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Near Riot

Miranda Divett González
University of Texas at El Paso

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NEAR RIOT

MIRANDA DIVETT GONZALEZ

Master's Program in Creative Writing

APPROVED:

Tim Z. Hernandez, M.F.A., Chair

Paula Cucurella Lavin, Ph.D.

Leif Lundmark, Ph.D.

Stephen L. Crites, Jr., Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

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2019

Dedication

To Carmelita and the feminine mob

NEAR RIOT

by

MIRANDA DIVETT GONZALEZ, B.S.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

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in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
PREFACE.....	viii
WORKS CITED.....	xxv
NEAR RIOT.....	1
Frank.....	2
Anita.....	11
Ulises.....	19
Maru.....	27
Estela.....	35
Brian.....	42
Virginia.....	50
Lázaro.....	59
Diana.....	67
Meche.....	74
James.....	81
George.....	88
Josephine.....	93
Walter.....	100
Abner.....	108
Carmelita.....	114

AUTHOR'S NOTE.....123
VITA.....124

PREFACE

Project Scope

What distinction can be drawn between a writer and a journalist? Both research extensively and present compelling stories, but only a journalist claims to produce an objective rendering of “truth” backed by verified sources. Journalists are ethically bound to present facts without bias, but even then, they comb through masses of information and extract only what best serves the story they wish to present for public consumption.

Selective culling of facts is especially prevalent in what is often called journalistic activism, or journalism that is presented with the aim of inducing people to change their behavior. During the 2016 presidential election and continuing through the current presidential administration, there has been much talk of the spread of “fake news”—that is, irresponsible journalism that takes information out of context or wholly fabricates it to pursue an agenda while presenting the story to the public as truth.

In the modern information age when anyone can publish anything and distribute it to internet users worldwide, it is more important than ever to consider the origin of any communication and check it against multiple sources to ensure its accuracy. But even in the most ethical of journalism, pure untouched truth does not exist. This is because there is no one perception of reality shared by everyone, even by people experiencing the same event at the exact same time. Literary theorist Dr. Paola Bozzi notes that it is possible to expose “the fictional nature of reality” (2). Reality itself is a construct. Nevertheless, on the spectrum between absolute truth and complete fabrication, journalism is the closest approximation to “reality” in written form.

The creative nonfiction genre creeps a little further from that journalistic claim of truth, allowing for artistic liberties as a means of presenting facts in a more humanized, interesting format. One such book is Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, which sets forth the story of the 1959 murders of all four members of the Clutter family on their farm in Holcomb, Kansas. *In Cold Blood* is considered one of the first, if not *the* first, nonfiction novel. Its creation was "derived from [Capote's] own observation" combined with "official records" and "numerous interviews over a considerable length of time" (Capote 16). Despite the book being presented as fact, other journalists who interviewed the same subjects as Capote found discrepancies between the book and the interviewees' own versions of events. A son of one of the law enforcement officers Capote interviewed said that his father "was so disappointed in Capote's book that he read only about 115 pages before throwing it across the room" ("In Cold Blood Notes").

However, even without access to first-hand witnesses, a reader of *In Cold Blood* can quite easily deduce that the dialogue between characters would be impossible to recreate with complete veracity. Capote was not there, so he could only piece together what might have been said in keeping with known evidence. Furthermore, most people would be hard-pressed to recall with exact accuracy a conversation they themselves had twenty-four hours earlier, so it is reasonable to say that no written dialogue can be factual unless it is an actual transcript of a recorded conversation. But if, in the name of preserving accuracy, the characters never spoke to each other in Capote's novel, it is certain that readers would not have found it as accessible and compelling. The addition of dialogue is the quickest way to humanize history. This is perhaps one of the greatest separations between journalism and creative nonfiction—journalism may only use verified quotes, but creative nonfiction can fabricate entire conversations, an essential technique used to present real events in a more entertaining, palatable format.

Moving farther along the spectrum and further away from fact is historical fiction. This genre readily admits to building fictional characters and scenarios, but it does so with the understanding that they must fit within the confines of a specified time frame and in accordance with generally accepted historical facts. Though again, this becomes problematic because history is just a past version of the fictional reality Bozzi speaks of, shifting with the sands of time and the influence of parties in power.

Placing fictional characters within the context of known events requires a tremendous amount of research—the characters’ behavior, clothing, speech patterns, etc. must be reflective of their time period. There is room for great variance within the genre. A book may make reference to a major historical event, e.g. World War II, but other than an avoidance of obvious anachronisms, be complete fiction otherwise.

Another historical novel may be a portrait of a real person in history rather than just an era, like in Luis Alberto Urrea’s novel *The Hummingbird’s Daughter*. Like Capote, Urrea combed through historical documents and conducted interviews to piece together the story of his great aunt, but unlike Capote, he makes no claims on absolute truth. Urrea readily admits that he is “no historian.” He states that his goal was to “write a story, big and wild” (“About”). In this way, his novel is a work of surfiction, one that makes no “distinction between memory and imagination” (Bozzi 3). Rather, it blends history and artistry to create something entirely new.

Similarly, Dr. Lucille Kerr of Northwestern University asserts that Elena Poniatowska’s historical novel *Hasta No Verte, Jesus Mío*, has the “propensity to lie in order to tell the truth.” This book, set during the Mexican Revolution, is a testimonial novel, one in which Poniatowska interviewed a real individual, Josefina Bórquez, who formed the basis for the fictional Jesusa Palancares. The testimonial genre aims to give a voice, albeit a fictional one, to those who are

illiterate or otherwise oppressed. However, after *Hasta No Verte, Jesus Mío* was published, the interviewee claimed that the stories presented were “*puras mentiras*” (pure lies). Kerr says, “Poniatowska has had to lie to tell her interlocutor’s story, which we may wish to regard as otherwise essentially true” (377). The line between fact and fiction becomes heavily blurred in order to convey a captivating narrative and a vital theme: the strength of an individual twice oppressed—both as a woman and as an indigenous Mexican.

Poniatowska affirms that her book is not a literal transcription of Bórquez’s life, and for the sake of transparency, historical novels often end or begin with an author’s note, outlining precisely which parts of the story are taken from history and which are the author’s own invention.

Further still from the factual baseline is what is simply referred to as fiction, which makes no claim to be a presentation of true events. But even buried within complete fabrications, there is evidence of truth. Naturally, while realistic contemporary literature mimics real-life events and problems, it doesn’t tie them to a named individual or organization. Characters are often composites of people the author has encountered in his/her life. Even the most far-fetched of stories involving green aliens or fantastical wizards still have very human problems that mirror real experiences. Author Mario Vargas Llosa writes, “All stories are rooted in the lives of those who write them; experience is the source from which fiction flows” (15). So just as absolute truth is an impossibility, so is absolute fiction. Stories may hover on one end of the spectrum or the other, or they may bounce around the spectrum as it serves the narrative. What is most crucial to realize is that no story fits neatly into a box labeled “true” or “false.”

With this spectrum ever present in my mind, my novel *Near Riot* is an attempt to weave verifiable historical events into the lives of fictional characters who could have lived and

behaved in the manner that they do in my stories. Instead of attempting to create a facsimile of the past, I have reimagined it. Bozzi states, “While reproductive imagination is largely limited to calling up images of phenomena from past perception, productive imagination, on the other hand, has the power to reinterpret things through the layering of images over perceptions and plays a range of roles crucial to cognition, aesthetic appreciation, and artistic creation” (3). Over past perceptions (primary sources), I have layered my own perception of these events and created something new that, while not a faithful rendering of the historical events, could not exist without them.

Research, Poetics, and Assessment

Nearly two years ago, while listening to Texas Public Radio in my car, I stumbled across the story of the 1917 El Paso-Juárez Bath Riots protesting harsh disinfecting policies at the U.S.-Mexico border. These policies were prompted by fear of a typhus epidemic, which then-Mayor Tom Lea blamed on “hundreds [of] dirty, lousey [sic] Mexicans arriving at El Paso daily” (Romo 233). My immediate interest in the very young, female instigator of the riot, Carmelita Torres, led me to write song lyrics about her role in the riot for Professor Tim Z. Hernandez’s course “The Poet and the Songwriter.” At his encouragement, I continued to pursue Carmelita’s story for my thesis, which led me to David Dorado Romo’s book *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juárez 1893-1923*. Carmelita appears on four pages of Dorado Romo’s 260-page history.

While I consider his exhaustive, heavily-researched book a great example on the journalism end of the fact-fiction spectrum, I wanted more of the personal and emotional aspects of Carmelita’s story than his book could offer. Surely—I thought—with the daunting task of

researching 30 years of history involving two nations, Dorado Romo simply didn't have the time to pursue Carmelita's story more thoroughly. There must have been some historical fact he overlooked, I arrogantly assumed.

But the trail went cold on Carmelita almost as soon as I began my research. I scoured old newspapers, including both U.S. and Mexican Spanish-language publications, for any minute details I hadn't explored in her story. I talked to people living in the region and called the government agencies who would have dealt with Carmelita's arrest. I searched genealogical websites and spent hours in library basements scrolling through microfilm for baptismal records, marriage certificates, or census documents relating to Carmelita Torres, but I found nothing that I could conclusively link to her.

I was initially devastated because I started my thesis with the plan that my novel would be on the creative nonfiction end of the spectrum, hovering somewhere close to Capote's *In Cold Blood*. At some point I had to admit that I simply didn't have the information to support such an endeavor. My creativity would need to propel the narrative further down the spectrum towards fiction.

Nonetheless, I continued to research the people and events surrounding the riots and came across a number of fascinating stories that provided historical context for Carmelita's story. For example, I found an article in the *El Paso Times* about an immigration inspector who died of typhus fever and left behind a widow and eleven children. The community was so dismayed that the newspaper itself took up a collection for the grieving family. This tragic story almost certainly fueled the misplaced fervor that led to the inhumane treatment of individuals crossing the border. I also discovered that in the wake of the riots, some of the citizens of El Paso were more concerned with their missing maids and the delay in attending horse races in Juárez than

they were with human beings subjected to disinfection at the border. These secondary stories kept popping up, even as I desperately searched for information about the person who led me to start the project in the first place.

This lack of principal information and an excess of ancillary information finally led me to the conclusion that I would have to write the story around Carmelita, on the periphery, and hope that I could do her justice from afar. To help the reader better understand Carmelita's motivations, I felt it necessary to view her role in the riot against the larger backdrop of border tension and an inherent imbalance of power. I decided to write a number of narratives preparing the reader for and leading up to the final story of my collection: the riot instigated by Carmelita herself.

My time spent on research was not wasted—there were so many stories I discovered that I would not have otherwise had I not been on the hunt for Carmelita. And since there were many characters in play, I was convinced they wouldn't fit in one narrative arc. To cover as much ground as possible, I would need multiple, smaller arcs that would act as pieces of the larger puzzle. In short, I needed to write an episodic novel.

While not an incredibly common format, there is certainly a precedent for episodic novels, also called short story cycles or sequences. In his book titled *Modern American Short Story Sequences*, Dr. J. Gerald Kennedy of Louisiana State University writes:

A literary form at once ancient and avant-garde, the story sequence resists precise definition and occupies an odd, ambiguous place between the short story and the novel. Critics still disagree about what to call it: The genre discussed here as the sequence – to emphasize its progressive unfolding and cumulative effects – has been variously labeled the “short story cycle,” the “short story composite,” and the “rovelle” (a fusion

of roman and nouvelle). Although such works as Joyce's *Dubliners* and Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* epitomize the type and herald a remarkable outpouring of such collections in the twentieth century, the combining of stories to create a linked series dates back from *The Thousand and One Arabian Nights* to Chaucer and Boccaccio and even further to classical antiquity itself (vii).

Kennedy also notes that there is some confusion among experts about the degree of coherence required to deem something he calls “the short story sequence.” He states that the link between the short stories may be a “developing character (as in the *Bildungsroman*), a composite type or a set of characters; through a dominant explicit theme, such as isolation or revolt, or through the delineation of a particular locale, milieu, or community” (ix). In my case, the stories in my novel are linked by location (the El Paso-Juárez border region), but also very much so by a theme: recognizing (or failing to recognize) the humanity of those who are different from us.

Though each story must stand alone, their combined parts create an even bigger, more complete picture. Again, the stories are complete in isolation, but still the “sequential ordering” Kennedy refers to is critical (ix). If each story were to fit on an index card and the pile of cards were dropped, shuffled, and rearranged, the overall feel and outcome of the story would be vastly different depending on the placement of the cards.

Since the riot was the impetus for my thesis and nonnegotiable the most important story in my collection, it had to go last—it had to be the crowning achievement of my episodic novel. Every other story in the novel would lead up to the final event. Curiously enough, this meant that the stories were not arranged by chronology. For example, for the purposes of understanding the overall theme of the novel, some stories about the repercussions of the riot had to come before the riot itself so that the reader could understand the full weight of the altercation at the border.

To ensure that my theme came across throughout the episodic novel, it was important to me that the stories be tied together not only by location, but by character. In each story, at least one character and sometimes multiple characters are connected to characters from different stories, but not all characters make appearances in all stories. The resulting narrative organization looks something like a spider web.

To accomplish this, I looked to Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. In this very short novel, Wilder explores the stories of five unfortunate individuals who die when a bridge collapses in Peru. Their lives are intertwined in a "series of coincidences so extraordinary that one almost expects the presence of some Intention" (6). One of the victims, a servant girl named Pepita, was raised in the same orphanage where another of the victims, Esteban, grew up. The manager and the son of a woman named Perichole also die, and Perichole has a somewhat unprofessional business relationship with Esteban's twin brother Manuel. The daughter of the Marquesa, another victim of the accident, visits the Mother Abbess at the same time that Perichole does. And so forth. Wilder also finds inspiration for his stories in historical facts but invents a number of events (including the all-important bridge collapse) to make a compelling story.

Another more recent example of the episodic novel is Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Each of Egan's thirteen chapters is a self-contained story, but the stories are all interconnected. The reader gets the viewpoints of different characters in each story and, with each chapter, uncovers a little more of the novel's "truth" until it has been viewed from all angles. This is the kind of thoroughness I wanted to bring to my historical episodic novel.

While Egan's novel shifts between locations as far reaching Africa, New York, and Naples, my novel only shifts between Mexico and the U.S., staying mostly in the El Paso-Juárez

border region. And while her novel covers decades and generations, the events in my novel take place within a span of three years in order to focus on the politics and attitudes of a particular time and place. The novel begins with the El Paso City Jail fire, where 27 men burned to death due to an accident with the delousing baths. It ends with the story of Carmelita protesting those same baths at the border. Every story in between points to that final event.

By choosing the border as a setting, I created a challenge for myself. My characters would be speaking English and Spanish, but the narrative would be almost entirely in English. Since I'm bilingual, it would have been possible for me to write in Spanish when my characters speak Spanish and English when they speak English, but I would lose any readers who were not also bilingual. But to write exclusively in English would be to lose some of the feel and meaning of Spanish that is simply untranslatable. So the question was how to convey the idea that people are speaking different languages when, for the purposes of the novel, they are all speaking English.

An author who does an incredible job of balancing just the right amount of bilingualism in his novels is Luis Alberto Urrea. In *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, he actually deals with English, Spanish, and the indigenous languages Yaqui and Mayo. His approach is mixed; sometimes he inserts Spanish words where there is enough English context to create understanding, like in this exchange on page 30:

“Afuera?” said the child. “Sí?”

“You are not going outside.”

Here it is very clear to the reader that “afuera” means “outside,”—an unobtrusive Spanish lesson. A mother living in Mexico would obviously say, “No vas a ir afuera,” but that is too much Spanish to be absorbed by the average English-speaking reader. So the reader gets a taste of the

language without being overwhelmed. Urrea also does not italicize the Spanish words, which gives them equal footing with the English words, but it also serves to blur the boundary between languages, lest the reader assume that anything not written in Spanish means the character is actually speaking English. Following this reasoning, I have chosen not to italicize the Spanish words that appear in my novel.

In other areas of the book, Urrea's method is more overt, like when one character explains the meaning of a Yaqui word to another on page 32:

“You walked here from Sonora?”

“Ehui.”

“Ehui?” said Segundo.

“It means yes,” Tomás said. “In their tongue.”

“Indians.” Segundo spit.

This method is used sparingly as it could easily become tiring—readers expect a novel to read like a novel and not a language textbook. But if employed carefully, it's an effective technique.

One last method Urrea uses is to simply include Spanish words and assume that the reader should be familiar with them or that they can easily figure them out, like in this passage on page 55 of his nonfiction book *The Devil's Highway*:

Between the Americanized prices for their frijoles and the unpredictable spikes in the price of tortillas, Veracruzanos sometimes didn't even know how they would feed their families.

Urrea assumes that his target audience, Americans, should know what a frijol is, and he also figures that they can figure out that “Veracruzano” means someone from Veracruz. There is the possibility of confusing the reader, but it's a small one and worth the risk in exchange for

authenticity. I have modeled my own work after Urrea's successful bilingual techniques in an attempt to capture the unique border culture of the El Paso-Juárez region.

Framework

While an author should feel free to write anything that falls anywhere on the fact-fiction spectrum, there is a certain obligation to genre if a writer decides to call something historical fiction and wishes to be accepted by its readership. The Historical Novel Society defines historical fiction as being “set 50 or more years in the past...in which author is writing from research rather than personal experience”. While some historical novels lean literary and others more commercial, the general consensus is that “frequent historical novel readers tend to be quite unforgiving of obvious mistakes, because they can cast doubt on the author's overall research” (Johnson).

But here there is a problem: the books an author uses to research are not absolute truth, as I discovered in one case when I went to find the original sources cited in a nonfiction book and discovered that the claims made in the book had no basis in the referenced primary sources. And given the fictional nature of reality, primary sources are perhaps almost equally fallible.

So if authors of historical fiction are expected to stick to the facts, the question is then, “Which facts?” Or perhaps more accurately, “Whose facts?” Furthermore, Bozzi states, “The fact of telling or writing a story, the fact of relating of an event, always distorts that story or that event—fictionalizes it in the sense that it displaces the story or the event from reality into the realm of the imaginary” (2). Even the most meticulous and ethical historian will unknowingly distort events through the lens of individual perception. Perfect accuracy is in no way attainable and perhaps not even desirable.

However, it would be a mistake to completely abandon the conventions of the genre. Authors can choose to break any rule they want, of course, but they cannot control how the work will be received. It is possible to write alternative histories or historical fantasy, but in the name of clarity, it's imperative to categorize them as such. People do look to historical fiction for entertainment, but just as often they are looking for education. And if I have an important story to tell (and I do), I must walk the line between grounding the narrative in historical fact and not being chained to it, a balancing act I have discussed at length with my advisor.

There are also ethical concerns when writing about real historical people and places. In *The Story of a Novel*, author Thomas Wolfe asks, "Where does the material of an artist come from? What are the proper uses of that material, and how far must his freedom in the use of that material be controlled by his responsibility as a member of society?" Wolfe confesses that he has "by no means" satisfactorily answered the questions he presents, but following the backlash he faced from his community after writing a book heavily borrowed from autobiographical experiences, he admits that some "materials of life...are, perhaps too naked and direct for the purpose of a work of art" (17).

Again, I am presented with a balancing act. I cannot allow fear of public opinion to strangle the story I want to write. On the other hand, it would be unethical to be intentionally slanderous or cruel to people with living descendants. I choose to walk the line by making each character as multi-faceted and human as possible. There are no caricatured supervillains in my novel—but there are also no faultless angels.

To allow myself the most freedom in producing an engaging narrative, I've chosen to write about real events mostly from the point of view of fictional characters. With the exception of the "Carmelita" and "Josephine" chapters, all of the stories are told from the perspective of

people I invented. Carmelita, being the inspiration for the project, was irreplaceable as the chief actor in her own story. Originally I did write another version from the perspective of a different maid observing Carmelita's actions and joining in, but ultimately the story lacked the impact I was hoping for. In the case of Josephine, her perspective also seemed to be the best way to execute the story regarding the death of her husband from typhus. This event was a crucial addition to the novel because it was a major impetus for Mayor Lea, a good friend of the unfortunate doctor, to institute his drastic border policy.

There are other major historical figures who appear as characters in my stories, but only with secondary importance to the primary characters. These include Mayor Lea, Generals Pershing and Obregón, and Major Tompkins. Other real figures who are mentioned but never make an actual appearance in the story are Pancho Villa and the Buttner family. My decision to not use these individuals as primary characters is a matter of creating my narrative under the least restrictive conditions. With fictional primary characters, I am entirely free to invent personalities and intentions as they best serve the story.

Having at least some allegiance to fact is arguably more important when a historical novel broaches subjects and eras which are less represented in a genre that has historically been oversaturated with European-centric stories from popular eras such as WWII. If this is the first exposure readers have to the pre-WWI, U.S.-Mexico border region, I would be doing a great disservice if I failed to inform them about this significant, though little-known, moment in history. I do feel that I have a certain obligation to Carmelita and the injustices she was fighting against, especially because my topic has not already been covered quite as exhaustively as other times and places in history.

In order to fulfill that obligation to keep at least a tenuous grasp on fact, I have fabricated characters and events between the gaps of what is not found in historical newspapers, government documents, telegrams, etc. For example, my El Paso City Jail fire story outlines one day in the life of an escapee from the jail in the pandemonium following the fire. *The El Paso Herald* confirms that there were indeed three men who escaped the jail, but I have no way of knowing if one of them was a recently homeless drunk who had been kicked out by his wife, a member of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. At the same time, it's entirely possible that he could have been. Who's to say?

But the very nature of filling in gaps is recognizing that my work cannot exist independently of those other texts. In her article "Intertextuality: Origins and Development of the Concept," María Jesús Martínez Alfaro writes,

The concept of intertextuality requires, therefore, that we understand texts not as self-contained systems but as differential and historical as traces and tracings of otherness, since they are shaped by the repetition and transformation of other textual structures.

Rejecting the New Critical principle of textual autonomy, the theory of intertextuality insists that a text cannot exist as a self-sufficient whole, and so, that it does not function as a closed system. (268)

My jail fire story is "a repetition and transformation" of the news articles that reported on the tragedy. It cannot exist in isolation.

