

chapter 7  
**DEAR ARGENTINA**



LETTERS  
POSTMARKED  
BUENOS AIRES  
ARRIVED EVERY  
FEW WEEKS.

THEY FORMED A  
SLENDER TETHER TO  
THE OLD COUNTRY.

1964



WITH EACH  
PASSING YEAR, MY  
IDEA OF ARGENTINA  
CONTRACTED A  
LITTLE MORE.

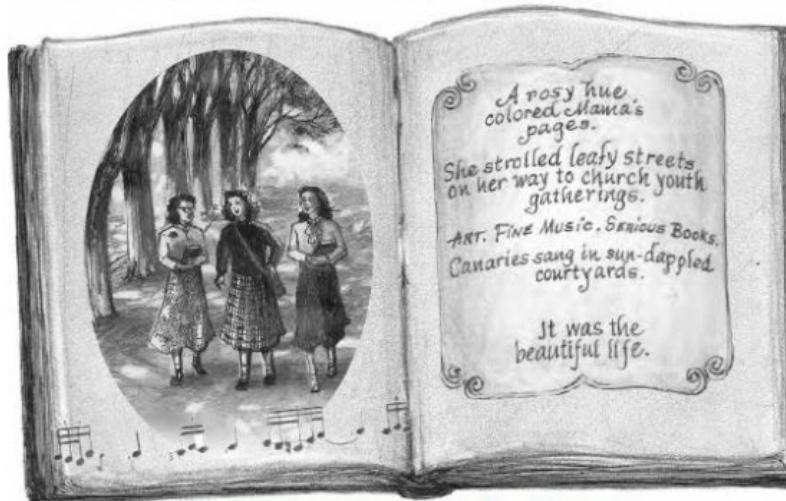
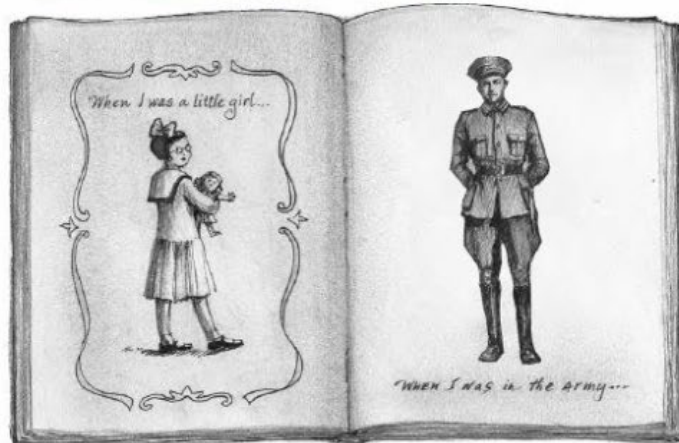
IT WAS DOWN TO THE WORDS OF  
MY GRANDFATHER AND THE PHOTOS  
THAT CAME WITH  
HIS LETTERS.



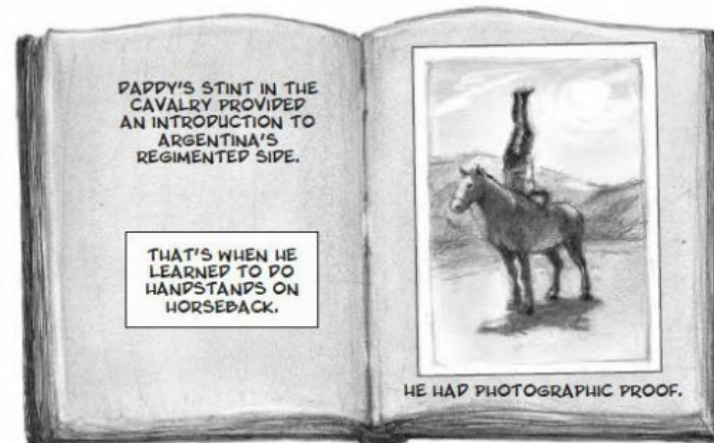
THE TINY PEOPLE  
IN THEM—AUNTS,  
UNCLES, COUSINS,  
GRANDPARENTS—  
LOOKED  
INCREASINGLY  
LIKE STRANGERS.



