

Ports of Entry

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“I don’t see why you can’t take him today,” she protested.

“It’s cold outside. He might get sick,” my father replied, pulling on his boots in the dark. “Our godson Carlitos died of the flu when he was nine.”

“It was cold last week and you took him. Besides, that’s not why Carlitos died.”

“Today’s not a good day.”

“Why?”

Silence.

“Are you seeing someone?” She pressed.

“What are you talking about?”

“¿Otra mujer?”

I listened quietly outside the door to their bedroom, my boots in my hands, bare feet shivering on the cold cement floor. I thought of my cousin, Primo Carlitos. We had learned to swim together. We had slept in the same bed at our grandmother’s house, giggling under the sheets. Then, I’d been told I’d never see him again.

“Another woman? Are you going to start with that again?” His voice turned dark and tense.

“Why won’t you take him then? If you’re not doing anything you’re not supposed to be doing?”

I imagined him glowering at her in the darkness, his thick eyebrows knitting together, a disapproving awning brooding over menacing windows. “Fine. I’ll take him. But if something goes wrong, you’re to blame.”

“What do you mean?” Sheets rustled as she sat up in bed, clutching her pregnant belly.

“Never mind.” The rocking chair creaked as he rose, sending me scurrying into the kitchen.

“Buenos días, Ramón,” his voice softened as he discerned my silhouette in the blue glow of dawn. “Ponte tus botas. Grab a blanket so you don’t get sick. Vámonos.”

In my dad’s pick up, I was grateful for the red sarape, unfurling vibrant stripes in green, yellow and blue. The colors emanated a magical heat. I wrapped myself tightly in it, but the truck still felt cold as a metal coffin on wheels, squeaking and rattling as we cruised the abandoned streets. The only signs of life percolated at the donut shop near the bridge. Señor Donut. Side by side, a portly woman served glazed donuts and pan dulce. Coffee and café. Gringos and Mexicanos.

“Everybody loves something sweet now and then,” my dad patted my head, ordering a dozen chocolate donuts, a coffee for himself and a hot chocolate for me.

Behind the counter, stuffed into a pink polyester dress, an expansive white apron stretched taut across her bulging belly, the woman pillaged the display case with long metal tongs, pouring coffee and chocolate simultaneously, a cross between a cursed sea monster with dexterous tentacles and a landlubber blessed with unfettered access to baked goods.

“¿Que cuentas, Perla?” My dad smiled, sliding a twenty across the formica counter.

“Nada nuevo, Señor Lopez. Working. Always working.”

The collection of men hunched over the counter nodded their heads in somber agreement, their Brownsville Heralds rustling like the wings of restless crows as they slurped noisily from their mugs.

“You still have room at the boarding house, like we talked the other day?” My dad asked as she handed him his change.

“Sí,” she answered slowly, her eyes falling on me. Why was she looking at me? I didn’t need a room at a boarding house. I already had a room.

“Bueno. I’ll see you there, after your morning shift.”

Was this the “otra mujer” my mother worried about?

Hesitantly, she held a steaming pot of swirling brown liquid in each hand, her eyes shifting again from my father to me. “¿Y el niño?”

“He’s with me,” he answered, touching the tip of his hat and retreating into the parking lot.

As we shed the stuffy warmth of the donut shop, the moist cold air stung my cheeks. Glancing back, I saw Perla place the coffee pots down and make the sign of the cross.

* * *

The rising sun illuminated the river as we crossed the Gateway Bridge into México. The streets were eerily empty as we cruised through Matamoros, the inhabitants of its colorful houses – a blur of hibiscus, aqua, lime, mango – slumbering still.

Soon we were out on the open road, hurtling towards the ranch as the wind whipped noisily against the truck. When the weather was good, my dad rolled down the windows and sang Mexican songs, ushering an instinctive smile onto my face. But today it was too cold. He remained silent, crouched over the steering wheel in his tan overcoat, his eyes burrowing holes through the windshield, his Stetson casting a shadow over his face.

Instead of his usual barrage of stories and advice, he turned and assessed me, pensively stroking his thick moustache. “You haven’t touched the donuts. When we get to the ranch they’ll be gone in an instant.”

