

"At once brave and heartbreaking... a thunderous artifact... by a poet whose voice, brutal and tender, is unique in America." —THE NATION

# A Place to Stand



# Jimmy Santiago Baca

## PROLOGUE

I was five years old the first time I ever set foot in prison. A policeman came to the door one night and told Mom she was needed at jail. She took me with her. When we arrived at the booking desk the captain asked, "You married to Damacio Baca?"

"Yes."

"He was arrested for drunk driving. His bail's a hundred. Sign here and make sure he appears for court."

"What are they?"

"His release papers."

The captain studied her hesitation.

"He stays till his appearance then." The captain shrugged, surprised at her, and led us past holding cells to the drunk tank.

It smelled like urine and whiskey vomit. I held tightly to Mother's hand. The corridors were dark and gloomy, and the slightest sound echoed ominously in the hall. We stopped in front of a cell where men sat and stared at the wall in front of them. Some were crumpled on the floor where they had passed out.

"¡Oye, Damacio, despierta!" the captain cried, and banged the bars with his baton.

The inmates glanced at us with hung-over disinterest, and one shook my father awake. He rose in a groggy stupor. Cautiously stepping over bodies, losing and regaining his footing, he approached the bars. He rubbed his face and blinked his red eyes.

"Did you have to bring *him*?" he asked accusingly. Then he added, clearly hurt that I was there, "I don't want him seeing me like this. Get me out of here."

"No," Mom said.

He stared at her. "Listen, you, don't—" Shaking with rage, he looked at me and made an effort to control himself.

We stood in silence for a few seconds. Then Mom cried, "Stay away from us!"

He reached his hand through the bars to me but Mom yanked me away, her hand painfully gripping mine. I wanted to tell her not to leave Father in there. I feared he might be hurt or be swallowed up by the darkness, and we would never see him again. The green painted bars, the guards with guns and keys and surly attitudes, the caked grime on the walls and floor, the unshaven men with no teeth and swollen red eyes and scratched faces—these filled me with terror. I tried to free my hand from Mother's to go back to him, but she squeezed harder and dragged me along.

"Get back here!" My father's voice was strained by both aggression and self-pity, but Mom opened the door and we left. I wanted to tell him I was sorry. I didn't want to keep him in jail. Only when he was drinking did he threaten to beat Mom up, wreck the car, lose his paycheck gambling, or sometimes not show up for days. He was not drinking now. We should have let him come home with us. When he would stagger in drunk, Miego and Martina would hide under the bed or in the closet, but I wasn't afraid of him. I would hold his hand and guide him to his chair, and he'd put me on his lap and moan drunkenly about how sorry he was for drinking and not being a better father. Even as scared as I was by the jail, I wanted to sit on the floor outside the cell bars and hold his hand because he needed me.

For weeks afterward my father's voice from behind bars echoed in my head as I moped around our yard or slept at my mother's side in our narrow bed. I had nightmares of violent forces hurling my father through the air, I tossed and turned but could never reach him. When I woke and lay still in bed, smelling my mother's skin, putting my face against my brother's hair, clutching my sister's hand, I curled in closer, fearing that a strange

official-looking person would come and take my sister and brother and me away. There had been conspiratorial whispers between aunts and uncles in Grandma's kitchen. With Father in jail, I thought maybe Mother might be thinking of moving us. I no longer trusted that my brother and sister and I were safe.

Outside the thin walls of our shack, howling winds swept the New Mexico prairie with violent moans that reminded me of the misery of the jail, its dark gloom and the faces that stared at me from behind the bars. Again and again I recalled the wasted features of the prisoners, the faraway eyes, pleading to be let out, gazing at me as if from a distant place.

In time I would become all too familiar with such places, not only with those very same cells down on Garcia Street but with a long string of others as well, on different if equally dusty streets, with different but similar jailers, different but similar men. That initial encounter, however, never left me. It remained a fixed, haunting reference point to which I would return to time and again. Whether I was approaching it or seeking escape from it, jail always defined in some way the measure of my life.

As I grew up, my own eyes came to reflect those of these drunks, addicts, and beggars, those grieving men, women, and children and their stories. It was the same despair I had seen through the bars in my father's eyes, the same story. Over the years, I encountered all of them: eyes filled with raging despair, with weary despair, with insane despair; eyes with the despair of an old man who can no longer fight injustice; eyes filled with the dark despair of terror or mental illness; the anguished eyes of a child weeping in a corner. In time, my own eyes would show all these emotions. My own voice, calling through another set of bars, would merge with distant echoes of my father's voice and permit some final but forever insufficient understanding, love, and forgiveness to pass between us.

The last time I was in prison it was for five years. It was serious time in a serious place—Florence, a maximum-security state prison in Arizona. I landed there as I had landed in the oth-

ers, by being a poor kid with too much anger and the wrong skin color and by fucking up again, though this time I was innocent of the specific charges against me. I was only twenty-one years old, still young, but by then I had already served a long apprenticeship in jail time. Some men measure their lives in terms of basketball games, fishing trips, school friends, movies, sleep-overs; these things, if they happened to me at all, were brief moments compared to the times I sat staring at cell walls for hours, days, and months at a stretch.