The theory of intertextuality applies to all genres of literature, but this is especially the case with the rich tradition of historical fiction. To attempt to get at the truth of the past, writers of historical fiction actively seek out other texts to inform their own work. This is perhaps one of the most admirable qualities of historical fiction authors—they admit that their work is not solely

their own, that it has been built upon generations of storytellers and a shared tradition, “this serious truth-seeking by means of a plurality of voices” (Martínez Alfaro 269). It would be unthinkable to write a work of historical fiction without first seeking out the very texts that constitute history.

Because of this, I found it especially fitting to utilize a “found title” (like a found poem) I lifted from the headline of the January 29th, 2017 edition of the *El Paso Times*: “Order to Bathe Starts Near Riot Among Juárez Women.” It’s a nod to my research, but more importantly, the words “Near Riot” are meaningful not only because the riot referenced inspired my thesis, but also because for the past century, the tension at the border has continued to be at a level I would consider on the verge of complete chaos—thus, “near riot.”

In addition to primary sources and non-fiction texts, writers of historical fiction are also inevitably influenced by authors who have gone before, who were also influenced by those before them. A writer of contemporary literature may claim to have single-handedly invented a story, but even that is inconceivable because “Aristotle holds that we learn through imitating others and...our instinct to enjoy works of imitation is an inborn instinct” (Martínez Alfaro 269). It is impossible not to be influenced by the texts that have shaped our basic education all the way to those that inform and entertain us on a daily basis.

In considering all of the texts that have informed my writing of *Near Riot*, I would be remiss not to include present day news stories. If border relations now were significantly better than they were 100 years ago, perhaps I would have heard the story about the Bath Riots in 1917 and said to myself, “How awful. Thank goodness things are better now.” And I may have moved on and not been properly disturbed to write these stories. But the fear of otherness at the border, inside the U.S., and throughout the world is alive and well. While U.S. officials no longer bathe

Mexicans in kerosene at the border, the panicked effort to keep that otherness at bay means that those who arrive at the border today are still being treated as problems rather than as people. Immigration policy continues to be based on how best to keep Mexicans out rather than how to cooperate and solve problems with our neighbor to the south. I have no illusions of orchestrating a border policy change through my thesis, but I do hope that readers of my novel will ask themselves the same question I have been asking myself throughout the writing of this work: Do I recognize the humanity of those different from myself?

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NEAR RIOT

Frank

March 5, 1916

Stark naked, Frank waited. Standing in a line of twenty-seven men, he tried to recall if his charges were for public intoxication or vagrancy. Probably both. He did remember being brought into the El Paso City Jail the night before, but as usual the particulars were lost in a drunken haze. Back when he was sauced, a lack of clothing wouldn't have bothered him. But now, disappointingly sober, he hunched forward in a vain effort to hide his pale, wasted body behind the man in front of him.

There were other skinny men too, but Frank was the thinnest of them all, except for a very young man at the front of the line. That boy was as skeletal as a street dog, ribs all sticking out and an Adam's apple taking over his tiny little neck. Fat men rarely went to prison, Frank thought. Jails were for hungry people.

Watching the health workers check the pockets of the prisoners' clothing and dip it in a chemical concoction, Frank covered his most treasured organ with his left hand, as casually as a man could while holding himself in public. He sighed. It was hard to stay out of jail since his old lady kicked him out of the house six months prior. After she joined the Women's Christian Temperance Union, she converted to the cause against everything he loved, principally, dance halls and liquor.

Frank looked down at his bare, dirty feet. The right one still ached every now and then, mostly at night, when the temperature took a steep dive. Myrtle had slammed his foot in the door the last time he tried to go home—slammed it good.

He'd tried to reason with her.

"But how will you provide for the children?" He'd asked, keeping his foot painfully wedged between the door and the frame so Myrtle couldn't completely shut him out.

"Ha!" she scoffed. "The way I have been for years since the saloon started stealing bread from our table—I've got work as a seamstress. We don't need you anymore, Frank, and we haven't for a long time."

Frank didn't know if it was the force of his wife's kick or the surprise of it that knocked his shoe out of the doorway and landed him on his rump. He'd had one too many, and his reflexes were slow.

Myrtle banged the door closed.

As Frank considered his options cross-legged in the front yard, Myrtle opened the door occasionally to toss some article of clothing outside—a worn pair of pants, a wrinkled shirt, a sock here and another sock there. When he was convinced she had nothing left to throw, he gathered his things in a bundle and set about wandering El Paso.

Around him once again, the familiar walls of the city jail seemed to be equal parts suffocating and comforting. This was his home now. After Myrtle tossed him out, he'd bounced in and out of jail, because who'd employ a hobo? He slept in an alley and got arrested. He slept on a bench and got arrested. He knocked back some whiskey to numb the ache of his former family, and naturally, got arrested. Jail was only good because he ate more regularly. Nothing fancy of course—oatmeal in the morning and something equally soupy in the evening to quiet his stomach. Though he'd trade food any day for the drink they deprived him of. He was subject to the whims of the Law.

Today was a new step in Frank's incarcerated experience: a delousing bath. When the jailer had ordered them to strip down, he knew something was different because the whole jail stunk of gasoline and vinegar. No one told him that's what it was, but the smell was unmistakable.

"What's with the gasoline?" Frank asked the jailer walking past the line of naked men.

The jailer stopped and gave a tight smile. "It kills the lice." He held his thumb and index finger up to his eye as if measuring the tiny bugs. "Typhus outbreak. The city is cleaning up, starting with the dregs of society." He pointed at Frank. "That's you." He turned and walked away.

"Oh," Frank said. "Right."

Frank had scarcely any hair left on his balding head—hardly a target for lice. Perhaps in the beard, though, he mused. The chemical burn that began in his nostrils seemed to be creeping into his brain. The staff opened all the windows in the jail to let the air circulate, but it wasn't enough. Frank's eyes teared up from the fumes. It was an involuntary reaction, but Frank couldn't help but feel that the tears were coming from something else besides the vapor. And the only thing more pitiful than a man crying, he thought, was a man crying *and* holding his pecker.

The young man in front of Frank blinked away the burn as they inched toward the disinfecting solution. He turned around to commiserate with Frank. "Hijole, that smell!"

Frank nodded, though he couldn't bring himself to make eye contact.

"What brought you here?" asked the young man. He crossed his arms over his bare chest.

Frank looked at the cement floor. What kind of strange individual wanted to start up a conversation in a room full of naked, uncomfortable men? "Drunkenness, I think." Frank locked

eyes with the man for a brief second, then looked away. He pantomimed throwing back a shot with his free hand, just in case the man's English wasn't that good. "I won't be here long."

"Nah," a man behind Frank jeered. "I saw you punch a cop in the kisser when they dragged me in. You ain't going nowhere."

Frank had no memory of hitting a police officer. He touched the knuckles of his right hand, which were indeed sore, now that he thought about it. This was just the kind of thing his wife was harping about when she talked about his regular blackouts. He ignored the man behind him because he sounded too much like Myrtle, which made Frank both oddly nostalgic and freshly ashamed of himself.

"How about you?" he asked the man in front of him. "What brought *you* here, er, what's your name?"

"Lázaro." He offered his hand.

Frank accepted it reluctantly, hoping that Lázaro's hand hadn't been touching his own man parts. "Frank." He released it quickly.

Behind Lázaro, a policeman brought in two fresh catches, still fully clothed, and held up a hand for them to wait while he mumbled something to the jailer.

Lázaro checked behind him to see if the line had advanced, then turned back to Frank.

"Well, I got arrested when—"

"Hey, McGowan!" The jailer yelled over their conversation, his voice bouncing off the ceiling. "You put that out!"

The whole line of men snapped their gaze to the two recent arrestees. In the absence of the police officer who had just exited the building, one of the new inmates, a blonde little fellow,

struck a match produced from his pocket. After the jailer's yell, he popped it in his mouth, extinguishing it on his tongue. A little puff of smoke escaped his lips. He didn't even wince.

"Don't you two boneheads move until we've got a chance to go through your things," the jailer hollered.

The two clothed prisoners nodded, then murmured something between them.

Seemingly satisfied, the jailer turned his attention back to a health worker hanging saturated clothing on a drying rack.

The other arrestee, the taller of the two, smirked and extracted a single cigarette from his shirt pocket. He put it between two fingers and brought it to his lips, where he held it tight while fumbling around in his pants pockets, searching for a light.

A hot panic crept up Frank's neck. Surely the idiot wasn't going to smoke in here with all the fumes. He was just fooling around, trying to provoke the jailer. But as the tall man extracted a book of matches from the pocket of his trousers, Frank realized he was really going to strike it. Fate wouldn't spare them all a second time.

The jailer was again distracted, scribbling something on a piece of paper.

"Hey!" Frank yelled to the man with a cigarette. "You're going to blow us all to hell, you son of a bitch!"

This caught the jailer's attention. He dropped his stack of papers and broke into a run.

McGowan elbowed the tall man. "Here he comes, Harry."

But Harry had already worked one match free of the pack. He struck it with a flourish, and before the orange flame could reach the end of his cigarette, the air around it ignited with a whoosh of white-hot fire, spreading around him like ripples in a blazing pond. Harry, McGowan, and the jailer caught fire, their clothing sucking the flames in their direction.

Then a blast like a 12-gauge shotgun sounded.

It took Frank a moment to realize that no shot had been fired. He blinked hard. No, the tub full of gasoline had exploded, raining flames and pieces of metal around the room. Those who were waiting for their clothes to dry, their bodies still dripping with the delousing solution, had ignited on contact. The room was now ablaze in angry orange holocaust, men screaming and making ungodly noises. They ran in circles, the flames following them around like their own devilish shadows.

Frank patted his body to see if he too was on fire, but as far as he could tell, only the hair on his eyebrows, chest, and arms had been singed off. The smell of burning human meat nauseated him, and he swallowed to push back the bile.

His eyes flashed around the room, looking for a way to escape, but the door to the hallway adjoining the police station was always locked. The jailer ran shrieking to the corner of the room, where he turned on a shower and extinguished his burning body under the water, sending up blinding clouds of gray smoke.

Suddenly, the soles of Frank's bare feet began to burn. Not the burn of running across hot summer sand, but like his feet were two cheap steaks in a cast iron pan. "My feet!" he screamed. He hopped from foot to foot, but it was no use. The heat from the floor was cooking him from the ground up.

"Let us out!" someone wailed from the adjoining cells. The bedding inside had begun to burn.

"Por dios, ¿no nos dejen aquí!" wailed another.

The sopping jailer emerged from the haze. Though he had thick-soled shoes on, he hopped on one foot across the room toward the doorway, and when he could stand it no longer,

switched to the other foot. He sprinted through the wall of fire and unlocked the main entrance before disappearing into the hallway.

“It’s open!” Lázaro gasped, dancing away the burn in his feet. “We’ll have to run through the fire.”

“Then we’ll burn too,” Frank yelled.

The doorway filled with firemen who were darting around, dragging out the moaning, half-cooked men closest to the exit.

“You’ll burn either way,” Lázaro trailed off as he broke into a sprint.

Frank cast a final glance back at the cursing men, mostly Mexicans, in the locked cells. Several had climbed the bars like monkeys to get away from the infernal floor. By the time the firemen got to them, it would probably be too late. It could be too late for Frank too. He didn’t have time to think—he’d rather die than stand on his damned hot feet a second longer.

He hobbled behind Lázaro, running on his heels with his extended toes in the air. Holding a lungful of smoky air, he jumped through the fire. There must have been pain where his body touched the fire, but he could only feel the agony of his sole-less feet. He squeezed through the crowd of rescuers and still-mobile prisoners out in the bright sunlight. Frank caught a horrific glimpse as he burst through the door: a few bloody, charred men lay with their tongues falling out of their mouths. His stomach lurched, and he looked away.

The cool air hit like water on Frank’s overheated skin. He wanted to stop and lie down right there in the street, but Lázaro kept running.

“My feet!” Frank yelled to him. “My feet!”

“I’m not,” Lázaro coughed, “going back!”

“Hey!” a police officer shouted.

In the midst of all the roasting men and choking heat, a jail break had not been on Frank's mind. If he escaped, there would be no doctors from the adjoining hospital to fix his melted feet. But the freedom might be worth it. Still thinking, he huffed, straining to keep up with the younger and more muscular Lázaro, following the trail of his bloody footprints. His brain wasn't decided, but it would seem his body was.

Being a repeat offender with an assault charge would keep Frank in for some time, and he didn't ever want to go back to that place, not where they were more afraid of a few bugs than a human barbecue. So he kept running, even though he realized that what little hair he had left was on fire, along with his scraggly beard. What must have been smoldering back inside the jail was now fully ignited, stirred up by his rapid movement. He beat at himself with both hands like a man possessed with a demon. Lázaro did the same, only more furiously because he had more hair.

By the time they'd both put out the flames, they'd passed the roads on the edge of town and were running through biting sand in view of the Rio Grande. Oh, Frank thought, the river had never looked more beautiful. For a moment he worried he might be imagining it, that it might be some sort of mirage born of fevered delusion. And he kept worrying, right up until Lázaro leapt into the water. Frank plunged into the cool after him.

He sighed, then turned and floated on his back, his chest heaving in the clean air while he stared up at the free blue sky. It was a real oasis. His submerged feet still felt like they were on fire, but the water was gradually drawing out the heat. Blood like red ink floated around them. He would never leave this river, he decided. He would stay, exposed to the sky, and let the current carry him away in its bosom.

A splash of water hit him in the face and made him choke.

“You got to cross the river or they’ll take you back.” Lázaro pushed great armfuls of river at him. “They can still get you on the border.”

Frank closed his eyes. “They’re not coming.”

“What?”

“They’re busy with the fire. I’ve got time. You go on.”

“Well all right then. If you want to be a fool.” Without hesitation, Lázaro swam away, creating a pleasant sloshing around Frank’s body.

Soon the splashing sound died away. Frank was too tired to raise his head, but he knew Lázaro was gone, like the black-haired guardian angel he was.

Angels. Maybe God had sent that fire to torch the jail, to spook Frank into leaving the bottle behind. Hell, maybe Myrtle had prayed that fire upon him. There would be no more drinking. No siree. He’d have to go to Juárez until things settled down. He’d get some work, learn some more Spanish. And find some clothes, first of all. He’d nearly forgotten he was still naked as a jay bird.

On the other hand, it would be a crying shame to go to Mexico and not have a few shots of tequila. That’s right, Frank thought, taking a gulp of river water to soothe his parched mouth. Just a few shots wouldn’t hurt. He had to have something to kill this awful pain while his feet healed, after all. Just medicinal. A pair of pants, a little tequila, then he’d leave the bottle forever and get to work. He floated down the river, pulled gently along by its lazy current.

Anita

March 9, 1916

When the first New Mexican house went up in flames, Anita was a few kilometers away on a small hill with a distant view of Columbus. Safe on the cold sand, her feet were in *old* Mexico, just south of the concrete obelisk marking the border. Even though she had a decent vantage point, with only a tiny sliver of moon, she hadn't been able to see much of anything until the town caught fire. Had burning the houses been part of the plan?

A Villa scout had told the División del Norte there weren't many U.S. soldiers keeping watch at the post, perhaps about thirty. Her brother, Luis, along with hundreds of other men, intended to commandeer much-needed American ammunition and livestock to bolster their rag-tag outfit. Then they'd go back the way they came. But there was nothing for Anita to do except wait on her side of the border next to her nervous old horse.

She licked the remains of mashed pinto beans from a wooden spoon and scraped the side of the pot, looking for more. There was something maddening about preparing a meal, smelling the lard, and testing the salt on her tongue, only to be left without a good portion. The more she made, the more Luis' unit ate. She didn't flinch when they asked for seconds, even though she knew that each additional spoonful she gave away was the shape of the future hole in her belly.

She couldn't begrudge them. After all, they were the ones doing the real fighting. Villa allowed soldaderas everywhere else but in his cavalry—they slowed the men down, he said. Expressly forbidden, he said. But after the defeat in Celaya, he was too disorganized to notice a stray sister in disguise.

When she caught wind of his location through the rumors swirling in the town among Villa supporters, Anita dressed in a spare set of Luis' clothes and met up with him. That way, he would at least have proper food in him before he rushed off to the possibility of death. Each time she saw him could be the last time. Power had changed hands so many times in Mexico City Anita had forgotten who the heroes and villains were.

Luis promised her the Villistas weren't the villains, but she wasn't so sure. "We are fighting for our stomachs," he'd say. "Don't you see?"

She could not see. The poorest Mexicans didn't seem any better off—unless it was better off to be dead. So many of them had followed Villa into the death trap of the revolution. If Anita was here with the Villistas at all, it was for one thing—to make sure Luis wasn't hungry or sick. He was the only family she had left.

The house-shaped torches burned orange in the distance, and if she squinted, Anita could see the silhouettes of tiny men running. To distract herself from the pop-pop of the sniper rifles from Villa's entourage on an opposite hill on the outskirts of town, she closed her eyes and pretended to be somewhere else.

She remembered another fire, just days and more than a hundred kilometers on horseback ago—the fire that sent her a young man without clothes, without shoes, and without skin in places. On her way to the Rio Grande to wash clothing for the trip to Columbus, she'd seen a glistening figure emerge from the water. It wasn't the first time she'd seen a man finish up a bath in the river. He'd locate his clothes, grabbing them from a nearby bush, and be on his way.

But this man didn't stoop to find his clothes. He didn't even appear to be going anywhere in particular, just walking aimlessly and not even aware of his nakedness, like Adam in the garden. As he came closer to her, she noticed his walk was one of pain, his weight on the outside of his

feet, bow-legged, as if he couldn't bear the pressure. With his thoughtful gaze elsewhere and the body of the man who must lift things for his living, Anita was entranced. By God, he was beautiful. If it hadn't been for his funny manner of walking, he would have been perfect.

“¿Está bien?” Anita called.

The man kept walking towards her in his odd way, wincing and disoriented. He lifted his eyes toward her, away from his feet. “No,” he said, with the slightest elongation of the “o”. He was an American Mexican.

“What happened to you?”

He stopped just in front of her and sighed. They were almost the same height, though he was maybe a few centimeters taller. “It's a very long story.”

Anita set her basket of dirty laundry down and tried to keep her eyes on his so she couldn't be accused of looking where she shouldn't. “I've got time.”

“There was a fire. An explosion at the El Paso jail.” He signaled backwards to the border with his thumb. “I was burned,” he pointed to his feet. “It hurts like the devil.”

He was still standing on the sides of them, knees jutting outward. The feet were ghastly—no skin, except the strangely white, jagged pieces around the edges. The rest was a painful muscle-colored red. The fire also explained his lack of eyelashes and eyebrows, his hairless chest. And the nakedness, too, she supposed.

She wanted to know what had landed him in an American jail but thought it would be rude to ask. Besides, he didn't look like a murderer. She wasn't afraid of him. If anything, she had an urge to run a finger along the smooth ridge of his brow.

“Well, your burns are getting filled with sand. I’ll take you to my brother’s house.” She dug around in the basket and found a shirt and pants that belonged to Luis. “They aren’t clean yet, but they’ll serve for getting you to the house.” She shook them at him. “Put them on.”

He took the pants from her and tried to lift a foot but nearly lost his balance. “Can I touch you?”

“Perdón?” Anita felt the heat flush to her face.

“I mean, can I use your shoulder to steady myself?”

“Oh.” She swallowed, then nodded. “Yes, of course.” She stood a little straighter.

His hand splayed on her shoulder while he picked up a leg. Through her blouse, she could feel that his palm was oddly cold. She turned her head to the side, decorously.

“¿Cómo se llama?” she asked the air beside them.

“Lázaro. And you?”

“Ana.” She glanced at him. “Anita.”

He squirmed, struggling with a pant leg. “A pleasure meeting you,” he said.

“You as well.”

The pressure on Anita’s collar bone lifted when he leaned his full weight away from her and buttoned the pants.

“Here.” She extended the shirt toward him.

“Gracias.” He put his arm through one sleeve but gasped when the cloth hit his shoulder.

“Ay.” He grimaced. “There must be a burn on my back somewhere.”

“Not to worry. You’re decent enough.” Even as she said this, Anita still felt the need to look at the sagebrush beside them instead of Lázaro’s bare chest. At least he was no longer pantsless.

He leaned to one side and let the sleeve fall away from his body. “Thanks anyway,” he said, handing her the shirt. “Now what? I don’t have shoes.”

“I’ll carry you.”

Lázaro snorted like a horse. “Really?”

“Really.” She threw the crumpled shirt in the basket, then squatted down in front of him and pointed to her back.

He laughed again. “I’ll break your back.”

“No you won’t. Get on.”

“Are you sure?”

“Just get on already.”

“Fine, fine.” He swung his leg over her and sat down while Anita braced herself against the weight. He placed both hands very lightly on her shoulders, clinging just by his fingertips.

“Hold tighter or you’ll fall,” she commanded.

He let his palms collapse onto her shoulders.

Anita looped her arms under his thighs and straightened her knees, which were protesting the added weight. Swaying and grunting, she took her first step and staggered a little. “Honestly,” she huffed, “I feel like you’re going to fall. Can’t you hold on any tighter?”

Lázaro pressed his chest into her for stability and wrapped both arms across her collarbone. “¿Mejor?” he asked.

Straining against his weight and with his forearms uncomfortably pressing near her windpipe, Anita was unable to speak. Instead she nodded and picked her way silently across the desert landscape. Her eyes became watery, perhaps because of the sandy wind or the fact that she

was near choking. Most likely it was because she couldn't remember the last time someone had embraced her, even a clumsy, backwards hold such as this.

Now, standing under the darkness and watching Columbus burn, she closed her eyes and thought of his body draped over the back of hers, the warmth between them as she took halting steps toward the house. What might he be doing now, there in Juárez?

