiring the garments hanging in the corner. The T-shirts were imprinted with the words UCSC DAD, UCSC MOM, UCSC GRANDMA, etc. I tried to imagine my parents wearing one of those shirts, announcing to the world that their daughter was a university student—the first in the family—and their faces beaming with pride.

11 I stood before the shirts, wondering if I could buy one for each of my parents. I took them off the rack and held them against my chest. I could put them in the mail first thing tomorrow. Maybe I could sacrifice the purchase of a textbook for these two shirts. But would they wear them? How would a silly T-shirt make my father and mother feel proud of me, anyway?

12 I put the shirts back on the rack. I would just be wasting my money on something they might never wear, on pride they might never feel.



13 I hopped on the bus and went downtown to shop at the big grocery store on Pacific Avenue. The New Leaf was just a bigger version of the food co-op, full of strange stuff I had never eaten. There was a large selection of bread, and I didn't know the difference between whole grain and sprouted grain and multigrain and sourdough. I grew up eating Bimbo, a Mexican white bread. The tortilla section was just as overwhelming in its selection. The store even carried red and green flour tortillas, which I'd never seen before. Who knew you could put tomato or spinach in the dough? I bought corn tortillas at twice the cost I was used to. Too many food choices at too high a price. I would have to find a cheaper place to shop. I wished there were a Mexican market nearby.

14 I stopped at the thrift store and bought gently used sheets, a towel, and a blanket. My last stop of the day would be the laundry room at Kresge, and I hoped to get a good night's sleep with my new used bedding. The night before I'd had to cover myself with my jacket.

15 I was shocked to find that downtown Santa Cruz had homeless people everywhere. I would have never expected to see homelessness in such an idyllic place. In L.A. I had seen panhandlers when my siblings and I visited our mother, who lived in the worst part of downtown. The street from the bus stop to my mother's apartment was lined with the homeless, most of them African-American. I was shocked that in Santa Cruz every man I saw sitting on the sidewalk asking for handouts was white. Many of them had weird hair like the girl at the co-op.

16 "Got a buck to spare?" they asked as I made my way back to the bus station. The sight of these men begging bothered me immensely. I wanted to tell them they had no right to be asking *me* for money. They were white, male, and American born. Those three facts alone put them at an advantage over so many of us—

17 especially immigrants and women of color. In L.A., I'd seen Latino men selling bags of oranges or flower bouquets off freeway exits, and selling tamales, corn on the cob, or chicharrones from shopping carts that they pushed up and down the streets. I'd seen them congregate in the Home Depot parking lot waiting to be picked up for construction jobs, and pushing lawn mowers or carrying leaf blowers, covered in sweat and grass as they maintained other people's properties. On the drive to Santa Cruz, I'd seen them bent over fields, picking strawberries and onions. But I had never seen Latino men beg.

18 From the moment my siblings and I arrived in the U.S., my father drilled into us the expectation that we were to grow up into hardworking adults who could take care of our own needs. "Never, ever, do I want you asking anyone for anything," he often said to us. My father had many flaws, but he was the hardest-working man I'd ever known. He looked down on beggars. He had even criticized my mother for getting food stamps to feed my U.S.-born siblings. I wondered what he would say about all these men lining the sidewalks of Pacific Avenue, grinning at me, asking me to give them the precious few dollars I had in my purse.

19 And then I spotted a young woman sitting by the bus station, her hand stretched out to passersby. She was my age. She could have been a university student, but instead she was here, sitting on the sidewalk, dressed in rags and hungry. I looked into her green eyes and saw an emptiness in their depths found only in a person who is truly broken—or high on drugs, as I would later discover was common around here—but at this moment, all I wanted to know was who had broken this girl's spirit?

20 I thought of my father, and the words he had said to me three years earlier came back to haunt me again, as if he were standing beside me. *You're going to be a failure.* His words had hurt me more than the beatings.

21 Had her father said that to her, too, and she'd believed it?

22 "Got any change?" she asked.

I handed her a couple of dollars. I wanted to tell her, *You aren't a failure*. But I said nothing. She had already looked away from me, stretching her hand out to someone else.

23 On the way back to campus, on a bus full of strangers, it took every ounce of effort I had to stop the tears from coming. I had tried so hard not to let anything break my spirit, but the sight of the homeless girl reminded me of how close I had come to that.