No, prison was not new to me when I arrived at Florence; I had been preparing for it from an early age. I had visited it a thousand times in the screams of my father and my drunken uncles, in the tight-lipped scolding of my mother, in the shrill reprimands of the nuns at Saint Anthony's orphanage; in all the finger-pointing adults who told me I didn't belong, I didn't fit in, I was a deviant. Security guards and managers followed me in store aisles; Anglo housewives walking toward me clutched their purses as I passed. I felt socially censured whenever I was in public, prohibited from entering certain neighborhoods or restaurants, mistrusted by government officials, treated as a flunky by schoolteachers, profiled by counselors as a troublemaker, taunted by police, and disdained by judges, because I had a Spanish accent and my skin was brown. Feeling inferior in a white world, alien and ashamed, I longed for another place to live, outside of society. By the time I arrived at Florence, a part of me felt I belonged there.

But if prison was the place of my downfall, a place where my humanity was cloaked by the rough fabric of the most primitive manhood, it was also the place of my ascent. I became a different man, not because prison was good for me, but in spite of its destructive forces. In prison I learned to believe in myself and to dream for a better life.

You make use of what is available and near at hand, no matter what your circumstances. I did what I had to do to survive. But I was also determined not to become what in my heart I knew I was not. I was not going to let them make me into a ward of the

state. I was lucky, too. For in that place where life and death are waging war every day and the right choice is often the most difficult one, I was able to reach out and find a finger hold on the fragile ledge of hope. Hope didn't support me all the time, and wouldn't have supported others in quite the same way, but it served well enough for me to slowly pull myself up. Very simply, I learned to read and write.

Language gave me a way to keep the chaos of prison at bay and prevent it from devouring me; it was a resource that allowed me to confront and understand my past, even to wring from it some compelling truths, and it opened the way toward a future that was based not on fear or bitterness or apathy but on compassionate involvement and a belief that I belonged.

I have been a writer ever since, a poet. Poetry became something to aspire to, to live up to. It informed how I saw the world and my purpose in it. It was never the answer to everything and could not become so. At times, I had to put my pen down and fight with my fists, and sometimes when I yearned for answers to allay the excruciating pain of merely surviving, there were none. But poetry helped make me the person I am today, awakening creative elements that had long lain dormant in me, opening my mind to ideas, and enabling my intellect to nourish itself on alternative ways of being. Poetry enhanced my self-respect. It provided me with a path for exploring possibilities for my life's enrichment that I follow to this day.

The person I have become, who sits writing in this chair at this desk, has been forged by enormous struggle and unexpected blessings, despite the dehumanizing environment of a prison intended to destroy me. Prison was the most frightening nightmare I ever experienced. It stripped me down to nothing, until I huddled in the dark corner of a cell, sometimes shivering with fear, other times filled with so much anger and self-loathing that it would have been better to die. I have never told the full story of my transformation, a story I now believe is important, especially for my sons, playing in their room. I want them to know my heart and not be

confused by conflicting rumors and gossip, wondering which ones are true. When I asked my father about his history, he would never answer. When I asked my grandmother about her history, she didn't want to talk about it. My sons won't have to ask. I want them to know their father's story, good parts and bad. I want to share with them what I have gone through, so they can make wiser choices where I did not and be invigorated with the courage and honor to live better lives.

It is also important for my father, who was never blessed with the good fortune I had in discovering a new path. I believe his death was hastened from the heartbreak of knowing I was in prison. But his failure as a father gave me a determined strength in my struggle for a better life that helped me be a better human being, even in a place like Florence. This maximum-security prison was a frightening and pain-racked place, but perhaps not as painful as other prisons I visited on my way there. I must tell you about them as well.

# ONE

When I was a boy, my father always wore a pained expression and kept his head down, as if he couldn't shake what was bothering him. He snapped irritably at the slightest infraction of his rules and argued continuously with Mother. He drank every day and she sank deeper into sadness and anger. To escape their fighting, and the gossiping of villagers in my Grandma Baca's kitchen, I often belied into the crawl space under our shack to be alone in my own world. I felt safe in this peaceful refuge. The air was moist and smelled like apples withering in a gunnysack in the cellar at my Uncle Max's ranch in Willard. A stray dog might be waiting when I entered. Happy to see me, he would roll on the cool earth, panting, his tail wagging, and lick my face. After playing with him, I'd lie on the dirt and close my eyes and float out of my skin into stories my grandfather, Pedro Baca, told me—about those of our people who rode horses across the night prairie on raiding parties, wearing cloth over their heads, as they burned outsiders' barns, cut fences, and poisoned wells, trying to expel the gringo intruders and recover the land stolen from our people. This happened on prairie ranches all over New Mexico, from the late 1800s to the 1940s, when my grandfather was a young man herding sheep on the range.

I don't remember much before the age of five; my memories are of Grandma and Grandpa Baca in the kitchen, whispering sleepily as the coffee pot percolates on the woodstove; at night, their voices become guarded, talking about Father's drinking, concerned by Mother's absence, and worried that there's never enough money. People come and go; behind their conversations, a Motorola radio under the cupboards by the sink drones Mexi-

can *corridos* or mass rosaries. Then tensions rupture in a night of rebukes. Uncle Santiago cuffs his younger brother, Uncle Refugio, for coming home drunk again, and Grandpa scolds Father for *his* drunkenness. I remember wondering if those fights had something to do with what I saw one hot summer afternoon.

