

The Encyclopedia of Small Places
Edition XIII
David Cremins

ALMOND, TEXAS: Situated between hill country and the panhandle, this dusty town has been routinely left off of maps since losing its incorporation status following a mid-20th century exodus to neighboring localities. Nonetheless, a handful of hearty residents have remained loyal to this patch of dirt, no more than a mile between any of its extremities. The primary economic activity of the former township is a rusty assembly line in an even rustier warehouse (still affectionately referred to as The Factory) where corrugated aluminum is bent and hewn into the approximate shape of a can. The company which distributes the final product of this labor (a tin of sugary, preserved fruits) has, for complicated reasons of pity and inertia, yet to move this part of their production away from the notably inefficient yet industrious denizens of Almond.

Any traveler through this region would be hard pressed to find as inspiring an example of the triumph of small-town spirit over the encroaching forces of global change. Yet, the modern reality of Almond must be far from the vision that the founder of the town, a Mr. Seymour Garrick (1891-1943), had in mind when he first brought his family and a few fellow farmers away from the fertile plains of eastern Texas to this rugged, unsoiled locale. It is lost to history why Mr. Garrick believed that in this inhospitable climate he could cultivate a deciduous tree native to the Mediterranean...

(Excerpted from Volume I, page 47)

Since the move, the first thing people commented on upon meeting Almond Reyes was not his first name, surprisingly. Since the move, what people first commented on was the fact that his

improbable family had chosen to leave the “Devil’s Coast” and raise their son in a town which shared his peculiar name. Then, of course, they asked about his name.

Before, Almond had tried explaining his name by blaming his parents – though Al soon found it was much easier just to shorten it. His family’s story, as far as he knew, went like this: His father Patricio, not nearly as king-like as one might expect from a patriarch of the Reyes lineage, had met and impregnated his mother, Beatrice, shortly after college somewhere in the Bay Area. During that time in her life, Al’s mom had been partial to two of California’s most famous crops: *cannabis sativa* and *prunus dulcis*. All of this was understandable enough. A semi-hippie, capricious mom, an indolent, capricious dad, and, naturally, their son, Almond.

By the time he was 13, having moved a year ago into a dusty tenant apartment attached to a dustier house on the third of five dusty streets which comprised the former municipality of Almond, Al had heard it all.

“Here comes old nut boy!” “I forgot your name; do you have a map?” “I heard your parents think you’re like, the Jesus of our city?” “Sorry, can’t play, my mom says I’m allergic to you.”

Even after these schoolhouse taunts had become as stale as the fruit which bore his name left out in a dry, Texan mid-summer (almonds, he learned at a young age, are in fact a member of the peach family), they did not become easier to take. The truth was that the reason his family migrated was never quite clear to Al. How did they even know this place existed? If there had been Internet in their home, at least he could have confirmed what he long suspected: there was no mention, not anywhere online, of a place called Almond. Perhaps his parents really had sought out somewhere for him to be raised as a sort of messiah of the desert, and he often worried that his inability to win the hearts and minds of his peers would be disappointing to his folks. They certainly hadn’t uprooted themselves from Pleasanton (some miles south of Oakland) for economic reasons, either. Beatrice Reyes currently stayed at home crocheting and reminiscing, in between brief spurts of parenting, while her husband found employment in the one semi-thriving industry around: can production. Nor did it seem likely that this young couple, still in their 30’s, was on the run from someone or something. Although, Al had to admit that the mixture of reverence and reverie with

which they sometimes recalled their time before Almond (both Almonds) hinted at a pair of lives at one point filled with some level of intrigue and excitement. Had Al known the true reasoning behind the Reyes' current residence, he would have been disappointed with the banality of it. Yet, he did not, and so he contented himself as best he could with conjecture and half-hearted attempts to live up to the allegedly divine concordance between boy and his city. This in spite of the fact that both calling it 'his' and a 'city' stretched the limits of belief.