“I’m not hungry today,” I confessed, staring at the glossy orange box filled with pristine wheels of mouthwatering air-puffed flour and sugar. The donuts reminded me of the tires my dad baked in his retread shop. Except these tires weren’t dirty and stinky. These were fragrant and perfect. Instead of dirtying your hands, they melted in your mouth. “Primo Carlitos liked donuts.”

My dad stared at the road ahead, his eyes glazing over.

When we spotted the row of elms on the left side of the road, we knew we had reached our destination. Five trees lined the dirt road from the highway to the humble ranch house. In their teens, my dad and his brothers had planted the trees

amidst bouts of nausea and vomiting, the arduous labor a punishment for stumbling home drunk from the 4th of July fireworks.

The pickup truck rattled along the bumpy road, kicking up a cloud of dust that enveloped us. When we reached the rusted gate bearing the Dos de Copas emblem, the number two and a cup, I descended to push the creaky behemoth open. Once the truck passed, I closed it and climbed back into the cabin. This was my weekly job, and I was proud to do it well. Rolling beneath the elms' sprawling branches, we reached a clearing. There, stood an obstinate cinderblock house. Two crumbling but defiant rooms. An explosion of children streaming towards the truck, laughing giddily at the prospect of donuts. Their faces were streaked with mud and soot, their hair matted and disheveled, their feet caked in dirt, but their smiles radiant. As my dad handed Fernandez the box, I was glad I hadn't eaten any.

While the children feasted, my dad addressed Fernandez beneath the nearest elm. "¿Y el bebé, Primo?"

He shook his downcast head and frowned. "No better, Primo. The clinic won't help us. Hijos de puta. They sent us home. For her to die."

"I talked to a doctor I know on The Other Side. She said she would help, but we need to bring the baby across. Like we discussed over the phone," my dad explained. "Did you look into the permiso?"

"Yes, but they won't give it to us. Chinga su madre. They think I want to go work over there. Pendejos."

My dad shook his head and spat onto the ground. "Chingados. Pues a la mala then. Is your wife ready to try?"

“Sí.” Fernandez summoned up a guttural wad of phlegm from his emaciated torso and spat on the ground as well. I wasn’t sure if it was a macho competition or a country tradition, but the men always did this. They loaded their phrases with curses, spitting from their foul mouths as if their salivary glands were determined to cleanse them.

The men turned, their troubled eyes settling on the house. The children had scurried back inside because the breeze was too frigid and humid this time of year for their scantily clad bodies, even with the extra sugar to burn.

I was accustomed to tagging along with my dad and quietly listening to everything he said. Usually, his conversations revolved around selling tires and amassing enough money to make the house payments or keep the lights turned on at the plant. At the ranch with Fernandez, his ramblings typically entailed talk of mending fences, breeding cattle, or planting sorghum to feed the scattered livestock grazing on the anemic pastures. This was different.

I followed as they sauntered towards the rustic wooden door. My grandparents had once lived in that insignificant home. Before that, on the same foundation, my great-grandfather had once burned down a wooden house by falling asleep with a hand-rolled cigarillo in one hand and a bottle of tequila spilt all over the sheets. The family had survived, but all their possessions had been destroyed.

As we entered, the children huddled around a rough-hewn table, the empty donut box dismantled at its center. We paused as Fernandez ducked behind a sheet that hung across the opening to the back room.

Murmuring. Tattered, musty cotton. Fernandez's weathered hand waving us through. The room cold and dank. Fernandez's wife – appearing far older than she was, her skin leathery and gaunt, her hair frayed – cradled a frail infant in her arms.

They spoke in hushed tones as my dad leaned over the baby. I strained to make out what they were saying, but all I could decipher was the woman whimpering softly that she did not want her baby to die.

“Bueno,” my dad concluded somberly. “We will wait for you outside.”

I followed him to the pickup.

Moments later, Fernandez escorted his wife to the truck. She required his support to remain upright as she shuffled barefoot across the packed dirt, the mass of children trailing behind her. I could never count how many of them there were because of their incessant motion.

“No mamá,” a girl about my age cried. “Don't go.”