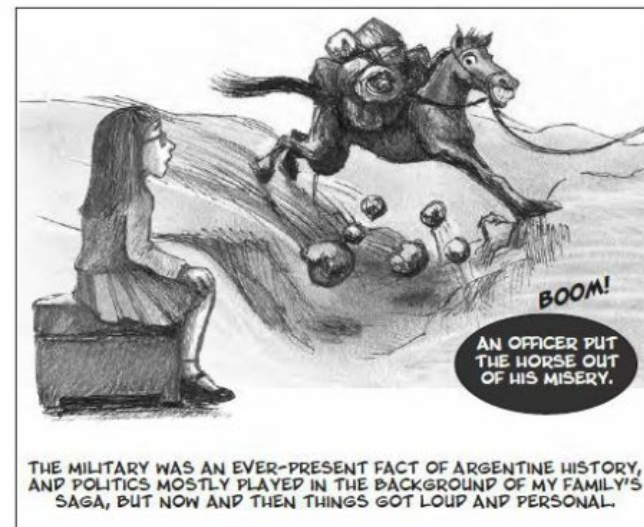
MAMA'S AND PAPPY'S STORIES ABOUT THE OLD COUNTRY TOOK ON THE FEEL OF FAIRY TALES ON YELLOWED PAPER.



MY GRANDFATHER'S POETIC LETTERS REINFORCED THIS IMPRESSION OF ARGENTINA.



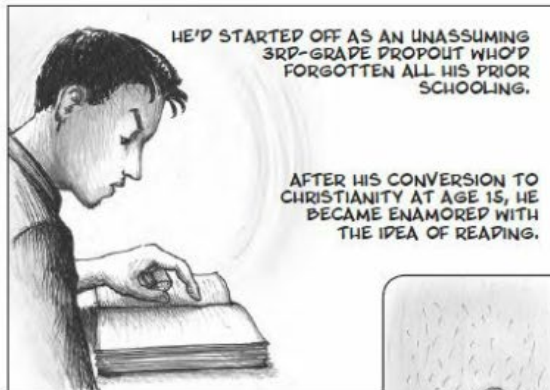
THEN THERE WAS HIS HORRIFYING ACCOUNT OF AN OVERLOADED PACKHORSE WHOSE SPINE SNAPPED WHILE CROSSING A RAVINE.



THE MILITARY WAS AN EVER-PRESENT FACT OF ARGENTINE HISTORY, AND POLITICS MOSTLY PLAYED IN THE BACKGROUND OF MY FAMILY'S SAGA, BUT NOW AND THEN THINGS GOT LOUD AND PERSONAL.







HE'D STARTED OFF AS AN UNASSUMING  
3RD-GRADE PROPOUT WHO'D  
FORGOTTEN ALL HIS PRIOR  
SCHOOLING.

AFTER HIS CONVERSION TO  
CHRISTIANITY AT AGE 15, HE  
BECAME ENAMORED WITH  
THE IDEA OF READING.

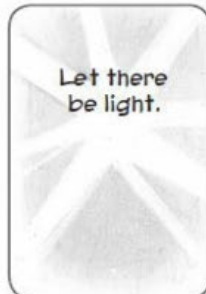
BUT THE MARKS ON A PAGE  
WERE NUMBING MYSTERIES.



HE LABORED OVER THEM,  
PUZZLING OVER PATTERNS,  
UNTIL GRADUALLY...



...EUREKA!  
THEY FORMED WORDS.



EVENTUALLY, HE FOUND A CHURCH THAT DIDN'T MIND A PASTOR  
WITH SCHOLARLY INTERESTS. THOSE WERE GOOD YEARS.



BUT THE PICTURE NEVER  
CEASED TO BE COMPLICATED.