I was six years old, in my crawl space under the shack—or La Casita, as we called it—where it was cool and quiet. I was drifting in a reverie when I was jolted back to the present by a door creaking open above me. I scooted to a dark corner and peeked up through a crack in the floorboards. A strange man entered La Casita and sat on the bed. Mother came in behind him, and he embraced her. His shiny wingtip shoes scraped grit into my eyes. They watered painfully, but I forced myself to watch as he raised her skirt and ran his hands along her thighs.

She protested, wrenching to one side and then to the other, pushing him away. But the bedsprings creaked as he pinned her and said, "I love you."

They made love with their clothes on.

She cried, struggling.

His voice trembled.

I wanted to race into the shack and seize him but fear disabled me. I scratched at the ground with my fingers and shook my head to blur what was happening. Dizzy and terrified, all I could do was brace my knees to my chest and hug myself in fear as their bodies bucked back and forth and the iron legs of the bed scratched on the wood floor. She shrieked and he groaned, and then all of a sudden they stopped, gasping for air and sighing.

After he departed, she waited awhile and then left too. I lay in the dark, shaking uncontrollably. The ground trembled. In the distance, a train was braking into the railyard, either to load up sacks of beans or deposit milled lumber or field equipment. An hour or so later, feeling vibrations as it pulled out, I wished it could have taken all our family problems away with it. I didn't know what this affair meant at the time, except I knew it was wrong, and I carried the secret of it like a fresh wound in my heart.

Days passed in anguish. I never told Father and I never let on to my mother that I knew. I feared Father would find out what Mother had done and was glad he hadn't been home for a week. Mother and I were napping one afternoon when I heard his car pull up outside, tires crunching gravel. She ran out to the car. "Where've you been?"

"You m'jailer?" he countered sarcastically. He'd been drinking again.

"Just stay away!" She had tried many times to avoid fights by ignoring his carousing, but when I looked out at her I saw no trace of the vulnerable bride. Her face reddening, she screamed, "You're a drunk!"

He scoffed. "You love to use the past against me, don't you? It's your weapon; you stab and turn and dig it in!" His bloodshot eyes glared with resentment. "I never wanted to marry you!"

"You raped me," she said, and seemed stifled by her words. "Liar," he growled. "From the very first day you chased after me. Waiting at school, at the dance, at my house! You trapped me, you wanted it! You can't make love or cook! The whole town's laughing behind my back!"

She turned and came into the house, speaking to herself. "You were so drunk you don't even remember." Tears streamed down her cheeks.



My mother grew up in Willard, New Mexico, with four sisters and three brothers on a forty-acre ranch with no water. Her father, Leopoldo, a Spanish Comanchero, was a renowned cabinetmaker whom I never met, because he died of alcoholism before I was born. His wife, whom I called Grandma Weaver, raised my mother and her seven siblings. They were poor cowboys and cowgirls. When they weren't competing in regional rodeos, they worked long hours outside in the unbearably cold winters and hot sandblowing summers, milking cows, feeding pigs and horses, filing ax blades, and chopping wood.

Being the youngest and prettiest, my mother, Cecilia, was shielded from much of the harsh work; she stayed indoors with her mother and cooked, canned fruits and vegetables, darned old clothes, and did housework. Her older sisters planned on marrying railroad workers, diesel mechanics, or cowboys, but Cecilia had set her sights above such a mean life. Although her family was Spanish and poor, she was fair-skinned, green-eyed, and black-haired. Her family expected her to marry a well-off gringo with a big ranch, but her heart was set on Damacio Baca, a Mexican from a neighboring village, Estancia, whose parents were landless peasants. When she first saw him in his new car passing her school bus on her way to school, she knew they were going to get married. At fifteen, he wore store-bought clothes and was already working part-time in the local grocery and feed store as stocker and cashier.

Her opportunity to meet him came when he made the high school basketball team and she joined the cheerleading squad. He was the team star and she the head cheerleader. It was the perfect match. Cecilia didn't mind his stopping at Francisco's pool hall to hustle hicks or play poker with older guys in the back room. After school, he usually gave her a ride home, and they would often park in an isolated field, hidden by windrow trees, to drink Seagram's and make out. They went steady for several months; she got pregnant, and they dropped out of school to get married.

Despite the early marriage, most people in Estancia were happy for them and pitched in to make their wedding a memorable one. Grandma and Grandpa Weaver, though indignant and against the marriage, gave them La Casita, which they trucked from Willard to Estancia and set up on blocks in the lot beside his parents' house.

The first few months my parents lived in La Casita next to Grandma Baca's house, but after my sister, Martina, was born, in 1950, Father took a job in Santa Fe, about an hour's drive north. They rented a house in Santa Fe, where they lived during the week, and then on weekends they'd stay in La Casita at Estancia. People liked my father and urged him to work his way into politics and one day run for office. A year later my brother, Mieyo, was

born, and when Father was not on the road—he was employed by the DMV to deliver license plates to rural villages—he was with politicians in Santa Fe, drinking at the Toro cantina.