When she left Lázaro, he was lying on her brother's bed, legs locked to keep the soles of his feet from touching any surface. She'd washed them methodically, extracting bits of sand and sticks while he gritted his teeth and silent tears slipped out of his eyes. Layers of seared skin came off during the washing and floated to the top of the water, but it didn't faze her. Anita had seen worse things among the wounded in Luis' unit.

She boiled linen and while it dried, covered his feet and the burned patches on his back and scalp with yarrow paste, something Tía Maru had taught her to make before she'd disappeared for good.

Then Anita wrapped his feet with the sanitized strips and told him to rest. She left him several pitchers of water to drink and a bed pot so he wouldn't have to go outside to answer nature's call. He was welcome to what little food he could find in the house, she instructed, but he was to crawl on his knees and not let his feet touch the ground.

"Regreso pronto," she said.

His black eyes shined all the brighter against his lack of lashes. "Come here, will you?"

She went to the side of the bed and looked down at him. He kept shifting positions, more restless than pitiful, impatient that the soles of his feet hadn't grown back yet, even though it had only been two days.

"Your hand."

She narrowed her eyes.

“To steady myself.” He grinned.

Anita scoffed but extended her hand.

He sandwiched it between his palms. “You’re an angel, you know that?”

“No sea tonto.” Anita’s cheeks felt hot.

“I feel if you leave, all the good things will go with you.” His smile had disappeared, his expression earnest.

Anita looked away from his eyes. “That’s ridiculous. We just met.”

Lázaro guffawed, far from offended.

Anita pressed her lips together. “I have to go.”

“I know that. I just want you to know that I will miss you.”

“I’m coming back.”

“I know.” He squeezed her hand lightly and brought it to his lips, pressing them against her skin.

The sensation provoked by his mouth on her hand was so strong and so sudden it was almost painful. Even though she’d never tell him, she wished she could stay with Lázaro and stroke what was left of his hair. She didn’t want to go anywhere. But she couldn’t abandon her brother.

The taka-taka-tak of American machine guns from Columbus interrupted her thoughts. A flood of nausea launched her to her feet. They’d been discovered. What if the Americans killed Luis? What if they mowed him down in a spray of bullets? There was nothing to do but pray for a hasty retreat.

There was no time to pace in distress. She packed her things onto her horse and mounted. She’d be ready to go as soon as Luis came back. If he came back.

Only a few minutes passed when, like a disturbed anthill, men on horseback scattered away from the town, urging their animals towards the border and kicking up clouds of dust. But something was wrong—past the marker the sound and smoke of the gunfire was following them into Mexico. And where was Luis? She sat still on her horse, like a statue, even though the wave of men was fast approaching, pursued by the Americans with one hand on the reins of their horses and a gun in the other.

One man from Luis' unit broke from the horde and galloped past her. "Idiota!" he yelled. "Luis is dead! Move before they shoot you too!"

So this was how she was hearing this news, shouted at her while the enemy descended upon them. She couldn't move. Her heart hurt as much as if she were the one who had taken in a stream of bullets. She'd always told herself she'd die when Luis died. The time had come, and she didn't know what to do. Should she stay and fight? With what? The bean pot?

She couldn't run away while Luis' body was stuck in that town—couldn't resign him to a kerosene-drenched, mass funeral pyre. Yes, she decided. She would die right here, on this spot. And then she and Luis would be together, along with her father who died in Veracruz, and her mother who died bringing to light a baby sister who didn't live longer than a week.

One U.S. Cavalry man veered off course, seemingly puzzled at the lone rider standing still, away from the pandemonium. Here he comes, Anita thought. The executioner. He yelled something at her in English, but she didn't understand. He pointed his revolver at her chest.

Shoot me, she wanted to tell the American. *Right here, in the heart. I'm already almost dead.* But her hands wouldn't obey. They were removing her hat. She shook out her long hair and raised her hands in the air.

Ulises

April 21, 1914

When he arrived at the Veracruz post office that morning, Ulises found a beautiful black butterfly on the outside window ledge. The wings were splashed with vivid blue lines and soft spots of orange. He inched toward it, wanting a closer look but afraid of frightening it away. As he bent to examine it, he realized the careful approach hadn't been necessary—it was stiff and lifeless, though the wings were perfectly intact, like it still might fly away on a whim.

A sudden, painful image struck him: his wife, Ana Gloria, in her casket. Her placid expression was frozen but she looked for all the world as if she could wake up any minute, just like this motionless butterfly.

He sighed and blew on it gently. It fluttered, but it was the movement of his own breath, not of inherent life. And something about that action struck him as revelatory. Ulises knew he was going to die.

He could say the dead butterfly was a premonition, but that sounded too gloomy. It was more like a welcome announcement. It was all right. He was fifty-nine—a perfectly decent time for expiration. He put his key in the lock, opened the door, and stepped inside.

As he prepared to receive his first customers, he was in especially good spirits, knowing this was his last day. He waited for the end patiently all morning, weighing letters and stamping postmarks for impatient customers and chatting with the regulars.

“May it be well for you, Señora Castro,” he sang as an elderly woman walked away from the package she'd left on his counter.

“Igualmente,” she called back. The door closed.

Ulises continued attending to customers, musing all the while. How was he going to die? It wasn't hurricane season yet. Perhaps there would be an earthquake, and the building would fall on his head. Or a fire, maybe?

Mail was very flammable; all it would take was one careless match. He cheerfully eyed his younger co-worker, Max, who was puffing his cigarette while taking instructions from a customer and tapping out a message on the telegraph machine. Though Max had never started a fire yet.

Hmm, Ulises thought. An armed robber was the most likely bet. It happened once before. How exciting to imagine the many possibilities.

At ten o'clock, Ulises began to doubt his vision into the future. Sure, the day was still young, but he liked to get things done in the morning. He would have to trust that it was God's timetable, not his. And he began to feel the slightest tinge of guilt about leaving his children behind. Luis was nineteen and Anita, seventeen. That was close enough to proper adulthood, he reasoned. They would be fine.

A two o'clock, Max rapped on the counter to pull Ulises back to earth. “Ulises.” He waved to get Ulises' attention. “Ya me voy,” Max said. “I'm going home to eat something, but I'll be back.”

Ulises nodded. He'd usually close up and head to a fondita to eat, but something told him he needed to stay in the empty post office. He didn't want to miss death if it came to call.

Not five minutes after Max left, the shift in the universe came. The still-unlocked door flew open and hit the inside wall with a bang. Ulises jumped at the noise, but then laughed a little when he saw who it was—his longtime friend, Eduardo.

“Ay, Eduardo. You scared me for a minute.”

Eduardo’s already thin face seemed collapsed with worry. He pulled the door shut behind him quickly, as if he expected someone to follow him through the open door. “Ulises!” he cried. “They’ve landed. It’s all over for Veracruz.” He dragged his hands down his worn cheeks in despair.

“Quién, Eduardo? Who has landed?”

“The Americans.” Eduardo leaned against the counter to catch his breath.

It occurred to Ulises that he must have run to the post office. The acrid smell of physical labor filled the room.

“They said a German boat was bringing weapons for Presidente Huerta,” Eduardo continued. “And you know how the Americans feel about the Germans.”

Still unalarmed, Ulises scratched the base of his skull. “Well, is it true?”

“Of course it is. I work at the harbor—I know. There are hundreds of sailors out there.” Eduardo stretched his arms wide. “And they’re so pale they’re almost green.” He made a face. “It’s very strange.”

“No, Eduardo. I mean is it true about the Germans bringing weapons?”

He raised his shoulders and frowned. “I haven’t seen any uniforms besides the American ones. But *somebody* is fighting at the port. I was unloading a shipment, but I left.” He shrugged, his gloom calming a little. “I told myself, they don’t pay me enough to deal with gringos with guns.”

Ulises frowned. “I’m sure it will be over soon.” Even as he said this, Ulises began to panic. He had embraced death when it came just for him, but God wasn’t supposed to take the

rest of his town with him, and certainly not his children. How had he miscommunicated this in his insistent prayers?

“No, Ulises. Understand me. They are going to occupy the town. They’re taking over. I heard they’re coming for the post offices and the railroads first. I came to warn you and give you this.” Eduardo held out a curved pistol with a barrel almost as long as his forearm. The metal lock piece looked tarnished and the walnut stock had lost its shine in places.

“Ay, what would I do with a gun? And with that old relic,” Ulises squinted at it. “What is this, left over from when the French invaded?” Guns made him nervous. But he wouldn’t tell Eduardo that.

“It was my abuelo’s.” Eduardo set the gun on the counter with a clatter.

Ulises scoffed. “I’m not going to save all Veracruz with,” he counted the ammunition in Eduardo’s extended palm, “six bullets.”

“You don’t have to save all of Veracruz,” Eduardo reasoned. “Just the post office.” He shoved the gun towards Ulises, but Ulises only folded his arms and shook his head.

Ulises suddenly felt very tired. More than that, he was annoyed with the turn the day had taken. He’d planned to leave this world today, not save it. He was no hero, but he did need to make sure his children were protected.

“Look, Eduardo,” he said. “If you truly want to help me, take that gun, and go find my son Luis. Give it to him and tell him to take Anita to my sister-in-law’s in Chihuahua. They’ll be safe with her, and the gun will protect him on the way.”

Eduardo rested a contemplative hand on the gun.

“Luis knows where the money is for emergencies. Tell him to get some and buy railway tickets right away. And to pay you for the gun.”

Eduardo stared at the floor and pulled at his graying beard. “No, Ulises. That won’t be necessary.”

“But will you give it to him?”

He glanced at Ulises. “If that’s what you wish.”

“That is what I wish.”

“I can’t believe it.” Eduardo shook his head. “As if we didn’t have enough of our own fighting in this country already. Now somebody poked the bear to our north.”

“Don’t worry,” Ulises said. “Just get out of here.” Suddenly he was remembering walking to school in the rain with Eduardo, fifty years ago.

The smell of Eduardo’s frantic sweat was replaced by the memory of a different aroma—the cup of bitter black coffee he’d had for breakfast that day and the banana he had eaten quickly because they were late, running with umbrella-sized leaves over their heads to block the rain. He shook his head. Pouring rain and they had no shoes.

The memory dissolved. He looked down at his tough brown shoes and wished he could run barefoot in the mud one last time before he died.

“Ulises!”

“What?”

“I said, what are you going to do when they come?”

“I will talk to them.” Ulises spoke a little English. He could do it. He’d at least try.

Eduardo clicked his tongue in disgust. “No seas idiota. Just close down the post office and go home. Wait till this blows over.”

“No. You’ll do what we talked about. Tell my children to leave, and I will stay here.”

“All right. And when you die, is there anyone you don’t want at your funeral?”

Ulises knew this question was supposed to bring him to reason, to frighten him into leaving the post office behind. But he was no longer frightened of anything. Not for himself, anyway. “My neighbor, Toño,” he instructed. “I can’t stand that man.”

Eduardo burst into maniacal laughter. “Está bien, Ulises. I’ll tell him he’s not allowed.” He laughed until tears worked their way down from the wrinkled corners of his eyes and onto his cheeks. “I promise.” He offered his hand.

Ulises grabbed it and pulled Eduardo in for an embrace. “Qué te vaya bien, Eduardo.”

“The same for you.”

Ulises released Eduardo and turned back to the counter to sort through a fat stack of letters. He didn’t watch Eduardo leave, but he listened for his heavy footfalls to fade away. When Ulises ran out of his regular tasks, he swept the floor, waiting, once again, for death to come.

Something small stabbed his hand. He winced and checked his palm to find it embedded with a splinter from the handle of the corn broom. He used his fingernails to pull it out. With a flick of his fingers, he let the splinter fall to the floor.

The customers didn’t return, and neither did Max. Inside was still and quiet, even though the world around him was in a muted chaos, people fleeing the city just outside the door.

The telegraph machine sounded, and Ulises checked the paper tape.

“La Galera prisoners released to combat invasion,” he read.

So Eduardo was right. Something truly awful was happening if his own government was letting its murderers roam the streets in hopes of running out the Americans. Ulises let go of the paper and sighed.

At six o'clock Ulises locked himself inside the post office. He lay down on the cold floor, the knobs of his spine making contact with the wood planks. He should have been hungry because he missed mealtime, but he had long since lost his appetite.

Tapping his fingers against his thighs, he waited for the pounding, for the voice that would yell at him in English to hand over the keys. But it didn't come. Not at seven, eight, nine, or ten. Finally, out of sheer boredom, Ulises fell asleep, and slept like a mummified corpse, completely still and with his hands crossed over his chest.

He awoke when sunlight streamed through the window, boring into his closed eyelids. For a moment, he completely forgot where he was and what he was doing. He sat up. The ache of his spine reminded him that he was supposed to be defending the post office. He looked at the clock. It read eight. Why on earth had he slept so late? And why weren't customers pounding down the door?

Stiffly, he stood and wondered if he should unlock the door. His head ached at both temples. He decided he would only unlock the door if a customer came, otherwise, he'd just leave it. In the meantime he would make some coffee and eat a few crackers.

A sense of melancholy washed over him, and he was ashamed to admit that it wasn't because his town had been taken over by the American Navy. No, it was because he had been so sure he was going to die yesterday. The sign was clear to him. He had wanted to die ever since Ana Gloria died, and doubly so after baby Perlita passed away a week later. That was fifteen years ago. Hadn't he held onto this world long enough? His children were finally old enough to take care of themselves. They had their own employment. No one needed him.

Well, he decided, apparently it was God's will for him to live. Maybe he was supposed to survive to defend the Republic of Mexico's post office. So be it. And when this was over, he would follow his children to Chihuahua and start a new life, find a pastime worth breathing for.

A pounding on the door sounded. Now they came. Now, when he had talked himself into a new sign. "I was expecting you yesterday!" Ulises yelled, even though he knew they couldn't understand him.

The men were grunting something in English, and Ulises knew they wanted in. He stepped in front of the window and wagged his finger. "No," he said. "No, no, no. Go away."

An American soldier raised a rifle and aimed at him, then motioned toward the door.

The sight of the gun made Ulises' mouth go dry, but he had no urge to run. He crossed his arms over his chest. "No."

And the American pulled the trigger.

Maru

January 21, 1916

Charlie sat on a low wall of rocks overlooking the sunset-colored valley, one knee drawn to his chest and the other dangling. “Something, something . . .” he said.

Sitting next to him, Maru smiled convincingly, she hoped. She nodded. The wind picked up some wisps of hair and blew them into her face.

His hands moved to punctuate the words Maru couldn’t quite understand. “—as beautiful as . . .”

Straining to listen, she caught the wayward hair and tucked it behind her ear. She wished Charlie would talk slower.

“It’s something, something . . .” He looked at her expectantly.

A question? Maru understood a fair amount of English, but only under ideal circumstances. Living on the border for two years now, she’d picked up enough English to get by, enough to secure employment as a domestic in El Paso, working in one country and sleeping in another. But this wind whipping around them and carrying away their words was a serious hindrance to communication.

She turned her attention skyward and deduced Charlie was talking about the beauty of the view. “Yes.” She pointed at the distant blue mountain ringed with a wispy, dust-storm-induced haze. “Beautiful.”

“No.” Charlie shook his head. “Well, yes, but...” He reached for her cold hand and took it between his warm fingers before placing it over his own heart. “You,” he drew the word out, gazing into her eyes. “You. Are. Beautiful,” he hollered over the wind.

That Maru understood. She blushed, or attempted to, trying to show she simply wasn’t used to this kind of talk. But that was a lie. She was thirty-nine and had been married three times. But Charlie didn’t know that. He was a foolhardy romantic.

He, a city health official, had bumped into her on the trolley shuttling people between El Paso and Juárez, and after his abundant apologizing, she saw the thawing of his gray eyes and knew he was smitten. It wasn’t her fault, really. Just as a girl cannot help being born flat-footed and ugly, neither can she help being born with a face and body that made silly boys fall in heaps at her feet.

And silly but handsome Charlie had begged to walk her to the house where she worked, and then promised to pick her up afterwards and walk her back to the trolley. This had gone on for a month now. He took her for dinner at the café every Friday night, encouraging her to order whatever she liked and more of it—always more. Maru felt so strange to be treasured after a full day of being treated like furniture.

He probably thought Maru was much younger, but it was just her genetics, her unfading skin playing tricks on him. Charlie with his lighter skin had more advantages in this life, but he also had the beginnings of wrinkles around his eyes, even though he was several years younger.

Besides, Maru had no children, and a lack of offspring always made a woman look younger than she really was. Regrettably, the biblical plague of being barren had also made her neighbors look at her a little funny, as if there were something evil about her, something even worse than being significantly darker-skinned than the rest of the town. There was nothing more

suspicious than a married woman without children. And a woman with no children after three husbands? Absolutely no one could trust a woman like that.

Maru now lived with her niece and nephew, but they were practically adults by the time Ulises, may he rest in peace, sent them. They had been raised by someone else. She had no hand in that, and the neighbors in Juárez knew as much. She was useless, as far as they were concerned.

But Charlie knew nothing of her life on the other side of the border. For all he knew, she lived in a fairy castle instead of a one-room house with a leaky roof. Now sitting as close to Charlie as she ever had, Maru mouthed, “Thank you,” and smiled again, a closed-mouth smile because she had her secrets to keep.

Then, putting one hand between her shoulder blades, Charlie brushed his lips against hers, and she let him. He tasted like cigarettes and chocolate, and it wasn’t unpleasant. She kissed him back. She closed her eyes and pretended she was fifteen years younger. It had been a good six months since she’d done this with a man, since she’d kissed her third husband goodbye and he came back on the train, the shell of him wrapped in a blood-stained blanket. That sadness made her press harder against Charlie, nipping softly at his bottom lip with her teeth.

Her years of experience with men kicked in, and before she realized it, his hand was at her ankle, then stroking up her calf, and finally sneaking past her knee. She pulled back and pushed his hand out from under her skirt.

“No,” she held up a finger. “Nice lady.” She smoothed her rumpled skirt.

Charlie blushed pink to match the gradient of the sunset. “Maru, I’m so sorry. I forgot myself...it’s just...” His rapid-fire speech got swallowed up in a gritty gust of wind and Maru’s shaky grasp of complex English sentences.

“It’s all right.” She said. “Time to go.”

He looked crestfallen. “.....angry, are you?”

Maru caught the end of his sentence and shook her head. “No, no, no.” She patted him lightly on the arm. “Time to go. Sleep.” She rested her head on her hands, forming an imaginary pillow.

He smiled. “Right.” He stood and offered his elbow. He was over a foot taller than her. His dirty blond hair gleamed in the dying light.

She stood and took his arm, and they began walking to the crossing.

“Maru?”

“Yes?”

“...don’t want....home...I....” Charlie was nervously machine-gunning his words again, rendering him nearly unintelligible to Maru. The sky was now a wash of purple behind him.

She stopped walking and put her hand on his shoulder. “Slow, yes?”

He stopped as well and sighed, then begin speaking loudly and slowly, pausing between each word. “Maru. I. Want.” He took a breath. “To. Marry. You.”

He looked like he might tear up. Maru almost laughed, but she pressed her lips together.

“No more working,” he continued. “You,” he pointed at her. “Live. With. Me,” he gestured grandly to himself. “In El Paso.”

She could feel the desperation leaking out of him, getting mixed with the fine sand swirling around them. She pretended to think about his offer, but she knew she had him. There would be no more living in that town where everyone was suspicious of her, where they called her “La Viuda Negra.” There would be no more explaining that no, she did not make a habit of

murdering husbands. She was just exceptionally unlucky. The first one died of diphtheria in Veracruz, in the winter of 1900. Diphtheria! How could she have had a hand in that?

To get away from the memories of his final days of swollen desperation, she hopped on a train to Mexico City and married the first mustached capitalino who offered. But he had the misfortune of supporting President Madero when the rebels came for him in 1913.

She married one more man upon arriving in Chihuahua, and as luck would have it, he died of a bullet to the brain fighting against Carranza, supporter and successor of the now-dead Madero. Her husbands had a tendency to choose the wrong sides, it would seem.

But it was the last death the Juarenses couldn't forgive her for. There was something particularly damning about a third dead husband. How careless of her.

"You should have gone with him," they said. "You, who have no children, should have been a soldadera."

Cooking for ungrateful men and mending the crotches of their foul-smelling pants? No thank you. Furthermore, a full stomach was not the same as a bullet-proof one, and if her Villa-supporting neighbors couldn't understand that, well, there was no helping them.

"Maru?" Charlie's strained voice interrupted her thoughts.

"Oh." She brought her eyes away from the darkening sky and looked into his eager face. "Yes." She followed this with an emphatic nod.

Charlie clenched both fists with excitement, his face transforming from concern to a frenzy of joy. He pulled her close, so she was eye level with his chest.

She studied the buttons on his shirt and thought about how much nicer it would be to iron for one person instead of several. So lost in thought, she was almost surprised when Charlie pulled back, placed his hands on either side of her face, and kissed her.

Maru felt a bit sad at his sincerity. She could never love him as much as he did her. But what was there to be done about it? Three pieces of her heart had already been chipped off—and there was no getting them back. He'd have to be satisfied with what little she could give him.

Besides, she'd gotten so good at pretending, hadn't she? Another pang of guilt hit her. What if poor, dopey Charlie wanted children? Oh, he didn't know about the cobwebs growing in her womb. Should she tell him? Or just let the slow wave of disappointment engulf him, like it had the others?

“You all right?” he asked.

She snapped her focus back to him. “Yes.” She ran a caressing hand down his sleeve. “Very good.”

“Soon.” He smiled and grabbed her hand once again. They began walking anew.

No, he couldn't know about her family, her dead husbands. That was the whole point, wasn't it? To start a new life in a new country, without the past shackled to her ankles. She'd sever her ties with Mexico and pretend she had never lived anywhere else but the United States, as if the very sky had birthed her and spit her out directly onto the American sand.

“Mm, Charlie?”

Those gray eyes flooded with worry. “What is it?”

“You wait. I come back.”

Charlie tilted his head and squinted at her. Then he nodded. “Okay.”

She broke into a sprint, running down the road towards some of the smallest houses in El Paso, which were still larger than the Juárez ones. Arriving at one with a green door, she knocked forcefully.