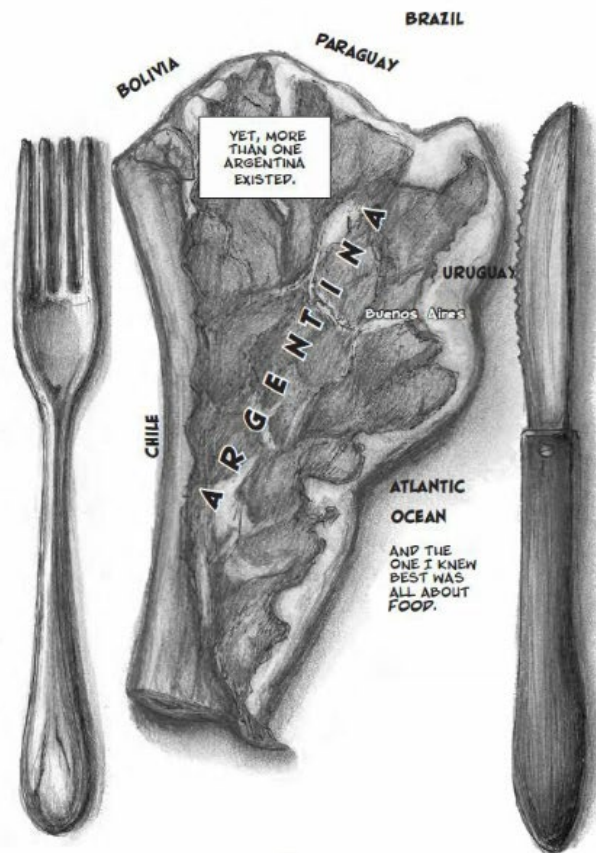


MAMA USED TO SAY,  
"ARGENTINA IS LIKE A BAD  
MOTHER THAT YOU LOVE ANYWAY  
BECAUSE SHE IS AFTER ALL YOUR  
MOTHER."

TAKING INTO CONSIDERATION  
THE LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES FOR  
WORK AND EDUCATION, TOGETHER WITH  
RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL OPPRESSION,




I UNDERSTOOD WHICH ARGENTINA SHE MEANT.












117

**ARGENTINE  
SPECIALTIES**

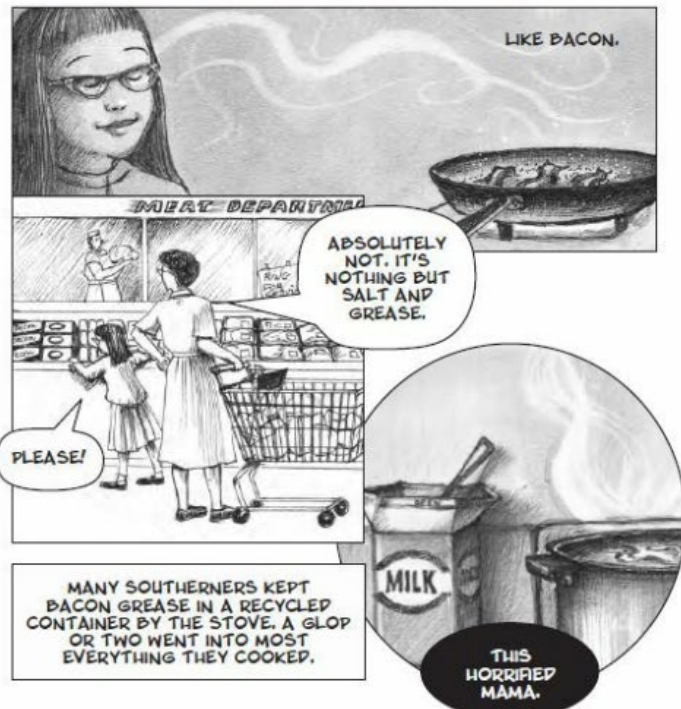
AS PERFECTED IN  
ALABAMA BY MY MOTHER.