One year after that, in 1952, I was born, and it was about this time that Father's drinking and his absences first became an issue. He was having trouble getting the jobs that the politicians promised him. Also, unlike his village, where everyone respected him, in the urban cities of Santa Fe and Albuquerque, the whites looked down on Mexicans. Mother's frustration began to show. La Casita, with its two tar-papered cardboard rooms, one bed where we all slept, woodstove, and cold water spigot, wasn't the white picket-fenced house in a tree-lined city suburb she'd dreamed of. We had no furniture or dishes; we ate at Grandma's—Martina, Mieyo, and me tugging at Mother's skirt, fighting and crying. Mother tried to care for us, but she didn't know how. She and Damacio were only sixteen when they got married, and with him gone most of the time she had her hands full. Grandma Weaver kept after Mother to divorce him, claiming Father was nothing but a drunk and a womanizer. Her brothers swore they'd shoot him if they ever caught him and blamed her for dishonoring the family by marrying a "damn Mexican."

I remember him being two men. When sober, he looked boyish in pressed trousers, dress jacket, and white shirt, his appearance giving no trace of alcoholism. When he was drunk, he became vulgar and abusive, reducing himself to a pitiful phantom of the man he was when sober. When he was supposed to show up on Friday night, Mother made herself all pretty, and we'd go to the park pond and she'd push me on the swing. She'd chase us across the grass, wrestling us down with hugs, laughing and entertaining us with her girlish enthusiasm. We'd picnic on the grass, her green eyes sparkling with happiness as she told us how we were going to buy a nice house, toys and clothes. But later, waiting for Father, when he didn't arrive, her disappointment would deepen into surly pouting and when I did something wrong, she'd yell, saying she wished I was never born. I thought her sadness

was my fault and I'd curl up on the floor in a corner and cry. Later, though, in bed, I'd weave her fingers around mine, kissing and tasting them as she caressed my face, apologized, whispered that everything was going to be fine.

We went back and forth between Santa Fe and Estancia more often once Martina and Mieyo started school in Estancia. I didn't want to go, and they didn't insist, so I played at home. In Santa Fe, although times were hard and we didn't have any money, neighbors sometimes came with canned staples and flour for tortillas. To show her gratitude for their kindness, Mother made me sit as they preached. "What is written in the Bible will come to pass!" they cried, as they stood above me in the middle of the room. "Infidels and sinners! The Lord will dash every idol and take upon himself proud ones and crush them!" I didn't say anything, but I thought they were strange and I was glad their visits were rare.

Not all Christians were the same. Sometimes, when a man named Richard took Mother out, she left me with a kind lady, Señora Valdez. Richard had sneaky ways and I didn't trust him. He was always whispering to my mother. When I asked what he had said, Mother told me I wasn't supposed to ask questions, and I didn't want to cause problems so I was quiet. Anyway, being with Señora Valdez allayed my anxiety about Richard. I often walked with her to the butcher shop for scraps to give stray dogs. At a small stream at the park by the plaza, we'd stand and toss bones to the starving creatures. She'd croon in an archaic voice, "*Bendice El Señor, El Señor perdona tus pecados, y cura tus enfermedades.*" Her voice was warm and reassuring. I believed God listened to her prayers and made the dust storms stop, so I asked her to pray for my parents.

Whether we were in Estancia or Santa Fe, Dad would still come in late at night, smelling of whiskey and perfume. When I was six or seven, I was usually in bed right after sundown, but I stayed awake, waiting for him to come home. I would brace myself for a fight, as anything could happen when he was drunk. Many times I hid under my covers. My body tense, as he threatened my mother, hurling a spindle-back chair at her and roaring.

Mom would scream at him to get out. I often wept with fear, hoping he would not hurt her. Some nights he rushed drunkenly into my room and yanked me out of bed. I always looked desperately at my sister and brother as he carried me out, but they couldn't help me. Mom usually hid, afraid for her own safety. He would toss me into the car and drive away. I never knew where we were going. We usually drove for hours on country roads. I looked at the stars, I listened to the Mexican music on the radio, I glanced at him swigging from his whiskey bottle, and I tried to pretend that none of this was happening. I snuggled deep into the suit coat that covered me. The hum of the engine, the drone of the heater, and the wind blowing past his open window made me drowsy, and eventually I would fall asleep, helpless and sad.

On good days he tried to be conciliatory, promising to stay home more and not drink or womanize. On such days he always had surprises to show that life was going to get better. Once, to make us proud of him, he showed us a creased photograph of the governor of New Mexico shaking his hand on the capitol steps. He was excited, saying the governor was going to hire him soon. Often, after sharing good news with us, he'd say he had to run errands and would be right back. And just when I thought he might be sincere, he would return hours later, drooling drunk and crying with remorse. I pretended to ignore his repulsive drunkenness but was deeply disappointed. He always returned, and after slobbering all over me, saying what a good boy I was, how I was his favorite and someday I would be a great boxer, he would then stagger out for the night and not return until the bars were closing.

I didn't know which was worse, eagerly expecting him, but never knowing when he might barge drunkenly through the door late at night to fight with Mom, or fearing he would never come home again at all.



Because father almost never came around, and when he did he was drunk, Mother had taken a job as a cashier at a Piggly Wiggly gro-

cery store. We almost never saw her. I was too young to have understood, when we were living in Santa Fe, what it meant when this guy Richard kept coming over. I knew, though, the night we went to visit his parents, that something was up. I'd always distrusted this thin pimply-faced man from the "other world" who would drive up to our barrio shack in a shiny car and new suit, bearing chocolates and flowers, dresses, blouses, and other presents for Mom. I pretended to be indifferent to the candy he placed on the table and waited until they'd left before I tore it open and stuffed myself. I was only a child, but I understood in the way children do that Mother enjoyed the new standard of living that Richard was giving her. She'd bleached her hair, wore jewelry he'd given her, and always had money. She'd been changing in other ways too. She quit speaking Spanish and told us not to speak it around Richard.