24 When I had set foot in this country, it didn't take me long to realize there were two sides to my father. First and foremost, there was the man who was my hero. I would always be grateful to my father for the one gesture that completely changed the course of my life—he brought me to live in the U.S. At first, he hadn't wanted to bring me, only Carlos and Mago, because they were older. He worried that at nine years old I was too young to attempt the dangerous border crossing. I begged him to take me with him. He could have left without me, but he didn't. He took me out of the misery in Iguala and brought me to the place he knew I could flourish.

25 *He didn't leave me*, I would tell myself over and over again every time my hero turned into my tormentor. Since he was an alcoholic, living with him had been like living with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. One day my father would tell us to reach for the stars and to dream big. Then the next day when he had drunk too much and his other side emerged, he was literally beating us to the ground, calling us a bunch of pendejos, ignorant fools.

26 Carlos was the first to leave. At twenty years old, he dropped out of college to get married. He wanted to show our father that he could do a better job at being a husband and father. His marriage didn't last, but the damage did. The next one to leave was Mago, who had turned to shopping and clubbing to deal with our traumatic upbringing. But soon the material things and the dancing weren't enough. She dropped out of college to get a full-time job to pay off her credit card debt and her brand-new car. Though she had

promised to take me with her, she left my father's house to start her own family without me.

27 I understood that my siblings had done these things out of desperation. My father's alcoholism and abuse had forced them to leave in pursuit of their own home.

28 In my senior year of high school, I was accepted into the University of California, Irvine. When my sister left our father's house and got pregnant soon after, my father was so disappointed with my siblings that he assumed I would disappoint him, too, even though I was still there with him, still in school, still the dutiful daughter. I was seventeen, and I needed him to sign the paperwork to secure my spot at UCI, but he refused. Mago was his favorite daughter. He had believed that she would reach the dream of higher education first. But her priorities had changed, and now I had to pay the price for my father's disillusionment.

29 "You can forget about going to that university. You're going to be a failure, too, just like them, so don't even bother going," he said, and with those words, he had crushed my dream the way he crushed a can of Budweiser when he was done with it.

30 Now, on the bus, I realized that if I had let my father's words break me, I could have ended up like that homeless girl. And the thought that I still might made the tears come.

31 Just as I was about to unravel on that bus, a miracle happened. I caught sight of a Mexican market through the window; its name, painted in bright red letters, made the tears go away: LA ESPERANZA MARKET. The bus sped up Mission Street, and I could no longer see the building, but I knew I hadn't imagined it. I had found the one place I could come back to again and again to taste the flavors and smell the aromas of the homes I once had! What a beautiful name for a grocery store, I thought. Esperanza—hope, expectation, possibility. Esperanza was also the name of the heroine in my favorite book, *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. Like me, Esperanza had left her family and her community to go in search

of her dreams, but she had promised she would come back one day and help those who couldn't escape. Like I hoped one day to return for those I had left behind.

- 32 When I got off the bus at Kresge, I took a deep, deep breath, filling my lungs with the Santa Cruz air until I felt as if I could soar across the sky. If the word esperanza had a scent, I thought this was how it would smell—like a redwood forest.



*Reyna looking toward the future*

## 4



*Reyna and Diana at PCC, 1996*

1 A FEW DAYS LATER, school officially began. I walked to my literature class—Theory and Interpretation—anxious about my very first university lecture. The crispy air nipped at my grogginess as I crossed the footbridge. Golden sunbeams radiated through the morning fog, making the redwoods appear dreamy and magical. It was a sign, I told myself. It was the forest telling me things would be okay.

2 Despite my father's prophecy, hadn't I avoided failure so far? After he refused to let me attend UCI, I fell into a gloomy place. But just like sunbeams on foggy mornings, my determination had cut through the gloom. I defied my father and enrolled myself at the community college, where I had graduated with not just excellent grades, but the knowledge that I was responsible for my own learn-

ing. I had learned how to adapt, how to use my creativity. There was nothing to be afraid of.

3 I hurried to class, and the fog had completely dissipated by the time I got to the lecture hall. Students rushed by me—some still wearing their pajamas—and I froze at the door. Over a hundred people were jammed into the lecture hall. *What have I gotten myself into?* At PCC, the only class I had been in that had a hundred students was marching band. For literature, thirty people max. Not this.

4 “Take a seat,” the teacher said, and I forced myself into the room. All the seats in the back were taken, and I had no choice but to sit near the front. The teacher, a bearded man in his fifties, went over the course outline and expectations, telling us about the books and authors we would be reading—Voltaire, Marx, Engels, Stendhal. I had never heard of any of them.

5 As I sat there looking at the overwhelming syllabus, I reminded myself I was good at English and literature—they were my strengths. At least that was what Diana had said.