My father gestured for me to open the passenger door and slide into the middle to make room for her. As Fernandez helped her up, I caught a whiff of a pungent odor. There was no running water out here on the ranch, only an outhouse and a pond that collected rain. They bathed in metal washtubs behind the house. And I reckoned they didn't bathe very often during the cold season. She shivered with cold, the baby's eyes remaining tightly shut. I marveled at its smooth skin. It looked as perfect as a doll. How could it face imminent death?

Fernandez closed the door and gazed through the window like a man trapped behind bars. The children swirled about him like a churning dust devil, pressing their cheeks and lips against the cold glass, their breath fogging it up.

Setting his jaw, my dad nodded at him, something unsaid transmitted between their eyes.

As we rumbled into town, the woman and my father did not speak at all. The cabin awkwardly silent, the air tensed with anticipation.

I had seen her many times during our weekly trips to the ranch. I knew she and her husband tended to the ranch in exchange for living quarters. They grew vegetables, subsisting off the land. When I asked my dad why he called Fernandez “primo,” he had told me they shared the same ancestors that had originally settled those lands. I knew we were poor, but we seemed far more fortunate than our distant cousins south of the border.

In town, we stopped at a trucking company compound. Every Sunday after our visit to the ranch, we swung by here to load tires. Two lanky men heaved the tires into the back, the vehicle shaking and bobbing as their weight dropped into the bed. As the truck rocked, the baby’s eyes fluttered open and she began to cry, the woman fruitlessly shushing her. The men asked no questions of my father and he offered no explanations. When the loading was finished, we creaked slowly back towards the bridge, the baby protesting loudly. A few blocks from the tollbooth, my dad veered off course, parking in an abandoned lot. There, he and the woman got down. Grunting, he pushed and pulled on the tractor-trailer casings, creating a nook between four towers of tires. He motioned for the woman to climb onto the tailgate and crawl into the hiding space, but she struggled to board the truck with the baby in her arms.

As she balked, my father instructed, “Give the baby to Ramón.”

The moment she placed her in my arms, the boisterous bundle fell strangely silent, staring quizzically at me through outsized black eyes, her body weightless even to me.

My father helped the woman scale the tailgate, where she backed into the crevice. She reached out and I gently transferred the baby into her arms. As they retreated deep into their rubber refuge, I helped my father push the tires back together and shut the tailgate.

He circled the truck, examining his work. "Can you see anything, Ramón?"

I hopped up and down, peeking past the tires, but all I detected were smooth casings eager to receive a new lease on life at the retread shop.

My dad dusted his hands off, which was pointless because the soot wouldn't come off until we washed them with Lava soap back at the house. This was the life of a tire man, he often declared. Dirty but honest. Humble yet proud.

We clattered towards the bridge, the tollbooth sliding into view as a light rain drizzled across the windshield. The wipers squeaked, sweeping back and forth across the glass. Beggars lined the street, shambling in grimy rags, shaking rusted cups jingling with loose change. Cars snaked towards the crossing. The queue would swell throughout the day. At the right instant, crossing could take merely five minutes, but during busy times it might consume an hour. Radiators would rebel. Steam would hiss. Tempers would flare.

As we joined the line, a sudden cry pierced the cabin. My dad and I turned to look at each other as the line inched along bumper to bumper. Surely the baby would stop. Wouldn't it? On the other hand, what did the innocent know about

immigration officials and drug-sniffing German Shepherds salivating over the slope of the bridge? What did the baby comprehend about being discreet while breaking the law? My heart pounded as I wondered what might happen to my father if he was caught smuggling humans beneath his tires. And what of the baby and its mother?

“What’s wrong with the baby?” I asked.

“Not its lungs, that’s for sure.”

“What then?”

“They think it’s her heart. In Brownsville the doctors can fix these problems sometimes.”

“Do you think she’ll stop crying before we get on the bridge?”

“Hopefully her mother can make her stop. Maybe she’ll feed her.”

But the crying persisted, growing increasingly shrill as we neared the tollbooth. My father stroked his moustache, peering over his shoulder through the small window to the truck bed. “We can’t do this with the baby crying.”

“Maybe it’s getting wet and cold,” I wondered, feeling guilty as I basked in the warm cocoon of the sarape.

My dad glanced back at the tires again. The rain was coming down harder now. The baby screamed. We rolled another car length forward. Only two cars remained between us and the tollbooth, the point of no return. He looked at me again, then down at the blanket that enveloped me.