The door swung open, where a small spectacled man blinked at her, the priest who conducted the Spanish version of Friday mass in El Paso.

“María Eugenia!” he exclaimed in surprise.

“Padre,” she broke into Spanish, “I have an emergency. Will you come?”

“Yes, yes, of course, hija. Let me grab my coat.”

He found it and his bag and shut the door behind them. As they shuffled quickly back to where Charlie was waiting, Padre Rogelio huffed, “And what is this emergency, my girl?”

The sky was growing ever darker, but even in the dusk Maru could see Charlie’s tall form from meters away. She pointed at him. “I’d like you to marry me to that man.”

“Pardon me?”

“Yes, I’d like you to marry us. You do have the authority, don’t you?”

“Well, of course I do. But, is there some sort of confession you need to make first?”

“No, Padre. But there will be later if you don’t marry us tonight.”

The priest’s eyes grew wide with embarrassment. “All right then, hija. That’s enough.”

Charlie’s eyes were even bigger when he saw the priest. “What’s happening, Maru?”

Maru turned to the priest, that translator of languages both earthly and spiritual. “Will you please tell him I’d like to marry him tonight, right now, before I change my mind?”

Charlie frowned a little when the priest explained Maru’s request. “But,” he stammered, “your family.”

“No family,” Maru said in English. It almost sounded like a shout, even though it wasn’t what she had intended.

Charlie shrugged and turned to the priest, his eyes crinkling at the corners, revealing his amusement.

The priest rushed through the wording of the ceremony, giving the vows first in English for Charlie to repeat, then in Spanish for Maru. After he pronounced them man and wife, he cleared his throat. “Well, good night.” He made the sign of the cross in the air first directed at Maru, then Charlie. “And good luck,” he mumbled.

“Buenas noches.” Maru said.

“Good night,” Charlie echoed.

The priest wandered down the road, shaking his head and muttering something to himself.

Maru beamed at Charlie. “Your house.”

Charlie grasped her hand and they walked in the direction of his home, where blessedly, he lived alone. Maru could feel the heat radiating through his palm and his pulse jumping at her as they walked up the steps of the porch. An unexpected sting of tears threatened Maru’s eyes, but she blinked them away. Charlie opened the door of the house, and she stepped over the threshold.

Estela

January 13, 1916

“This is bad news for us.” Carolina leaned her stiffly-corseted form against Estela’s porch railing. She glanced quickly in either direction, as if making sure that all of El Paso was not eavesdropping on them from their quiet street.

“Ay, tú,” Estela scoffed. “Pancho Villa has nothing to do with us.” She didn’t tell Carolina that early in the morning she’d dragged her maid down to the Union Depot to accompany her while she watched the bodies come in on the train like a common chismosa.

“But the gringos will find a way to blame it on us—*vas a ver.*”

The horse and carriage waited for them in front of the house. Though she could afford one, Estela didn’t trust automobiles. They were noisy and gave off a sickening chemical smell. Not that the odor of horses was pleasant, but at least it was familiar.

“No exageres. Everything is going to be fine.” Estela smiled at her neighbor. “We’re decent people. That’s why we had to leave Mexico. We are friends of Diaz, and Diaz was once a great friend of the Americans.”

“A great friend of American business, you mean.”

“Exactly.” Estela patted Carolina on the arm. “It’s the same thing.”

Carolina’s wrinkles, particularly the ones that fanned out from her upper lip, seemed more apparent today. She’d been worrying too much, Estela mused. She instinctively traced her own top lip, but her forty-year-old lines were still too fine to be detected by her fingertip, thankfully.

“Those poor engineers,” Carolina lamented. “Pulled from a train and shot like pigs.”

“Eighteen of them, I heard.” *I saw them, one after another, wrapped in cloth*, Estela almost added. “The Americans should not have gone back on their word with Villa.” She clicked her tongue. “Bueno, they shouldn’t have done business with a bandit in the first place.”

Carolina didn’t seem to be listening. Even though the afternoon sun had taken the edge off the chill in the air, she pulled her fine linen coat tighter around her shoulders. She mumbled, “Did you hear that one man survived?” and turned suddenly to face Estela, her eyes misty. “He played dead like a dog.” She grabbed Estela’s forearm. “Just imagine.”

Carolina’s grip raised the tiny hairs on Estela’s arm. She couldn’t see them under her blouse and jacket, but she could feel the muscles pulling inward until she felt something horrible running up her forearm.

“What I’m saying,” Carolina continued, “is that you shouldn’t go. Americans looking for revenge can’t tell the difference between a Carrancista or a Villista . It’s not safe for you.”

“I’ve made a commitment of service to the Holy Family Parish and to the less fortunate quarter of this city. I will not shirk it.”

Carolina took a step back from the railing. “Well I’m not going. Being a charitable Christian doesn’t mean you have to be a careless one. And you can’t go without me.”

“Can’t I? Maru is waiting for me in the carriage.”

“Your maid?”

“Who else?”

“I see. You’ve replaced me with an illiterate.”

“She’s company. I’m not an idiot. I won’t go alone.”

“Mmmhmm. But just remember that one more day is not going to magically bestow the gift of literacy on those indios.”

“I’m a woman of my word.” Estela started down the stairs toward the driver opening the carriage for her.

Carolina called after her. “What does your husband have to say about his foolish wife?”

“He’s away on business.” She stepped into the carriage. “Adios, Carolina.”

Maru let herself into the carriage on the opposite side. As the horse began to trot, Carolina waved without enthusiasm, and Estela wagged her fingers in return. She turned to Maru, who had her arms tightly folded against her chest.

“Nerviosa?” Estela asked.

Maru frowned but she shook her head no.

They sat in silence for the rest of the ride, until they reached Sofia’s one-room home, where they were ushered in quickly. Estela had begun teaching Sofía how to read on Thursday afternoons. The reading lessons were coming along nicely—if Estela picked a passage from the Bible at random, Sofía could read almost all of the words. Estela was inordinately proud of herself.

“Come in, please,” Sofia urged. She greeted them with manzanilla tea in mismatched cups.

Estela tilted her head in the direction of Maru. “Doña Carolina couldn’t make it.”

Sofía nodded and indicated two wooden chairs, motioning for them to sit. Estela sat in her usual place, and Maru sat in the corner on the dirt floor. After a moment’s hesitation, Sofia sat in the other chair instead of her usual spot on an overturned crate.

But on this occasion Sofía seemed distracted. She hadn't turned Estela away, but she may as well have. She kept glancing at the thin door, through which all the sounds of the neighborhood—cooking, cursing, chatting—permeated.

Maru sat cross-legged, silently drinking her tea. Estela was explaining spelling variations in verb conjugations when a neighbor burst through the door.

Sofía sucked air in with a wheeze. “Horacio!” she exclaimed.

Sofía's husband Horacio, a tall, thin man about a decade younger than Estela leaned heavily against a stout older man. His eye was swollen shut and blood trickled from one corner of his mouth. He was conscious but moving ever so slowly, painfully. The older man staggered under the weight.

“¿Qué le pasó?” Estela demanded.

Sofía stood and guided her husband into her chair by the elbow. “Are you all right?”

Horacio nodded.

“Thank you, Señor Luna.” Sofía gave him a grateful glance, then murmured something into Horacio's ear.

It was infuriating to be ignored. “I said,” Estela raised her voice, “what happened to him?”

Señor Luna looked down at his shirt front where Horacio's wound had wept on him. “There's a mob of angry gringos attacking any Mexican they see.” He laughed bitterly, still staring at the bloodstain. “How many bleeding Mexicans does it take to bring back one American engineer from the dead?”

Estela stood quickly, unwilling to answer his riddle. She was rapidly descending into affairs that had nothing to do with her. “I—” she glanced at Maru in the corner “—we’d best be going before they get any more agitated.”

Maru examined the bottom of her cup and made no move to get up.

“I think you’d better stay the night, Doña,” Sofía said.

“Stay the night?” Estela’s voice came out like a screech. “Here?”

Sofía nodded and gestured with an open palm. “Está en su casa.”

“That’s very kind of you, but my family—my neighbors—they’ll begin to worry. You have no telephone,” she stammered. “I mean, I couldn’t possibly. I have no way to get word to them.” She shot a look at Maru, who was still staring at the bottom of the cup. “Come along, Maru.”

Using only her legs to propel her, Maru stood straight up without touching her fingers to the packed dirt floor. She set the cup on the table. “Doña, are you sure?”

“Sí, sí. Stop fussing.” Estela opened the door and grabbed Maru’s wrist. “Goodbye now,” she called toward the house while hurrying in the opposite direction. When she got to the street, she let out a gasp of dismay. Her carriage and driver were gone.

How could he abandon her in Chihuahuita? *He’d better be dead*, Estela thought.

“Don’t worry, Doña Estela. I walk this way often,” Maru said. “I’ll show you.”

Estela nodded and followed Maru, all the while gaping at a trail of bleeding and sometimes unconscious men who lined the route the mob had taken. They seemed to have already passed over, but a shudder of fear gripped her as she considered what the angry men might do to a pair of Mexican women.

Carolina had been right. Estela was an idiot. She held her elbows in opposite palms and tried to make herself disappear. She began to run, or run as well as she could in a fitted gown. Head down, she watched the road below her because she didn't want to see anymore disfigured faces or smears of red.

Estela stopped short before running directly into an American infantryman positioned at the crossroads next to the dry goods store. She saw his knee-length boots and looked up.

"No Mexicans above Overland Street," he barked in heavily-accented Spanish.

"But I live north of Overland."

"No Mexicans above Overland Street," he repeated.

Estela looked around the soldier. A whole line of them in hats with pinched-looking crowns patrolled the street. "I have nothing to do with Villa or his supporters," she shrieked. "In fact, my husband's company supplies the U.S. Army!"

The soldier shrugged. "General Pershing's orders. Riot control."

"But I—" Estela glanced at Maru "—I don't live in this neighborhood." She pointed behind her. "I don't live with these people." She gestured at Maru.

The soldier shrugged. "We're keeping the races apart to stop the violence."

"But," Estela whined, "can't you see the difference between us?" She pointed again at Maru and then at herself. "Between our classes?" She lowered her voice. "Between our complexions?"

He surveyed both women. "Nope."

Estela's throat was dangerously tight. She could feel the hysteria coming on. "I'm here to help these people. I'm not one of them. Can you understand that?"

"No Mexicans above Overland," he repeated again, maddeningly.

Estela turned away from the soldier. “Maru, I don’t suppose I could stay with you tonight?”

“I live in Juárez.” Maru blinked hard, twice. “I don’t live here either.”

“Oh no.” Estela frowned. “Absolutely not. I’m not crossing the border.” She looked again at the American infantrymen and wondered if she would be able to outrun them. Her long dress put her at a distinct disadvantage, and besides, it probably wasn’t wise to provoke men carrying guns, no matter how stupid they seemed.

There was a sudden fish-like hollowness in Maru’s cheeks, and Estela realized that Maru was biting the inside of her cheeks, fighting a self-righteous smile.

“Bueno,” Maru began, then cleared her throat. “I suppose we’ll see if Sofia still has room for us.”

Estela had the sudden urge to slap Maru. Instead, she clenched her fist and determined to remember this impertinence, this near laugh from Maru, so as to punish her accordingly later. But for now, Estela would follow her back to Chihuahuita.

Brian

April 12, 1916

Private Brian Gallagher dreamed of New York. He hated the southwestern desert, hated the way his hands cracked and bled, hated his snot mixed with sand in his handkerchief, hated the massive swings in temperature from blazing heat during the day to freezing nights, hated the way all the rabbitbrush smelled like a wet dog on the rare occasion it rained. He despised it all. And yet here he was, his nights spent on a hard bedroll under a black sky riddled with relentless stars, getting whacked in the face periodically by an escaped tumbleweed.

He'd joined the Army because he didn't have the guts to kill himself. When the girl he was supposed to marry fell pregnant, he'd rather have shot himself in the head, but instead he learned to shoot others. He knew the baby wasn't his because he and Mary hadn't done it, since the lying bitch had insisted on them saving themselves for marriage like good Catholics. What a load of shit.

Even now, his butt saddle-sore and his eyes seeing black shapes from too much sun, it still invaded his thoughts, how he'd been wronged. Five hundred miles of following Major Tompkins through the desert like he was goddamn Moses, and he couldn't get her out of his head. He still carried a pale blue ribbon Mary used to wear in her hair. He didn't know why; it was stupid. He'd almost thrown it in the fire many a night, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he was supposed to keep it.

Of course Major Tompkins was no Moses, and he and his band of soldiers certainly weren't looking for the promised land. Instead, they were wandering around Chihuahua hunting

Pancho Villa. Brian had seen the man once in person. Villa and General Pershing smiled for the photographer at the Santa Fe Bridge while Brian stood at attention. That was something like two years ago, before the United States and Villa had fallen out. Since Villa had become the enemy, his wanted picture had been circulated so widely only an idiot wouldn't recognize him.

Sometimes Brian saw Villa's smirk and thick mustache when he closed his eyes at night.

Brian understood why his regiment was going after him—he'd been in Columbus, New Mexico, when Villa's men set houses on fire and killed over a dozen civilians and eight soldiers before they managed to bring out the Hotchkiss and machine-gun the hell out of those Mexicans. They laid out probably something near two hundred of them, bleeding in so many places they looked like sieves.

And he was among those who followed Villa into Mexico, when he found that scared girl sitting on a horse. He still remembered the fear in her eyes, seeping out behind the reflection of firelight. He wondered where she was now, and if she would ever forgive him.

There was a five-thousand-dollar bounty on Villa's head, but the rat had disappeared into thin air. They'd killed handfuls of bandits here and there and captured some horses, but Villa was the one they were really after. How long would Brian's regiment wander in the desert until they'd admit they were never going to find the bastard? Forty years?

"Could be worse," Major Tompkins announced cheerily. "We could be wading through the rice swamps of the Philippines!"

Brian thought that maybe a swamp didn't sound so terrible. At least the inside of his nose wouldn't be covered with dried scabs from where the arid air had rubbed him raw.

He patted his horse, and a cloud of dust issued from her side. He coughed. "We're almost there, Betty," he murmured. "Almost there."

Old Betty kept plodding straight ahead. From what Brian could see of her buggy horse eyes crusted with sand, she was ignoring him. Throughout the expedition Brian had made a number of promises to her that he couldn't keep—promises of rest and water and oats that often didn't materialize. He wouldn't trust himself either.

Brian breathed a sigh of relief as the town of Parral came into view. It wasn't much—a mining town with a few stores and some saloons. It was no New York City, but he and the rest of the men would finally get to rest. Good thing too, because the day was already heating up and Brian could use a drink.

As soon as the horses entered the town, Major Tompkins called for a halt. What now, Brian thought. Though he was nearly at the back of the regiment, he could make out the figure of a tall Mexican general dressed in a clean uniform a much lighter color than the Americans' dusty army green. It was a khaki Carrancista uniform, which made the general look like he was going on an African safari.

Brian knew the uniform well as they were under strict orders not to tangle with Carranza's army, since the U.S. government recognized them as the legitimate governing force of Mexico. Villa's men would never look so sharp, at least not now that the U.S. had withdrawn its support and its money. When they came across Villistas, they were hungry and dirty.

Not so different from us, Brian thought. He rubbed his beard and wondered if there'd be time for a shave in Parral.

"What's happening?" he whispered to Private Larsen, sitting on his horse in front of Brian.

"Shut up, Gallagher," Larsen hissed.

Major Tompkins and the Mexican general disappeared into a big building that looked something like a peasant's city hall. Now no one could listen in. Brian and his regiment stayed on their horses and eyed the town warily. Several people had come out of their homes and other buildings to glare.

“Viva Villa!”

Brian looked for the source of the voice and locked eyes with a toothless old man giving him a squinty scowl.

“Viva Villa!” the man shouted again.

A splash of something that smelled like urine hit Larsen on the head and ran down his left shoulder. A sprinkling of it sprayed Brian as well.

Larsen sniffed and lurched forward in a dry heave. “What the hell?”

Brian looked up. A stout woman from a second story balcony was holding a chamber pot and waving gleefully. It suddenly struck Brian as inappropriately funny, and he almost began laughing.

“Son of a bitch.” Larsen spit on the ground. “If I didn't have my orders, I swear to God I'd take that woman and split her in half,” he fumed.

Brian felt something wet fall on his own shoulder. This time the air smelled of tobacco and spit. A shiny, empty spittoon gleamed in another woman's hands, and the confirmation of the odor turned his stomach. He wiped the brown liquid off with the back of his hand and gagged a little.

More townspeople were gathering and chanting several things in Spanish, but the only thing Brian recognized was the intermittent shouts of “Viva Villa!” For a moment he thought he saw the girl on the horse from Columbus—a young woman watching the regiment intently with

black hair in two long braids. He stared at her while the spit of a dozen Mexicans baked in the sun on his soiled shoulder.

No, he decided. It wasn't her. This girl's chin was a bit too wide. The girl on the horse had a face like a small, rounded heart. Brian's fingers had memorized the shape of her jaw. Besides, he was so far from Juárez. It couldn't possibly be her.

The men in the Cavalry were restless, some putting a ready hand to their weapons. The door to the town hall swung open and the Mexican general shouted an order and several men in khaki uniforms fired into the air.

"Your warning," the general told Major Tompkins. "Leave."

The way he said 'leave' sounded like 'leaf,' Brian thought.

"What about our supplies?" Major Tompkins shouted.

The Mexican general shook his head, and more warning shots were fired. Somehow, the choking smell of gunpowder was worse to Brian than the urine and spit. The sulphuric gunpowder held the smell of stolen blood, the smell of men holding their intestines against their shredded skin, the smell of piles of bodies and cries of misery. A flash of a memory hit him—his dead bunkmate face down in the Columbus dirt. Brian took a deep breath to stave off the nausea.

Finally abandoning his negotiations, Major Tompkins spun away from the general and shouted, "Move out!" He dug his spurs into the flanks of his horse and sent it into full gallop.

Brian and his unit spurred their own horses into a run, and Brian thought with disappointment that there would be no drink, no rest, no time for sensation to return to his completely numb rear end.

Outside of the town, Major Tompkins slowed his horse to a trot, and Brian and his regiment matched his pace. In the distance, a fog of sand formed. It first it looked to be an erratic

dust devil, but as it drew closer, it grew black legs—horse legs. Atop these horse legs were human legs, wrapped in those same khaki Carrancista uniforms. There were so many of them, but still Brian tried to count. They seemed to outnumber the U.S. Cavalry five to one.

The air sounded with pop, pop, popping. A Lieutenant near Tompkins fell.

“You men,” Tompkins yelled. “Rear guard!”

Oh no, Brian thought. Instead of breaking the horse into a sprint, he’d have to stay and fight the Mexicans they weren’t supposed to fight while the rest of the regiment fled. He was so tired of the blood and the dirt and the chaos. We are here to help you, he wanted to yell at the Carrancistas. But they wouldn’t understand him. Surely they had to know that Villa was their common enemy, and that the U.S. Cavalry was only there for him. They just wanted the smug fellow on the wanted poster.

But Brian could explain none of these things. He could only dismount. He left his Colt in its holster and instead reached for his repeating rifle in his Cavalry saddle.

“Hurry it up, Gallagher.” Larsen pulled out his own rifle. “The only good Mexican is a dead one.”

Brian took aim at the approaching Mexicans. He could only defend the people he had sworn to defend, the country he had promised to honor when he signed his name. Pull the trigger, cock the hammer, pull the trigger. Load the clips without dropping them and hope they didn’t get him first. I’m sorry, he wanted to say, after his bullet found a young Carrancista’s heart and wilted him right off his frightened horse.

With a steady hand but frantic heart he capped another. “I’m sorry!” This time he screamed the words aloud.

He recognized the startled look on the wounded men's faces as the same one the girl wore the night of the Columbus raid. Once she removed her hat and he realized she was a girl, he'd dismounted and tackled her to the ground. She began to scream but he clamped his hand over her mouth and he put the weight of his body on top of her. He knew what she thought he was trying to do—any woman would think the same. But that was precisely what he was protecting her against.

If he let her scream and the men captured her as a prisoner, she might have been hung with the other Villistas, even if she didn't have a gun. Before the rope snapped her neck, the men would use her as he had seen them do before. And even though Brian was so fiercely angry at that whore Mary, he couldn't stomach the thought of watching any woman getting forced open by a train of vengeful men—especially not a girl who was waiting quietly in her own country with a cooking pot strapped to her horse.

So, twice her size, he lay on top of her while she squirmed and panicked as the storm of cavalry passed them by. One man slowed at the sight of two riderless horses, but Brian forced the girl's straw hat on top of her head and yelled, "I've got him!"

The girl lurched forward and bit his hand. He slapped her, more forcefully than he planned. "It's for your own good!"

His fingers grew slippery with her tears, and he could feel the heat radiating from her cheek and her body shaking beneath him. When finally the rest of the men were out of sight pursuing the Villistas, he released her. Her face relaxed with relief for a split second before twisting newly in confusion.

Brian stood up and pointed at her horse. "Go," he said.

She narrowed her swollen eyes as if Brian was trying to trick her. She backed away cautiously and mounted her horse, never turning her back to him.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I was trying to help you. I’m sorry.”

She said nothing but urged her horse into a run, urged the animal away from him.

He followed her form with his eyes until the darkness swallowed her whole.

“I’m sorry!” he screamed again now, catching another man in the shoulder with a sickening spray of red. But still he could not turn the gun on himself, just like he couldn’t when he found out Mary was pregnant with another man’s child. He thought of the girl, he thought of the men, he thought of his stupid chicken heart. And he kept shooting.

Virginia

February 28, 1916

Perhaps it was in poor taste to go through with the tea party, Virginia worried. Deaths were never conveniently timed, and this was no exception. But it was too late; the ladies were on their way.

She did phone the women in the morning to inform them that she had transformed the usual tea into a benefit event for her poor neighbor Mrs. Buttner and her eleven now-fatherless children. There would be a collection basket and a discussion of other ways to help the family. Virginia would also host a quilting bee for the following week, in which she and her friends would get together and tie a quilt for the family, while discussing the goings-on of El Paso as usual, of course.