6 Diana was the first person to give me my very own book, one that I could keep, *The Moths and Other Stories* by Helena Maria Viramontes. That book was followed by *The House on Mango Street*. She was the first person who told me I had writing talent, that my stories mattered. It was because of her that I was now majoring in creative writing.

7 But the best thing that Diana had done for me was to take me into her home two years earlier when my father was arrested for spousal abuse. I lived with her for four months, and then again after my father got back with my stepmother, Mila. The time that I spent at her house was a time that I will cherish for the rest of my life. She helped me finish my studies at PCC and kept me from dropping out because of my family problems. I was at UCSC because of her, but as I sat there surrounded by all these students, and as I read the list of assignments and tests we would be doing, I couldn’t help but wonder if she had been wrong. What if I didn’t have what it took to succeed in this place?

8 At the end of class, the teacher took attendance. I listened to the names, looking at the sea of students around me, most of them white. I dreaded whenever teachers took roll. Having the name Reyna Grande, “the big queen,” when you are only five feet tall sets you up for a lifetime of ridicule. I braced myself for the laughter that would follow as soon as the teacher said my name. But there was no laughter. My name wasn’t even called. Instead, the teacher said, “Renée Grand?” No one raised her hand to claim that name, and I suspected he was trying to say my name but mispronouncing it. It had happened to me before. When we first arrived in the U.S., Mago’s teachers had changed her real name—Magloria—to Maggie because they claimed it was unpronounceable. At home, she was always Mago, but outside in the world she was Maggie. At times, I got called Renée and sometimes my last name—Grande—was pronounced like the river in Texas, a river I hadn’t crossed, though I had on numerous occasions been called a wetback.

9 “Renée Grand,” the teacher said again, and this time I knew he meant me. I looked at the students around me. The ones wearing their pajamas, the ones who hadn’t brushed their hair and had what I later learned were called dreadlocks, the ones who had stayed up too late drinking and partying, who walked around campus so sure of themselves. I wanted to be like them. I wanted to be Renée Grand because I knew she would blend in with them in a way Reyna Grande might not.

10 “Renée Grand,” the teacher said a third time. I didn’t raise my hand to claim that name as my own, though there was a part of me that wanted to. I was in a new city, starting a new life, and I could reinvent myself into Renée, the girl who belonged.

11 But if I did, what would happen to the Big Queen, the grandiose name my mother had given me and which I knew one day I would have to live up to?

12 After class, I gathered up the courage to approach my teacher. “My name wasn’t called.”

"These are the students enrolled in my class." He let me look at the list and sure enough, there I was.

13 He checked the roster where I was pointing and said, "I did call you. I called you three times."

"My name is R-r-reyna Gran-de."

14 He shrugged and marked me present. If he mispronounced my name again, I knew I wouldn't be afraid to correct him, just like I wouldn't be afraid to tackle the works of those white European men we would be reading.



15 Luckily, literature was my only big class. My other classes were more manageable. As a transfer student, to my great relief, I realized that the study skills and academic confidence I had acquired at Pasadena City College had prepared me for university work. It turned out I knew how to hold myself accountable for my own progress. Some of the students at Kresge didn't know how to manage their independence. They just wanted to party, drink, and do drugs, instead of focusing on their studies. When it rained, they would go out into the redwoods and dance naked in circles, pretending to be fairies or wood nymphs. They didn't care about getting in trouble with the school administration. Without their parents keeping them in check, they were doing everything they hadn't been allowed to do at home. Others missed home too much and walked around wallowing in their homesickness. The couple of times I ran into Jaime, the other Latino student at Kresge East, he reminded me of the protagonist in Voltaire's novel. Seeing Jaime's tragically sad face—like the face of someone who had been ejected from an "earthly paradise"—made me think of Candide.

16 Jaime mentioned that he might return home by the end of the quarter. "I feel lonely up here," he said. "I miss my family. My girlfriend."

17 *Don't you understand that this is an opportunity of a lifetime? ]*

wanted to say to him. *To be at a university, working hard toward your future, and you would throw it all away simply because you miss your family and some girl and now you want to go home?* But the truth was I envied Jaime. I wished I had a home that I could return to. Candide had been kicked out by the baron and was never allowed to return to the "most beautiful of all castles," and though the home where my father reigned had never been beautiful, I wasn't allowed back, either.

18 "School just started," I said to Jaime, trying to be kinder, more understanding of his añoranza, that deep longing I knew well. "Give it time. It'll get easier. This place could be home, too."