My eyes followed his gaze down to the stripes, the folds, the excess fabric spilling onto the floor, white tassels dangling in the shadows beneath my feet.

“What if...” I mustered. “I hold the baby beneath the blanket?”

Wipers squeaked. Tires rolled. Brakes squealed. Baby cried. One car left. Red light. Green light. Water sloshing. Baby screaming.

At the last moment, my dad jerked the steering wheel to the right and made a U-turn away, backtracking along the road by the levee. A few blocks away he turned into a side street and parked beneath the canopy of an evergreen tree.

He left the truck running as we got down and separated the tires.

Slowly, the woman crawled forth with the baby clasped to her chest.

“Lo siento, Señor Lopez,” she said. “No deja de llorar.”

The baby sneezed and coughed, wriggling in her arms, as if she were trying to free herself and escape this horrid, unwelcoming world, her face scrunched up, her skin fiery red.

“Maybe she doesn’t like the fumes,” I coughed in a cloud of putrid exhaust from the rusted, hole-pocked muffler.

“The nurse told me not to let her get upset. Her heart. It’s too much strain.” The mother began to weep.

My dad put his arms out. “Give us the baby.”

She did as he said. In his arms the baby continued to struggle and protest. He looked at me and I held out my hands. As he deposited the feather-like bundle into my arms, she opened her big black eyes again and fell silent, her limbs relaxing as she ceased kicking.

The woman smiled feebly, wiping away her tears. “He has a gentle soul.”

“We will hide her up front. Whatever happens, don’t move, don’t say a word until we move the tires again.”

She nodded and disappeared beneath the tires. After he shoved them back into place, my dad opened the door and positioned the sarape over us.

“Scoot down on the seat,” he said. “Suck in your stomach.”

I followed his instructions.

“Hmm,” he studied me. “Put your feet on the edge of the seat so the baby can lie between your knees and chest.”

I contorted into the position. “It’s kind of uncomfortable.”

“Suck in your stomach again. Pretend you’re sick.”

I closed my eyes and let my head angle down to my shoulder.

“Act like you’re trying to get permission to stay home from school.”

I moaned.

“That’s more like it.”

I peeked at the baby beneath the blanket only to find it sound asleep.

When we returned to the bridge the queue had doubled in length. Shaking his head, my dad muttered obscenities in Spanish as he followed the levee back to the front of the line.

My parents always said it was not proper to skip the line. They said it was unfair and that everybody should wait their turn. But clearly this situation was unusual. My dad gestured for a chance to cut into the line. After two rejections, an elderly lady consented.

Minutes later we ascended the bridge’s slope. At the summit, I gazed through the rain-streaked window at the river winding towards the horizon.

“Too bad we couldn’t have brought them across the river near the ranch,” I whispered.

“Too dangerous.”

And this wasn’t?

What if the baby woke up? What if she got hungry? What if she started suffocating beneath the blanket? Delicately, I raised it and softly blew air over the baby’s face. She looked pale now, even in the pink light filtering through the sarape’s fibers. Weak. Maybe the crying had drained her. What if she died in my arms?

The brakes squealed as we started and stopped, crawling towards the customs inspector. Sometimes, my dad knew the agent. He’d been crossing back and forth his whole life, ferrying tires across for years. He’d gone to high school with some of them. Their parents knew each other. Other times, there might be a gringo inspector transferred from a northern city. More than once, those inspectors had sent him to the secondary inspection area, a covered parking lot where more officers and dogs searched vehicles for drugs and undocumented passengers. If that transpired, we’d be finished. They’d order us out of the truck and the baby would be revealed. Wielding flashlights, they’d scrutinize the tires and discover its mother cowering in fear.

My dad strained to discern which agent was working each lane. But the rain made it impossible. The last thing he said to me before we advanced was, “Ramón, remember. You’re trying to avoid school. Sick as a dog.”

As we reached the checkpoint and my dad rolled down his window, I moaned and let my head slump over my left shoulder. Listening intently, I pulled the blanket

up around my chin, my arms wrapped tightly around the baby beneath the colorful fabric.

“Lopez!” I nearly jumped out of my seat.