For better or worse, Al's day-to-day was largely isolated from his parents. For better because he possessed the rare gift of indefatigability when it came to putting himself out there and hoping for the best. For worse because the results of this tendency were most often mild rejection, befuddlement, or outright scorn. Nonetheless, one could not help but admire this young boy, so out of place and lacking in the social graces of southern small-town society. He nearly managed to succeed in his quest to meet every one of the 200 or so occupants of Almond within a year of moving there. In between the long hours his father spent twisting metal with antiquated equipment and his mother spent staring out the window, often in a generally westward direction, Al would walk, intentionally aimlessly, towards somewhere fascinating, such as the fire station (located in the garage of one of the town's first residents) or perhaps the high school (whose shiny lockers were decidedly the least grimy and therefore most interesting objects in his whole world). Everywhere he went, Al approached locals and they bore his onslaught of questions about their lives and why they chose to live there, bristled at the judgmental tone coming from such a small child, made some feeble joke about his name, and then went on with their routine. Every day was different, every day was exactly the same.

It was during one of these interminable meanderings about town that Al, in between the butcher's and the baker's, ran into her.

VISTA DO MAR, CALIFORNIA: It is not often taught in schools, but the Spanish were not the only 16th-century colonial power to reach the Western coast of the future United States. A Portuguese expedition led by an Admiral João Rodrigues Ferreira in the autumn of 1576 also made significant inroads into what is now

central California. Unfortunately for the crew of *A flor da carnificina*, however, it appears none of their compatriots were particularly keen on new settling enterprises so far from the already vastly profitable forests of South America. So, after a few months, the last of these ambitious Portuguese sailors slipped away from their incipient attempts at subjugating the native environment and people of that idyllic coast and sought their fortunes in more traditional venues. Amazingly, however, the name they aptly christened their burgeoning community lasted through the centuries.

Not to be confused with the Spanish-derived “Vista del mar” (a retirement community in Ventura), this charming beach town has only in recent years begun to find its sea legs...

(Excerpted from Volume V, page 22)

At least they always had the water. Part of a beachfront property, leased. Ocean everywhere, but not a drop to drink, or eat, or pay the bus fare with. But, Reina’s mother liked to remind her, who needs cable when you have the coral, a smartphone when you have the sand?

“Reina, Reina, go away-a,” they chanted. Or used to, anyway, now they mainly just ignored her, distracted by disappearing electric stories and their small town’s miraculous addition of an Urban by The Pier (it was really more of a dock). Not that she minded much. She had a surfboard (borrowed from Mr. Chung, their leaser), tan lines (which her mother called “cancer lines”), and an after-school job now (lifeguard, naturally, which apparently you could do at 14).

After work, she would swim. The commute was good, less than 50 steps from her post to the waterfront and just enough daylight left on the horizon that it was still warm, the salt prickly. Never mind the tide, the jellyfish sightings, or the hidden currents which had carried away poor little Terry Chung three summers ago (his mother had moved away shortly thereafter, forcing his father to lease out part of his house which now once again, uneasily, sheltered three people). Never mind

all that, just keep swimming. Like in that movie, Reina's favorite movie, the only one she could remember having seen in the old theater by The Pier. The old theater, where everyone used to go spend their allowance money without her, before they started going to spend it at Urban without her. Not that she had allowance money, anyway.

When she got home after dark, sandy, starving, and smiling, her mother made her shower before dinner. It was bitterly cold, as usual. No one in the house complained out loud about the temperature, though it wasn't as if they were speaking much anyway. Reina figured that, objectively speaking, the shower might be around the same temperature as that sweet, warm sea water she bathed in less than an hour ago. It just didn't feel as right.

On Thursdays, after showering and dinner and homework, Reina would do the laundry. It was late by then, it needed to be done, and she knew her mother was way more tired than she was. Mr. Chung's house didn't have a washing machine, and he didn't seem interested in purchasing one. Reina supposed Mrs. Chung had done the washing by hand. She must have been really busy, until she wasn't. So, Reina would take beach bags full of clothes to the laundromat down the street. On her way out the door, she would fish a few quarters out of Mr. Chung's wallet on the kitchen island to use for the machines. Reina wasn't sure if he knew she did this. She wasn't sure if she cared if he did.

The wait was bad – almost two hours, alone, late at night until she could go home, deposit the clean clothes, and kiss her mother goodnight. Often, staring into the second spin cycle, Reina would think about school, about how far she had gotten in her latest solo swim race, about how badly she wished she could just once come home to her own house and a hot shower. Often, she would drift off. Then, awakening to a mechanical chime, she would be struck by the taste of her own drying tears. They were as cold and salty as the dark and treacherous parts of the ocean she had been dreaming about.

