and the shadows took him
—a novel—

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“[A] memorable family portrait which demonstrates incredible insight into the dark side of fitting in.”
—El Paso Times (#1 bestseller)
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Daniel Chacón
Their father never took them to restaurants, because he thought it a waste of money when they could open up a can of beans, sprinkle on Tabasco sauce, stuff their bellies, and it would all shit out the same way anyway. When the kids cried and whined to go to McDonald’s for cheeseburgers, he stood over them and growled like a bear that they only wanted to go there because it was so expensive. They wanted life to be like *The Brady Bunch*, but they were poor Mexicans, not rich movie stars, and they better eat whatever the hell he put on the table, whatever it was, even if it was food they hated.

Like steak.

For them, steak was a cheap strip of meat that their mom fried in lard until it was hard and charred and tasted like burnt wood.

And if the kids didn’t want to eat the meat—if they pushed it around their plate with a rolled-up tortilla, as if that strip of steak were the very thing in life that they found distasteful—they saw the shadow of their father’s hand rise up the white wall of the kitchen. “Don’t make me do it,” he’d say. On his fist’s fingers, his hitting fist, were tattooed letters that spelled “L.O.V.E.”

The kids didn’t know that a steak could be thick and juicy and
explode with flavor, because they had never been to a steak house. On the rare occasions that they went to the drive-in movies, the father pulled the car into a grocery store parking lot, and while they waited in the hot backseat, he went inside for a big bag of salted pigskins and two six-packs of warm generic sodas. Then he drove across town by the factories and the stinky lumberyards and bought them a bag of burgers at Munchies. The burgers were ten cents. They held the warm bags on their laps until they got back across town to the drive-in movies and ate in the car during the first feature. Munchies burgers tasted like liver meat, so they balanced burgers on their knees and smothered them in ketchup and mustard. Billy, the older son, said he had heard that they were so cheap because they used old horsemeat instead of beef, but Joey, the youngest, liked them anyway.

Joey liked food.

On days that the mother went for groceries, he was so distracted while she was gone, imagining the good things she would bring home, that he couldn’t concentrate on playing with his best friend Ricky Jones or doing his homework or whatever. Once while his mother was gone buying groceries, he was supposed to be helping his father fix the Ford. The father lay on his back, under the car, his torso and legs visible, with the smell of grease rising from the heat of the asphalt. He cursed the car.

“Give me a three-quarter wrench,” the father yelled to Joey, who watched for his mom’s car to turn the corner and handed him a crescent wrench instead.

“You worthless piece of shit, go get your brother!”

While the father, William Molina, and his older son, Billy, fixed the car, Joey sat on the curb in front of the house and waited for her
'63 Chevrolet to turn the corner, slow and heavy, the music beating from down the block, Rachel's head bopping up and down, black sunglasses and strawberry-blond hair. He reverently stood up before she pulled in the driveway, as if greeting an important relative he was in awe of but had never seen.

It was the boys' job to unload the bags. Billy carried two or three bags at a time, grasping them in his muscular arms like a dockworker, but Joey only carried one, hugging it to his chest, the itchy brown paper against his forearms. He placed the bag on the counter or the table, but before going back to get another one, he looked inside the bag for something good, a bag of chips, cheesy crackers, or a box of sugary cereal.

After the mom and Vero, the oldest child and only daughter, put the groceries away, he took out bologna and American cheese and tortillas and mustard and made himself a couple of burritos—he used three slices of bologna per tortilla—and tore open a bag of corn chips. Afterward, even though his stomach felt bloated, he opened the refrigerator door and looked at all the food and tried to decide what he would have for breakfast the next morning. He liked fried eggs and wieners, which he cut in half. He liked fried bologna, which puffed up in the sizzling lard like a Chinese hat and filled the kitchen with that wonderful fried, salty smell. He'd warm up three fat flour tortillas.

One evening William Molina came home, stood above Joey, and told him to get his ass off the couch and turn off the TV. Joey, who was enjoying a rerun sitcom about a 1960s middle-class family, asked, "Why?" The father said that he was taking them all out to dinner, and he wanted Joey to tell everyone to get ready.