“Treviño!” My dad replied as they shook hands vigorously.

“¿Que hay de nuevo?” The customs agent asked.

“Lo mismo, bringing tires back for recapping. But this time my boy got sick out on the ranch. I’ve got to get him home.”

The man peeked in. At that instant the baby rustled and sneezed. Instinctively, I coughed and feigned a sneeze. Then I moaned for extra effect. Just don’t cry, baby. Don’t cry.

“It’s this weather. Muy frio. You should’ve left him home with his mother.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Bueno,” his eyes hovered over the tires. “I’ll see you next week.”

“Andale, Treviño. Say hi to your familia for me.”

The agent patted the truck bed and flashed the green light.

As we rolled down the slick ramp, we sat in silence, our hearts slowing in relief.

* * *

Perla stood on the porch of her boarding house. It was a dilapidated wooden structure, once painted pink, now faded and peeling. A grill rusted in the front yard, a mangy dog lay chained to a scraggly tree.

As we parked in the cracked driveway, she descended the rickety steps. I couldn't help but wonder if she had donuts stashed in her apron pockets. All this stress had whipped up my appetite.

She helped my dad part the tires and held the woman's hands as she climbed down from the tailgate. Then I handed them the sleeping baby.

"Que Dios te bendiga siempre," the mother whispered to me.

"You're a hero," Perla remarked, shaking her head in disbelief. "A free donut for you next time you come to the shop. Cherry-filled."

I beamed. "I'm just glad we made it."

"Wait here, son," my dad patted me on the head.

I watched them walk through the light drizzle, up the stairs and into the house.

On the way home, I asked him, "What will happen to the baby?"

"We called the doctor I know and she is going to come this afternoon to examine the baby. Then she'll decide. Maybe she'll take her to the hospital."

"You think she'll be okay?"

"I don't know, son. Remember, todo lo que nace muere. Everything that is born dies. It is not for us to decide when, where or why."

"But she's just a baby." I felt a surge of anguish rising in my chest.

"Tonight, include her in your prayers."

"I don't even know her name."

"Emilia."

“Okay,” I said, wiping away the droplet of moisture that had condensed like morning dew at the corner of my left eye.

As we approached our house in Southmost, a collapsing heap of wood on a narrow lot behind a sagging chainlink fence, my dad cautioned me. “Not a word to your mother. Or, she’ll never let you go with me to the ranch again.”

* * *

Their arguing had been worse than usual, rousing me several nights in a row. Then one morning I heard her talking on the phone with my grandmother. Between sobs, she cried, “They say he has another family.”

Another family? Impossible. He worked all day and came straight home from the tire shop every night. When would he have time for a whole other family?

“They say he keeps them in a boarding house. But he denies it. Can you imagine? We have a baby on the way. And we can barely pay our bills. What am I to do, mamá?”

She had it all wrong. Why wouldn’t Dad explain? I couldn’t bear to hear her crying and badmouthing my father to Abuelita Carmela. He was just trying to help a family in need, greater need than us.

When my dad came home that night, I intercepted him outside.

“Dad, why don’t you tell Mom about the woman and the baby?”

“It’s none of her business.”

“But she has the wrong idea.”

“Son, you let me take care of things. Go play.”

As he entered the house, the yelling began. Play? I sat on the front steps, staring at the weeds choking out the grass, listening to the incessant buzzing of the cicadas vibrating in the trees. As I sulked, neighbors popped their heads out of windows to eavesdrop on the racket.

The next day, when I walked home from school, I found her standing by the door next to a collection of tattered suitcases assembled at her feet. Her belly loomed over them menacingly as she dabbed her eyes with balls of tissue paper.

“What’s happening?”

“I’m going to my mother’s house. You can come with me if you like.”

“To visit?”

“No. To stay.”

“Why?”

“Someday, when you’re old enough, you’ll understand these things. But for now, you are too young.”

I stared at the faded blue Samsonites, my heart sinking. I didn’t want her to leave. I wanted her to understand that my dad wasn’t as bad as she thought. But he had forbidden me to say anything. What was I to do? I thought of the baby, Emilia, wondered how she was doing, thought of that day crossing the bridge with two stowaways. Didn’t you have to break the rules sometimes simply to do what you knew in your heart was right? What would be worse, betraying my father’s trust and not getting to go to the ranch anymore, or allowing my parents’ marriage to fall apart when I could do something to help save it?