Riding around in the car Richard had given her, she'd point to white-skinned, blue-eyed children and say I should be like them. When she dressed us, she mentioned that we should look like normal American kids. I had no idea how to do this. She would get mad at me for getting dirty playing in the dusty yard; when Richard was around, we had to stay clean and behave and sit quietly in a chair and say nothing. Richard would get mad when I asked for beans, chile, and tortilla, saying, "It's time you started eating American food." I knew Mom was trying to impress him with her "white ways," but it made her look silly.

It wasn't so with my father; he spoke Spanish and used English only when he had to. He listened to Mexican music, and all his friends were Mexicans. I never saw him with an Anglo. He never said anything bad about them, but he made a point to stay away from them. I remember riding around with him and saying, "No, don't want to go in there, too many gringos." I sensed that if he was around them, he'd be placing himself in harm's way. Ever since I could remember, my Baca grandparents mistrusted whites. When they came to Grandma's with official papers, we hid in the back rooms. Grandma said to be polite but warned me not to talk to them more than necessary. Uncle Santiago said they cheated Uncle Refugio out

of his pay. When Grandpa was under the tree by the fence with his friends, I'd hear them talk about whites who used lawyers to pass laws to steal land or intimidated poor folks with their money.

That was why I was nervous the afternoon Richard took us to meet his rich parents. We were going into their world. Mom sat up front all made up, wearing a pretty pink dress and red high heels. Mieyo, Martina, and I huddled in the back. When we were almost there, Richard turned to Mom and explained that, since his parents were old-fashioned, it would be best if she said she was Anglo and that she was just babysitting us for a girlfriend. From where I sat I could see Mother bite her bottom lip as she stared straight ahead. I expected her to say something back to him, but instead she said to us, "You better be on your best behavior." And we were, for the whole boring afternoon; all we did was sit on big soft chairs in the living room as still as we had been in the car, afraid to touch the fancy food on small plates on the table unless it was offered, afraid to speak unless asked to speak, afraid to do anything but sit there and pick our fingernails. When we finally said our good-byes and pulled the car door closed, she turned to Richard and asked, "How'd I do?"

"A-plus," he replied, pleased with her. I remember looking at Mother again and noticing that a bit of lipstick that had smudged her bright teeth when she bit her lip was still there. I felt an odd satisfaction.

The next day, driving out of Santa Fe, Mother forced a smile and told us we were going to Estancia. Her voice was tight. She lit cigarette after cigarette, the lighter in her hand trembling. I could feel a mounting tension in Richard. He would press the gas pedal, making the engine hum higher, and then he would release it, and a few minutes later he would press down on the pedal again. I watched his eyes in the rearview mirror. They were hiding something. I felt Richard was going to do something bad to us, and all I could do was sit and wait for it to happen. I wanted to hit him and take control of the situation somehow, but how does a seven-year-old do that? I fidgeted instead, feeling my pulse throbbing in my fingertips, the seat

springs against my butt. I looked up and caught Richard's eyes darting in and out of the mirror, looking at me. I picked my cuticles until they were bleeding. I was thinking of grabbing the steering wheel and begging Mother to stop the car and take us back to Santa Fe; or to leave Richard and just let the four of us live together. I looked out the window at endless miles of cactus and sage. In the window was my sister's reflection, her hand running a hair ribbon through her nervous palm, and Miego fingering a roll of caps.

"It's your fault," Martina hissed.

I turned and saw her and Miego looking at me. Miego's face was white, his neck artery engorged, dark eyes full of fear. "Told you," he said, pinching me. I sucked my breath back to hold my tears in but they came anyway. Maybe they were blaming me because I cried too much. "Crybaby," Miego said, and then the engine slowed and Richard backhanded him across the face.

"Stop that or I'll throw you out!" he yelled, and the car swayed forward again, picking up speed. "Do something with them, they're your kids," he told Mom.

"I hate you!" I screamed at Richard. Miego grabbed the door handle and flung it open. Richard braked, and we lunged forward as the car skidded in the roadside gravel.

Mom turned and slammed the door shut. "What is the matter with you! Don't ever do that again!" I'd peed in my pants, my blood drumming in my head and my heart beating wildly. I kept my head down to hide my tears.

Richard kept mumbling, "I'll be so happy . . . so happy." Why was he going to be so happy? Maybe we were going to picnic at the park pond. Maybe we were going to eat some good beans and hot buttered tortillas at Grandma's. Maybe he was dropping Mom and us off. Maybe he was going away.

After a while, we drove down Main Street. Trucks brimming with potatoes were parked by the track warehouses. There were men working in a big hole, standing around in that easy manner of small-town workers, talking and laughing. We turned off down a dirt road and pulled into Grandma's yard. She came outside and

stood in the yard, her long gray hair braided, her apron splotted with flour. Mother brought us to her and kissed us briskly on the cheeks and said she'd be back. As I watched her leave, hearing the tires whir away on pavement, I felt weightless, sucked into a lifeless, paralyzing emptiness. I couldn't breathe and my legs were shaking. An intensely bright, luminous ball of fire was streaming into my eyes and blinding me. I tried to pull free of Grandma's hand, and I heard her say, "*Mañana sera mejor con el favor de Dios.*" Tomorrow will be a better day with God's help. But as she led us into the house, I knew tomorrow would never be better. Something in my life had changed forever.