"No way!" Joey said.
Billy was lifting weights when Joey ran into their bedroom with the news. He was doing curls with barbells and wearing no shirt—his fourteen-year-old muscles glistening with sweat. "You mean, like at a restaurant?" His long black hair was in a ponytail, and every time he lifted the barbells toward his chest, the ponytail seemed to want to crawl up his back.

"Yeah, a restaurant," Joey said. "So hurry. Get ready."

Joey pulled off his shoe while still standing, hopping and losing balance, exaggerating the comic movements a bit, and after he got one off, he did the other. "Hurry, before Dad changes his mind!"

"You're a liar. Dad ain't taking us to no restaurant."

Vero, the oldest at fifteen, sometimes let her boyfriend, Paul, a Chicano in a low rider, come by the house when the parents weren't home. They would stand at the curb outside and listen to music under the shade of the fruitless mulberry tree that covered the yard. If Joey came anywhere near them, Vero told him to go away, although he didn't know why she didn't want him there. She and Paul never hugged or kissed in front of the house; they leaned against the car as if it were the coolest thing in the world that teenagers could do. She was an urban Chicana, dressing in baggy pants and oversized T-shirts with raza images like the mustached Lowrider man or a brown fist proclaiming "Chicano Power." She would listen to acid rock or oldies in her bedroom with the door locked. She never let Joey see inside her room, as if she didn't want him to look too closely at her. For Joey, her room was a place of mystery and imagination. Whenever he was near her door, he would imagine noises, mysterious sounds—a lion's roar? A shovel scraping on cement? Noises that he didn't know he was imagining. When she came out or went into the room, he would peek
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in, but she'd push him away and slam the door. Glimpses inside were all he ever got, a poster of Jimi Hendrix, a candle, a turntable with a record spinning.

When he knocked on her door and told her in a singer voice to get ready because Dad was taking them to dinner at a restaurant, she didn't respond, just turned up the music.

Oh oh no no

don't want you to go

He knocked louder and said, "Vero, guess what?"
"Get out of here," she said.

Please, please.

"Dad's taking us out to eat," he yelled, and then he put his ear against the door. "To a restaurant. Get ready." She turned the music down.

"Really?" she said.
"Yeah, really!" Joey said.
The door opened, revealing her round, dark face. "Our dad?"

Rachel sat in a chair before her beauty, leaning into a makeup mirror with lights all around the frame, painting on purple eye shadow. "I guess you know," he said.
"I know," she said.
"I wonder where he'll take us," he said.
"Someplace nice, let's hope," she said.
"I'm kind of scared," he said.
"Why?"
“What if I don’t like what I order?”

She looked in the mirror at him and sighed and slowly shook her head. “Oh, Joey,” she said. He thought that she was sighing about him, at what he had said, and he felt guilty, but then she said, “I don’t know what to do with your father.” Her Mexican accent came out strong. She was the only one in the family with an accent, the only one who had been to Mexico, except for when Vero went to Tijuana with her cousin Norma and some friends. Rachel was also the only one in the family with blond hair and blue eyes. Everyone else had dark skin, Vero, Billy, Joey. William looked like the son of an Aztec, black hair slicked back, tattoos up and down his arms, one on his chest of a spider, the legs of which reached out from his tank top undershirt, and tattoos on the knuckles of both hands, love on one hand, hate on the other, a tattoo that had been popular among Chicano boys when he was a teenager. Rachel was a white Mexican from Jalisco, the seventh daughter in a family of blue-eyed hueros. Joey was embarrassed when neighborhood kids watched her walk across the lawn or step out of her car in a skirt. Every time she came out in the front yard in shorts and bent over to move the sprinkler, someone was watching. Her shape was what men and boys liked, buxom, wide hips, long legs. One time, a kid at school who watched her drive up to the curb and drop Joey off said, “Wow, your mom looks like Marilyn Monroe.”