There was a knock at the door. Virginia waited for her maid to answer, but she did not immediately hear the groaning hinges open.

“Lucía!” She poked her head into the parlor. “The door!”

Lucía scrambled away from the teacakes she was arranging on Virginia’s best china serving dish. She wiped her floury hands on her apron and hurried to the door.

If it weren’t so chilly out, Virginia might have waited on her front porch to greet her visitors, wearing her favorite enormous hat piled high with silk flowers. But since she wanted to stay warm in the house, she stood a few feet behind the door so the first thing the guests saw was her well-moisturized face. She did not look at all bad for a woman of fifty-three, in her opinion,

even if it did require a religious nightly application of Gouraud's Oriental Face Cream. The El Paso climate was very cruel to a woman's skin, and one had to stay on top of these things.

Lucía opened the door to reveal Priscilla and her monstrous feathered hat.

"Welcome, Priscilla dear, it's so nice to see you," Virginia gushed, folding her plump friend into an embrace. Hugging Priscilla was not unlike hugging a busty pillow filled with goose down, and though her hat was pressing uncomfortably against Virginia's cheek, the embrace seemed to calm some of her anxiety.

Priscilla released her with a smile. "Good afternoon, Virginia. It's kind of you to arrange this benefit for that poor family."

"Well," Virginia examined the lace at her collarbone in an attempt to look humble, "the Bible makes particular mention of caring for the widows and the fatherless."

Priscilla frowned slightly. "But you're a widow yourself."

"Ah yes, but my children have all grown."

"True," Priscilla nodded. "Tell me—how is poor Jennie doing?"

Virginia coughed lightly into her handkerchief, then tucked it into the sleeve of her dress at the wrist. "She's terribly distraught, as you can imagine."

Priscilla removed her flat hat, its brim as wide as her shoulders. "Is there any risk she or the children might be contagious?"

"No, none at all. They quarantined poor Morris as soon as they found out he had the typhus. His wife and children hadn't even seen him for ten days before he died." Virginia glanced out the front door, and seeing no one else, signaled to Lucía to close the front door.

"Well, thank heavens for that!" Priscilla exclaimed.

“Actually, my son Charlie tells me the fever can’t travel from one person to another. It comes from a louse bite. He says the quarantine was completely unnecessary if Morris was properly deloused—the move was just to put nervous people’s minds at ease.”

Priscilla nodded thoughtfully, and Lucía took Priscilla’s hat and coat and whisked them away to the guest room.

“You see,” Virginia continued, “Morris had gone to Juárez. That’s where he picked it up. You know these people—” she glanced in the direction Lucía had gone and lowered her voice “—and their natural aversion to baths. There are lice everywhere, as I understand it. Of course I never go over there myself.”

“Ah, I do see.” Priscilla began to walk and stopped short when she heard a scraping noise. She looked down at her buttoned boots, which were standing atop a drift of sand. “Oh dear,” she exclaimed. “Look what I’ve tracked in!”

“It wasn’t you, my dear.” Virginia flicked her wrist, shooing the concern away. “It’s this dreadful desert wind. Lucía!”

Lucía, standing next to her, jumped at Virginia’s shouting.

“Oh, I didn’t see you there,” Virginia tittered. “Bring the broom, will you? We can’t have sand dunes greeting our guests.”

Lucía nodded and disappeared.

Virginia led Priscilla down the narrow hallway to the dining room, where her silver tea service gleamed on the table.

“Sit. Sit.” She gestured to Priscilla to take a seat.

Priscilla pulled out a chair and backed her large lower half onto it. “How your home does sparkle, Virginia.”

“Well.” Virginia poured Priscilla a cup of tea. “It would be disingenuous of me if I didn’t give Lucía some of the credit. She’s the best maid I’ve ever had, much better than any I had in Ohio. I hope she never leaves me.”

Priscilla leaned heavily against the backrest and the frame groaned in protest. “That poor, poor family. Of all the strange illnesses. I do worry sometimes.”

“How many sugars?” Virginia held the tongs above the dish.

“Four, please.” Priscilla fanned herself with her hand. “It’s my James. He can’t seem to stay away from the Juárez racetrack. I tell him it’s the beginning of an epidemic, but all he cares about are those confounded horses.”

“Here you are, dear.” Virginia set the teacup in front of Priscilla, then set about serving her own tea.

Priscilla took a sip and winced.

“I should have warned you. It’s very hot.”

“It’s all right. Tea usually is.” Priscilla looked at her gold-rimmed cup as though she were disappointed in it. “But don’t you worry about Charlie? As a health inspector, he might be the next to come in contact with it. What if he gets ill?”

Virginia carefully gathered her skirts under the backside of her knees and sat daintily on the chair across the table from Priscilla. “Which of you, by taking thought, can add one cubit unto his stature?” Virginia asked, her tone rhetorical and didactic.

Priscilla looked around. “Which of who?”

Virginia gave a tight smile. “It’s a quote from the book of Matthew, remember? It means that worrying won’t change things.”

“Oh.” Priscilla’s scrunched brow remained. “Yes of course. I thought it sounded familiar.”

“Mrs. Virginia,” Lucía whispered.

Standing next to the maid was Emily, regal as always with her snow-white hair and blue damask afternoon dress. Her daughter Miriam, dark-haired and newly married, was only slightly less beautiful than her mother.

“Good afternoon, ladies,” Emily said.

“Good afternoon,” echoed Miriam.

“Good afternoon,” returned Priscilla.

“Welcome.” Virginia gestured at the table. “Please, sit down.”

They sat, and Virginia poured tea into two more delicate cups splashed with cobalt-blue daisies. Lucía disappeared as quietly as she had entered.

Miriam plunked cubes of sugar into her teacup. “When did he die?”

“Just last night.” Virginia sighed audibly, and perhaps a little too obviously. It was a terrible business, to be sure, but there was a sense of pride in being the neighbor of a dead immigration inspector and his pitiable family.

“What a tragedy,” Emily sighed even more loudly than Virginia, her thin shoulders dropping as she exhaled. She stirred and stirred the tea, her spoon never striking the side of the cup. She still hadn’t taken a sip. “I like it nearly cold,” Emily explained. “If it’s too hot it hurts my teeth. As I was saying—to be left with eleven children. Just imagine if her three other babies had lived. She’d have fourteen now.”

Miriam gasped. “I don’t want to speak ill of the dead, but you’d think Mr. Buttner could have given the poor woman a reprieve every now and then.” She shook her head. “These men need to find a new pastime that doesn’t involve their wives.”

Emily’s cheeks reddened. “Miriam!” she scolded.

Miriam clapped her hands over her mouth as if stifling a laugh.

There was an awkward pause in the conversation, and Virginia panicked a little, her heart beating so loudly she was sure her guests could hear it. There was nothing so unnerving as silence in social situations.

Ah, she knew just the thing to stimulate discussion. “What a cruel twist of fate,” she clucked, “that the country where Jennie was born was the same one that robbed her of her husband.”

“What?” Priscilla exclaimed. “Jennie doesn’t look Mexican.”

Virginia breathed a sigh of relief. The chat was back on track. “Her father was German, and her mother, Spanish, I think.”

“I would have never known,” Priscilla mused.

“The mother died in childbirth, when Jennie was only two,” Virginia continued, taking a sip of her tea. “What a tragic life she has led, poor Jennie.”

“Tragic indeed.” Emily continued to stir her tea.

Miriam twirled a loose curl and nursed her cup of tea.

It was nice to feel needed. Information made Virginia important. She made a mental note to visit Jennie and find out more so she would have something else to talk about at the quilting bee. Though she did remember a certain scripture in Proverbs condemning those who revealed secrets. But these weren’t secrets, were they?

“Morris himself was half Mexican you know,” Emily noted. “That’s why those children don’t burn in the sun, even without their hats.”

Virginia felt a wave of anger. Emily had given away Virginia’s next piece of information. Two more women had arrived for tea. Virginia hadn’t even heard the door. They took the remaining empty chairs, and Virginia served them their tea, but only because of that mechanical quality of the body, when it continues to function when the brain is miles away.

When handing over the teacups, she realized with a start that one of the recent arrivals was Zola May, Mayor Lea’s wife. The other woman was Major Tompkins’ wife. Ann? Alice? Something like that.

“I’m so sorry for not greeting you properly, Zola May. My brain is elsewhere today. Thanks so much for coming,” Virginia feigned a smile, and before she could remember to greet Mrs. Tompkins, her mind snapped back to Emily.

Why had Virginia invited her, again? Oh yes, because she was as old as sin and something of an institution in El Paso. But Emily had beaten Virginia by disclosing Morris’ mixed genealogy. The Buttners were Virginia’s neighbors, not Emily’s. What right had she to tell their life story? Virginia raised her teacup to her mouth to hide her disapproval.

“They are beautiful children.” Emily stopped stirring. “They turned out very light indeed.”

Priscilla nodded. Miriam munched on teacakes, eyes on her plate and appearing completely indifferent to the conversation now. Mrs. Lea and Mrs. Tompkins were silent, and having just arrived, were still trying to find their conversational bearings. Lucía took the empty sugar dish to the kitchen to refill it.

Virginia did not like the turn this exchange was taking. She would change the subject.

“What do you ladies make of the teacakes? It’s a new recipe.”

“Excellent!” Priscilla smiled.

Miriam grabbed another and lifted it towards the ceiling in a salute of approval.

“Lovely,” Zola May noted.

Mrs. Tompkins smiled weakly.

Emily ignored Virginia’s derailing comment. “I wonder how your grandchildren will turn out, Virginia,” she mused, sipping her tea elegantly.

Virginia felt hot all over. How could Emily say such a thing in front of the mayor’s wife! She wanted to rip the tight collar of her own dress from her throat. Air! She needed air. Or she might just fall out of her seat.

Of course the women had to know about her stupid son Charlie’s elopement, the way he paraded his wife all over town. They knew Virginia didn’t even get to attend her only son’s wedding, and that furthermore, he picked a girl of the ignorant class, not even from El Paso, no, not even from northern Mexico, but from its dark southern jungle.

But that was more than a month ago, and Virginia had thought that the gossip had blown over, that she was in control again. Her friends knew it wasn’t something she liked to talk about, or perhaps they no longer even remembered. Emily hadn’t forgotten though; Emily would never forget.

Virginia stood up quickly and jarred her teacup. It didn’t overturn, but the impact sloshed tea all over the white linen tablecloth. “Lucía!” she shouted.

The maid came running, a damp cloth already in hand as if she had seen the future, as if she could divine messes before they happened. She immediately began blotting the stain.

Virginia felt unsteady, like the rug was shifting beneath her.

Mrs. Tompkins stood. “Are you all right?”

Virginia waved her away. “Ladies, I am so sorry. I invite you to continue with your tea, but I’m afraid I must retire. The grief—the loss of my dear neighbor Mr. Buttner and my immense sympathies for the family he leaves behind has gotten the better of me. I haven’t allowed myself a good cry, and I’ve developed the most splitting headache. I’m afraid if I don’t lie down I just might faint.” She gripped the table with one hand and extended a shaking finger at the basket on the sideboard. “There is the basket. When you are through visiting, don’t forget to leave a donation for the grieving family. Again, my apologies, ladies. My maid will see you out when you are through.”

The women pronounced a number of well-wishes as Virginia tottered off to her bedroom, pulling herself along with a flat palm to the wall. But though the general tone was kind, she could not hear any of the words they were saying. Falling against the door with her shoulder, she pushed it open and staggered to the bed. She collapsed against the mattress and realized that with her trembling hands, she would need help unbuttoning her shoes.

“Lucía!” she wailed. “Lucía!”

Lázaro

March 3, 1916

Lázaro's father would drink turpentine if there were no spirits left in the house, though it took him a little while to get that desperate. On paydays, Lázaro went straight to Levy's Grocery to spend every cent he'd earned—this because he couldn't have money lying around the house or it would turn into bottles of whiskey and gin, as if by its own volition. He'd buy exactly one large bottle of liquor, but no more. That one bottle would get him a grumble from his father that he didn't buy enough, but failing to bring home anything at all would indubitably result in a black eye he didn't want to wear to work at the railyard.

Lázaro pushed open the door to the store, and a clunky cowbell announced his presence.

"Hello, Mr. Walter," he mumbled to the mustached man behind the counter.

Walter nodded in acknowledgement. He looked tense, his large shoulders practically touching his earlobes and his sweating red face distorted with concern. Lázaro couldn't understand what Walter had to be anxious about. Surely a job behind a counter couldn't be that taxing.

Lázaro flexed and extended his dirty fingers, cut and bruised from moving freight, and shook his head at people with indoor jobs. Dried blood and grime had settled into the tiny lines

covering the surface of his knuckles. He could never get his hands completely clean, no matter how hard he scrubbed.

When he looked up again, Lázaro saw the inspectors, next to the canned fruit: two men wearing sack suits and ties, circling the store and the handful of people in it like vultures. Both thin men, one short and one tall, they were practically swimming in their suits.

Lázaro wandered to the counter, where he cast a questioning glance at Walter.

“Health inspectors,” Walter whispered.

Lázaro nodded and considered the door. He wondered if he should come back another time. All authority figures made him nervous, even though he had nothing to be nervous about. Just a general feeling of unease. But he couldn’t go home with all that cash in his pocket. It was getting late. He would press on and get his flour, sugar, beans, and what else? He suddenly couldn’t remember.

Pretending to study the label on a yellow box of sugar, he watched the mysterious men. After one more circle throughout the store, they picked up a pair of sodas, paid for them, and left, the cowbell banging behind them.

“Good riddance.” Walter breathed out an audible sigh of relief.

Lázaro was about to do the same when, through the front window, he saw the men block the path of his tiny elderly neighbor, Señora Garza. Her eyes widened and wandered like they always did when she didn’t understand something. She took a shrinking step backwards, away

from the men. Her eyes continued to bounce around until they fell on Lázaro through the window.

“Lázaro!” she mouthed, then motioned with an age-spotted hand for him to come outside.

Lázaro pushed the box back to its place on the shelf and hurried to the door. He stepped out into fading evening light.

He smiled tightly at Señora Garza before nodding at the two men. “Is something the matter, gentlemen?”

“Do you know this woman?” the tall blond one asked.

“Yes, sir. She’s my neighbor. She doesn’t understand English.”

With worry transforming her face, Señora Garza looked older, shabbier. Was she sixty-something? Seventy? He’d never asked.

“Well, can you tell her we’ll be needing to take her in for an examination and treatment at the city hospital?” the blond one asked.

“Treatment? For what?”

“Just you translate, boy.” The short, dark-haired one crossed his arms with impatience. He held a cigarette clenched between his lips, his entire face scrunched to accommodate it. His deep voice seemed in discordance with his slight stature.

Lázaro raised his eyebrows, incredulous. “Well, she’s going to want to know.”

“Delousing,” the blond one interjected.

“What’s that?” Lázaro.

The dark-haired one rolled his eyes at the dusky sky. “For getting rid of lice?”

“Lice?” He scowled. Certainly Señora Garza’s ragged clothes made her look a little unkempt, but they were clean. Old things can be clean, he wanted to say.

“Either you tell her or just go on about your business.” The short one spit his cigarette into the gutter and crushed it under his shoe. “I’m sure Charlie and I can get her into the car without your help.”

“Now, just hold on a minute, Roger.” The blond one’s tone was kind, but perhaps that was less honest, more dangerous. This inspector’s aim was the same as the other one—he was just trickier about it.

“You want me to tell a sweet old lady to her face that she has lice?” Lázaro asked.

“That she has the appearance of someone who could have lice,” Charlie corrected with an embarrassed smile. “There’s a typhus epidemic you know, and we can’t be too careful.”

Lázaro looked at Señora Garza’s softly wrinkled face and swallowed. “Seño.” He cleared his throat. “Dicen los señores que la van a llevar al hospital para un tratamiento.”

Her little shoulders jumped in surprise. “¿Para qué?”

Lázaro cleared his throat again. “Pues, para los piojos.” He shrugged and glanced at the sidewalk, ashamed.

“¿Piojos?” Señora Garza shrieked, smoothing her gray bun with both hands. “¡Nunca!”

Lázaro turned back to gangly Charlie and the diminutive Roger. “She says she doesn’t have them.”

“That’s what they all say,” Roger scoffed. “And then people start dropping dead.” He took a swig of his Coca-Cola, a good third of the bottle.

Something about the way the bottle touched his lips infuriated Lázaro. He supposed it reminded him of his father, not much taller than Roger, guzzling alcohol and looking smug.

“I’ll just put her in the car, then,” Charlie said firmly, as if giving himself instructions. He set his untouched bottle of soda on the floorboards.

“This way.” He touched her shoulder to guide her to the car, but Señora Garza pulled back in disgust, stepping on Roger’s toes, who sucked in a breath.

“We’ve had quite enough of you, ma’am.” Roger grabbed her roughly by the elbow.

She yelped in pain.

Lázaro didn’t think, something manic coursing through his veins. His body moved instinctively and left his brain behind. He swung a fist at Roger and punched him square in the nose. The cartilage crumpled so easily that Lázaro’s knuckles didn’t even hurt.

Roger dropped Señora Garza’s elbow and the Coca-Cola bottle he’d been holding in the other hand. It smashed on the sidewalk, spraying sticky brown droplets on the concrete and everyone’s shoes.

“Now you’ve done it,” Roger growled. Closing his eyes tightly, he brought both hands to form a tent over his nose. Blood ran from the twin spigots of his nostrils and over his lips.

The bright red ooze on Roger’s upper lip didn’t trigger remorse in Lázaro like he expected it would. Instead, it was weirdly satisfying. He wouldn’t mind seeing more of it, though this thought disturbed him.

He turned to Señora Garza. “Ya vayase a su casa, Señor.”

“Sí, hijo.” She gathered her bag of groceries and scurried away in the direction of Chihuahuita.

“Roger?” Charlie’s voice was panicked and his eyes were darting between his partner and the escaped woman. “Should I go after her?”

Roger blew out a long nasally-congested sigh. “No,” he said, still holding the handkerchief. She can die of fever for all I care.” He opened his eyes and glared at Lázaro.

“We’ll be reporting you to the police, of course.”

Roger reached again with his free hand, this time for Lázaro’s elbow, but he lurched away.

“You little bastard!” A second wave of blood, triggered by Roger’s movement, descended from his nostrils. He reached into his suit and extracted a handkerchief, which he pinched against his nose.

Roger was distracted and Charlie was stunned, but Lázaro didn't run. He squatted on the sidewalk, examining the glinting bottle shards in the fleeting light. He rocked forward on the balls of his feet, then backwards on his heels, thinking about the groceries he still hadn't bought and that his father would hit his mother if there was no liquor in the house tonight. He'd hit her if there was, too, but he was easier to hide from when he was tanked.

"Get up, you good-for-nothing greaser." Roger growled.

And then the urge came. Before the thought was fully formed, Lázaro grabbed the severed neck of the Coca-Cola bottle and jammed the sharp ends into Roger's thigh. Roger grunted and staggered back, and more of that glorious red leached through his pants.

Charlie snapped out of his stupor and flung open the door to the store. "The phone! The phone!"

Lázaro's palm bore a half circle indentation from the mouth of the bottle. Reason settled on him. What had he done? He'd never behaved like this before, never even hit his father back when he pummeled him in a whiskey rage.

Roger backed up to the car and slumped against the door, the bottle still embedded in his thigh. "My leg," he screamed. "My leg!"

The logical part of Lázaro told him he should run, but just as he had the overwhelming urge to stab the little man, something heavy and internal was still restraining him from fleeing.

“Sorry,” he whispered, though he wasn’t sure to whom. To Roger? To God? To his mother? Squatting again on the sidewalk, he thought about all he would lose, all his mother would lose. He lay on his back, easing onto the remaining bottle shards covered in brown syrup. They pricked almost pleasantly through his rough cotton work shirt. Watching the nightly birthing of the stars, he waited for the law to come and carry him away.

Diana

June 17, 1916

Diana's mamá woke her up well before the sun, even earlier than usual. She told Diana that the bad men were coming to take apart their house. It was a house to them, anyway, even though the men said it was a shack. Diana had never thought of it that way, but she supposed that the men's houses were probably made of brick, while hers was made of milk crates and sheet metal. It was clean though. That much she was sure of, because she personally swept the packed dirt floor each day.

Now Diana, her brothers, and her mamá were taking all of their things—their clothes, their dishes, their blankets—out of the house and putting them under a tree by the river. Papá couldn't help because he was away hammering spikes to make railroad tracks.

Other families were moving their things too. Diana was glad she had claimed the biggest tree before anyone else did. If her family couldn't have a house, at least they would have lots of leaves.

Her baby sister Dora didn't help because she was only two. She only cried and got in the way when people were walking. Mamá had to wrap Dora in a rebozo and carry her on her back so that her hands would be free to do work. Diana could help a lot now because she had just turned seven. She could carry three or four things at once.

"But what if it rains on our things?" Diana set down her own folded clothes on top of a tree root snaking out of the ground. "Will the water come through the leaves?"

Mamá shrugged. "Pray that it doesn't."

Diana removed her cloth doll from the pile.

Mamá adjusted the rebozo so that Dora could sleep tightly between her shoulder blades.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting Lulú.” Diana held her tightly. “She can’t breathe under all of those things.” She slipped the doll under her blouse to keep her from getting dusty while she worked.

Mamá laughed. “I don’t suppose she can breathe under there either.”

Diana considered this, then pulled the doll back out again. She’d had Lulú since she turned five. Black yarn hair was coming out from its bun and her dress was a bit frayed, but she was still very pretty. She had earrings and a necklace. She even had a beauty mark next to her lips, just like Diana did.

Because Lulú was homemade, the eyes were not quite straight. One had been embroidered on slightly to the side and slightly above the other one. Lulú had always looked like she had a bit of a lazy eye, but today it seemed like she was looking over her shoulder with suspicion.

“Are you sad too, Lulú?” Diana whispered.