One Thursday night, Reina was surprised to come home to an unfamiliar scene: her mother and Mr. Chung sitting at the narrow slat of a dining table, talking. She sensed tension, like the subtle change in air pressure before the onset of an electric thunderstorm offshore. Her mother's face told

her to go to bed. She slinked off, only looking forward to several hours of difficulty falling asleep. It was hard to relax in a room studded with the crayon drawings of someone else's childhood.

In the morning, Reina's mother informed her curtly that Mr. Chung's house was being repossessed. It didn't seem like a good moment to ask what that meant. But there were some questions she felt the need to get answered right away.

"Where are we going to live?"

"I... I don't know, honey. I think it might be, be time for us to move."

"Move? Move where? Move away from here?"

"I don't know. Maybe. How would you like that? We still have the station wagon. I'm sure I can find another, a better job."

"Would my surfboard fit?"

"What? Oh, I'm not sure. I thought we could drive maybe...east?"

"What's east?"

"You remember my home is Little Rock?"

"Yes."

"Well, Little Rock is east. I'm sure other places, too. Maybe somewhere else small, comfortable. Don't worry about it, Re, we'll find somewhere to be just, uh, fine."

"Okay, mom."

And so it was that Reina and Linda Haest decided to leave Vista do Mar and head out into the unknown. They were like reverse pioneers, trekking away from the golden sun of California which had for years now remained tantalizingly, frustratingly just out of reach beyond the horizon.

PROVIDENCE, NEW MEXICO: Angela Goodman was moved to move from her comfortable life in the Northeast to the yet-unmapped mountains of the Southwest because she had a mission, a mission from God. The details of that mission were then and are still now unclear - to find out, her followers had to pay in monthly installments and were then immediately sworn to secrecy. It could be said that she had a prophet motive. Without casting too many aspersions, suffice to say that the Reverend Goodman arrived with a small band of highly invested devotees to the rugged landscape of this new Providence in the summer of 1887. Suffice to say, additionally, that within a year half of the party, including Goodman herself, were killed by a rare mountainous fever. Of those who remained and their descendants, not much is known. In fact, it was only in recent years that the existence of this self-sufficient community was discovered when the New Mexico state government commissioned a new stretch of freeway...

(Excerpted from Volume III, page 202)

The verdant crops of non-coastal California had given way to the red rocks of Arizona which in turn gave way to the blue mountains of New Mexico. Neither of the Haest women had expected this, the clear delineation of each state's color palette from the others. Yet the distinctions were undeniable. What unified their trip in that creaky station wagon, however, was a general sense of helplessness. Until they came across Providence.

Providence brought Reina to Almond. Linda was up to her well-worn habit of inquiring in the latest gas station if the attendant knew of any job openings in town. "None? Okay, well, is there

anyone else you think I should go ask...Yes, yes, of course I have the money...ah, better just a half tank all the same..."

Except this time was different. Reina was staring off into the mountains, willing their snow-capped peaks to become the crests of enormous waves, when she noticed her mother coming back to the car with a curious look on her face. She looked...pleased. It had been weeks since Reina had seen a genuine smile come over anyone, it weirded her out a bit. All the same, this was intriguing.

"What is it?"

"A job."

"Here?"

"No, in Texas, a few hundred miles away."

Reina had no idea what lay in Texas, besides cowboys and some failed presidential candidates her mother had loved, or hated, she couldn't quite remember which. She figured it couldn't be any more boring than this place.

"Cool. What type of job?"

"A factory job. Jim, the man who works in there, says his wife's friend is leaving her position there end of next week, he's making a call for me right now to see if they haven't found a replacement yet. What do you say, it's exciting, right?"

"Is there ocean?" Reina asked forlornly, glancing up at the roof of the car where her surfboard should have been tied on tight, had they not needed to sell it along with half their possessions to scrimp enough together for this trip to the middle of nowhere.

“Uh, no, honey, sorry, I don’t think there’s quite any ocean in Almond, Texas...you know, Jim was telling me about the history of this little place too while I was in there. Sometimes the most beautiful things get created for the worst reasons...”

The blues of New Mexico soon gave way to the expansive, immutable browns of Texas.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Why’re you looking at me funny?”

“Why...I...what’s your name?”

“What’s yours?”