We lived with Grandma and Grandpa Baca. Grandpa said it was only temporary and reassured us that our parents would return to pick us up once they settled into our new home. I looked forward to that day, fantasizing about how happy we'd all be. Little did I know that my mother had eloped to San Francisco with Richard, fleeing into a white world as "Sheila," where she could deny her past, hide her identity, and lie about her cultural heritage. I was also ignorant of my father's alcoholic oblivion, in which he pawned every last possession to get a bus ticket to San Francisco to try and find her.

We were resilient, as most children tend to be, and while we awaited their return, my Uncle Santiago took Miego and me everywhere with him—to milk his cows, ride his horses, feed the pigs, gather wood in the mountains, and hunt deer. I started to enjoy living with my grandparents again in Estancia. With my friend Mocosó, who came over when his mother Juanoveva visited Grandma, I spent the whole day roaming the village. We crossed fields, played in trees, tracked coyotes, built mud forts in ditch banks, and watched giant frogs crush our dirt village; we spent days in the barn teasing spiders out of webs, trapping mice, climbing up in the loft and making towns out of gunnysacks and tool crates; spying out of wood cracks at people who visited Grandma. When

Mocosco wasn't around, I went over to the high school and hung out with Grandpa, who was a janitor. I followed him everywhere through the halls, pushing the dust mop; later we went to irrigate a farmer's bean fields; and I walked home with him in the dusk.

Then, suddenly, Grandpa died. Except for my immediate family, I had loved him the most. When my parents left, it was Grandpa who kept life stable as possible for us. He was always reassuring me that things would turn out fine. Grandpa ordered my father and Uncle Carlos to stop arguing, and they did. Grandpa had often come over to La Casita and brought us candy, food, or other surprises. He was a gentle man, and my mother trusted him.

Before I could come to terms with Grandpa's unexpected death, Miego and I were taken to St. Anthony's Boys' Home in Albuquerque. Martina stayed in Estancia to help Grandma. It was June 1959.

At seven years old, I could never accept that my parents had abandoned us. What a shock! Thinking we were going to join them, Miego and I were driven instead to an orphanage and dropped off. Nuns escorted us up a flight of stairs into a dark, creaky third-floor dorm with kids in cots lined up on each side of the long room. I was scared and confused, weeping and clinging to Miego, begging to be taken back to my grandparents' in Estancia because my parents were coming to get us. No matter how hard the nuns tried to explain, not a day passed that I didn't expect my parents to come.

We were not coddled or given any special treatment at the orphanage, nor did anyone tell us anything about our parents. In the snap of a finger I found myself in a different world, among hundreds of strangers, with each minute planned out for me. The first few months, we slept on the condemned third floor. It rained almost every night, and the roof was leaking everywhere, soaking the bedsheets hanging between the bunks. Thunder roared and lightning revealed me weeping on my bunk at night. Miego would come and cradle me, and I clung to him as if we were one person.

At 4:30 A.M. we marched in columns to the chapel for mass on the second floor. After mass we went downstairs to the ground-

floor dining room for breakfast. After eating, the older kids scattered out to do their chores and then go to school, and at noon we had lunch. The younger kids went to the playground. After supper the older kids did evening chores and us young kids got to watch TV for an hour; then we washed up and got ready for bed at 6:30 P.M. Six months after our arrival, new dorms had been completed and we moved into them. Groups were divided into age groups. I was in the 200s, the five-, six-, and seven-year-olds; Miego was in the 300s, the group of eight-, nine-, and ten-year-olds. I saw him in the dining room and at mass, but after that he went with older kids to do different chores and sit in different classrooms.

I'd always looked up to Miego, since he knew how to read people. At the orphanage he soon had the keys to the soda storeroom and the pantry, stocked with fresh-baked sweet rolls; he had a milk can full of marbles; he had the best clothes; and he worked as a barn boy, which gave him a lot more freedom to come and go as he wished. He knew the answers to things. He had comforted me when Mom and Dad fought.

When I asked the nuns if my parents were coming back, I was told the matter was in God's hands and children shouldn't ask such questions. God knew what he was doing. I should consider myself blessed, because God had something special in store for me. I felt lost and confused around grown-ups. They never told the truth. They were always hiding something that would eventually hurt me. I stayed in the field, away from them, playing with other boys—in the wind or on the teeter-totter with Big Noodle, dizzying myself on the merry-go-round with Peanut Head, shooting marbles or spinning tops with Coo-Coo Clock. Those blissful afternoons made me forget my circumstances. I was the happiest when I was by myself playing in the dirt under an elm tree. I'd notice big rigs and cars on I-40 in the distance, running parallel to the back boundary fence, and wonder if any of them might be carrying my parents. I felt a painful longing for Estancia. In the back of my mind, I always hoped that my parents would come for Miego and me.

## EPILOGUE

I was still a convict at heart. I didn't know, when I left Florence and went to live in North Carolina, that I was going to have such a difficult time being with people. Many times, standing in a corner at a cocktail party, or in the office of a magazine editor, or at a gathering of writers in Raleigh, I yearned to be back in prison. But the thought of going back made me grit my teeth in bed. I gritted my teeth loudly the whole time I was with Mariposa, not because of anything she was doing, but because of the nightmares I was having. I stayed with her for two years, and then, toward the end of 1980, I moved up to Blacksburg, Virginia.