No, Diana thought. That was silly. Dolls didn’t think. She knew that now that she was bigger. But if they could, she decided, Lulú would cry blue embroidered tears. Diana hugged Lulú, just in case. Then she stood with her back to the Rio Grande and squinted into the sun, which had emerged from its hiding place.

The bad men had come earlier, maybe a month ago, when they had just come home from school. They picked through Diana and her brothers’ hair and looked all over the house.

“What are they looking for?” Diana whispered to her mother.

“Bugs,” Mamá whispered back.

“Bugs?”

Her mother nodded, squinting at the men messing up her things. “Cockroaches, maybe. But piojos for sure.”

“I got them once at school.”

“Shh...I know. Every child does, once in a while. We covered your hair in coal oil and combed them out proper, remember?”

“I remember.” Diana made a face. “But I don’t have them now. Who told the men we had them?”

“The mayor,” Mamá said. “He’s worried about our whole neighborhood.” Her voice sounded funny, like she was riding in a bumpy wagon.

Mamá held Dora’s head against her chest to stop her from thrashing. Dora was always upset around strangers, but these mysterious men had her worse than Diana had ever seen. Her face was covered in mocos and she was screaming so shrilly that Diana felt the space between her ears vibrate.

Eventually the men left. Diana patted her little sister’s sweaty head. “Good job.”

Diana thought they would see no more of the bad men, but a few weeks later, Diana noticed a paper tacked to their front door.

“What does ‘condemned’ mean?” Diana demanded of her older brother, Samuel.

“It means those men came back,” he said, sounding very tired. “We have to find a new house.”

“You’re lying. I’m going to ask Mamá.”

“Adelante.”

Diana ran outside to find her mama, to see if it was true or if Samuel was playing a mean trick on her. He did that a lot, like when he put a lizard on her neck. The lizard got scared and its tail fell off and wiggled all over the floor.

“Maaaaaaa,” she hollered, even before she reached the cooking pit. “Ma,” she shouted again.

Mamá looked up from the caldo she was stirring. “¿Sí?”

Diana could see that her eyes were red and puffy, and she knew she didn’t need to ask anymore. “Oh,” she said. “I forgot.” She backed away from the wood fire so she didn’t have to hear her mother cry.

Now, today, it was time for them to wait. Even though it was sad, Mamá wanted to see how they were going to take apart the house. Maybe she wanted to be sure that it was really gone, to be sure that there was absolutely no chance of going back.

The burning blue sky seemed to stretch the sun, to pull it closer. Diana used two fingers to swipe sweat away from her hairline. Maybe the Mayor would change his mind. Or maybe the bad men would forget. She clung to her mother and hugged her around the middle tightly.

“Enough, hija. It’s too hot for you to be hanging on me so.”

“When are they coming?”

“Soon.” Her mother blinked against the sun.

Samuel, who was thirteen, was squatting, drawing pictures in the dirt to entertain himself, and Mateo, nine, was running up and down beside the railroad track.

Daniel was not with them, and had not been for some time, but often Diana forgot and looked for him, expecting him to pull gently on her hair and laugh. Sometimes she would cry for

him, but more often than not, she imagined he was still with them—like he was the angel over her shoulder.

Her older brother had died in the fighting between Villistas and Carrancistas in Juárez. Daniel was the reason they came to Chihuahuita, to escape the dangerous revolution, but now they had no choice but to go back. There would be no more house here in El Paso.

“Look!” Mateo pointed. “Look!”

Diana turned west and saw a truck coming towards them, the tires kicking up clouds of choking dust. The back of the truck was full of men who hadn’t shaved recently. These were not the same bad men who had checked them for lice. These men had pickaxes, hatchets, and shovels.

Were they going to chop the house down like a dead tree? Diana’s eyes prickled, but she shook her head to chase away the tears. When the truck rolled to a stop, the men hopped out with their mean tools and stretched their legs.

One man scowled back at Diana and her family. “Stay out of the way, will you?”

Mamá nodded solemnly. She put a hand on Diana’s shoulder and took a step back, pulling her along. Samuel continued to draw in the dirt, pretending as though he couldn’t hear or see anything.

A second truck pulled up next to the first. Out came the bad men, one short with dark hair who walked with a limp, and the other, a tall one with hair the color of baby chickens. Both groups of men, perhaps ten of them all together, huddled together.

They came to some sort of agreement, nodding and pointing. Then they started in on the first house—old Señora Garza’s. The men in work clothes pulled hard at the doorframe until it snapped.

Diana had to cover her mouth to stop herself from shouting at them to stop. Right after the first crack of old wood, Diana heard a loud pop and the tall, thin man crumpled to the ground—one of the bad men she had seen before. He hadn't been working, only supervising a few meters back. Did the worker men drop something on him?

“My shoulder,” screamed the man, writhing in the dirt. “I’ve been shot!”

He gripped his upper arm and grimaced. Even from a distance, Diana could see the red burst growing larger through his shirt.

The remaining men looked back in the direction of the shot, opposite of where Diana’s family was standing. Because the men were so close to the houses, they could not see who had shot the gun. But Diana, squinting, could make out a man with a shotgun lying flat on his stomach on a building not too far away. It looked a lot like their neighbor Mr. Luna. Would he really shoot a man? Maybe he only looked like Mr. Luna but wasn’t really him. She hoped.

Mateo nudged her, his eyes still focused on the roof. “Ma! He—I saw—” he stammered.

“Shh. Don’t say anything.” Mamá forced the words through clenched teeth.

“Will the man die?” Diana asked.

“I don’t know,” Mamá whispered. “Let’s hope not. It was only his shoulder.”

“And will the man on the roof shoot again?” Diana chewed nervously on the end of her braid.

“I don’t know,” Mamá snapped. She was shaking. With Dora on her hip, she grabbed Diana’s hand. “Let’s go for a walk, hijitos.”

“But the house—” Diana pulled free of her mother’s sweaty grasp, “—what if it’s gone when we get back?”

“Then we had best say goodbye now.” Mamá gripped Mateo roughly by the wrist while balancing Dora. She didn’t even have time to put her in the rebozo.

“Ay,” Mateo whined. “You’re hurting me!”

“Goodbye, casita,” Mamá tried to say. But her voice was getting very soft and squeaky. She cleared her throat and began to walk briskly, dragging Mateo alongside her.

Samuel followed, rubbing his eyes. Was he crying? Did Samuel cry?

“Goodbye casita,” Diana repeated with a little wave. She turned and followed her family.

As they began their trek back to the safety of the tree, Diana thought of the bad man. “Do you think he’s still bleeding?” Diana glanced over her shoulder at the crowd of people gathering around him.

“Maybe. Don’t look back,” hissed Mamá to Samuel and Diana. “Walk normally, but don’t look back.”

Diana’s stomach hurt. It hurt so badly she thought she would never eat again. She held Lulú’s face against her chest, shielding her from the ugly thing behind them. “Goodbye, Chihuahuita,” she said to the summer air.

Meche

June 25, 1916

If Meche Garza had known she'd be living under a cottonwood tree one day, she wouldn't have collected so many things. Not only did she no longer need lamps and tables, which she had given away to her neighbors returning to Mexico, but she also had no need for useless bric-a-brac.

She could have left these unnecessary things inside the house after the health department tacked a notice to everyone's front door, she supposed. Her items could have been smashed like everything else. But the practical part of Meche couldn't bear the thought of such waste.

As more families left their own under-tree camps, she'd send them off with a set of salt and pepper shakers (who used pepper anyway?) or a piece of costume jewelry and her blessing.

"Take this, please." She offered a tiny lacquered trinket box to her neighbor Sofía, who had only come to the neighborhood, what, three years ago? Something like that. It had to do with fleeing the Mexican Revolution. Sofía had lost a son.

Sofía stared at the dark blue box painted with brightly-colored birds. "It's too beautiful, Doña Meche. Keep it for yourself."

"Don't insult me, hija. Take the stupid box."

Sofía blushed and accepted the box. "Gracias."

Meche's heart ached for Sofía and her family. Now they would have to go straight back to the violence because there was nowhere affordable left to live. Would Sofía lose another child?

“Come with us, Doña Meche,” Sofía pleaded. “You’ll always have a home with us.” She glanced back at her children, who were screaming and chasing each other around Meche’s tree.

“How kind of you to offer. But I was born here on American soil, this side of the river. This is my home.”

“What home?” Sofía’s pretty face turned sour. “Can’t you see they’ve leveled the whole block?” She glanced again at her children, who were now climbing the tree.

Meche shrugged. “You don’t need to have a roof to have a home.”

Sofía sighed and put her forehead in her hand as if Meche were a small, persistent child. “Yes, you do. That’s exactly the definition of a home, Doña. A roof over your head.”

Meche laughed. “When you are old like me, you’ll realize that none of this—” she gestured at her things spread on the straw mattress on the dirt, “—matters. I understand that now.”

Sofía sighed in exasperation. “Be angry, Doña Meche. When the mayor of El Paso demolishes your house and calls you dirty, that’s the time to be angry.”

Meche laughed again. If Sofía only knew Meche had buried seven still-born babies when she was her age, perhaps she would realize that anger was no help. It didn’t bring babies back to life, so it certainly wouldn’t resurrect a house or change Mayor Lea’s mind. “Look at the good side, mija.”

“What good side?”

“Perhaps I don’t have that long left to live anyway.”

Sofía looked like a dog that had been kicked in the ribs. She squatted next to Meche. “Don’t say that, Doña.”

“I’m sixty-eight.” She patted Sofia on her tiny shoulder. “I can say whatever I want. Now go tell your children to stop picking all the leaves off my new house. I need the shade. And good luck to you.” She grasped Sofia’s hand for a moment, then quickly dropped it.

“Ya, niños,” Sofia called two giggling children down from the tree, a girl and a boy. She called another, older boy out from behind the tree. She gathered her things and her too-skinny husband and walked away, looking back wistfully between steps. She raised the box at Meche and nodded before turning around once more and becoming distracted by her rambunctious brood.

The last time Meche felt truly angry, or perhaps offended was a better word for it—it resulted in sending her neighbor to jail. Yes, the brash health officer had accused her of harboring lice, but she shouldn’t have panicked and called to Lázaro.

Gracias a Dios, the officer survived his injury and the neighbor boy wouldn’t hang. But then there was the guilt. She should have left Lázaro out of it. She could fight her own battles, at least in Spanish. Perhaps she could have used hand signs. She could have gone along quietly; she didn’t have anywhere she needed to be. Instead she asked for help from a young man who was at his breaking point.

How could she have known he would stab the man in her defense? Why had his unforeseen rage been so quiet? That’s exactly why she had to get rid of the anger—let it go with a blessing. If she let it hide within her, it could pop out at the most inconvenient time like it did with Lázaro. It could make a person murderous.

Meche tried to visit Lázaro only days after he was taken away, but when she arrived, the jail was blackened and empty and the guards only shrugged when she gave his name. His mother, Señora Chavez, assured Meche that he escaped when the prison burned. She’d received

a letter from her son, now in Mexico, and Meche was relieved to lift another death off of her conscience. It, like the rest of her, was getting arthritic and simply couldn't bear any more weight.

She picked up the family Bible and put it in the small pile of things she planned to keep. Inside was a blurry photo of her once-thin self next to her late husband—when he still had all of his dark hair and before the eternal coughing took him. Alongside the picture was their brittle marriage certificate. How she missed him. How nice it would be to have him under the tree with her.

She squinted her eyes and imagined what her husband might look like as a ghost. Would he look as she last had seen him? Or would he look like his ancient photo? She hoped she would recognize him if he came for a visit.

There was one other photo in between the pages of the Bible—a slightly less blurry photo of her only son Antonio, long before he turned forty-something years old and lived in a nice house in El Paso with his barren wife. That was the curse of only one living child—only one chance for grandchildren.

Ah well, it was a little late for life to start treating Meche fairly anyway. And even if he'd had children, it was very likely they would speak only English, and she wouldn't have been able to communicate with her grandchildren anyway. It was for the best.

Like Sofía, Antonio had begged her to leave the shade of the tree, but as he didn't care to be seen associating with El Paso's poorest, he didn't linger long enough to convince her. Actually, he had demanded that she leave the Chihuahueta neighborhood years ago, long before there was talk of destroying it.

“We’ll get you a house with electricity,” he’d said, his smile strained but hopeful.

“Imagine it.”

Meche had shrugged. “I’ve got kerosene.”

Then there was the drinking water from the filthy canal that had to be boiled before drinking it, he lamented. And the cold winters, and her arthritis. He would care for her, he promised. If she would only let him.

But caring was Meche’s place. She would not be swayed.

It was an embarrassment to Antonio, a proper banker, that his mother continued to live in the place he had moved beyond and wanted to forget. He would not sit with her and watch the demolition with funereal respect while the cloudless sky made their backs sweat. And now that his mother lived under a tree, well, he was drowning in shame.

He still sent her supplies from the grocery store, and those she wouldn’t reject. With her pot and a decent fire, she didn’t want for anything, especially with the sluggish Rio Grande just behind her for bathing and drinking.

When the rain came in late summer, she’d have to find a way of keeping dry. The cottonwood leaves would only flutter and tilt in a rainstorm. Though the rain was infrequent enough she could probably just dry out the next day. And if she caught cold and died? Well, if God wanted it, who was she to protest?

If Antonio had bothered to accompany her on the day his childhood home was dismembered, he would have seen disgruntled neighbors with rifles lying on their stomachs on the roofs of the houses slated for destruction. He would have seen the way they played the sniper, poised to snuff out the worker men before they could crush their El Paso dreams. And he

would have seen his mother tipping off a skinny blond health officer accompanying the demolition crew.

As the universe would have it, the man was the same who had stopped her in the street—Charlie, was it? The nicer half of a partnership who had planned to drag her off to the city hospital to rid her of imaginary lice. She wouldn't have been glad to see him dead. He was someone's child. Never dance on graves, Meche thought. Not even of your worst enemies.

When the truck had rolled to a stop, the tall man opened the driver side door while the workers hopped off the bed with their hatchets, crow bars, and other instruments of destruction. They didn't see the men waiting on the roofs. But Meche did.

One lifted the rifle and aimed at the blond man.

“Aguas!” she yelled.

Charlie turned in the direction of her still-strong voice, and the bullet caught him in the shoulder instead of the chest. A puff of dust erupted when he collapsed to the ground. Stunned, Meche watched his wound bloom large like a vibrant hibiscus. It was just as beautiful as it was alarming.

One man threw down his pickaxe and produced a handkerchief from his pocket, which he pressed hard against the blond man's shoulder.

After his initial scream, Charlie said nothing else and made no more sounds. Meche worried that he was dead, but his eyes were still open, still moving. Oh, but he was a frightening color of pale now. Meche prayed for help to come, but she didn't move. She just couldn't.

It didn't take long for the police to arrive, and young Charlie was carried away to the city hospital. The men on the rooftops slunk away. Meche didn't know why they didn't fire any more

shots, but she liked to think she had broken the spell. And the sniping neighbors didn't get angry with her. They had respect for an old woman, even one fraternizing with the enemy.

With her warning she had attempted to atone for that health inspection business in front of Levy's store. But perhaps it was too late for redemption. She watched the families make their exodus into Mexico and smiled at the quiet. They shook their heads at her, and she at them. Why couldn't they understand that this side of the river was where her husband and babies were buried?

Meche patted the earth beside her. No, she wasn't going anywhere. The mayor could send a team to remove her, but she would hug the tree and never let go. Though it was the middle of summer, a chill ran through her. She pulled a shawl around her shoulders, one her late husband had given her one Christmas long ago—as warm as his embrace.

Let them leave, let them come. Just let her be.

James

January 28, 1917

James paced in the shadow of the five-story Hotel Sheldon. “Think,” he muttered to himself. He had to keep a cool head, had to have a plan for what he would say when he entered the bank housed on the first floor of the hotel.

He’d ask for Antonio, of course. He always asked for Antonio because Antonio had a harder time saying no. That was always the way with old classmates.

James took in a deep breath and pushed open the door to El Paso Bank & Trust Co. It always surprised him how small it felt inside, just a long rectangle of white marble tile for patrons to stand and wait for a teller to call them up to the window, where they would make their withdrawals or deposits through an opening no bigger than the mail slot on James’ front door. If the lines got too long or moved too slow, some of the customers would sit on a built-in bench under the window.

The tellers stood at the counter behind thick iron bars, because the bank had had its share of holdups. It always made him chuckle to see the tellers in their wide-lapeled suits behind bars. He liked to imagine the crimes that had put them there. On the other hand, though, the ornate mahogany frame around the bars also made each teller station look a bit like a confessional box. Forgive me, Teller, for I have spent all my money, James thought.

There were four of them working this morning, and each had a queue. James selected the shortest line and stood behind an impatient-looking man and an older woman. Sweat beaded at

his hairline as he moved closer to the window, even though the continually opening door let in the brisk January air.

He straightened his tie and tucked the knot into the slot between his starched collar. The old woman doddered away with cash in her purse, leaving the pathway clear. James stepped forward.

“Good morning, sir. How may I be of assistance?” The teller’s inflection seemed too practiced. False, James thought.

“Mr. Antonio Garza, please.”

“You’d like to see a banker, then?” The teller’s thick facial hair started under his nose and continued across his cheeks. The ear-to-ear mustache gave him the appearance of having a permanent, sinister grin.

“Yes. That is, no. I’d like to see Mr. Garza, the banker.”

“I’m not sure he’s available just now.”

“I can wait, over there by the telephone. I’ve got time.”

The teller frowned. It occurred to James that the mustached teller probably recognized him.

James backed away and called over the other customers’ heads, “I’ll just sit here then. Let me know when he’s available!”

“I’ll just be a moment,” the teller apologized to the next person in line.

Soon the teller returned to his post, counting cash and filling out slips of paper. James watched the minutes tick by on his wristwatch and listened to a man shouting on the telephone.

“I was told the deposit would be made last Friday,” he bellowed. “Well, I’m here at the bank, and the money isn’t here!” The man looked down at James sitting on the bench and scowled.

James looked away.

Nearly an hour passed, but James did not grow impatient. If Antonio meant to outwait him, it wouldn’t be accomplished. James had nothing but time. Where else would he go? Home, where Priscilla could sigh pathetically at him?

Finally Antonio emerged from the back office, looking somewhat frazzled, his Brilliantine-glossed hair having come loose from its aggressive middle part.

James stood and extended his hand. “Good morning Ant—”

“Let’s take this conversation out of the building, shall we?”

Antonio ignored his extended hand and guided him by the elbow out the glass doors and onto the walk next to the hotel. El Paso was still bustling around them, but their conversation would be lost among the many others.

“Antonio, I—”

“No, James. There’ll be no more loans. You have nothing left to borrow against. And all the smiles in the world won’t convince me otherwise.”

“But it would be the shortest of terms. I’m just going over to the racetrack today, and I’ll triple it. I’ve got an inside man now. It can’t fail.” In the beginning James had been embarrassed to beg for money, but it had happened so frequently of late he was past feeling.

Antonio used his fingers to smooth his unruly hair back behind his ears. “I know your children have left home, but what about your wife? Will you gamble away the roof over her head?”

“Away? Did I not just tell you it’s a sure thing?”

“Oh, James. You’ve lost your mind. I don’t even know how you feed yourself and Priscilla. Do you want to be turned out into the street?”

“Like your mother, you mean?” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, James knew he’d been unwise.

When asking a favor, it was damned foolish to insult the one giving the favor. But James couldn’t help it. He was impulsive about everything else, why would his manner of speaking be any different?

A muscle at Antonio’s jaw bulged. He clenched and unclenched his fist, and James knew he wanted to hit him, to knock all the teeth right out of his face. He’d seen that look once before, in a schoolyard fight, thirty-something years ago.

James had cheered Antonio on when he destroyed that other kid. The boy had been making fun of Antonio’s neighborhood and wound up with a face as swollen as a sloppy boxer’s. But Antonio wouldn’t hit James. Not here, anyway. His bank job was too precious to him. He would never tarnish his image in front of downtown El Paso.

“Well, James. You should know that you are no longer welcome at this bank.” Antonio’s tone was practiced, just like the teller, just like a machine. “This is by no means a personal vendetta,” he continued, again smoothing his wayward hair. “It’s simply instruction from my superiors that you may not set foot in the establishment again unless it is to repay your loans.”

“Don’t be that way. You know I’m good for it this time.”

“Be advised that if they are not repaid in full, the bank will be taking ownership of the home and the other items you used as collateral. And that is all I have to say to you. I wish you well.”

Antonio turned to re-enter the bank, but James pulled at his sleeve. “Please, Antonio. I’ve got nothing left. This is my last chance to keep my house.”

“Get a job, man!” Antonio shouted.

Several people in the street turned to stare. He brushed away James’ hand and lowered his voice. “You can’t act like an heir anymore. You have no inheritance left. Go take employment as a clerk somewhere. If nothing else, there’s always the railroad and the smelter. Honest work.”

Tears stung his eyes, and being unable to stop it, James began a full-fledged cry. He knew it was part manipulation on his part, but his visceral despair was genuine. A grown man, blubbing in the street before God and everyone. He pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose with a noise like an angry goose.

As James had anticipated, Antonio looked mortified. He reached into his pocket and extracted three silver dollars. He grabbed James roughly by the wrist and dropped the dollars into his palm.

“There. It’s not a loan. It’s a payment. For you to never bother me again. Do you understand?”

Sniffing, James nodded.

“And I hope to God you’re not stupid enough to throw it away on horses. Get some food in your pantry, then get a job.”

“Indeed I will.” James pocketed the coins and shook Antonio’s hand vigorously.

Antonio pulled his hand away and pulled open the door of the bank. Before walking through, however, he turned and spit on the sidewalk behind him, as if getting the taste of the unpleasant experience out of his mouth.

James was wounded to see it. If he'd only had a bit more luck. They'd still be friends then. Oh well, he thought, putting on his hat. Sometimes life gave a fellow a raw deal.

He felt the cold weight of the coins in his pocket. He touched each one individually, caressing the outline of a woman's face on each one. The coins clinked against each other as he walked past the grocery and department stores.