This is how it began, as it only could have ever begun. The chance, inevitable encounter took place on one of Almond’s easily numerable streets. The boy was heading home after a disappointingly one-sided conversation with a man, identified by a faded, fabric nametag as “Preston”, who stood stoically behind the counter of Preston’s Sandwiches. The girl was exploring her new hometown for the first time. He looked at her. She looked around his age, although taller than him, with skin that even a heat-hardened Texan would call tan. It was almost as dark as that of his grandfather, whom he had seen only in the Reyes’ sparsely-populated photo album. Her hair, meanwhile, was all golden sparkle; that flowing color was decidedly from somewhere else, somewhere with more wind and sun of a different disposition. A noticeable moment passed while Al took all this in, and indeed they both noticed. She looked at him, looking at her. His eyes were different from any of the boys she had known before; they seemed peculiarly curious for someone his age, piercing even. She figured he must be around her age, on the verge of a growth spurt. He was still small, with

none of the wild black hair on his arms yet that darkly haloed his round face. Before he could notice her looking back at him, Reina decided to answer his question.

“Reina, Reina Haest. Your turn.”

“My name is Almond.”

“Al-”

“Yes, you can call me Al.”

Reina giggled but stopped when she saw confusion, maybe even a bit of pain flash across Alm-, Al’s otherwise focused eyes.

“It’s a song. You can call me...Paul Simon. Like, Simon and Garf – never mind, my mom used to play it.”

“Used to?”

“Back when we had a record player. I mean, before we moved out here.”

“You just moved here?”

“Yeah, uh, yesterday. My mom came for a job.”

“In The Factory?”

“Yes, I think so. She told me she starts tomorrow. Are you here alone or do you have family?”

“Well, right now I’m alone, but I do have family. You’re going to school tomorrow?”

“School? I, I suppose so. I’ll see you there if I do?”

“Yes.”

BETWEEN ACQUAINTANCESHIP AND FRIENDSHIP: There are some places that are so small, they belie even geographic definition. This is one of them. There exists no written history or set of directions to let you know you are here, only feeling can inform you of that fact.

You may find yourself in this place upon meeting someone at school and, having asked them a few obligatory questions, wondering whether you should push the interaction further. The other person may be wondering the same thing. Neither one of you wants to appear over-eager to make friends, but both of you are internally desperate to not be left behind in the social milieu. Or, you may sit next to someone on a plane and discover you are both traveling to the same city for several weeks. You might get dinner together that night and then be left pondering...should I ask them to get dinner again, or go to a museum the following day? The last time something like this happened, they never responded to your messages. But maybe this time will be different. Or, you may have been working in the same office with someone for years, exchanging pleasantries and discussing business when necessary. One day, they ask you to go for a drink after work. You accept. Soon, you find out you have much more in common than being mutually frustrated by the way Sharon starts her slideshow presentations with a meme she clearly got from her son and does not really understand. This is promising, as you have found it difficult to make new friends since university ended...

(Excerpted from Volume III, page 127)

They entered Almond's joint elementary-middle school for the first time together on some otherwise forgettable September Monday, having arrived at the same time from opposite directions, and nodded at one another in recognition. The other handful of children in their class – 12 in all from 4th through 7th grade, all taught by one aging woman whose name and personality are as irrelevant as they were forgettable – were intrigued by this development, just as they had been when Al first walked in just over a year ago.

The jokes didn't come as easily this time, though. The name Reina, while uncommon, was not as workable by the children of Almond whose only exposure to anything approaching comedy was a Will Ferrell movie or two rented from the gas station 30 miles away. After the morning's lessons on the geography of South America and the history of the War of Northern Aggression came lunch, which was combined with a recreation period (during which time Ms. Whatsherface would take a smoke and her pupils, lacking anything in the way of playground equipment, or even a playground, would invent games involving their sandwich wrappers, empty soda bottles, and fists). Reina took this opportunity to make the rounds meeting her new classmates. Brad Lane was cute by 7th-grade standards: dusty-haired, freckled and dimpled appropriately for his future job as a Honda sales associate in Denton. Margaret (Maggie) Robinson's voice had a lisping, damsel-in-distress contour far beyond her years. Chip Tucker had two first names, both of which reminded Reina of food. The boy sitting by himself was Almond, Al, whom she had met yesterday. The rest were difficult to distinguish. What unified them all, though, was that they had brought lunch.