In Virginia I picked some strawberries in the fields and loaded tobacco leaf in tractor trailers to earn enough money to buy myself a beat-up Harley, and here and there I managed to contract my services as a poet to community centers, art centers, and schools to feed myself. But I couldn't afford an apartment, so I slept in my sleeping bag by the nearest river I found myself. Then, since I had been thinking about Albuquerque almost every day, I decided to go back.

It was a long hard ride on that Harley, but I took it easy, stopping and camping out, eating free fruit from orchards and other vegetables from fields as I encountered them along the way. After I finally rolled in, tired, hungry, thinner, but happy, the first thing I did was look through the want ads. I managed to land my first job on the graveyard shift as a night watchman at a house for court-supervised adolescents.

In 1981 I met the woman I married. She was a counselor at the house, and one cold evening when I had come in on my Harley, freezing, wrapped in my jacket and mittens and scarf, carrying a backpack full of books, she asked me what I was reading. When I showed her all my poetry books, she smiled and invited me to her house for dinner. After that, we met on a regular basis and became good friends. One snowy morning she called me to say she was driving a kid to his village in the mountains and wouldn't be back until late. I told her the roads were dangerously icy up there and I would drive them. I knew the roads, she didn't.

Within a few months, she was pregnant. We moved in together. Shortly after that, we bought our first house with a thousand dollars down. It was an old, seriously wrecked fixer-upper. When I took a claw hammer and yanked the nails from the plywood covering the front doorframe, all these drug addicts who had passed out in the living room woke and stared at me, wondering if I was a narc. They'd been using it as their crash pad. When I told them I had bought the place, they laughed that anyone would be stupid enough to buy such a decaying heap. For a whole year, every day from dawn to dusk, I fixed the place up, rebuilt the entire house, and trucked more than fifty loads of trash in the backyard to the county dump.

After my first son, Antonio, was born in 1983, my mother came back into my life. I was thirty-one and I hadn't seen her since the brief encounter shortly before going to prison. I had friends always coming by to help out, and on this day I was up on scaffolding taping Sheetrock and smoothing stucco in the cracks in the cathedral ceiling, when she drove up in a new Lincoln Continental. No one knew she was my mother. She was quite a sight. In a short red dress, lush sandy hair curling over her ample cleavage, big diamonds on her fingers, and silver and gold bracelets on her wrists, her green eyes sparkling, she looked up and greeted me cheerfully.

"Hi, honey." She exuded health and optimism.

I climbed down the scaffold. "How'd you know where I lived?" "Your sister told me," she said. "We're best of friends now."

My sister had tried to persuade me to see my mother, but I had declined. She had bought my sister a new house and Mieyo a new motorcycle and had given them both additional money as they needed it.

"I came to see my grandbaby," she declared, with a big smile.

"They're not here. They've gone shopping for food."

She left after visiting awhile, but after that she stopped by every day. When she came, I stopped working and we went outside and sat on a plank bench in the shade. She asked if I would teach her Spanish, and I told her she could hang out and pick up the language as we spoke it. She had not spoken Spanish in so long she had almost forgotten it. She started coming by a lot, hanging out for hours, mimicking our Chicano language, practicing her words against ours. We had a good time. She'd spoken Spanish as a child, and it came back to her. I guess to compensate for her guilt at leaving, she offered to buy me a house, give me money, help me out in any way she could, but I told her I was okay and didn't need anything. I was working on a book of poetry at the time and asked her if I could stop by sometime to interview her. I wanted to know more about her life growing up on the ranch in Willard and what her family was like, her childhood, and her life with my father.

It was a beautiful spring day when, with a recorder and legal tablet, I drove up to the affluent area where she lived. Her house was white brick, red shingle roof, impeccable lawn and garden, the perfect magazine cover for *Good Housekeeping*. She hugged me at the door and led me to the kitchen table. She was always busy and vibrant, on the go, planning this or that social event, shopping, receiving friends. Her life seemed perfect. She introduced me again to my step-sister and brother, in the same manner as she had introduced me years before, as her good friend. Richard, who had never liked me, greeted me in the kitchen, his cordiality overlaid with mistrust.

He left us alone, though, as we proceeded with the interview. At first she was all bubbly and eager to tell her story. But as the interview stretched over days and then weeks, she began to skirt certain questions I asked. Full of euphoria about how good times were growing up, she abruptly stopped and then burst out weeping. She tried to light a cigarette but her hands were shaking too much, so I lit it for her. She looked at me, tears streaming down her pretty face, and broke down, muttering through convulsive sobs that she had been raped and her brothers had made fun of her when she was young for being overweight. That was why she kept herself so attractive, because it was what men wanted. If you were pretty, she had learned, men would give you anything you wanted.

Then I asked about why she had hid her past and her identity from her children. She said her husband had forbid her to tell them. And his parents thought she was white. She exploded in telling me this—her teeth clenched, her fist slammed the table, spilling my coffee, and her face flushed red with rage.

"All my life I've had to hide who I am, because Richard's parents wouldn't let him marry a Hispanic. But I'm going to tell them. I'm going to tell them everything and I'm going to tell my kids the truth too. I'm leaving him. I can't stand him, or the lies I'm living. I'm going to go out whether he likes it or not. I'm filing for divorce. I can't take it anymore." She reached into her purse, twisted off the cap, and swallowed some pills. "I can't live without drugs. Just to go home, I've got to be drugged!"