Now she looked in the vanity mirror and pouted her lips as she put on lipstick. This time she said it in Spanish. “Ay, Joey, ¿Qué voy hacer con tu papá?”

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

She turned around. “I don’t know if I should kiss him, or kick him really good in the cojones.”
William was having second thoughts. Rachel was ready to go, wearing red and black. Joey was standing by the front door, but William was still in his tank top undershirt, sitting on the couch and looking suspiciously out the window as if the world outside were waiting to push him to the ground and beat him. The principle of eating out, the entire concept of paying extra for someone to serve you food, always bothered him. He used to say that when he was a boy he had to share an apple with three brothers, how his mom cut it into slices as they eagerly awaited, their hands cupped for the offering. Since he was the youngest, he got the smallest slice, with seeds and stem, tastes so bitter he had to spit them out.

Now Rachel buys fruit and they don't eat it before it goes bad and she has to throw it out. What kind of lesson would he be teaching them by taking them to a sit-down dinner? Even as they gathered, Billy sitting on the edge of the couch, Vero standing in the doorway of the hallway as if life were just a fact, the father seemed like he hadn't fully resolved that he would follow through. He stood up and said, "Maybe we should go get some Chinese take-out, and we could eat at home."

"No way, Dad," Joey said. "That's not fair."

"I knew it wasn't true," said Billy.

Even Vero was disappointed. "Figures," she mumbled, and headed back to her room, until Rachel told her to wait.

"William, don't do this to us."

"Do what? I'm not depriving you of anything. You never had it, how could you be deprived of it? Huh, vieja, think about it."

"Don't try to reason your way out of this."

"You said," Joey whined. "You're depriving us of our desire to go, the desire you created for us."

As they sat in the car, the motor running, Joey looked at the house. It was one of those rare times when it was empty, when the entire family would be gone at the same time, and there was something sad about it. The father looked at the house too, and he commented about how drab the brown paint looked. He wondered aloud, If he were to paint the house some bright color, would it have a subtle psychological effect on them and make them happier? Vero said that was ridiculous, and William said that there were psychological effects on them that they weren’t even aware of, and color was one of them. “Why do you think actors wait in the green room before going onstage? Because green is a calming color. It’s called the subconscious, and it’s something we don’t even know it’s there, but it’s always with us.”

“You mean like an angel?” asked Joey. “No, stupid, not like an angel—not anything like an angel. I’m talking scientific stuff that’s been proved.” “No kidding, Dad,” Vero said, “I know what the subconscious is, but I’m just saying. A different color won’t make us any happier.” “I want a happy color for the house,” he said. “It could make a difference.” “You’d have to change more than the color,” she said.

William looked at her in the rearview mirror. Then he studied the face of Joey and then Billy. He looked at his wife, and she smiled.
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at him. He winked at her. “How about yellow. Who wants to live in a yellow house?”

He parked the Maverick in front of the windows of the Thrifty Café, located between a pool hall and a vacuum-parts store in a strip mall. In the windows handwritten signs announced “Chicken Fried Steak and Eggs,” “Discount Turkey Dinner,” “Early Bird Special.” After he stopped the engine, no one said anything or got out of the car. He raised his butt from the car seat and reached for his wallet. He counted the bills to himself, then looked up at the ceiling and closed his eyes as he calculated the numbers. He sighed loudly and put the wallet back in his pocket while Rachel watched.

Billy had his head sticking out the back window. “I never heard of this place,” he said. “Why are we going here?”

“Where the hell do you want to go?” William said, “the Four Seasons?”

“What’s that?”

“You want the most expensive restaurant? Would that make you happy, Prince William?”

“I’m just asking.”

“Let’s go to Happy Steak,” said Rachel.

“No way,” Joey said. “I don’t want no yucky steak.”

“It’s good, Joey. Come on, William.”

“Oh, sure, and after Happy Steak, why don’t we go buy a luxury car? Anything else, Princess?”

“I’m sure it’s better than . . .”—she looked sadly at the restaurant—“. . . than the Thrifty Café.”

“Are we going to sit in the car forever?” said Vero.