Al watched in amazement as his new...acquaintance introduced herself. This was rare, as he tended to be far more interested in adults than in anyone within reach of his own age. Reina was worth watching. Had he known the word 'hustled' he would have said she hustled. The three tables out back of their schoolroom were as splintered as the groups which sat at them. At one sat 6 younger kids, 4th and 5th graders whose discussions mainly centered on who had started puberty and how far they had gotten. At another sat the 6th and 7th graders who were preoccupied with whose older siblings had started drinking or having sex. And then there was Al, holding dominion over a table so mistreated by years of dust and rust that it had remained unoccupied until his arrival. So, although no one said anything out loud, 13 pairs of eyes trained on Reina as lunch began to see where she would choose to sit down.

Except she didn't sit, she walked. To each person in turn, even the younger kids, Reina walked up, said hello, asked their name, and if they could share any of their food with her. Even as she moved to the older table and everyone knew quite well already what the routine consisted of, she continued to repeat herself, cheerfully yet methodically. By the end of the second table, she had had three successes: an apple from Chip, some gummy snack from Maggie, and, remarkably, half of a peanut butter sandwich from Brad, delivered with a smirk.

Finally, she came to Al's table. He braced himself for the ask, not wanting to deny the new kid sustenance but also reluctant to part with his meager holdings of a juice box and bag of beef jerky with a picture of a smiling beaver on the package. Reina sat down, though, that was new. He looked at her expectantly. She noticed a silent question on his face but decided to answer a different one. In her Californian voice, which shone miraculously clear of any drawl, she said:

"You never know if you don't ask. Being hungry is worse than being told no."

She then began the simple, jaw-dropping act of eating her bounty. Al, at a loss for words for once, also busied his mouth with food, trying not to watch her too furtively. The rest of the 4th-7th graders of Almond Primary did the same.

Why had the new girl chosen so? She was 14 (Almond lacked an 8th-grade class), so it was clear she was too old to sit at the first table. And with 6 pimpled bodies already straining the confines of the second, it would also have been difficult to sit there. Naturally, then, the only remaining choice was the right one. This made all the difference.

Now would be a good time to explain the history of immigration to Almond, Texas: there was none (except for the towns founding members, the Reyes family, and now the Haest family).

Now would also be a good time to explain the history of resentment towards the idea of outsiders in Almond, Texas: there was some.

The following weekend, an informal network of parents of young-ish children in Almond (with some notable exceptions) clustered around burnt brew in the Garrick Trading Post, right next to Preston's Sandwiches. There, they confirmed and reconfirmed what they had learned from each of their bright, above-average children ("did you see Chip throw that shot-put at the track and field regionals last May? I tell ya...") earlier that week: yes, there was *another* new kid in town.

It is undeniably a tired trope in Westerns – "this town ain't big enough for the both of us!" – but as with most tropes, it traffics somewhat in truth. It is well known in many circumstances that where one is bearable, cute even, another is just too much. Just ask the parents of twins. Or anyone who has seen multiple Will Ferrell movies. As it was at this point in the town of Almond, Almond was enough.

September turned into October, hot turned into slightly less hot, and a tentative alliance turned into a genuine friendship, forged by mutually assured silent lunch and recreation periods. They began to travel together. They would walk in silence out of school until, stepping free of some invisible bubble, Al would gasp in a breath of relief and blurt out whatever question had percolated throughout the day to the top of his endless list.

"How many people were in your old town?" "How does your mom like the work here?" "Where's your dad?" "Do you ever think about going back?" "Why don't you?" "What's it like to surf?" "Do you wish there was a swimming pool here?"

Reina usually allowed him two or three before turning the conversation to the ever-present question at hand: where to go? This was their deal. She sat with him and never asked for his food, he only pestered her with a small handful of questions, they traveled together. Anywhere. Everywhere. They preferred endless, repetitive trips across the one-square-mile grid to endless,

repetitive worksheets and books far below their reading level. Meandering from the schoolhouse to Garrick's or Preston's storefronts, then maybe to the joint dentist's-doctor's-barbershop (unfortunately labeled as "Hurtz") or grocer's, the duo wouldn't split up towards their respective homes until thirst, hunger, darkness, or some combination therein overtook them. There, families awaited them, hopefully with more food than questions about their recent whereabouts. Sometimes, if they were bored and feeling a bit adventurous, they would make plans to sneak out and meet at the graveyard. There they could stay for hours, trying to scare each other with improvised ghost stories featuring the late inhabitants of Almond plotted throughout the weed-filled acre.