Today was going to be different. He could feel it in the changed wind. Thinking about those horses sweating around the track made his heart tighten with excitement. Yes, today would be the start of his winning streak.

When he reached the trolley station, he stopped short. Crowds of grouchy men were milling about, and the empty trolley car was stopped. He spotted the operator on the platform and yelled up to him, "What's going on here?"

"No service today," he hollered back. "Go on now. All of you. You're wasting your time."

James turned to a tall man waiting with suitcases next to him. "What does he mean?"

"This bridge is closed. No crossing into Juárez today. There was a disturbance."

James felt his heart seize. No crossing into Juárez? How was he to turn his luck?

He felt sick. "What was it about?"

"Some Mexican women didn't want to take a bath at the health station and they went crazy, throwing rocks and beating up the operators."

"The women were beating on the men?" This amused James immensely. He would have liked to have seen it, that mob of angry women. Then he remembered they were the reason he'd miss out on the opportunity of his life, and he hated them for it. "How can I get to Juárez? I've got a date with the racetrack."

“You can’t.” The man puffed on his cigarette. “It’s too dangerous. It’s not just the women now. The Villa supporters are rioting as well. You’ve all got to wait for things to settle down. Maybe a couple of days, they said.”

A couple of days? Those stupid Mexicans, James thought. He reached down and touched the coins again. Priscilla’s family could keep them afloat for a little while longer.

Poor old Priscilla. Pretty, plump Priscilla. She deserved better. There was a quick pang of guilt, something like a thread of conscience he had worked hard to keep suppressed. James blinked hard and shook his head, erasing the shame. He could give her something better, and he would. All he had to do was wait a couple of days for the border to reopen.

George

December 30, 1915

George set his beer glass down so hard it made the men on either side of him jump. He didn't apologize. The banquet had just begun, but the whole affair was already getting on his nerves.

Mayor Lea, getting ready to deliver what George was sure would be a sycophantic speech, was the only one standing. His tie was crooked and he appeared to be sweating. Most of the men in the room, labeled respectively as Mexican or American by their flag lapel pins, had stopped eating. Or at least they had made a marked effort to eat quietly.

George's table was on the opposite end of the room where the honorees were sitting, and he had a very good view of the speakers. He sawed deliberately away at his filet of beef, his knife producing a satisfying screech against the porcelain plate.

"We have here with us Generals Pershing and Obregón," the mayor began. "And we extend to them, and our other guests, a hearty welcome."

Nods of acknowledgement rippled around before the room burst into obligatory applause.

"General Obregón, who sits at my right, is one of the hopes of Mexico," the mayor continued.

"Pffft," George huffed.

"He has forgotten self for his country..."

George let his silverware fall with a clatter that echoed into the vaulted ceilings of the hotel's banquet room. His four tablemates, prominent El Paso dignitaries, glared disapprovingly.

George folded his arms, leaned against the seat back, and waited for whatever ridiculous thing the mayor would say next.

The fawning article yesterday in the *El Paso Herald* had been bad enough, but this hero-worship of General Obregón, to his face, was absolutely nauseating. So Obregón was missing an arm. So he delivered a crushing defeat to Villa at Celaya. So he was a “military genius.” Did that mean that the United States had to pay any attention to him at all?

George was sick to death of Mexican politics, sick of his business dealings being determined by President Wilson’s foreign policy du jour. He was sick of Mexicans in general. It was unfortunate that his silver mine was on Mexican soil. Just three hundred or so miles north, and George wouldn’t have to be at this banquet. He wouldn’t have to pretend to like any of these greasers, like everyone in El Paso was pretending now.

Mercifully, the mayor’s speech was brief. A businessman named Martinez began speaking in Spanish. George found he could eat again if he just stopped listening to the stream of nonsense, which was easy to do because he didn’t understand most of what Martinez was saying. He finished his carrots and creamed potatoes and counted the arms on the chandeliers. If he could just get through this meal without losing his temper, he would have done his part to protect his business interests.

Then General Pershing stood, and his clear English snapped George’s brain back into focus. Pershing spoke of meeting General Obregón once before alongside General Villa. He began comparing the two generals. “One of them was uncouth,” he lectured, tapping the table in front of him for emphasis. “He was without any conception of government and with few ideas regarding the ordinary courtesies among gentleman.” His face wrinkled in disgust.

George remembered the newspaper picture clearly because it had annoyed him then, a year ago. Pershing grinned widely in a front-page photo, standing next to Villa. He'd extended a warm welcome to the outlaw then. George scraped the remains of his dinner loudly.

More eyes from nearby tables glanced nervously at George.

"The other was a man of quiet impressive presence...our guest tonight." Pershing nodded in the direction of Obregón.

"Oh, spare us the hypocrisy!" George rolled his eyes.

Pershing paused, narrowed his eyes across the room at George, then continued his praise of Obregón.

John, a banker and usually a friend, leaned over to George. "Go easy on Pershing," he said. "He just lost his wife and children in a fire a couple of months ago. Don't you remember?"

"That's no excuse for idiocy." George hiccupped painfully, loudly.

"I think you had better settle down, George. You're not doing yourself or anyone else any favors."

George had just realized why he felt so irritable—too many aperitifs before the meal was served, thinking about his daughter Priscilla and his twin grandsons at Princeton running out of money. They were always running out because their father was a good-for-nothing leech. That detestable gambling husband of Priscilla's was going to bankrupt the whole damn family.

George wanted to strike his idiot son-in-law in the face, right in his smug nose. A grown man playing games with his family's future. It was James who George really wanted to punch, but now, with a good deal of gin in his gut, he was ready to hit anyone. But preferably a Mexican.

John put his hand on George's shoulder and whispered into his ear. "You're going to need Obregón as a friend if you want your company protected from bandits. Good business is a closed mouth."

George jerked away from his touch and his wine breath.

"Aren't you sick of it, John? Aren't you just sick?"

"My speech is up next. Don't do anything rash." John stood and tapped his glass.

George didn't listen to the speech. It was more of the same, he knew. More promises of friendship and peace. George didn't want friendship or peace. He just wanted money. And for his son-in-law to die in a mysterious accident. He smiled to himself, then shook his head. No. Priscilla loved the unbearable blockhead. He put his head in his hands and rubbed at his temples.

George only realized John had finished speaking when he patted him on the back. He sat up straight, repelled by John's condescending hand. Now no one was speaking. Everyone had returned to their dinners and to the smallest of talk. Excellent. No more of this obsequious garbage.

Then George looked at the principal table and saw Pershing and Obregón smiling at each other stupidly, which incensed him anew.

"All this kowtowing to the Mexicans—it's exhausting," George told John. "I don't want to do it anymore."

John shrugged and forced a smile. "It's part of the business, my friend."

"Well, I'm not going to stand for it." George stood abruptly.

"Come on, George," John pleaded. "Think of the newspapers. There are reporters here." He nodded at the press table. "Vultures."

George took a step away from the table.

John grabbed the corner of his suit jacket. “Think of your family.”

George flicked John’s hand away and marched to the front of the room where the head table was. He’d been ready for a fight, but now, with each step towards Pershing and Obregón, John’s last words to him resounded in his brain.

He stopped when he reached the table and pulled down on his suit to straighten where it had gone askew when John pulled at him.

Obregón smiled expectantly at him, but Pershing’s expression was suspicious.

George took a deep breath and extended his hand. “General Obregón,” he shouted with the confidence only alcohol could give him. “It’s such an honor to meet you.”

Josephine

January 3, 1917

The red spots marked the beginning of the end. They weren't particularly large, but they were bright and constellatory, all over his body, but oddly, not his face.

Josephine had never seen anything like it, but her husband, Clarence, had. When he lifted his nightshirt to examine his chest and stomach, his face went a greenish-gray.

"Typhus," he said. He sucked in air through his teeth as if the word itself brought him pain. "I won't make it to my fortieth birthday."

"No." Josephine's voice was quiet, resolved. "Not you. You're a doctor."

Clarence shrugged. "Death comes for all of us, I suppose." He lowered his shirt.

And then Josephine laughed, because she didn't know what else to do. Once the tears came, the short circuit in her brain righted itself, and the crying transformed from hysteria to genuine sorrow.

Clarence stared out the window the rest of the evening, and Josephine wept until she saturated the striped fabric on the arm of her favorite chair. She cried until she gave herself a migraine, then went to lie down.

Two weeks later, Josephine sat in her wooden rocking chair, leaning forward and falling back, over and over. The maid had rubbed beeswax in the joints to take away the creak so Clarence could have absolute silence. Josephine had sent their two young daughters away with her brother and his wife for their safety, but also so she could care for her husband. Squinting

through the dark at his restless form on the bed, she wondered what she had done wrong that God would punish her so.

Josephine knew that doctors were at risk of contracting the illnesses they treated, but Clarence was so careful. He always washed, fingertips to biceps before and after treating each patient. He did get sick on rare occasion, but he was resilient and returned even stronger than before the infection, like a set and mended bone after a fracture. But this time, because of a single errant louse, the hooded figure of death was peeking through the window.

Clarence had been unable to move without crying out in pain for the past week. He repeatedly soaked the bedsheets with his feverish sweating, and often he couldn't bear even the weakest lamplight on his eyes. Josephine kept her vigil with a single candlestick as she changed out the wet cloths on his boiling forehead.

His hacking cough shook the brass bedframe.

"How are you feeling, dear?" Josephine asked from her chair. It was a stupid question, but one meant to elicit any sort of response.

Clarence moaned pitifully.

She stood and moved closer to him. "Is there anything I can get you?"

Clarence's eyes didn't register her presence, as if Josephine were a wall. Nor did he cringe at the light or make any move to wave the candle away.

Suddenly he spoke. "I'm sorry."

Josephine took another step forward, hopeful. "What is it, Clarence?"

"I'll be with you in a minute, ma'am. I've just arrived. Let me put down my coat and hat."

Josephine's heart sank. He'd been confused before, asking about earlier periods of his life back in North Carolina, but this was the first time he didn't recognize her. How could he forget her, even in his delirium? Was their love not stronger than any illness?

"It's me, Clarence." She sat on the edge of the bed and touched his knee gingerly through the quilt. Clarence's colleagues had promised her that the disease wasn't communicable from person to person, but Josephine was still wary. She supposed she should be caressing him now in this time of great distress, but coming into contact with one of his weeping sores made her stomach turn. She patted him on the thigh.

"You who?" he peered in the dark.

She held the candlestick close to her face, so close the heat grazed her cheeks.

"Josephine."

His face was blank.

"Your wife?" Anger was creeping into her voice and the sharp sound hurt her own ears.

"Hmm," Clarence nodded and stroked his weeks-old beard. "If you say so."

Josephine set the candlestick down so abruptly it made Clarence jump. She flipped the electric light on in the bedroom.

Clarence whimpered and covered his eyes. "Close those drapes, please. It's much too bright for the patients."

"But you are the patient, Clarence! Look at you. And look at me. I'm your wife!"

Josephine couldn't decide whether she should throw something or collapse into a chair and cry, so she did neither.

Clarence kept his eyes closed. "Tom," he mumbled. "Tom, you were right all along."

"Tom?" Josephine gripped the foot of the bedframe. "Tom Lea?"

“Like you said, we’ve got to do something,” Clarence muttered, eyes still closed.

Josephine left the bedroom without turning off the light and went out to the hallway where the candlestick-shaped phone sat on a table. She picked up the receiver and removed the mouthpiece from its base.

“Operator, please get me the Lea residence.”

“Mayor Lea?”

“Yes, yes, the mayor’s. I know it’s late, but I’m a personal friend.”

“I’ll put you through.” It sounded like the operator was yawning, then the sound got cut off by the cable switching.

“Lea residence,” the maid answered.

“Yes, get me Zola May, right way,” Josephine commanded. “Tell her it’s Josephine.”

“Yes ma’am.”

There was noise from the receiver being set down clumsily, then a few excruciating seconds of silence, and then the sound of someone picking up the receiver again.

“Jo? Are you all right? How’s Clarence?”

“I think he’s going to die any minute now. He doesn’t recognize me.”

“Oh, Jo dear, that’s just awful. I don’t know what to say.”

“Will you send Mr. Lea over right away? Clarence is asking for him. Besides, I’d like him to see what those Mexican illnesses have done to my husband. Perhaps he can get them to close the border.”

Zola May cleared her throat. “Well...”

“Well what?”

“It’s just that, you see, it’s not that Tom hasn’t tried. If it were up to him, all of Mexico would be quarantined. But he needs the cooperation of the federal government, don’t you see?”

“That’s all well and fine, but send him over all the same. I think he needs to see what El Paso has come to.”

Zola May cleared her throat again. “I just don’t know if that’s a good idea. Tom has a sort of phobia of illnesses, especially the typhus. I know your husband recommended he wear silk underwear so the lice couldn’t stick and he’s been doing that but—”

“Zola!” the mayor protested in the background. Then there were more noises from the telephone being shuffled around.

“Mrs. Kluttz.” The mayor’s voice had taken over the telephone. “You may tell your husband I’ll be right over.” The line clicked off.

Josephine replaced the receiver and surveyed her home. All seemed to be in order. She continued down the hallway to the bedroom, where she wiped Clarence’s forehead one more time before collecting all of the used cloths and putting them in the bathroom for the maid to wash when she came in the morning.

Clarence’s eyes were still closed and he didn’t flinch.

She then went about straightening articles on top of the bureau, a hairbrush, a water glass, a bottle of tonic water. Then there was nothing left to do but pace.

Clarence continued moaning in his pitiful way. Josephine imagined that when he died, she would miss even the sound of his moaning. But at the moment, it irritated her immensely.

A knock at the door sounded. Josephine smoothed the front of her dress and answered it.

“Come right in, Mr. Mayor. I know you and Clarence have been such good friends, and I thought it would be good to have you see him off. Of course, he doesn’t recognize anyone, so just prepare yourself for that.”

Mayor Lea nodded.

“Right through here.” Josephine motioned toward the bedroom. She put her hand on the doorknob. “Again, don’t be alarmed if he doesn’t know who you are.”

The mayor nodded again but said nothing. When the door swung open, Clarence was sitting straight against the headboard. He still had the flush of fever, but he looked as if he had bathed, even though Josephine knew he didn’t have the energy to do so. Besides, there had not been sufficient time. His thinning hair was even properly parted and he was smiling.

“Good of you to come and say goodbye, Tom,” said Clarence. “Now I can die properly.”

The Mayor walked to the bedside, where he sat on the bed and put an arm around Clarence. “Keep on breathing, Clarence. It’s not over until the wind is all out of you.”

A tear rolled down Clarence’s sallow cheek. Mayor Lea sniffed and pulled Clarence tighter.

Josephine suddenly felt like an intruder in her own home, or an adolescent boy peeking at a dirty picture in his desk. The thought occurred to her that she had always been an intruder, ever since the epidemic started. Her husband could not see her for all the patients, all the city politics. And now, he didn’t even care to say goodbye to her.

She was sick too, she wanted to tell him. Sick at heart. Josephine hadn’t told Clarence that she might be pregnant. The time for her monthly hadn’t come quite yet, but she could already feel something was different, like she had with her last pregnancy four years ago. First

she'd thought that if she told him, he'd send her away. But now she realized she had worried in vain. In order to send her away he'd have to recognize her.

She left the bedroom she and her husband had shared and closed the door silently behind her. Studying the knots in the varnished pinewood, she thought of all the dead branches this particular tree had dropped, shedding its appendages until a lumberjack swung an axe and ended it once and for all.

“Goodbye, Clarence,” she whispered to the door.

Walter

August 18, 1916

Walter Levy was tired of holding the town together. On an already-hot August morning, he unlocked his grocery store and flipped the sign on the door to “Open.” Not for the first time, he wondered if anyone could buy him out and take the store off his hands. Sure, it’d been the family for a few generations, but it required a lot more upkeep than some heirloom pocket watch.

Nah, the store itself wasn’t the problem. He’d always enjoyed calculating how much he’d need of any given product, and he liked being the one to bring new goods to the West just as they were catching on back East.

The railroad brought in all sorts of interesting people to the store—prospectors, prostitutes, preachers. He usually had a colorful story to tell his wife after the kids went to bed. And he’d always enjoyed talking to the people in his own town. That was, at least, until lately.

Everybody was at each other’s throats. At first it was the spillover from Mexico’s war—the gut-eating nervousness that a Villista and Carrancista might happen to wander into the store looking for provisions for their men at the same time. So Walter would hurry one or the other along while glancing over his shoulder. It simply wouldn’t do to have Mexico’s civil war right there next to his potatoes. To think of all the blood spatter ruining his groceries—absolutely not.

Fortunately that settled down some once some U.S. Major chased Pancho Villa into Mexico after Villa set New Mexico on fire. Walter didn’t see much of the Villistas anymore. Just the occasional Carrancista. He could almost relax around them when he wasn’t worried Mexico’s paramilitary ruffians would be stumbling through the door.

Walter took out his key, unlocked the cash register, and examined its orderly stacks of bills. Then he closed the drawer.

There had been new trouble of late. The mayor said Mexicans were bringing diseases into El Paso. There'd been a few cases of typhus fever, but Walter thought Mayor Lea was a bit of a hypochondriac. He'd wanted to quarantine the whole damn country, only the higher ups in Washington wouldn't let him. Thank goodness, because a lot of Walter's fruits and vegetables came from Mexico. If they closed off the border, he'd go out of business.

Still, even though the border didn't close, El Paso was unsettled. Health inspectors wandered inside and in front of his store, and something like six months ago, there was an altercation with some health inspectors that ended with a stabbing—with a soda bottle from Walter's own store!

"Oh, that's right," Walter mumbled to himself. The image of a broken bottle sticking out of the inspector's leg reminded him to bring out a shipment of Coca-Cola that was stacked in the backroom. He hadn't had the energy to do it yesterday evening. He wandered to the storeroom, then picked up a case of empty glass bottles and moved them over so he wouldn't trip over them on his way out back to the sales floor.

It wasn't just Mexico Mexicans everybody was worried about spreading typhus. The Anglos in town had started worrying about the El Paso Mexicans too, the ones whose families had been in town since before they were Mexicans, since the land grant from the king of Spain. Everybody was looking suspiciously at everybody else. The darker a person's skin, the closer his ties to Mexico, it was presumed.

Walter was both. His mom was an El Paso Mexican, and his dad was a Scottish Presbyterian. Walter was a chameleon, in language and appearance. He'd never had to pick a

side. He was neutral. He was fairly sure nobody thought of him one way or the other. He was only Walter, owner of Levy's Grocery and a friendly ear.

The cowbell over the door sounded, and in came Willie, his stock boy. Walter set the case down in front of the counter.

"Put these in the icebox, will you?"

The skinny boy nodded.

"And you know the rule—fast as you can so you can close the door."

"Yes sir," Willie said. He disappeared into the storeroom.

Walter pulled his inventory pad out from under the counter and put a pencil behind his ear. He would begin in the canned goods section, then see what orders he needed to place.

The bell clunked again. Walter looked up. The scrambled eggs his wife had made him for breakfast churned in his stomach. It was the dark-haired health inspector in his too-baggy suit, the one who'd been stabbed with the bottle.

Think of the devil, Walter mused.

The inspector winced and limped his way to the counter.

"Good morning, Roger." Walter's voice came out scratchy, like a sudden attack of pharyngitis.

The inspector clicked his tongue in disapproval. "It's Mr. Green."

"Right," Walter said. His underarms were already damp with nervous sweat. He retreated behind the counter, his fort. Was Mr. Green there to examine his store for typhus? He kept a very clean store, and quite frankly, he was tired of the inspectors hovering around it.

Walter cleared his throat. "What can I do for you?"

Mr. Green waved dismissively. “I’m not here on official business, so you can stop your sweating.”

Walter relaxed, put down his pad, and sat on his stool. “What, then?”

Mr. Green hobbled to the counter and extracted a stack of photos from his suit jacket. He handed them to Walter with a grin.

Walter stared blankly for several seconds before the shock of what he was seeing processed properly. He glanced up to make sure Willie wasn’t around. He flipped quickly through the photos and confirmed they were all of embarrassed-looking, naked Mexican women, though none he recognized. Even without their clothes, he could tell from their eyes that they were working class.

Walter handed the photos back quickly. “What the hell are those?”

Mr. Green rolled his eyes to the ceiling. “Tits, obviously.”

“Yes, but whose?”

“Mexican maids coming through the inspection station at Santa Fe. We have to check them—” he raised his eyebrows “—for body lice.”

Walter’s instinct was to grimace with disgust, but he controlled his face by chewing on his tongue. He squinted. “And why are you showing them to me?”

“I thought you might be interested in carrying a new product. Behind the counter, of course. Strictly for gentleman.” Mr. Green fanned the photos out on the counter.

Walter thought about his words carefully. He couldn’t offend this man who had the authority to meddle with his store and his customers, but he was not about to peddle amateur pornography in his store. Absolutely not. Avoiding trouble was Walter’s business model.

He pushed the photos back at Mr. Green. “No can do.”

“You worried about the wife?” Mr. Green twisted his lips into a smirk.

“Yes, something like that.” Walter drummed his fingers on the counter. “If there’s nothing else can help you with, I uh, need to get back to my morning inventory.”

“Well then. Suit yourself.” Mr. Green gathered the photos and deposited them in his suit jacket. “I’ll take them to the cantina.”

“You go right ahead.”

Mr. Green shook his head and scoffed. “I’ll just get myself a pack of gum before I go.”

Walter picked up a pack of Juicy Fruit and slid it across the counter to Mr. Green. “On the house.”

Mr. Green gave Walter a little salute using the pack of gum and limped away.

When Walter heard the clunk of the bell indicating Mr. Green was gone, he used the back of his hand to smear away the sweat on his forehead.

“What next, boss?” Willie hollered from the stock room.

Walter stared at the counter.

Willie stepped out to the sales floor. “Boss?”

“Oh, um, there’s a truck that’s supposed to be coming out back. Go and watch for it, will you?”

“Yes, sir.” Willie disappeared.

Walter picked up his pad again and walked over to the canned goods display, where he began counting cans of green beans. His stomach wouldn’t settle down. He moved onto the peaches, but the labels blurred in his vision.