“Is someone coming to pick you up?” I asked.

“I called a taxi. It’s on its way.”

I took her hand and gazed up at her. “Mom, there’s something I have to tell you.”

“What is it?”

“I know the woman and the baby at the boarding house.”

“What?” She exclaimed, clutching at her heaving abdomen.

“Dad is just helping them. The baby is sick. The woman’s husband and kids are on The Other Side at the ranch. They’re the family that works and lives there, Dad’s relative Fernandez.

“I...but...people said...” She seemed to lose her balance but I hung on, steadying her until she placed her hand on the doorframe.

Outside, the sound of an engine approaching. Through the window, a yellow car pulling up to the curb, brakes squeaking. On the wall in our meager front room, a clock ticking loudly.

She grunted as fluid splashed at her feet. A frightened expression gripped her eyes. “Help me to the taxi,” she gasped, reaching for the doorknob.

“What’s happening? Are you still going to Abuelita’s house? Didn’t you hear me?”

“I heard you. The baby is coming. I’m going to the hospital.”

I glanced back at the suitcases as I chased after her. “Do you want to bring something?”

“Just lock the door. Hurry,” she huffed, waddling to the cab.

* * *

It was a long night at the hospital. The waiting room overflowed with family chattering over the din of crackling intercom announcements. My grandmothers. My dad's brothers. My mom's sister. Uniformed nurses drifted in and out like restless moths, white shoes squeaking across shiny linoleum. At first it was a festive gathering, an enthusiastic welcome party for the newest addition to the Lopez clan. But as the hours dragged on, everybody grew tired and worry lines etched across their foreheads, their dark features drooping like shadows at sunset.

My dad had been summoned behind the ominous swinging doors that held visitors at bay. I heard murmurs about a breech birth. What was that? Feet first. Pain. Blood loss. Then there were the screams. Shriill. Piercing. Savage. Everybody could hear them emanating from the long gleaming hallway. How many sets of those heavy doors stood between us and whatever table my mother's life balanced upon? How could her tormented shrieks still reach us all the way out here in the waiting area?

My uncles darted outside, anxiously igniting cigarettes, blowing clouds of smoke at the full moon. My Abuelita Carmela wrung her hands around her rosary, pleading for her daughter as my paternal grandmother, Fina, comforted her. My stomach growling despite the unfolding drama, I gravitated towards the vending machines, marveling at how the press of a button could mechanically transport shiny packages and tasty morsels into a person's eager hands, as long as said person

was loaded with quarters. Over the cool hum of the soda machine, I discerned a familiar voice, turning to catch a fleeting glimpse of a pink puffball floating down the corridor. Others may have seen just another visitor checking on a loved one, but I recognized a free jelly-filled donut when I saw one.

“Miss Perla,” I hustled after her.

She stopped. “Ramón. What are you doing here?”

“My mom’s having the baby.”

“Good God,” she made the sign of the cross just as she had that morning at Señor Donut. “May everything go well for them.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m checking on Emilia.”

“She’s here?”

“Yes, hasn’t your father told you? She had her surgery earlier today. I took her mother home to rest because she hasn’t slept in days.”

“No my father hasn’t told me. But I’ve barely seen him. It’s been a crazy day.”

“Yes, I can imagine. Well come with me. Do you want to see her?”

I followed Perla through the labyrinthine corridors, ending up at a panoramic window. Beyond the glass, rows of babies rested in plastic baskets, swaddled in white blankets adorned with pink and blue stripes. On the sides of the baskets, cards hung with names written in black marker. Rodriguez. Gomez. Cross.

“Are those plastic cribs?” I peered curiously at the tiny beings lying on their backs, some sleeping, others jerking their limbs aimlessly in the air like dying cockroaches.

“Those are incubators. They keep the babies warm.”

My eyes opened in awe. “I’d like one of those for myself. Our house gets cold in the winter.”

Perla chuckled. “Yes. I wouldn’t mind starting over in an incubator. I’d do a lot of things differently, that’s for sure.”

I gazed up at Perla. Her life didn’t seem half bad. She owned a boarding house and worked at a donut shop. She’d never go homeless or hungry. What could she regret?