Their town (Town? Settlement? Territory? Not even Almond's most wizened residents could agree on how to refer to their home) contained no court, library, jail, or DMV office, yet it had a graveyard. The more mundane affairs of civil life could be settled up in the county seat a 2-hour drive away, but no one liked the idea of some distant government official they did not already know intimately taking control of their remains. Consequently, that grim task fell to Doc Merritt Hurtz. Doc Hurtz insisted that his neighbors and patients call him "Doc" instead of "Doctor" both because it sounded more amiable and because he lacked an advanced medical degree. Instead, he relied mainly on skills acquired from an EMT course he took in Austin several decades ago during a failed stint in UT's pre-health program. He was handy with a pair of scissors, at least. Even lacking in certain qualifications, though, the Doc could ascertain that, if Almond had some real emergency services available, there would surely be a number fewer residents resting under the cracked earth and a number more still toiling away on the assembly line a few blocks away.

They never went to The Factory. It was the single largest and perhaps architecturally most interesting building in all of Almond, certainly the most filled with life, yet it never crossed their minds to tread there. Something about the smell of screeching metal forging smaller metal and their parental counterparts somewhere in there, maybe standing next to each other, maybe not knowing the other existed, was too weird and depressing. The schoolhouse belonged to the other children, the apartments and The Factory were for the adults. The rest of Almond, as small as it was, as small as the friends were, that was theirs.

THE PAROCHIAL IMAGINATION: Isaac Newton and William Shakespeare were born in insignificant hamlets in the English countryside. Emily Dickinson and Rachel Carson hailed from similarly modest villages in the northeastern United States. Therefore, it would be unbecoming of the standards of this publication to suggest that the mere fact of being from a small place necessarily confines one to a limited worldview or lack of creativity. Indeed, we know that just the reverse can be true - ignorance can often be found in plenitude in the most bustling of metropolises. If you doubt this, try being a black family trying to buy a home in mid-20th century Chicago or a Protestant trying to find work in the Parisian court of Louis IX.

However, it would be equally unwise to ignore a fact made most evident to our research team as they have traveled to far-flung, near-forgotten places the world over: it is difficult to comprehend the unfamiliar when all you know is your own way of life. We do not judge this phenomenon, we just try to understand...

(Excerpted from Volume III, page 199)

Before they knew it, Halloween was upon them and with it came the first blessed cool gusts of air of an obstinate autumn. These breezes, though they came in fits and starts, were a much-needed refreshment for a place like Almond where Willis Carrier's miraculous invention (air conditioning) had only made tepid forays into the foyers of a select few homes and businesses. Perhaps, then, Brad Lane was in a good mood due to a reprieve from the typically incorrigible heat on that final Friday of the month. This is what Almond and Reina thought as he approached their lunchtime social refugee club with a smile.

He had been a regular donor to the Haest Lunch Program for over a month now. Maybe today he was thinking to ask for his donation back. Reina hoped not, the turkey on rye was characteristically

delicious and already half-demolished (it was easy to eat quickly without the distraction of conversation). But no.

“Hey, Re... Almond. Listen, we were talking over there,” he motioned to his usual crowd, most of whom were watching slack-jawed at this latest development “and I just wanted to let y’all know ‘bout this little plan we were getting together for Halloween tomorrow night.”

Al was quiet. He knew this much about Brad: Mr. Lane was a foreman at The Factory, might even be Patricio Reyes’ superior, and his uncle, Preston Lane was the reticent eponym of the local sandwich shop. The two boys had not spoken since Al’s first week at school, and there was no clear reason to recommence communications. Reina, however, was game, having not yet entirely discarded the possibility of making other friends in this place which had, to date, welcomed her like sandpaper.

“Oh, yeah? What’s going on, is there candy involved?” she asked.

“Nah, but it’ll still be sweet, ya hear? Listen, we’re gonna meet ‘round the old graveyard at 9. You know where that is?”

“Yeah, we know.”

“Cool, so, you in?”

“Yeah. Yes. We’ll be there,” she responded, growing confident in her answer only as it left her lips. She felt more comfortable being the one setting the terms of engagement.

“Okay, great! Here, let me tell you about our costume idea, it’ll be a *treat* to have you,” he said with as much twinkle in his eye as a 13-year-old with acne scars could manage.

It wouldn’t be. In retrospect, it was too clear, too juvenile to have missed. In retrospect.