“What wrong with sitting in the car together?” Joey said, scrunched in the middle between his brother and sister. “This is
neat." He rested his head on Vero's shoulder, but she jerked it off.

"It's hot in here," said Billy.

Joey felt the urge to hug Vero. But he knew she'd slap him.

"How come we don't hug in this family?" he asked, putting his hand on her shoulder. She flicked it off with her finger.

"Why do you want to hug?" asked Billy.

"To show our love for each other," he said.

"Little shit, you think spending my money on feeding and clothing you ain't enough love?"

"No, I'm just saying. Some families hug."

"You mean The Brady Bunch?" said William.

"You better not try to hug me," said Vero.

"Me neither," said Billy.

"I'm just saying."

"I'll hug you, Joey," Rachel said, but she didn't. "Come on, William, what are we going to do?"

"I'm thinking."

"The kids are hungry."

"I'm not a kid," said Vero.

"Then don't act like one," she said.

"The kids ain't going to starve," William said.

"The kids are not going to starve," Joey corrected, and his dad turned around, raised his fist, and clenched his teeth. "Boy, you better shut the hell up."

"Sorry."

"What's your reason for choosing this restaurant, William? Why here?"

"I heard things about it. Good things."

"From whom?"
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“Someone at work.”
“What did they say, that it was cheap?”
“Mom, open the door,” said Vero, as if it were an emergency.
“What’s wrong?”
“Just open it, please.”
“All right.” She opened it, and Vero slipped between the seats and stepped outside and stood in the parking lot. She put her hands in her baggy pants pockets.
“What are you doing?” Rachel asked.
“Getting some air,” she said.
“Little brat,” the father said. “You too good to sit in the car like the rest of us? I should leave you here.”
“Please do,” she said, not loud enough for him to hear, but Joey heard because he had his head out the window, hoping for a breeze.
“How about a good-bye kiss?” he said to his sister, puckering his lips.

She looked at him, a short cold stare, and then she looked away.
“When you guys decide, let me know.” She walked to the storefront windows and looked into the pool hall, which was empty except for two guys drinking beer, and they both looked at her. Between them, the reflection of her face appeared like a ghost in the glass, round cheeks, sad eyes. She wrapped her arms around herself and walked past the vacuum repair shop, her vague reflection sliding across the storefront window, where old vacuums shone like torture instruments. She looked away and walked to the next door, a Laundromat, looked inside, sighed, shook her head as if she had decided something important, and walked to the next door, a liquor store. She read the newspaper through the glass case.

“Can I get out too?” Joey asked.
“You sit the hell down,” William said.
“William, let’s decide, please. I’m getting hungry and hot.”

“Okay, we’ll eat here,” he said, and Rachel said, “Ay, dios,” and moved to get out, but William stayed seated.

“What is it now, William?”

“I was thinking . . .”

“What were you thinking, William?”

“Maybe Sambos,” he said. “Maybe we should try Sambos.”

“Yeah, Sambos!” Joey yelled. “I want to go to Sambos!”

Rachel smiled at her man.

“We want Sambos!” yelled Billy.

They often looked longingly at the sign aglow at night, a cartoon of a ferocious Bengali tiger, SAMBOS, and inside the restaurant was lit up like a stage, walled by picture windows, people sitting at the timeless booths, drinking sudsy sodas from sparkling fountain glasses.

“Sambos!” Joey yelled.

“That would be nice, viejo,” said Rachel.

“They got good deals there,” he said to himself.

“Let’s go,” said Billy.

“All right,” he said. “The boys want Sambos: Sambos it is!”

He started the car, but Rachel said, “Don’t forget your daughter.”

He rolled down the window and said, “Hey, girl. Want a ride?”

“Don’t take rides from strangers,” Billy yelled.

“I’m not strange,” the father teased.

She rolled her eyes.

“We’re going to Sambos,” Billy yelled.

She looked at her feet as if sending a message for them to start walking. Then she wrapped her arms around herself and slowly walked back to the car. Three cholas came out of the liquor store, hard-core barrio girls wearing dark eye makeup and baggy pants, and
they stopped walking and stared at Vero. They looked liked they wanted to beat her up.