<p>empanadas</p>   <p>pan francés</p>		<p>ravioli</p>   <p>milanesas *</p>
<p>dulce de leche</p> 	<p>medialunas</p> 	
<p>paella</p> 	<p>matambre **</p> 	
<p>ALL THIS AND MORE, SHE ACCOMPLISHED WITHOUT AUTHENTIC INGREDIENTS AND OFTEN WITHOUT A RECIPE.</p>		

\* A BREADED & FRIED STEAK \*\* A STUFFED ROLL OF BEEF

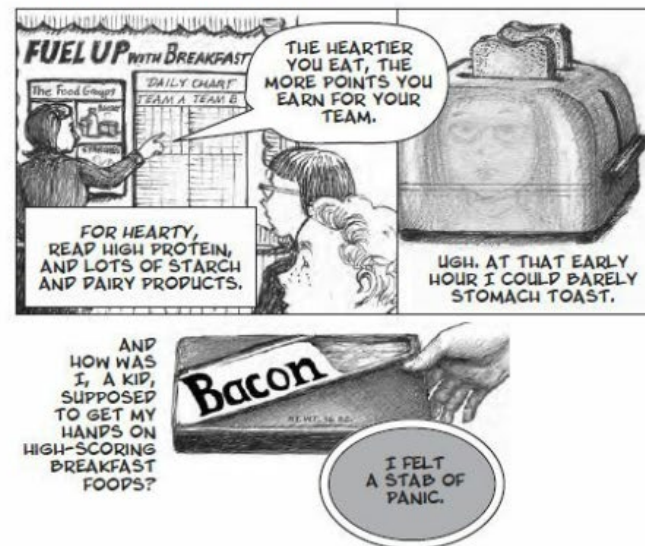
MY TASTE BUDS HAD BEEN TRAINED ON SOUTH AMERICAN FARE, BUT I HAD HANKERINGS THAT COULDN'T BE SATISFIED AT HOME.



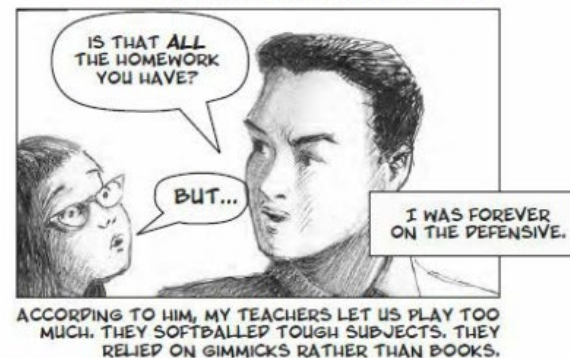
THERE WERE OTHER CULINARY PRACTICES THAT LEFT HER BEWILDERED.



WHEN MY 3RD-GRADE TEACHER ANNOUNCED A BREAKFAST COMPETITION, THAT'S WHEN THE CULTURAL FOOD WARS BEGAN TO ENCROACH ON MY PEACE.



I HAD YET ANOTHER PROBLEM THAT KEPT ME FROM APPEALING FOR HELP AT HOME: PAPPY'S SCORN OF AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL METHODS.





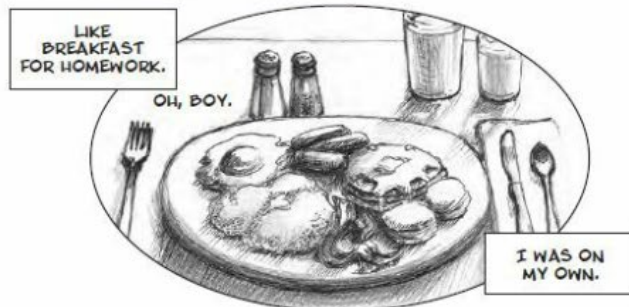
AND AS FAR AS HE WAS CONCERNED, THERE WERE FAR TOO MANY:



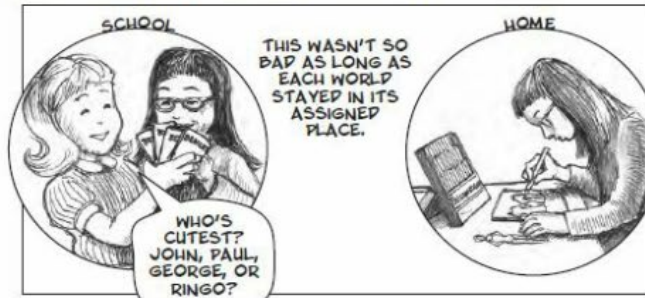
SCHOOL IN THE UNITED STATES WAS TOO EASY!