The first woman, the one at the top of the stack, wouldn't get out of his head. It wasn't that he desired her body, really, though of course he couldn't say she was terrible looking. He was a man after all.

But that wasn't why the picture was worming its way into his brain. It was her miserable eyes. Why a man would want to sell misery was beyond him.

By the time he got to the canned corn, he was really feeling sick. Was this some sort of attack of conscience? He didn't have time for that sort of thing. Besides, he already told Roger he wasn't going to sell the damned things.

Think of something else, he told himself. He began humming "You're a Grand Old Flag" because they'd taught it to his kids in school and they'd been singing it all summer long. The tune had been rattling around his brain for days. It had been annoying him, the way it got stuck in his head, but today he welcomed it.

The bell clunked again. He looked up.

"Buenos días, Sofía."

"Buenas," she called back, then set about hunting for her groceries. Or maybe for her employer's groceries, he wasn't sure. He didn't ask.

"I'm here if you need anything," he called out from behind his canned bunker.

Another pain hit him in the stomach so hard he had to lean on the box of apples on display. He remembered that Sofía had just moved back to Mexico after they razed her neighborhood. And that she worked doing laundry for wealthy families in El Paso. He wondered if they made her strip down to enter the United States.

He imagined her standing naked in front of Mr. Green and doubled over, knocking a few apples on the floor.

“Está bien, Señor Walter?” Sofía retrieved the apples and put them back in their crate.

He straightened up. “Fine, fine. Thank you.”

“Seguro?”

“Yep, just lost my balance for a minute.”

“All right then.” Sofía continued to stare at him for a moment longer, then wandered back to the hygiene section of the store.

Walter thought another moment while waiting for the stomach cramp to pass. He could stand up straight now, but the misery was still hiding out in the pit of his stomach. He needed to exorcise it, somehow. It was time to take a side, he decided. Goodbye, neutrality.

He walked warily over to Sofía, who was comparing boxes of soap. “Listen,” he broke into Spanish, “you cross the border every day, right?”

She set a box of soap back on the shelf and nodded.

“Forgive the intrusion, but do you have to have any sort of health exam when you get to the bridge?”

“No, I just pay my five cents for the trolley and that takes me over.”

Walter swallowed. “Good.” He turned away and began shuffling back to his inventory.

“Señor Walter?”

“Yes?”

“Why do you ask?”

Walter rubbed a hand over his mouth and thought some more. He returned to where Sofía was standing and dropped his voice to a whisper, just in case Willie was back in the storeroom.

“Well, just in case, there’s something you might want to pass on to your lady friends.”

Sofía narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

Walter hesitated, and another pain jolted his gut. He took a deep breath and thought about the line he was about to cross. There'd be no going back.

“Sofia,” he said. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Abner

January 28, 1917

Abner could smell the faint stink of breakfast dishes from his place at the table. Even though it was late evening, a lopsided tower still remained in the sink. The egg yolk would be tough like cement by now, but he wasn't going to wash it. Instead, he sulked at the toast he was eating and wished it was a roast chicken. He kept his mouth shut, though.

His wife Miriam waddled into the kitchen, her colossal belly throwing her off balance. Abner chewed his piece of dry bread, thinking about how large her breasts looked this evening, almost comically enormous, the way the bodice of her dress strained to contain them.

He heard a muffled whine and moved his gaze to Miriam's flushed face. She had the tight frown and moist eyes that signaled she was about to begin a good cry. Since she had begun carrying his son (Abner was sure it would be a son), his beautiful, cheery wife had been replaced by a fat one who did nothing but sob and complain.

Abner took a deep breath and tugged at his mustache. "What's the matter, dearest?"

"I've just been a nervous wreck all day, waiting for her." Miriam sniffed. "What if she never comes back? How am I to do all this housework in my delicate condition?"

Abner heaved himself to his feet and pulled a chair away from the table. He put out his hand and Miriam grasped it so tightly the bones in his hands ground against each other. She squatted her heavy body slowly into the chair, all the while hanging onto him. Her wide rear made contact with the chair and she released his hand, blessedly.

He used his left hand to massage away the pain in his right. Miriam was not only eating for two—she had the strength of two.

“I’m sure this whole thing will blow over soon.” He patted Miriam on the hand. “If María never comes back, we’ll find another servant. There are countless Mexican women who’d be glad of the work.”

Miriam dabbed at her eyes with her lacy handkerchief. “It’s Carmelita.”

“Who?”

“Our maid.”

“Right.” He removed his spoon from his coffee cup. “Carmelita.”

“And don’t be an idiot, Abner,” Miriam continued. “If they close the border permanently there’ll be no maids at all.”

Abner prickled a little, but he knew it was no use to tangle with his wife, especially of late. “They’re not going to close it forever. It’s just this new health practice. The Mexican ladies are getting very upset about having to take a bath before entering the U.S.” He pointed at the evening news spread out before him on the table and tapped on the headline. “Imagine being upset about a little ole bath. This just means we’ll know our next servant will be one of the clean ones—one that has submitted to the practice.”

Miriam slapped a hand on the table.

Abner jumped a little, spilling coffee down his chin. He grabbed a napkin and swiped it across his face.

“Are you telling me that Carmelita didn’t bathe?” Miriam’s voice was increasingly shrill. “That we let a dirty person in our home expecting her to clean it? That an unclean woman was preparing our meals?”

Abner considered the remains of his toast. His stomach grumbled. He couldn't continue eating when his wife was engaged in debate with him. "Well...no, I guess not. If María had been visibly dirty then, no, I don't suppose we'd have been apt to hire her."

"Carmelita!" Miriam threw her hands in the air. "And no, if there was any question of cleanliness, we wouldn't have hired her. This nonsense at the border is unnecessary and wildly inconvenient."

Abner eyed Miriam warily, wondering if the matter was now settled and he could return to his toast and coffee.

"I want you to go down there and talk to someone about this."

"Down where? The border? Don't be ridiculous."

"I don't know. Wherever these decisions are made. Go to City Hall. If the mayor isn't there, you go find him at his house."

"Miriam, it's Sunday."

"And?"

"I'm not going to go marching to the mayor's house and interrupt his Sunday supper."

"At least he has a Sunday supper," she snapped. "I've been eating cold tinned food all day."

To keep the string of unpleasant words he wanted to say in his mouth, Abner chewed his toast quickly and swallowed. He hadn't chewed it nearly long enough because it scratched the back of his throat as it went down. "And what—" he coughed, eyes watering "—am I to tell him?"

“You tell him to revoke his ridiculous bath policy at the border. Tell him that your wife is about to have your child and needs her maid, and we’d thank him kindly to leave the affairs of El Paso families alone. We were doing just fine before he came along.”

“Miriam, I have no authority to do such a thing.”

Miriam pressed her lips together. “You’re upsetting me,” she said, frighteningly calm. “When I am upset, it’s not good for the baby.”

Abner put his face in his hands and his elbows on the table. He huffed.

Miriam continued in a measured tone, “Abner, you go right now and get your coat. Do not come back into this house until you’ve done as I asked.”

“May I finish my coffee first?”

Miriam nodded, but the way she stared at him made him decide to finish the coffee in one gulp. After all, it had cooled down during all her yammering.

He stood, dusted the crumbs from his shirt front, and wandered to the entryway. He could feel Miriam’s eyes upon his back, and he was glad to be leaving the house. If he’d known growing a child would turn his wife into an unbearable despot... He grabbed his coat and hat from the hallway rack that looked like an anemic tree.

“Mind how you go,” Miriam called after him.

Abner shut the door with perhaps unnecessary force. He glanced behind him, half expecting Miriam to come after him and lecture him on shutting the door correctly. He walked faster, glad that it would take her some time to get to the door.

Hmm, Abner wondered. How many blocks would he have to circle and how late would he have to stay out until Miriam was satisfied? Of course he had no intention of approaching the mayor or any other municipal official. He’d say that he’d pounded and pounded on their office

doors, and that no one answered. Perhaps Miriam would even be fast asleep by the time he got home.

He kicked at a pebble and watched it skitter down the road. It was too bad it was Sunday or he'd pass the time in the cantina.

Abner walked several minutes until he neared City Hall, hoping the lights would be off and he could tell Miriam everyone was at home enjoying their Sunday evening with their families. But the lights were indeed on, and as he was about to pass the building he saw a handwritten sign announcing a Chamber of Commerce meeting.

He debated whether or not to go in as the meeting was already in session. It would be rude to barge in, he reasoned.

He sat on the steps and scratched the back of his neck, itchy both because of the wool collar and the unease he felt. It was too cold to remove his coat.

His gaze rested on his shoes and realized that they weren't as shiny as usual. When he looked back up, a Mexican girl of about nineteen was standing at the bottom of the steps staring at the lighted windows of City Hall, as if she too were weighing her options. She was very pretty, and her face seemed weirdly familiar. He wondered if she was one of the nude girlies in the pictures he'd seen the men flashing around at the saloon. An idea struck him.

“Hablas inglés?” Abner drawled.

“Yes.” The girl squinted at him. “How can I help you, sir?”

Her English was perfect. She had no accent. She was from El Paso, which meant he'd have to pay her more than a maid from the other side. He considered aborting the plan but then remembered the ache of his hand from his wife's terrible squeeze.

They wouldn't need María after all. Problem solved. Abner grinned at the girl in his best charming manner and put out his hand in greeting. "Well then," he said. "How'd you like to come and work for me?"

Carmelita

January 28, 1917

The high electric hum of the cable car gave Carmelita the beginnings of a dull headache—that and the fact she'd pinned her hair tighter than usual. A poor start to the day at seven in the morning. She'd not be returning to Juárez until the evening, after she'd cleaned and ironed and cooked until she could no longer stand.

She closed her eyes and massaged the back of her skull with her fingers, the rough edges of her fingertips catching in her taut hair. She glanced around the car at the many other maids like her, checking to see if they too had paid special attention to their appearances today. A few men were on board, but the early morning patronage was heavily female.

The women's attire depended on the employer. If an El Paso woman just wanted a laundress or a weekly clean, the hired girl could wear a white blouse and simple skirt. But if the lady of the house had a lot of money or at least wanted to pretend she did, she'd have her maid dress in a black dress and a starched white apron, like Carmelita did.

Stiff silence and tensed jaws told her she wasn't the only one worried about the new policy. One row up, a friend and neighbor named Lucía was bouncing her knee uncontrollably and receiving a scowl from her seatmate.

There'd been hysteria in the neighborhood last night, talk of women being forced to remove their clothes and bathe in gasoline at the new quarantine plant that opened one day prior on the Santa Fe bridge over the Rio Grande. One woman swore on good authority they were taking pictures of women in the nude and distributing them, no, selling them, around town.

Carmelita had been ill yesterday. Usually she went to work anyway, but there'd been a raging bout of vomiting making the rounds, and it struck with particular force. Without the strength to sit up, let alone clean, she'd sent a neighbor in her place. So she had missed the commotion at the border. Surely the stories had been exaggerated, hadn't they? Perhaps the baths were only for those who didn't have the money for trolley fare—those who were dusty from all the walking.

Carmelita had taken extra care of her person today so as not to be grouped in with those of unclean appearance. They would see she was in no need of their disinfecting station.

It was still dark out, but Carmelita could orient herself by how many minutes had gone by. They'd have passed the Guadalupe Mission by now. When the season was lighter, the figure of the white church always gave her a pang of guilt on Sundays. Now she didn't even need to see it to feel the guilt. Yes, she was working on the Lord's day, but certainly he would understand that her family needed to eat. She moved her fingers in the sign of the cross: forehead, chest, shoulder to shoulder. One day, she promised God, she'd save enough to rest on the Sabbath.

The trolley began to slow, but somehow the track seemed even louder. A square building of freshly layered brick sat at the end of a ramp leading down from the platform. She'd seen the construction progress slowly over the last several months. There was speculation about what it would be used for, but one thing was clear: the new landmark meant that the dividing line between two countries had grown more distinct.

She wished she could jump out of the car and sprint the rest of the way to the job awaiting her, but that wouldn't solve the problem for tomorrow. Word around town was that a weekly certificate would now be a requirement to cross the border—one stating she was clean so United States inspectors would allow her to go on with her business.

The car screeched to a full stop and an inspector stepped aboard. “Señoritas.” He tipped his short-billed hat and continued in Spanish, “Everyone off the trolley please. Line up over there to be examined and disinfected.” He was young, deeply tanned, symmetrically handsome, and Carmelita immediately hated him. His Spanish was perfect. His parents had likely been born on Carmelita’s side, but now he was working against his own people. It made Carmelita want to spit.

“¿Todos?” She squinted incredulously at the official.

“Everyone, yes. Let’s hurry it along, ladies.” He smiled like a toad.

Carmelita locked eyes with Lucía, who appeared to be in nervous distress. “Hurry,” Lucía urged the women in front of her, tap-tap-tapping her hand on the seatback. “I’m going to be so late!”

The women filed off the trolley onto the ramp leading to the station.

“Women on this side of the bath house.” The inspector motioned with a flip of his hand.

“Bath house?” Carmelita squinted at him again, smoothing her hair and glancing at her clean clothes.

“Don’t be difficult.” The inspector glared. “It’s not just any old bath. It’s for delousing.”

“Well, in that case—” she pointed at her hair “—You can see I have no lice. So if I can just get my certificate, I’ll be on my way.”

The handsome inspector shook his head without removing his eyes from hers. “Everyone must remove his or her clothing and be disinfected before entering the United States.”

Panic seized Carmelita. What if the stories were true? What if this man was going to watch her get undressed? What if they really were going to print her pictures and pin them up on cantina walls?

A large woman in front of Carmelita scoffed. “They’re crazy if they think I’m taking my clothes off in front of them.”

“As if you had something they want to see.” A middle-aged woman in a feathery hat rolled her eyes. “Hurry along and this will all be done with.”

“Cállese, vieja,” the big woman shot back.

Several women who had submitted to the process one day prior were allowed through after showing their certificates. Another official opened the door and the line of women without paper proof of their cleanliness began to shuffle.

Carmelita sniffed the air. A smell spilled out of the open door, something oily, something overpowering. Kerosene, she thought. Just like what she filled the lamp with back at home. She took an instinctive step back from the line. Absolutely not.

A young woman next to her began to cry.

“What’s the matter?” Carmelita asked.

“They’ll burn us all to death in those lice baths,” she sobbed. “Just like at the jail. My husband was there. He survived, but he still can’t walk right.”

The fear in the woman’s sobs stirred something in Carmelita. The jail fire was nearly a year ago, but no one had forgotten. Carmelita took another step back, decisively this time. “Then get out of line,” she told the young woman. She took several more steps away. “Come on. They can’t continue on with this if we all refuse.”

The weeping woman deserted the line, but the rest eyed Carmelita warily.

Carmelita thought about the money she would lose, the food that would be missing from her table. Then she thought of being subject to this humiliation once a week until she died. No, she thought, even begging would be more dignified.

Clearing her throat, she looked up and down the line of women in front of her. At seventeen, Carmelita was younger than most of them, but she seemed to be the only one thinking clearly. She had to take them with her. With a force that surprised her, she shouted, “Get out of line!”

The line stared at her, pairs of eyebrows furrowed with incredulity.

“Do you want them to take pictures of us without clothes on and set us on fire?” she screamed. The headache was lifting now, forced out by the adrenaline of her madness.

A few more women shook their heads and joined her.

Lucía flattened herself against the wall as though hoping to be absorbed by it. She had already begun unbuttoning her shoes.

Carmelita strode over to where Lucía was leaning. “Don’t you do it.” She pointed a finger in Lucía’s face. “No seas así. We have to be in this together. If we all refuse they’ll have to let us through.”

Lucía looked from the inspectors to Carmelita, then back to the inspectors again. Her eyes were wide like a trapped rabbit’s. “I need this job,” she pleaded.

A mustached health inspector blocked the way back to the trolley. “No one’s getting through without an inspection,” he said. “Either you take the bath, or you all can go on home.”

“That’s just fine.” Carmelita put her palms out in surrender. “Then I’ll be needing a refund of my fare since I won’t be getting to El Paso today.” She passed him, trekked back to the trolley, ascended the first step, and extended her hand to the operator.

“No refunds,” the operator told the windshield.

Carmelita knew one nickel wasn’t the end of the world, but somehow it was enough to break the dam inside her. The disease of remaining unacknowledged, festering in her spine, split

open and spilled into the rest of her tissues. She marched up the remaining steps of the car, pounding her feet to make a point. “Look me in the face when you are talking to me, you coward.”

The operator shrugged and continued to stare straight ahead.

With both hands, she took hold of the trolley controller bar and yanked up, dislodging it from its connection.

The operator’s eyes went wide with shock. “Hey!”

Carmelita leaned out of the streetcar and waved the bar at the inspectors standing in front of the disinfecting station.

“All I want is to get to my job,” she screamed.

The handsome inspector was running toward her, mouthing something unintelligible.

“I have a respectable position.” Her voice still loud, she watched him so she could be ready to run when he caught up with her. “Don’t treat me like a dog with fleas!”

“A bitch with fleas,” the stunned operator mumbled.

Carmelita felt fire behind her eyes. Her grip on the controller tightened. The young inspector was now just in front of the streetcar, gripping his side as he gasped for air.

“That’s right,” the inspector wheezed. “You’ll have to get your dirty self off this car and take a bath if you want to enter the U.S. And that’s final.”

Carmelita shrieked at the women still in line. “Escuchas a estos hombres? Are you going to let them treat you like dogs? Are you going to let them laugh at your naked bodies? Are you going to let them bathe you in gasoline?”

“No!” The large woman threw down her purse. “Levántense, mujeres, let’s go!”

The growing discontent buzzed through the air. One by one the women abandoned the line and worked their way back to the cable car.

Carmelita moved to get off of the car but the inspector blocked her way.

“Let me pass,” she said.

The inspector planted himself on the running board and crossed his arms over his chest. Carmelita realized that he looked much smaller up close—she was at least a hand taller than him. What was there to be afraid of?

“Give the operator back his controller and then we’ll talk about you getting disinfected.” He reached for the controller bar and Carmelita dodged him.

The operator came up from behind, reaching around Carmelita’s collarbone, grabbing hold of the bar. “Give that back, you red-haired prostitute,” he spit into her ear.

Carmelita’s body recoiled from the wet saliva and the venom in her ear. She jerked the controller away from the operator and when it slipped from his hand, the force hit the inspector square in the face, cracking his beautiful straight nose. He tumbled down the steps of the trolley and hit his head on the ground.

Dumbfounded, Carmelita watched the slow, steady flow of blood run over the inspector’s upper lip. The angry throng of women rushed the tracks, and an older inspector ran towards the fray. He had just enough time to drag the young one away before the women trampled him.

The mob of women pressing against the cable car snapped Carmelita out of her stupor. “Don’t let those other trolleys move,” she instructed, running back towards the station. “If we can’t pass, no one can.”

A group of women wrenched another controller bar away from a second trolley, and the operator fled in fear. One woman lay down in the tracks so a third trolley could not move.

Women all around picked up rocks and hurled them at the inspectors and the inspection station. The crowd was growing rapidly and a few men had joined in. One shouted, “Viva Villa!”

Three gunshots pierced the air, but Carmelita could see no casualties. Just warning shots, she scoffed to herself. There was no fear now. Only fury.

At the station, Lucía was at the point of entering the building. Carmelita wanted to be disgusted with her for being willing to take her clothes off for the sake of employment. But she couldn't do it. She knew Lucía's father had never been right since he took a bullet to the brain for the revolution. Everything depended on Lucía and her position now. Carmelita knew the fight wasn't with her, and it wouldn't do any good to be angry with her. She would have to forgive her instead.

As a volley of rocks pelted the inspection station, Lucía ducked and placed her palms behind her skull to protect it.

The tall inspector shoved her toward the door.

Carmelita was about to rejoin the ever-growing mob, but she decided to try one last time. Running towards the station, she cupped her hands to her mouth. “Lucía!”

Hearing her name, Lucía raised her eyes to Carmelita. She froze momentarily, then surveyed the women-led chaos surging around them. Carmelita weaved through the crowd as she ran towards Lucía. The women's previously docile faces had transformed with righteous, sweating rage. Many had become one, a mass of hair loose from pins, rumpled skirts, and hands wearing the dust of weaponized rocks.

“Lucía!” Carmelita shouted again.

Lucía shook her head at the inspector.

“Now what?” he scowled.

Lucía broke from the line. “I won’t do it.”

He followed her, towered over her. “What did you say?”

She bent and picked up a rock the size of her fist. “No.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I have relied heavily on historical newspaper articles from the *El Paso Times* and the *El Paso Herald*, particularly regarding the jail fire and riots. Readers wishing to learn more about these events can research these newspapers using the approximate dates referenced at the beginning of each story. For a general overview of the region and a jumping-off point for my research, David Dorado Romo's book *Ringside Seat to a Revolution* has been indispensable. *Chasing Villa* by Colonel Frank Tompkins provided details I used in Anita and Brian's stories, and Anthony Quinn's memoir *The Original Sin* offered insight into the destruction of the Chihuahuita neighborhood and the effect it had on the displaced families. In only one instance do I directly quote from any of these sources, which is in the story titled "George." In this story, both Mayor Lea and General Pershing's banquet speeches are verbatim as recorded in the December 31st, 1915 edition of the *El Paso Times*.

VITA

Miranda Divett González earned her bachelor's degree in English and Spanish Education from Brigham Young University-Idaho. After a short stint working in public schools, she began her writing career developing and translating educational content as well as blogging for the language-learning companies Livemocha and Rosetta Stone. In an effort to expand access to dual-language curriculum in her community, she volunteered as a co-founder and inaugural governing council member of the Sandoval Academy of Bilingual Education, a K-8 public charter school, in Rio Rancho, New Mexico. She has also taught basic writing courses for Brigham Young University-Idaho, and her creative work has appeared in *Lost Balloon*, *The Binnacle*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Heart Online*, and the *GNU Journal*. She currently lives in San Antonio, Texas, where she and her husband are raising three bilingual children.