“Let’s go,” William said, honking the horn at Vero.

“Don’t, Dad,” Joey said.

When Vero reached the door, Rachel opened it and stepped out of the car.

She was dressed in a snug red blouse and black polyester pants, black cat-eye sunglasses, and her blond hair was up in a bouffant. She looked like an incognito movie star. The cholas, pointing at her, started laughing, and even though Joey didn’t know why they laughed, he didn’t like it.

“Let’s go, Dad,” Joey said.

“We’re going, you little shit,” William said. “Have some patience.”

Inside was narrow like a river, and there was only one occupied booth in the back, a bald man and a teenage girl. She had a gift in front of her, a box wrapped in silver paper and a bright red bow, which she looked at as if afraid to see what it might contain. The waitress, who walked across the shiny floors with a handful of menus, wore a light blue waitress’s dress with a white apron, her hair in a bun like a TV mother from the past. Her name tag read ALICE.

“Good evening, folks. Can I start you off with something to drink?”

The boys yelled for Cokes.

“How much are they?” William asked.

The waitress sighed. “Fifty cents,” she said.

“All right,” he said, but after she left the table, he shook his head in disbelief. “You guys better suck slow on those things. You’re only getting one.”

On the menu Joey found the hamburger section.
"This is why I hate restaurants," William said as he read, shaking his head. Then he looked at the boys. "Don't go ordering something just because it's the most expensive thing on the menu."

"William, let them enjoy themselves," Rachel said.

"I just don't want them to think they're the royal family."

Vero slammed down her menu.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked.

"I don't want nothing if that's how you're going to be," she said.

"Good," he said. "Save me some money."

She stood up, put on her dark chola sunglasses, and held out her hands. "Can I have the keys? I'll wait in the car."

"Sit down, Veronica," Rachel said. "You can order whatever you want."

"Are you paying for it?"

"If I have to, yes," she said.

"Horseshit."

"Can I have a cheeseburger and fries?" Billy said.

"Me too," Joey said.

William looked up cheeseburger and fries on the menu and said, "Why do you want cheese? You could have brought some from the house."

"William."

"All right. Have what you want. We're here to have fun, right? To celebrate." He looked up at Vero. "Sit down. Order whatever you want."

Joey put down the slick menu and was so excited that he rubbed his hands together and licked his lips. He looked around the place, at the lights, the curves of the booths, a round clock over the metal counter, beyond which the cook in a tall white hat stood over a sizzling grill. Vero reluctantly sat back down, but she left on her sunglasses
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and frowned until Rachel whispered to her and she took them off.

The waitress came back with old-fashioned soda fountain glasses, and she placed the sparkling drinks in front of them. I could stay here forever, Joey thought.

Alice flipped open her order book and said to Joey, “What’ll it be, sweetheart?”

That thrill that came right before you do something brave or crazy like jumping into a cold canal or going to talk with Sherry Garcia came over him like strong wind, but when he tried to speak, no words came out, and the thrill disintegrated into doubt. Was he ordering the right thing? It was a decision he’d have to live with. The waitress held her pen point to the pad, but he was thinking that maybe he should try something other than a cheeseburger, because he might never come back to a restaurant, ever again. He read descriptions that seemed so good: “A generous stack of ham smothered in two kinds of cheese and stacked with strips of crispy hickory bacon.” Or “Prime Rib Sandwich: A fat slab of roasted prime rib of beef.” And he hoped it wasn’t just the language that made them sound good and that the words actually meant what they evoked.

“Well?” Alice said.

“I’m not ready yet,” he said.

“Let’s start with you, then,” she said to Vero.

“Me either,” she said.

Alice flipped closed the order book. “I’ll give you more time.”

Joey, happy for more time, sucked cold cola through a straw.

“I can’t decide either,” said his mom. “I really can’t decide. What are you thinking?” she asked Vero.

“I was thinking of the club sandwich,” she said.