She gazed at me placidly, as if she could read my thoughts. “Look over there in the corner, that’s where the really sick babies are. They call it the NICU.”

At the far end of the room sat a lonely incubator with a tiny, defenseless Emilia in it. The card read, “Fernandez.” A fleet of machines surrounded the incubator. Tubes and wires ran into it, swarming the baby.

“Will she be okay?”

“There was a hole in her heart and they had to close it. She is a strong baby. But you never know. All we can do is pray.”

“I prayed for her like my dad told me to.”

“Good. So did I.”

As we stared at the lone crib in the NICU, a nurse backed into the room through a set of white doors. She wheeled an incubator into the corner next to Emilia.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

I strained to read the card hanging from the side of the fresh arrival's incubator. It remained blank as the nurse connected hoses and tubes. We watched the nurse methodically conduct her work. When she finished, she extracted a black marker from her pocket and leaned over the name card. As she stepped out of the way, I gawked at the card hanging from the incubator.

"Lopez," I whispered.

Perla gasped, covering her mouth as if she wished she could take it back.

"It's your brother," I heard my dad say from behind us. "René."

As we turned around, he looked like he'd aged ten years since that morning.

* * *

That night after the family left, my dad and I stayed as late as we could. Around 1 a.m. we drove home. It was the only night we had ever spent alone in the house. The place seemed strangely alien without my mother. He tucked me into my bed and dragged in the rocking chair from his room. Sitting in the corner, he swayed gently, the creaking lulling us hypnotically. We drifted in and out of sleep, his snoring occasionally stirring us.

"Dad," I asked. "What's wrong with Mom and René?"

He rocked for a while, "Your mother lost a lot of blood. It was a very difficult delivery, but she will be okay."

"And my brother?"

He rocked some more, shutting his eyes, snoring and then finally answering, “René came out feet first. They say he might not have gotten enough oxygen to his brain. We won’t know for some time what it might mean. He also needs surgery for his neck.”

I stared at the ceiling. This was all rather unexpected. Babies were supposed to be born healthy and happy. And here the only two babies I knew were fighting for their lives in the corner of the NICU.

“And Emilia?”

“Her surgery went well. The doctor says if she continues to improve, she could be out of the hospital in a couple of weeks. But she is still in critical condition, which means nothing is certain.”

“Did I have problems as a baby?”

“No.”

“I guess I was lucky.”

“You are blessed. Now you have to work hard to make more luck and earn more blessings. Life is like the river. It has many twists and turns. You never know what is coming around the bend,” he said, slipping back in to sleep, the creaking of the rocking chair slowing until it stopped.

I thought of the Rio Grande carving its groove in the land beyond the levee we passed each day. Climbing that levee, I could see the river, the banks on the other side. I knew the river flowed east and emptied into the Gulf near our ranch, winding through the lands our ancestors had first settled. The river was dangerous and unpredictable. Sometimes it ran dry and people and livestock went thirsty. Other

times it flooded and swept away entire neighborhoods like an angry god wreaking havoc on his inadequate followers. Was that what life was like?

When I fell asleep, I dreamt of being out on the ranch. I saw Emilia and René. But they weren't babies any more. They were four or five years old. They ran through the fields, vanishing into the tall swaying grass. I was surprised to find myself not chasing them, but rather waking within the confines of a giant incubator. Tubes and wires ensnared me as I gawked desperately through the plastic walls. I lurched and tugged at my restraints. Then a sudden calm washed over me as I caught sight of Emilia and René. They held hands as they gazed back at me, waving. Gone was my fear. All I could feel was joy. They were alive and healthy. I smiled and fell back asleep.

We headed out the next morning, stopping briefly at Señor Donut. The shop was empty and silent except for the beeps that issued from the coffee machines. They reminded me of the sounds emitted from the NICU. My dad had a distant look in his eyes. He stirred his coffee as Perla handed me the free donut she'd promised. I saw her pull it out of the bin marked "cherry-filled," but when I bit into it during the bumpy ride to the hospital, it turned out to be lemon. It was sweet and powdered on the outside, sour and bitter on the inside. It wasn't what I'd hoped for, but I ate it anyway.