BUT I HAD MORE IMMEDIATE CONCERNS.



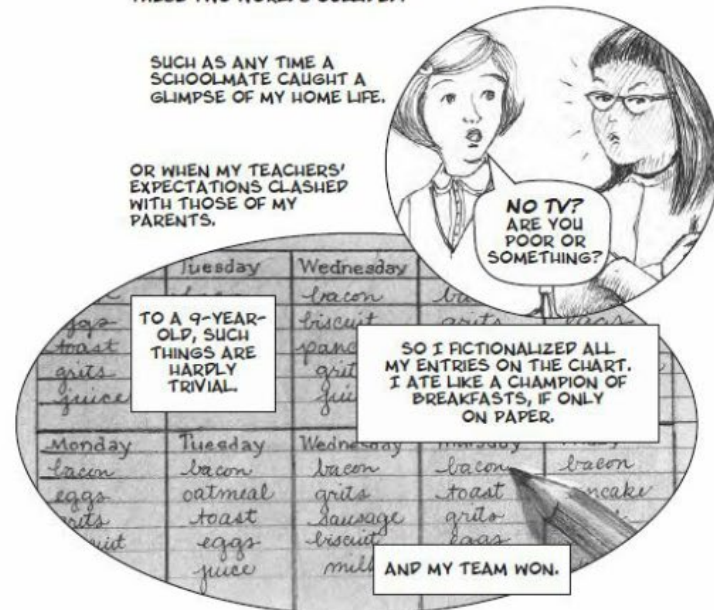
MORE AND MORE, I FOUND MYSELF ON MY OWN, SHUTTLEING BACK AND FORTH BETWEEN MY TWO WORLDS.



BUT SOMETIMES, DESPITE MY BEST EFFORTS, THESE TWO WORLDS COLLIDED.

SUCH AS ANY TIME A SCHOOLMATE CAUGHT A GLIMPSE OF MY HOME LIFE.

OR WHEN MY TEACHERS' EXPECTATIONS CLASHED WITH THOSE OF MY PARENTS.

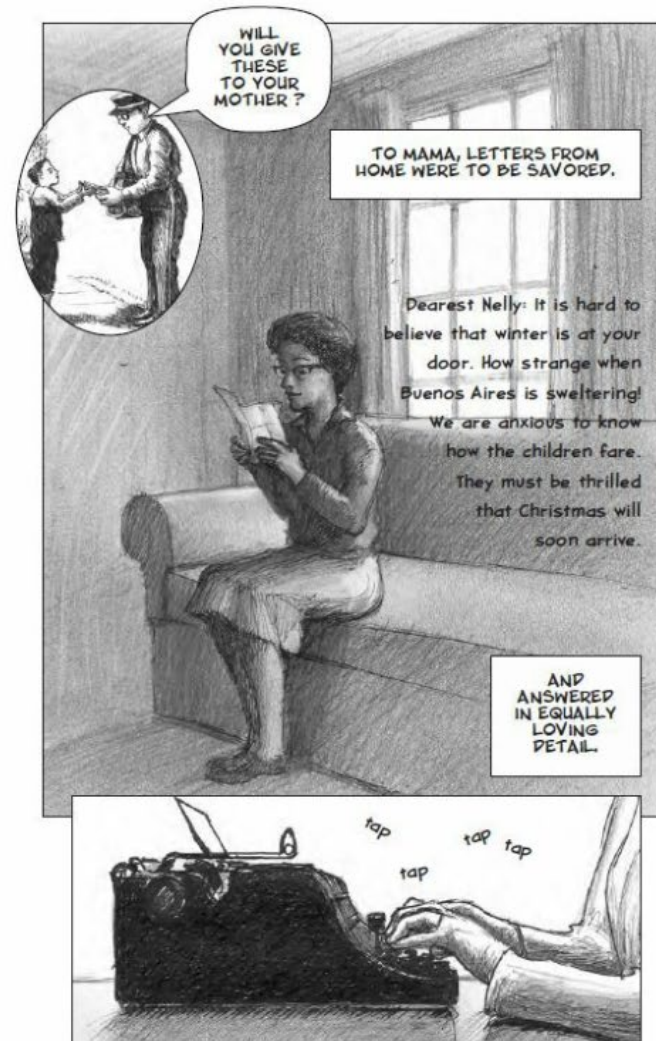


I SUMMONED WILINESS, AND IT CAME TO MY RESCUE. IT KEPT MY PARENTS IGNORANT OF THE BREAKFAST LESSON AND MY TEACHER IGNORANT OF THEIR DISREGARD.