She leaned over Vero’s menu, touching her shoulder with a hand, and said, “Where is it?” Vero pointed to the club.
"Oh, that does sound good. What about you, viejo?"

"I don’t know. I can’t find the chile verde con arroz y tortillas."

Vero laughed.

William, surprised and pleased that she laughed, continued. "Ni el menudo ni pozole."

"This ain’t no Mexican restaurant," said Billy.

"It ain’t?" he said, feigning surprise. "I thought this was Sambós."

"It’s Sambos," Billy said.

"You guys of course know that ain’t does not exist as a word," Joey said.

"Oh, shut up," said Vero.

"I want a cheeseburger," said Billy.

"Maybe I’ll have," said Rachel, looking intently at the menu, "the chef’s salad. Or maybe the soup and sandwich."

Alice came to the table with her pad already flipped open. "Okay, folks. What’ll it be?"

Vero put down her menu and said, as if she were speaking at a formal occasion, "I’ll have the club sandwich, please."

Then the waitress looked at Rachel, who said, "Oh my!" hand over her mouth as if she were making the most important decision of her life. "I guess I’ll have" — and she closed her eyes — "would you recommend the fish and chips?"

"It’s great," Alice said like she didn’t really care.

"All right, I’ll take that. But instead of the fries, can I have mashed potatoes?"

"Sure, sweetie, whatever you want." She wrote it in her pad.

"Then it wouldn’t be fish and chips, mensa," the dad said. "It’d be fish and mush." He laughed and looked at Vero to see if she was laughing, but she wasn’t, so he frowned and read the menu.

"What about you kids?" asked Alice.
“I want a cheeseburger and fries!” Billy said.
“How do you want it cooked?” Alice asked.
“How? What do you mean?” Billy asked.
Rachel answered for him. “Well done.”
Then she looked at Joey, but he was thinking that maybe he should try something different and new because where he was now he would be forever, he would never forget this day, he would live it over and over again.

“Can you ask me last?” he asked
“What do you want?” she asked William.
“Let me have the Salisbury steak with mashed potatoes.”
“Soup or salad?”
“Oh, I don’t know. Does it cost more?”
Alice rolled her eyes when she said, “It’s included with all the dinners.”
“I want the soup!” said Billy.
“Not the burgers, just the dinners,” said Alice.
Billy deflated. “Oh.”
“This is dinner,” he whispered to Joey.
“What kind of soup is it?” asked William.
Alice lowered her pad as if it were too heavy to hold, and her shoulders slumped. “Vegetable beef or cream of broccoli.”
“Try the vegetable beef, viejo,” Rachel said. “You’ll like that.”
“All right,” he said. And then, as if making a proclamation: “The vegetable beef.”
“You got it.” She wrote it down. “Well, sugar,” she said to Joey. “You’re the last one.” She pressed her red ballpoint pen to her pad.

He felt everyone’s eyes on him and that thrill like wind, like going over a small hill in a fast car, his stomach falling, and he blurted out, “Primerib sandwich.”
“Good choice,” said Alice.

“What?” the dad said, opening up the menu. “What the hell?”

“I want to try something new.”

“That’s two dollars more than a hamburger,” he said.

“William!”

“You better eat every bit of it,” he said.

“How do you want your prime rib cooked?” Alice asked, and he looked at his mom because he didn’t understand the question.

“Well done,” she said.

The family kept looking at Joey after the waitress left. “You’re stupid,” Billy said.

“No, he’s not. It’s good to try new things,” Rachel said.

“I think it’s pretty cool of you,” Vero said.

“I already know what a cheeseburger tastes like,” he said.

“You don’t even know what prime rib is,” Billy said.

Which was true, but he pictured TV ribs like Fred gets on the credits of The Flintstones, a slab of meat so big that his car tips over when the carhop sets it on the tray. With his hands clasped on the table, he waited.

“Well,” William said. He looked at Rachel, who with a gleam in her eye looked around at the kids, and when she looked back at William, she nodded. He cleared his throat. “Go ahead,” he said to her. “You tell them.”

“Kids, do you know why your father’s taking us out to dinner?”