A few weeks later, while I was loading my truck with trash, she came by to tell me she had told her husband.

"And what'd he say?"

"He said if I tried, he'd kill me."

"Does he mean it?"

"He's said for a long time that he'll kill me if I leave him. But I can't lie anymore. I have to tell my children and his parents the truth. Only then can I start living my life."

Later in the week, she called to tell me she had told her children about Martina, Mieyo, and me. She also told her husband's

parents that she was Hispanic. She planned on seeing a lawyer about a divorce and would call me back. I found out later that she was in her kitchen polishing her nails, preparing to go dancing, when Richard came into the kitchen and shot her in the face five times with a .45. Then he put the pistol to his temple and killed himself.

Mieyo never got over it. He plummeted into drinking and drugs. He lost all connections to reality and just wanted to find oblivion. He had loved her a great deal. He had always wanted a mother, wanted her love, and when she came back and they got together, he was happier than I'd ever seen him. After her death, he spiraled out of control, drank every day, and started using crack cocaine. When he called me once to come get him, saying he needed help, I went immediately. I hardly recognized him. He'd been beaten by several men with bats. He was six foot one, and normally weighed close to two hundred pounds. He was less than a hundred pounds, and because his arms had needle marks and because I wanted to make sure he didn't have AIDS and his skull wasn't cracked, I took him to see my doctor. After he checked out okay, he took a bus to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to live with Martina, who had moved there after Mother's death.

Around this time Martina heard that Theresa had died from a drug overdose. She was not going to let the same thing happen to Mieyo, so everywhere Mieyo went she went with him. For the time being, he was happy and not using drugs. He was working and making a lot of money. He was exercising, riding his bicycle, lifting weights, and taking vitamins, and he weighed over two hundred, all muscle. I was happy to hear this, and once I even talked with him on the phone. He sounded great, saying how much he enjoyed fishing, how he loved Florida, that living there was like being on a permanent vacation. About six months went by. My sister had called me once during that time telling me Mieyo had gone back to drinking. She hadn't seen him. She was worried about him. Then she called again, weeping, scarcely able to get a word out until finally she said that someone had killed him. They

had found him in an alley, a bloody galvanized pipe next to his crushed skull.

I went to the funeral, and, using every bit of strength I had, I went up to his coffin and looked into his face. I touched his hands, rough from the carpentry work he'd done most of his life. What went through my mind was how he had never been able to express himself. Like my father, he was shut down emotionally. And I didn't know even how to think about this, the three most important people in my life, with no linguistic skill to express themselves. They lived in shame. They lived with guilt. And then my father choked to death when he came out of a treatment center, my mother was shot to death when she was about to start living her life, and my brother, trying so hard to stay clean, relapsing, but always trying to stay clean, was bludgeoned to death in an alley. It has taken me a long time to understand how so much injustice could happen to such good people. Why had my family gone through so much tragedy? Why had they met with such horrible deaths? Why so much suffering? They were three people trying to regain their self-esteem, after being considered too brown, after being raped, after being abandoned. They kept trying to make a comeback and heal themselves. But they couldn't seem to get past the pain.

Months later, still struggling to understand my brother's death, I found myself one evening in Santa Fe, standing before Saint Francis cathedral. It was where I was baptized. I went in to see what it looked like. I didn't know what the event was, but a lot of people were in the pews. On one side were Indios, on the other side parishioners. A young priest was shaking the hands of the Indios. The Archbishop and scores of other priests milled around, talking to the people. Everyone seemed in good spirits. I asked this lady next to me what the special event was and she said the pope had proclaimed that this evening every Catholic church was formally to ask for forgiveness from the indigenous people, the Indios, for the atrocities perpetrated on them in the name of God by Catholics. In essence, the church was apologizing for its acts of genocide.

I was okay with that and decided to stay for the whole service. Then I saw this young couple approach the altar and stand in the center. He looked just like my father and she looked just like my mother when they were both young, in their late teens. They were holding a brown baby that looked just like me in the photographs my sister had shown me. They were my parents and I was the baby they were preparing to baptize. I saw them exactly as I must have been here once with my parents, innocent, my whole life ahead of me, they with their dreams still intact.

And suddenly I began to forgive them for what they had done or had not done. I forgave myself for all my mistakes and for all I had done to hurt others. I forgave the world for how it had treated us. As the priest stepped up to the fountain to begin the baptism, I had so much emotion welling up in me, with such violent force, that I knew I was going to cry and cry. As the ceremonies began, I left the pew, genuflected, and walked out.

Outside, tourists were laughing in candlelit restaurants, others were drinking and carousing loudly in open-door bars, and the streets were wet from a light rain. I walked down a deserted street, wrapped in my coat, my head down, feeling an overwhelming relief from giving and accepting forgiveness. I felt it was a new beginning. That little baby was me, before my father became a drunk and died in the gutter, before my mother left and was murdered by Richard, before I was taken to the orphanage and the D-Home and then jail and prison, before Theresa overdosed, before my brother was murdered. I was innocent and pure. I was that child, free to begin life over and to make my life one they would all bless and be proud of. I was truly free at last. And as I thought this, it began to rain harder and the cathedral bells started ringing.