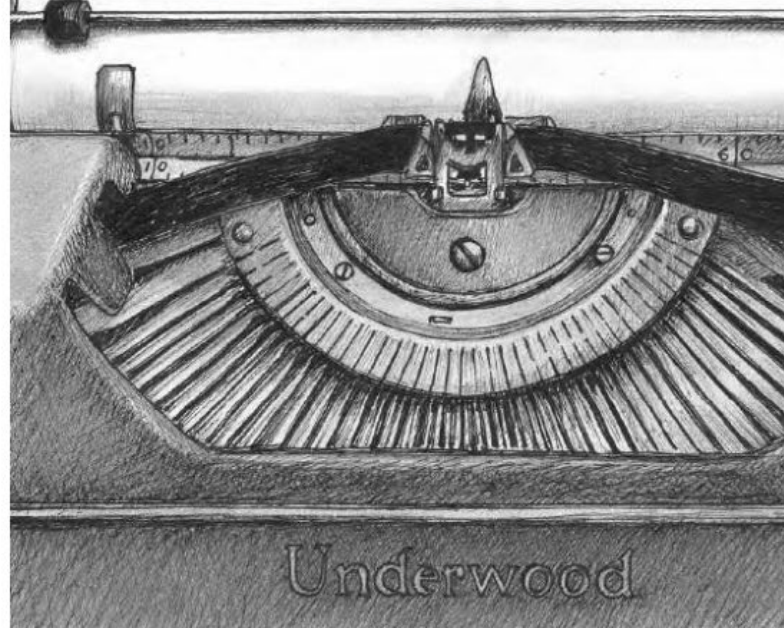
BUT  
THERE WOULD  
BE NO REST  
FOR THE  
WILY.

PLEMMAS  
LIKE THIS  
KEPT ON  
COMING.





We are all busy in our own way. Nestor's day consists of teaching or preparing to teach. He is truly in his element in the classroom. Ginny and Bill are settling in as newlyweds. Lissy is doing very well in school. She started the 7th grade and is collecting butterflies for a science project. I'm glad she's conscientious. There's little time to supervise anyone's homework, as I have several portraits to complete by Christmas. Johnny is the exception, of course, since he's learning to read and needs practice. Unless the weather's bad, he and Lila walk to school. I don't know what to do about Lila. She is our little neurotic! Her recurring nightmare is that she arrives at school without her books, although it has never happened—that I know of; she's rather secretive.



AT THAT MOMENT, I HAD FEW WORRIES. I WAS PUTTING THE FINISHING TOUCHES ON MY SET DESIGN FOR THE NATIVITY PLAY.

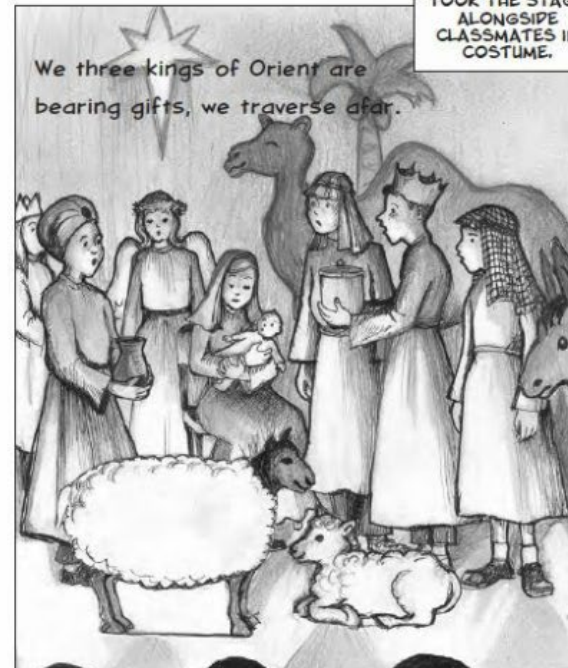


WHAT A PLUM ASSIGNMENT! I GOT EXCUSED FROM CLASS TO FIDDLE WITH PAINT AND BRUSHES.