19 Also like Candide, I had come to learn that not all is for the best, but if there was anything that life had taught me so far, it was to try my hardest to make the best of things, no matter how difficult they might be. I focused on this until it became routine, until I no longer felt lost and disoriented.

20 My roommate Kim, who was a foreign student from China, helped me set up my computer and even gave me a pet. He installed a program on my computer that was a screen saver unlike any I had ever seen. When my computer wasn't in use, a little dog ran around the screen, and I could feed him, give him water, and throw balls for him to catch. He even barked! That old Mexican saying didn't apply to me anymore. I still didn't have a father or a mother, but I finally did have a dog to bark at me.

1 EDWIN CAME TO visit me on the weekends, but soon the demands of our schoolwork, the distance, and our jobs became too much and we went our separate ways, though we remained friends. I had taken a tutoring job at the writing center, which kept me busier than I would have liked. My financial aid package—loans, grants, and work-study—wasn’t enough to cover my expenses. In my last semester at PCC, Diana had helped me apply for scholarships, and though I had gotten several small ones, without parental support I had no one to turn to when money was tight, which was often. This California beach town was an expensive place to live. It was full of wealthy retirees, people with trust funds, and high-tech workers from Silicon Valley, but the jobs, on and off campus, were low-paying compared to the crushingly high cost of living.

2 My work as a tutor was to help students with their writing assignments, and one of my students was Alfredo. Because of his brain injury, writing didn’t come easily. I helped him with the essays he had to write. The other students I tutored were struggling with their writing as well. I taught them how to put together a good sentence, a good paragraph, how to take ideas, thoughts, and opinions and make them come to life on the page. It amazed me that I was mostly teaching students whose native language was English but who had worse grammar than ESL students and couldn’t write a decent paragraph in their native tongue.

3     “Where did you learn to write like this?” Alfredo asked me one day.

4     We were sitting at the dining table in my apartment. The dining room had a big window where I could see the redwoods.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “I’ve been writing in English since I was thirteen.”

5     I told Alfredo about the very first story I wrote. It was for a writing competition at my school when I was in fifth grade. I wrote it in Spanish because I had only been in the U.S. for a few months and my English was limited. My teacher didn’t read Spanish, and when it was time to select the stories to be entered into the competition, she put mine in the reject pile without another glance. “I swore I would never write again,” I told Alfredo. “To me, my teacher hadn’t just rejected my story, she had also rejected me, and I felt ashamed to be an immigrant, a Spanish speaker, a person of color.”

“I’m sorry she did that,” he said.

6     When I was in eighth grade, I told Alfredo, my junior high had a writing competition as well. By then, I had graduated from the ESL program at my school and was enrolled in regular English classes. My accent was still pretty thick, but my writing and reading skills were solid. I made myself enter the competition because I wanted to be judged on the same terms as everyone else. My story was inspired by my relationship with my little sister. Whenever Betty and I saw each other, things were awkward between us. Having grown up in two separate households, she with my mother and I with my father, made us feel disconnected, distant. I had been reading books like *Sweet Valley High*, and so the story I wrote was about twin sisters who get separated when the parents divorce, each parent taking a daughter, and when the sisters are reunited years later, they’re complete strangers to each other.

7     “And I got first place!”

“That’s awesome!” Alfredo had put his essay aside and was lis-

tening to my story with interest. “I’m glad you overcame that first rejection.”

8     I was glad, too. If I hadn’t, my writing career would have ended before it had even begun.

9     I didn’t know that at thirteen years old I had turned to writing as a way to deal with my traumatic experiences before, during, and after migration. Because I was a child immigrant, my identity was split; I often felt like an outcast for not being completely Mexican but not fully American either. The border was still inside of me. Physically I had crossed it, but psychologically I was still running across that no-man’s-land. I was still caught back there, and so were my parents because the truth was that we were never the same after we crossed the border. We all changed. Perhaps it was because we had left something of ourselves behind, the way migrants leave a shoe, an empty can of tuna, a plastic water bottle, a shirt. What we each left on the border was a piece of our soul, our heart, our spirit—clinging to the branches of a bush, flapping in the wind.

10    Depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder—these words were not part of my vocabulary, so I never used them to describe how I felt. I expressed my feelings through stories while my father drowned his in a can of beer.

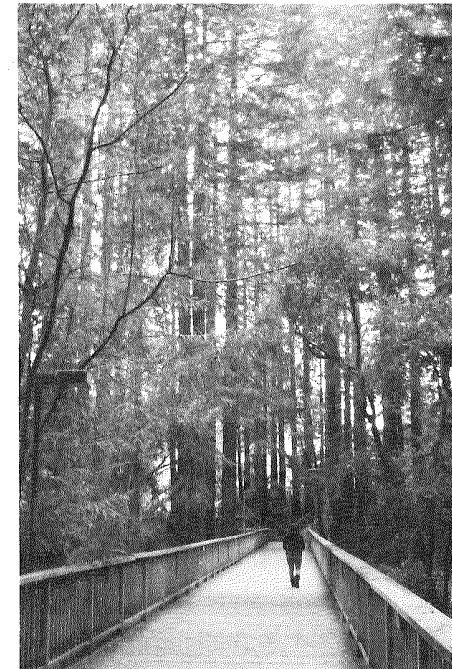
11    I turned to writing to save myself, to record and remember, to give meaning to my experiences. Writing was an act of survival. It wasn’t until PCC that I discovered it could be a possible career option. Having grown up never reading any Latina writers, I thought Latinas didn’t write and publish books, so I had assumed I couldn’t either. I hadn’t thought I could pursue a career in writing until I met Diana. “If Sandra Cisneros can do it, you can do it. If Isabel Allende can do it, you can do it,” she would say to me while handing me a copy of their latest books.

12    After Alfredo left, I went to my room to work on a story that wasn’t part of any class assignment. Talking to him about my writing had given me inspiration to sit and write, which I hadn’t done

the whole month I had been at UCSC. My creative writing classes wouldn't start until winter quarter. For now, I was stuck writing academic essays about *Candide* and *The Red and the Black*.

13 Usually my stories were about Mexico. I had now lived in the U.S. longer. Only through my writing could I hold on to my native country and keep it from floating into the mists of my memory. By writing about it, I could claim Mexico in a way I couldn't in real life. Despite everything I had gained by emigrating, I had also lost things: my relationship with my sweet maternal grandmother, my aunts and uncles, my friends, and my native country itself. The Mexican way of life felt different now; my Spanish was broken, my Catholic religion almost nonexistent. I knew little about Mexico, just pieces of its history, its customs, its geography. It was, in many ways, a mystery to me. Like my parents, my native country was full of flaws, and it had mistreated and abused me, and yet I still loved and clung to Mexico with childlike hope and optimism, dreaming of the day it would change for the better, in the same way I hoped my parents would change.

14 On my first return visit to Mexico three years earlier, everyone treated me like a foreigner because I had been "corrupted" by being Americanized. To the people who had seen me grow up, I was no longer Mexican enough. But in the U.S. I wasn't American enough either. For years, I had struggled to fit in, to learn the language and culture, to find my way. But no matter how hard I tried, I still felt like a foreigner, especially here in Santa Cruz where I was struggling with feelings of isolation, loneliness, otherness. UCSC wasn't yet the Hispanic-Serving Institution it would one day become, so I hardly saw anyone who looked like me. I took refuge in my writing. The words I put on the page created a bridge that connected both countries, both languages, both cultures. I hoped someday to write my way into a place where I finally belonged, where I finally felt I was "enough."



Kresge footbridge

15 One day in November, as I was walking across the footbridge to my Latin class, I ran into my roommate Carolyn.

"Are you going to the protest?" she asked as she walked alongside me with her usual briskness.

"What protest? I'm going to class."

"You have to go to the protest, Reyna. You have to support your people."

16 I had no idea what she was talking about, and I wasn't going to miss my class just because of some protest. I had never been to a demonstration, and I didn't want to get into any kind of trouble that might jeopardize my studies. So far I had kept a low profile, stayed focused on my classes, and done very little besides studying and working.

17 "Maybe another time," I said.

"There might not be another time. You have to come with me. You have to stand with your people." She grabbed me by my elbow, and by the look she was giving me, I knew she would drag me over there whether I wanted to go or not.

18 "Okay, fine, I'll go," I said. She let go of my elbow, and I followed her, getting angrier and angrier just thinking about my class and what I would be missing, the work I would have to make up to get an A.

19 I followed Carolyn to Hahn Hall, the building where the administration and student services were located, and as we neared the building, I heard them. The chants of the students rose up into the sky, and I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Spanish. "*¡El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido! ¡El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido!*"

20 Once we cleared the redwood trees, I could see the building and the hundreds of students who were marching around it, holding signs. Carolyn's words suddenly made sense. There they were—all the brown faces I had been looking for. Students who looked just like me. Hundreds of them mixed in with black, white, and Asian students. Where in the world had they been all this time?

21 "What are they protesting?" I asked Carolyn.

"Prop 209." At seeing the blank look on my face, she added, "It's a proposition that was voted on yesterday and passed. It does away with affirmative action in California." When I didn't say anything, she got angry at me. "Don't you get it? It affects you as a Latina. It affects me as a woman. We have to make ourselves heard!"

22 I liked to believe that my good grades and my dedication had earned me a spot at the university, but the reality was that as a Latina I was up against not only gender inequality but also racial inequality, and in some way affirmative action had given me a boost. I suddenly realized that if Prop 209 no longer required schools to consider race, ethnicity, and the gender of their students, minority students—and females of all backgrounds—would have a harder time being admitted to four-year universities.

23 "I get it," I said. "Come on." I hurried down to Hahn, my backpack swinging from my shoulder, and I made my way to the students who were forming a human chain, preventing anyone from entering or leaving the building. They broke the chain to let me in, and I took the hands of the students on either side of me and began to shout.

24 "*What do we want?*"

*"Diversity!"*

*"When do we want it?"*

*"Now!"*

25 My voice rose to join theirs until we all became one. For the first time since I had arrived at the school, I felt connected. We began to walk around the building, still holding hands and singing, "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine. Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine."

26 I had never heard this song before, but as I sang it, I felt my chest expand, the pressure making me hurt. There was a little light inside of me that life's challenges had tried to extinguish on more than one occasion. But it was still there, shining bright, and I knew I had to protect that light no matter what. For me, for my family, for my community. For both my countries.

*"Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine."*



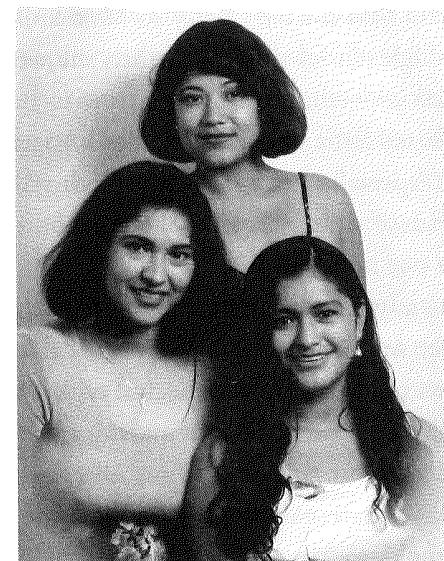
27 Our protest didn't have much of an effect. Prop 209 had passed, abolishing affirmative action so that people like me wouldn't get "preferential treatment," and there was nothing I or anyone could do to reverse its passage. The defeat was felt across campus, and though demonstrations at other universities were also held, nothing came of our student protests. Yet it was the first time I realized I had a voice and that it was my responsibility to use it.

28 It was also when I finally discovered that most of the Latino students were at two of the other colleges at UCSC—Oakes and

Merrill, which hosted the Latin American Studies and the Languages Departments. I would later find out that 15 percent of the student body at UCSC was Latino, but I wouldn't have known that being at Kresge College, where the majority were white and Asian. To my delight, Oakes and Merrill also housed the two taquerías on campus, and I soon started going over there after class to grab a carne asada taco or shrimp burrito, and to surround myself with other Latinos who, like me, were struggling to figure things out as the first in their families to attend a university. Most were majoring in education, Latin American and Latino/a studies, math, Spanish, or history. They encouraged me to take Chicano literature the following quarter.

- 29 It was then that I realized that the protest did have a profound effect—on me, that is. It led me to a place of belonging and brought me closer to making Santa Cruz and the university my home.

## 6



*Mago, Reyna, and Betty*

- 1 **I**HAD BEEN SO wrapped up in surviving my first quarter at UCSC, I hadn't yearned for my family as much as I had when I first arrived two months earlier. I had talked to Mago and Carlos a few times, and my father and mother not at all. Once, in a moment of weakness, I had walked over to the pay phone and picked up the receiver to call my father. I was desperate to hear his voice. To hear him call me "Chata," my special nickname. But I didn't dial. Clutching the coins in my fist, I listened to the dial tone until the phone started screeching like a dying rooster and then I hung up.
- 2 I knew I should call my mother. Right before I left for Santa

Cruz, she had sent my fifteen-year-old sister to Mexico as punishment for her behavior. For a few years now, Betty had been going down the wrong path: getting into gangs, having unprotected sex, stealing the rent money, ditching class, and the last straw—dropping out of high school.

3 My mother said that she sent Betty to Mexico because if she no longer wanted a high school education, then she would get a different kind of education—she would learn how to be a woman. My aunt would teach my little sister how to cook, clean, and obey the men in her life, especially her future husband, whoever he might be—just the kind of upbringing my grandmother, mother, and aunts had had in our hometown.

4 I hadn't known what my mother was planning until it was too late. My sister was already on a plane to Mexico by the time I found out what was happening. "I can't deal with her anymore," my mother said when I told her it was the most irresponsible thing she had ever done. Her decision reinforced my idea that my mother had been born without a maternal gene. Or at least when it came to her four oldest children, because she indulged my little half brother and gave him everything.

5 It shamed me to realize that I hadn't given Betty much thought since I arrived in Santa Cruz, and I should have. Just as my father had banned me from his life, so had Betty been banned from my mother's, though for opposite reasons. I had done nothing but try to make my father proud and help him during his hour of need. Betty had done nothing but make life difficult for herself and my mother, but she had her reasons. She was reacting to my mother's physical and emotional abuse in the only way she knew how—by rebelling. But by hurting my mother, she was also hurting herself in the process.

6 I picked up the phone and called my mother to see how Betty was doing in exile. My family in Mexico didn't have a phone, which meant I would have to go through my grandmother's neighbor to

reach my sister. Besides, I didn't have money for international phone calls.

7 "She's driving your aunt crazy" was the first thing my mother said. "She's running wild, and your aunt can't control her anymore."

"Well, you shouldn't have sent her down there in the first place," I said. "She's your responsibility, not my aunt's. Why are you always making other people raise your children?" It was a low blow and I knew it, but every time I spoke to my mother, it brought out the pain of the many times she left me, and I retaliated.

8 As usual, she ignored my comment and said, "Your sister is having an affair with a married man. ¿Me escuchas? She's fifteen years old and already her reputation is ruined!"

9 I didn't have anything to say to my mother then. The year before, Betty had asked me to take her to the clinic for a pregnancy test. She was fourteen, and as we sat there waiting for the results, I had prayed so hard for it to be negative, which to our relief it was. A pregnancy would have ruined her life. And now here she was again, jeopardizing her future. I couldn't let that happen.

"I'll go check on her," I said. "I'll go to Iguala."

10 As I walked back to my apartment, I realized there was a big problem with what I had just committed to—I didn't have money for a trip to Mexico. But something told me I needed to make it happen. I was worried about my little sister, so I wracked my brain wondering how I could come up with the cash. I paused halfway across the footbridge, looked up at the redwoods, and said a silent prayer, though I was no longer religious. When my siblings and I arrived in the U.S., it didn't take long for us to lose our religion and forget the teachings of our sweet maternal grandmother, Abuelita Chinta. When we asked our father to take us to church, he refused, raising his can of Budweiser and proclaiming, "This is my God." That quickly put an end to our Catholic faith.

11 Now I was an atheist, yet when surrounded by such natural splendor here in Santa Cruz, by trees that seemed to nearly reach the

heavens, I couldn't help but want to believe in a higher being. God? Goddess? Mother Earth? Tonantzin, Aztec mother goddess?

12 One of them heard my prayer. The next day, when I stopped at the main office after picking up my mail, I spotted a flyer announcing a \$500 research grant Kresge was offering to students. That was the perfect solution! I hurried back to my apartment and filled out the application and letter of intent, explaining that I needed to go to Mexico for a short-story collection I was working on. It wasn't true. I wasn't working on a collection, and I felt ashamed about lying, but it was the only thing I could think of. On the application, I stated that I needed the funds to do research on the town and the people I was writing about.

13 A few weeks later, I knew that I was meant to go see my sister when I received a letter from Kresge informing me I had received the grant.

14 This trip would be my second time visiting the country of my birth since I had left at nine. The first visit had been three years before, when I was in high school and I had gone with Mago and my mother. It was on that visit that I realized I was no longer Mexican enough. Everyone treated me like an outsider, as if I was no longer one of them, as if I had lost my right to call Mexico my home.



15 As soon as winter break arrived, I headed south. My plane landed in Mexico City at 7:00 a.m. and I began the three-hour journey to my hometown. As I rode in the taxi from the airport to the bus station, I lowered the window and breathed in the smell of the city, a mix of diesel fumes, urine, and corn tortillas.

16 "You aren't from here, are you?" the cabdriver asked me. I held my breath, feeling the floor sinking under me as I imagined the worst. He thought I was American. I was going to get kidnapped!

17 "Chale, claro que sí," I said, trying to speak Spanish like a real Mexican. But the man shook his head.

"I can hear America in your voice," he said.

18 Thankfully, I arrived at the bus station safely, where I waited until it was time to board. As my bus traveled south, I thought about my mother. Every time I talked to her, I couldn't control the anger that raged inside me.

19 Even after all these years, I still felt the devastating blow of her abandonment.

20 The first time my mother left, I was four years old. She walked away from me, Mago, and Carlos to join my father in El Otro Lado. For many years, I hadn't been able to understand why she had made the choice to leave her children behind to go to my father's side simply because he wanted her to join him. Why did she have to obey him? Why couldn't she have said no and stayed with her children? Later I understood that my mother hadn't wanted to be an abandoned woman. In Iguala, there were women whose husbands had gone north long ago and had completely forgotten about them. How happy and proud my mother had been when my father telephoned and said, "I need you. I want you to come."

21 And just like that, she packed her bags and, complying with my father's request, dropped off her children at his mother's house. We had to watch her walk away from us, wondering if we would ever see her again. Then we went inside Abuela Evila's house to endure two-and-a-half years of hell.

22 The irony was that even though my mother left for the U.S. to save her marriage, my father still left her for another woman. Mila was a nurse's assistant, a naturalized U.S. citizen, and a fluent English speaker—a woman who was everything my mother wasn't. When my mother returned to Mexico with my little sister, Betty, it was one of the happiest days of my life. But soon after, she ran off to Acapulco with a wrestler and abandoned us once again. My maternal grandmother did her best to make up for the pain of my mother's absence. But no matter how much Abuelita Chinta loved us—it wasn't enough.

23 When my father returned to Mexico to get us, my mother re-

fused to let Betty come with us, so we left without her to reunite with our father and find something better in El Otro Lado. I had never gotten over the guilt of leaving Betty behind.

24 Though my mother, and then Betty, moved to Los Angeles a few years later, and we were then all on the same side of the border, my family had completely disintegrated by then.



25 I slept during the three-hour bus ride and woke up when the bus was making its way around the mountains cradling my hometown like cupped hands. I looked out the window, holding my breath in anticipation of the first glimpse of my city in the valley below.

26 Iguala de la Independencia is a city of about 110,000 people. The first Mexican flag was made in Iguala in 1824. The treaty that ended the Mexican War of Independence was written in Iguala, and the Mexican national anthem was sung for the first time there. Despite its richness in history, Iguala is a poor city, with 70 percent of the population living in poverty. Through the years to come, things would get much worse—the mountain on which my bus was traveling would one day be covered in poppy fields to supply the heroin trade with the U.S. Iguala would become a distribution center where buses would leave the station loaded with drugs destined for cities like Chicago and Los Angeles. It would become a place of infamy when, in 2014, forty-three college students were attacked and forcibly disappeared by the police working with the cartel. During the search for the missing students, numerous mass graves would be found not far from where I grew up.

27 But those things hadn't happened yet, and when I arrived in Iguala in December of 1996, all I saw were the shacks, the dirt roads, the crumbling houses, the trash—the grinding poverty my father had rescued me from. When I was a child, I had been able to see past the imperfections and find the beauty of my hometown, but now, after all my years of living in the U.S., I no longer could.

28 I hailed a cab at the bus station. Immediately, the driver said, "You aren't from here, are you?" And I wanted to say that I hadn't even opened my mouth to speak yet, so why the hell would he be asking me that already?

29 "You put on your seat belt," he said with a smile, anticipating my question.

And I laughed.

30 The road where my grandmother lived wasn't paved, so taxicabs and buses didn't venture there. I got off at the main road and walked to my grandmother's house, dragging my suitcase behind me. I inhaled the smoke from the burning trash heaps along the nearby railroad tracks. City sanitation services didn't exist in Iguala, so people had to burn their trash every day. I passed the canal in which my siblings and I swam when we were kids, and was shocked at seeing the canal full of trash—old car tires covered in mud, broken pieces of furniture, the skeletal remains of an old mattress. The stagnant water smelled worse than a dead animal, and I held my breath as I hurried past it. Abuelita Chinta lived in a shack made of sticks and cardboard. When I lived here, it had been the only shack on the street, but now there were two of them. My aunt, Tía Güera, had built her own shack next to my grandmother's.

31 I stood there in front of my grandmother's home, scanning the dirt road, the abandoned freight car left to rust on the train tracks, the piles of burned trash, the children walking barefoot, their feet and legs covered in dust.

32 I was a long way from Santa Cruz, California.