Beatrice and Patricio Reyes were proud. They were proud that their parenting attempts – which had ranged the entirety of the parenting attempt spectrum – had, somehow, paid off. Their son had a friend (they weren't completely blind to his comings and goings). And now he was going to a party as well. The extra hours put in monitoring an endless stream of chrome-colored cylinders for defects had paid off, they were able to afford the basic holiday necessities: chocolate, rubber accessories, doting attention for up to but not exceeding 30 minutes. For all her time spent looking out a window, thinking about relatives back in Pleasanton or her life in college before meeting her husband, Beatrice could still play the role of attentive mother hen when she desired. "Let me take a photo! Are you sure you got enough sweets? Be back before midnight, okay?" In some ways, they were a traditional family.

Linda Haest was exhausted. She sometimes wondered why she hadn't tried pushing the station wagon to its absolute limits, maybe several hundred miles more to San Antonio or Houston in order to find a better job, a better school. She sometimes wondered if she was settling and thereby setting her daughter on a path of being forced to settle. But the truth was, Reina seemed more alive here than she had seen her in years. She no longer had to do the laundry, cold showers didn't feel so bad after a day in the Texan sun (they hadn't yet lived through a desert winter), nor did they have to share a house with a strange, sad man anymore. The look of simple contentment on her daughter's face when she came home from God-knows-what adventure was reminiscent of how she had looked following an ocean swim or successful surf. In some ways, they were a happy family.

They arrived at the festivities the same way they arrived at school each morning – separately, but together. So far, this was familiar. It was dark, cool, and it appeared no one else was around. Re and Al stood next to each other, barely exchanging a word, observing their surroundings. Neither of them knew what to do. This silence was palpably different than the one they were accustomed

to sharing during lunch. That daytime quietude was confident, comfortable. Now, Al felt embarrassed. Re felt foreboding.

They waited 10 minutes. 15. During other nighttime, flashlight lit excursions to this darkened space, this time would have been spent examining the stones for some inspiration for their stories. Though of course they each had their own, more private motives for this investigation. Al found himself scouring the fading names for any hint of his own family's past, any clue as to why his parents had moved him to this forsaken Almond. His companion, on the other hand, found herself, despite her best intentions, expecting to find the name Terry Chung on each subsequent slab. But there was none of that tonight. Their costumes grew uncomfortably hot, as if they were wearing them in the middle of the day.

A voice broke through the painful monotony.

"I'm glad I met you."

"You too."

"You and your mom, maybe you can come over for dinner some time...I could ask my parents."

"Oh. Yeah, that'd be cool...thanks."

"Do you hate it here?"

"I –"

A sudden noise in the near distance interrupted the reply.

It was the thud of something metallic on something non-metallic. Two heads swiveled and could just make out a swift movement in the distance. Wordlessly, they crept forward. It was a rotund man in stained workman clothes holding a shovel. Even from their vantage point several meters

away, they could smell the sweat of his exertion as he thudded the shovel into the hard ground again and again. A grave robber? That would be exciting. But no, they knew him. He had traded in his catch-all white lab coat for overalls, but it was unmistakably Doc Hurtz. This must have been another one of his myriad occupations. Had someone died, or was this only in anticipation? Reina wondered if this strange man realized the morbidity of undertaking this particular activity under cover of darkness on October 31st. Almond wondered if it would be rude to alert him to their presence and ask if he had seen any other children around.

So entranced were they by this grim, methodical work that both time and awareness of their surroundings slipped silently away. A bright flash brought them out of this reverie, and they spun around in unison to find themselves caught in a pair of headlights which illuminated and nearly blinded them from one edge of the graveyard. Some obscure figures of varying sizes were coming from either side of the vehicle, a Jeep it looked like.

Even from a distance, something seemed off. These were surely their classmates, finally arrived, but not in the getups they had agreed upon. There was Brad, leading the pack, followed by Chip and Maggie and the rest. Backlit by ultra-high-beams, this approaching posse of recent pubescents was vaguely reminiscent of a superhero movie poster. They were dressed in uniform, too. Beige pants, beige shirts, beige hats – and glints of silver. Badges? Handcuffs? A replica Smith and Wesson or two?

And here they were the twin aliens, feeling caught. Green on the outside, burning red on the inside of their cheap plastic masks. Confounded, yet completely understanding. Almond Reyes and Reina Haest instinctively and simultaneously spun back around. The Doc was nowhere to be seen; he had vanished along with any trace of his dirty labor. Unsure of where to go or what to say, their gazes trained on

THE GRAVE: Uncharted territory.

(Excerpted from Volume II, page 4)