NO OTHER KID WAS SIMILARLY ENTRUSTED.

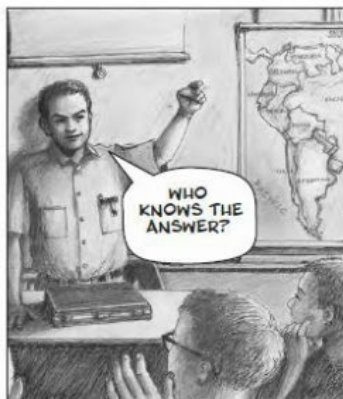
MY HANDIWORK TOOK THE STAGE ALONGSIDE CLASSMATES IN COSTUME.

We three kings of Orient are bearing gifts, we traverse afar.

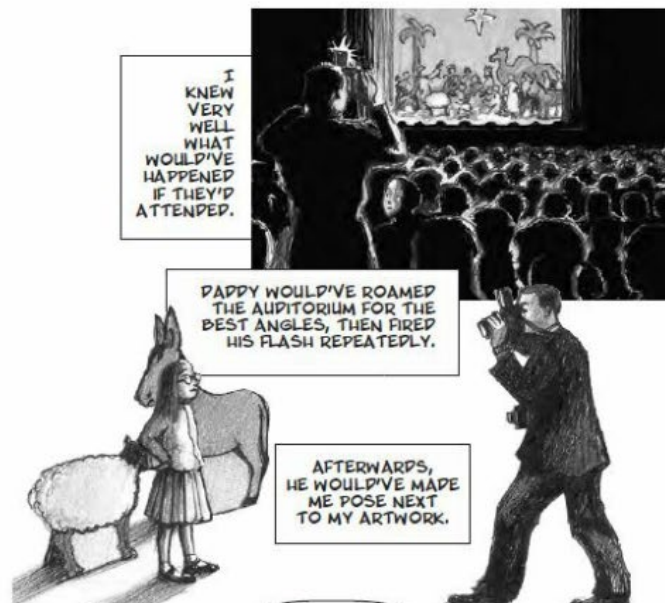




MY MOM AND DAD WERE GOING ABOUT THEIR NORMAL ACTIVITIES, OBLIVIOUS OF THE PLAY AND MY ROLE IN ITS STAGING.

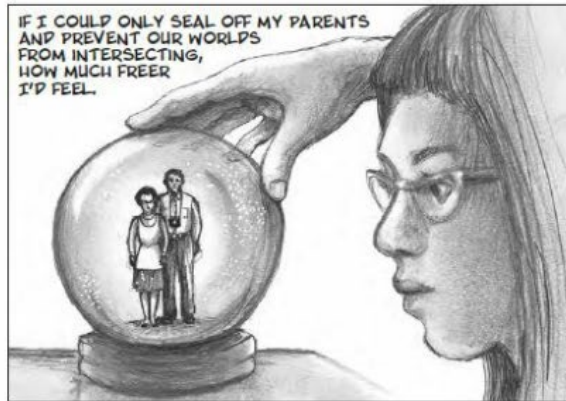


I baked two loaves of pan dulce for the holidays. It's not the same, but with every slice we think of you there.

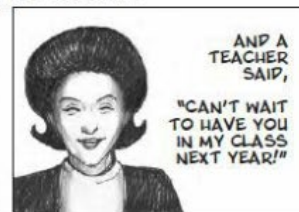


\* MOVE A LITTLE TO THE LEFT.





FREE TO REVEL IN THE MOMENT'S TRIUMPH...



I THOUGHT I HAD THE SITUATION UNDER CONTROL,  
BUT A FEW DAYS LATER:





