LONG JOURNEY HOME

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A Project
Presented
to the Faculty of
California State University, Chico

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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English

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by

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Spring 2015
LONG JOURNEY HOME

A Project

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Martin Alejandro Salgado

Spring 2015

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to Frances Herrera Martinez.
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First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge the community of Chico. As a city that has watched me grow from a teenager into my adult years, Chico, with all its beauty, offered itself as a place of healing and growing for the past six years and for this I am grateful. I would also like to thank California State University, Chico, and the various programs and opportunities that have been available to me to further my academic and creative pursuits. I would like to thank the English Department and all of its staff and faculty for their guidance and encouragement during my undergraduate and graduate education.

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ABSTRACT

LONG JOURNEY HOME

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This memoir is a recollection of a Mexican-American childhood lived in Huntington Beach, California. The narrative addresses a search for identity, a construction of identity, along with questions of place. This narrative is a coming of age story that follows the young narrator, Marty, inviting the reader to look through his own lens at his family’s household. Marty explores his relationships with his father and grandmother, reflecting on the emotional triumphs and struggles of his family. Marty’s story is also about finding himself through pop-culture, reflection, and questioning of identity and sense of place. This memoir finds Marty navigating his way as a musician, writer, son, grandson, brother, and a Mexican-American. Marty’s trials include his young attempts at love, handling a generation gap between himself and his own generation and mediating his way through his tumultuous, but loving relationships with his father and grandmother.

In the accompanying Critical Introduction I talk about the craft of the memoir, authors and influences, and market considerations. I address the process as an author about the search for identity and the construction of complex characters. The Critical Introduction also covers the literary nonfiction genre driven by characterization scene-building with key references.
in the field of creative writing such as Phillip Lopate, Brenda Miller, and Maxine Hong Kingston.
PART I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

The Craft of Memoir

I have chosen to make this literary nonfiction project a memoir because this allows me to cover a certain length of time in my narrative. I am able to give my narrative proper reflection from my current point of view, develop the three main complex characters that I wanted to focus on in my story, build scenes, and introduce the landscapes that I grew up with.

The best definition that I believe sums up the memoir is from Rob Davidson, creative writing Professor at California State University, Chico, who states that:

As a literary genre, the memoir (from the French memoire and the Latin memoria, meaning “memory,” or a reminiscence) is a sub-category of autobiography. In contrast to the autobiography (which is a kind of comprehensive personal history, from birth to the present), a memoir tends to focus on a particular era—often a single, selected episode—or a quality of one’s life, or a theme, and so forth. In literary memoir, a complex, well-rounded rendering of the self on the page is of central importance.” (Davidson)

It is also important to define the difference between a personal essay and a memoir. Phillip Lopate, leading essayist and teacher on the craft of nonfiction writing, tends to use “personal essay” as an umbrella term, but there is a difference between these two forms. As Phillip Lopate points out in his Introduction to The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology From the Classical Era To the Present, the personal essay is “a kind of informal essay, with an intimate style, some autobiographical content or interest, and an urbane conversational manner” (Lopate Introduction xxiv). Lopate’s attention in mentioning that the personal essay includes “some autobiographical content or interest” is important and is what distinguishes an autobiography from a memoir or personal essay. Although the personal essay and the memoir
both have select moments, a narrator and reflection, a personal essay asks the narrator to contextualize their experience and analytically address larger questions that may arise within culture and society (Davidson).

A memoir, as a form of nonfiction literature, is a specific selection of memories and moments in one’s life. The memoir can still address those larger questions about society, but its main focus is to include a deeper reflection of the author’s past. Along with the element of natural reflection comes the development of characterization and the concept of narrative form. All of these required elements of the memoir give the author permission to have a lengthened narrative for natural storytelling. These are the reasons why I chose memoir as my genre for this particular narrative.

My memoir deals largely with memories of my childhood all the way up to the point when I left home for college. This timeline covers my young adult life from elementary school to the end of my high school years. I chose to cover this period of time because I had enough distance from those years and experiences that I was able to write about them and think about them critically and effectively. This is one of the reasons why choosing memoir appealed to me. Having enough temporal distance from what I am writing about is crucial because it gives me the opportunity to think critically about myself, enabling speculation about my characters’ past actions and words.

In the essay “Reflection and Retrospection: A Pedagogic Mystery Story,” out of his craft book To Show and To Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction, Lopate discusses the serious issue of maintaining a double perspective when writing nonfiction and states that, “In any autobiographical narrative, whether memoir or personal essay, the marrow often shows itself in those moments where the writer analyzes the meaning of his or her own experience” (Lopate To
*Show and To Tell* 26). This conversation between the past and present selves is important to my writing. It allows me to step outside of the moment that I am writing about and look at myself in the past. By doing this I am able to understand my thoughts and actions and, using the point of view I have today, and give reasons and explanations for them. This is what I accomplish for the three main characters in my narrative. This is important for personal growth but it is also important for the Marty character that is on the written page.

Although I have many members of my family and social life that come into my narrative periodically, the three main characters that I focus on are my grandmother, my father and myself. I go into great detail and length about my personal frustrations with these two people and describe their hostile relationship because these were the people who had the most influential voices and power in my household while growing up. But I also discuss my love for them and the positive aspects in our relationship. In doing so, I wanted to portray these three people, including myself, as complex characters on the page.

In my narrative I try not to focus on all of the negative emotions of my family and I definitely do not want to look at my family with an unsympathetic eye. I want to portray my family as people who have had a hard life and the beauty that comes from that with their raising of two children while struggling with their own personal lives.

In Phillip Lopate’s essay entitled “On the Necessity of Turning Oneself into a Character,” Lopate refers to the narrator of a nonfiction piece of writing as an “I” character, and he further discusses how a memoirist can make the “I” character in their writing a trustworthy narrator for the reader. In order to establish an “I” character that the reader can relate to and invest in while reading, the writer must first make sure that he or she has the appropriate distance from the time period being described (Lopate *To Show and To Tell* 18). This reiterates what I
have said above about the importance of temporal distance from the events being written about. Such a distance allows the writer, if he or she chooses to do so, to look into the past objectively therefore allowing for judgements and criticisms about who he or she was at any particular moment in time.

In order to go about making Marty a complex character, I had to make sure to show the many aspects of his character that reveal how some of his past words and actions, which had detrimental consequences on the other members of the family, also make him a vulnerable character on the page.

The way I found those certain memories was by thinking about the moments, the actions and words that have rattled inside my soul and that I have questioned for so long. Questions such as, How do I feel about my father not being able to read and how does he feel about it? How did my parents’ relationship play into my own viewing of what love looks like? How did I navigate my way around living in a small apartment and develop my personality? All of these questions go hand in hand. It was these specific years and moments that I write about that make the narrator who he has become.

In my narrative I give the reader a scene from four-year-old Marty’s perspective when he realized that his father couldn’t read. Within this scene, there is a deep exposition that comes to light for these two characters:

I moved my finger to the next word, something wasn’t matching. He would either not say enough words, or said too many when there weren’t enough words left on the page. At that young age before I could even read, I realized my father couldn’t read either. I looked at him and felt sympathy in that moment. My father wasn’t reading but was pretending to, for me. I played along as if I hadn’t noticed anything. (48)

The four-year-old Marty portrayed on this page can be seen as sympathetic and compassionate at such a young age. This is important for me as the author to illustrate this
because those emotional skills follow Marty throughout the narrative as he grows up and influence many of his life decisions.

Later on in the narrative the reader gets to see Marty grow up into a teenager, sensitive about his own life and finding it difficult to accept his father. During one of his parents’ arguments Marty says, “I joined in, saying, ‘You can’t even speak English,’ and mocking him as he spat out stuttered remarks in the wrong tense” (64). Showing this aspect of Marty, and comparing it to later scenes where Marty is verbally abusive to his father, shows the different sides to his personality and the changes he experiences as a character on the page.

One of Lopate’s last remarks in “On the Necessity of Turning Oneself into a Character” argues that a writer must allow one’s character on the page to demonstrate one’s faults. Discussing the trials we endure in our life is only one aspect of the story. It’s important to show how we contributed both positively and negatively to our story. If we constantly sound like a victim, Lopate believes that our character becomes unreal and makes our character’s portrayal “off-putting” (Lopate To Show and To Tell 24). Lopate suggests that, “By showing our complicity in the world’s stock of sorrow, we convince the reader of our reality and even gain his sympathy” (24).

Marty’s character is ultimately rounded out during the scene where he becomes a mediator for his parents and comforts his father: “I pressed on keeping calm and asking him why my mom was mad. Although I already had some idea, I wanted him to feel like he had a voice. Like he had a say in the situation. To let him know that he mattered” (78). These three scenes show Marty’s positive and negative aspects, but overall as a real dynamic character. I wanted to make sure that the reader could see that I don’t paint myself as a person who solved everyone’s problems in my family but rather one who contributed to them in both negative and positive
ways, ultimately learning from those experiences. Throughout these contemplations, the attention I give to the Marty character will help the reader understand the hope that I have for young Marty’s future and perhaps even see that in themselves.

My grandmother, my mother’s mother, the matriarch of the family, had a lot of influence and power over me, my sister and my mother. It was interesting as an author to think about how that power was used. This is why I felt it was important to explore her role in my life and portray her character on the page. In my narrative I present my grandmother in those same positive and negative views that I portrayed for my character.

Dialogue was very effective when describing my grandmother’s negative traits. There are many times in the narrative when the grandmother character casually talks to the young narrator and inadvertently hurts Marty by verbally bashing his father:

She would tell me that my father needed to get an education and that he was just “a dumb Mexican.” Before meeting my father, my mom had her first marriage which resulted in her having my sister. Having my father come into the picture was not what my grandmother had in mind for my mom and my sister. “Things were fine before you and your father came along. (55)

As an author, I chose quotes like this for my grandmother’s dialogue to show her character’s selfishness and inattentiveness toward her grandson.

The more vulnerable parts of my grandmother’s character comes via speculation on my part. Taking stories about her life that she told me as a child, I made connections, showing that her character had weaknesses and strengths:

I understood the chronic pain and heartache my grandfather instilled in her after leaving her for another woman. Most of my grandmother’s life, I think, was sitting in the dark, depressed and sad after my grandfather left her, and she was probably depressed sometime even before that. Even though I understood her, she brought that insecurity into our lives, and especially into mine. She brought accusations, blame and pointed fingers which she directed towards different members of the family. (55)
As an author, this was a way to show that this woman had been hurt in life, and although she created a distance between the narrator and his father, there was still a deep love in their relationship which was fragmented.

The emotional process that I must go through in writing about these memories can sometimes be painful. There were times when I had to step away from the keyboard or pen and paper because I found some memories still as fresh as the day they occurred. Although this was at times difficult, I am glad to have experienced this as a writer. Through this project I have learned that I have to be patient with myself and my writing. I found that I have to listen to myself and know where I am with my emotions and written words and know when to keep pushing forward. For this particular project, writing about the grandmother character so soon after she had passed away proved to be difficult.

One particular aspect that proved difficult was reliving some of the scenes and dialogue that used to frustrate me as a child, such as hearing negative remarks about my father or being demanded to do something for her. Thinking and writing about these thoughts during my grievance period proved a struggle, but the peace that I found as an author was when I began that speculation and reflection in my narrative. Forming theories and connections with my current vantage point made it more possible to develop her character, which could otherwise be misunderstood.

The third and final complex character that I build in my narrative is my father, Martin Salgado. The father character has definitely played a large role in the narrator’s life and this narrative shows the father’s personal and familial struggle.

In order to build the father character, I wanted to show the frustration his character felt living with a family that gave the idea that they were all against him, and also his feeling of
hopelessness and intimidation brought on by his illiteracy. This can be seen in the narrative during the emotionally charged scene where his character finally breaks down in front of his son:

I asked him to tell me how he felt. My father’s face scrunched up, and he began crying, hiding his face with his left hand. This was the first time I had ever seen my father cry.

“All of you are so mean to me because of that evil lady,” he said, pointing to the room where my grandmother slept. “All of you make fun of me, that I don’t know how to read, or speak English,” he said in his broken English. “You think it’s easy? It’s not easy. And you, you hate me because she tells you things about me,” he said, sobbing. (78)

This is the most important scene in the narrative because his character is very quiet and passive. In this one moment his character opens up verbally and emotionally, letting his true feelings out, making this male character vulnerable on the page.

To further his complexity, I show his character as forgiving even after the abuse he took from his family members. I show this in the scene between Marty and his dad when they have a strong bonding moment:

The radio was on, and he turned to me from the driver’s seat and asked, “What do you want to do with your life?”

The question confused me because I was already in my second year of college and he knew that I was studying to be a teacher. I asked him what he meant and if he meant for the rest of my life. He replied, “For the rest of your life to support you and your family.” I knew the answer and I quickly said, “I want to be an entertainer. I want to make people laugh.”

My father laughed, and said, “well, you always make me laugh.” As if to say that I would have no problem supporting my future family as an entertainer. (79)

This shows the father’s forgiveness and unconditional love in his character. It describes the relationship that Martin had with his son, a relationship that was first torn down and then later built back up. This also represents Martin’s dexterity and strength as a character.
With Martin’s character I also address the societal questions about being Mexican-American and being Mexican in America. I show this with Marty’s contemplation about his identity and comparing that to his father’s:

Struggling with my identity, I blamed my father for making me a Mexican. I blamed my father for not making enough money. And although my grandmother and my mother were also Mexican, they were Americanized, and I blamed my dad for not being able to do that either. (53)

Martin’s character serves as a physical and mental block for the narrator because of his father’s Mexican nationality. This also gives the narrator an opportunity to address these societal constructions that hindered the narrator from accepting his father to ultimately coming to terms and understanding his father: “America and I may have seen my dad as a yard worker, a Mexican busboy or a dishwasher. And he was all of those things, but he was also my father, still is and always will be” (81).

On the other side of these characters in my narrative, I feel that they are the three that need the most looking after as characters and as people and have the most that I can unpack for them through speculation and tenderness.

I see myself as a writer who is trying to find the deepest and most honest way possible to talk about the human condition. One of the rules that I do hold for myself as a writer is that I am a son, a brother, a grandson, and a nephew before I am a writer. This does not mean that I cover up any harsh truths, but rather look at my life with a critical eye and try to make sense of it the best way I can. Reminding myself of this helps me to remember to analyze my past with curiosity and caution, making sure to be kind. Therefore, when speculating about events and different moments in my life, I try to be as fair and honest as I possibly can. Although memory is not static, when I begin to write, I see my memories as mini 35 mm films.
When I read or write them I feel that they are glimpses into my own perception of my family that I am able to share with the reader. Memories do change and these memories are my own perception. I write these scenes down to the best of my ability. They are only proof that those moments existed and I do my best to understand why everyone acted the way they did.

In his Introduction to The Art of the Personal Essay, Lopate describes what he believes to be the root of creative nonfiction. He states, “At the core of the personal essay is the supposition that there is a certain unity to human experience” (Lopate Introduction xxiii). It is my job to be as honest and truthful within my nonfiction storytelling, and at the heart of it all I must show the reader this part of the human condition. Working with speculation and my own viewpoint helped me realize my memoir is a narrative about real people. The reader will be able to relate or understand the reasons for who they are and their actions as I present them in my story.

I grew up in a Mexican-American family while living in a fast-paced and ever-changing Huntington Beach, located in Southern California’s Orange County. I grew up with the cities, the freeways and everywhere in between. This landscape allows me to show where I lived and to draw comparisons and contrasts between how I viewed my family’s home and how I saw the families of my school mates.

One of those differences that I try to make clear in my narrative is the difference of neighborhoods between Norwalk and Huntington Beach. I portray Norwalk as a city in Los Angeles whose neighborhoods still resemble that of the post-World War II baby boom era. I show this visually when I describe the courthouse scene: “The Norwalk Civic Center was located in the middle of the city surrounded by shopping centers and busy streets. The buildings seemed
to be at least four stories high and the architecture of the courthouse resembled a very stoic personality with a Seventies aesthetic” (16).

I match the visual aspect with auditory emotions as I describe the music that would accompany those drives from Orange County to Norwalk. “Listening to Diana Ross and The Supremes sing ‘Come See About Me’ while listening to my mom talking to my dad is how I remember those drives,” I write, early in the memoir. “I loved looking out the window watching the cities roll by and catching glimpses of neighborhoods from the freeway with kids playing in the street” (7). These scenes help relate to my feeling of being out of time and widening the generation gap that I felt distanced me from the other kids my age.

I have chosen to write my story as one long narrative. The long narrative form allows the reader to read without being hindered with section breaks or quick scenes and lets my writing and use of punctuation drive the storytelling. It also allows me to go back and fully reflect about my past as the person I am today. It allows me to develop the three main characters and building scenes around the Southern California landscapes. The long narrative format also allows me to take my time inserting my reflection on those events and gives me room in my writing for speculation for the other characters.

Brenda Miller’s and Suzanne Paola’s Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction was a vital read and a must-have companion at my side while writing. The particular section of this book that I found the most useful for my thesis project was the section entitled “The Forms of Creative Nonfiction.” In this part of the book there is a sub-section in chapter eight titled “The ‘I’ and the Eye: Framing Experience.” The authors describe for the reader what it is like to take personal memories and figure out a way to frame them into a story. The authors equate writing to a photo, and the author to a photographer (Miller and Paola 75). Although I
have wondered about the frame for my own writing, this scenario makes a lot of sense to me and how I began to edit and put together my own writing project. The section goes on to describe that although the final displays of both art mediums, writing and photography, show a final product that seems true and transparent, there was a great deal of work being done behind the scenes. The photographer must think about lighting, positioning and the subject being shot. The author must also think of the subject, their perspective and scene development.

What I took away from this section was that I must also think about the time and effort that goes into writing. I used to believe that I could write a powerful essay in just one draft. I look back at my writing and realize that not enough time had been given to my story and that perhaps I needed to reframe it multiple times. In many of my revisions I have found that there were many memories and commentary that I had written about that did not have a place in this current version of my project. I had also come to realize that perhaps certain moments needed to be delved into deeper. In terms of nonfiction that means building stronger scenes into my narrative.

My revision process made me feel like an artist where I was taking lines and whole paragraphs and moving them around my document. I was carefully looking at my narrative with an artistic eye, trying to weave each scene around each other, allowing for perfect moments of description, reflection, and narration.

To elaborate on this process, Miller and Paola state that, “You take something that is important to you, something you have brooded about. You try to see it as clearly as you can, and to fix it in a transferrable equivalent. All you want in the finished print is the clean statement of the lens, which is yourself, on the subject that has been absorbing your attention” (76).
Authors and Influences

As I began this project I gathered a wide array of writing influences. One of those influences was Maxine Hong Kingston’s nonfiction memoir, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. In *The Woman Warrior* there were many instances where I didn’t realize that the narrative was creative nonfiction. Although the word “memoir” is specifically in the title, I believed the fairy tales woven through the narrative to be such a strong part of the story and so fantastical that I thought I was strictly reading fiction.

Kingston’s unique craft of writing constructs and weaves together two different worlds of narrative and a recanting of a one of her favorite folktales. There is a dreamlike quality in the storytelling as she recites her own surroundings and thoughts and fictionally tells beautiful majestic Chinese folk tales. This is done very carefully by Kingston especially in her second story “White Tigers.”

In this story Kingston starts the reader off by saying, “When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talk-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves” (19). Kingston specifically mentions this at the beginning of her story because she is showing the reader the kind of thoughts that the older women had about females in Chinese culture. From here Kingston goes on to recite the folk tale of her female heroine warrior Fa Mu Lan. On the second page of this story she begins to drift off into the telling of the story as she becomes a part of it. The reader sees this transition in one sentence as she states, “I would be a little girl of seven the day I followed the bird away into the mountains” (20).

As a reader, in that one line, I began to drift off into twenty-four pages of a folktale with Kingston as she transforms herself into the lead character of the folk tale of Fa Mu Lan,
until she brings us out of that appropriated folk tale in the next section with the line, “My American life has been such a disappointment” (45).

In the three movements of this story Kingston successfully makes commentary on the Chinese culture and, in a way, shows the reader her reaction to that. By weaving together both Fa Mu Lan’s and her own story, she has appropriated a folk tale and made it her own. To me it seems as if Kingston’s appropriation of Fa Mu Lan is not malicious in the sense of stealing the story, but rather an artistic move. This heroine meant so much to Kingston as a child that she shows the reader how she saw herself as that folk tale character during childhood.

In my own writing, I make many references to pop-culture such as music and television. Many times I have written about my love affair with the band Fleetwood Mac. I mention this because I saw myself in those members of the band just as Kingston saw herself in Fa Mu Lan. My writing is like an expression of art therefore taking in the music and stories of a favorite band and weaving them into my own life to make meaning. Although the folk tale is fiction, Kingston draws strength from this character and in reality tries to become that character.

Another inspiration was Richard Russo and his memoir *Elsewhere: A Memoir*. The writing in this memoir is crisp and to the point, but throughout the whole narrative, I appreciated the way he depicted his childhood and his relationship with his family, especially his mother:

Wild eyed, she’d often fix her gaze on me and ask unanswerable questions: “Don't I deserve a life? Am I so different from everyone else? Don’t I deserve what other people have?” As a boy what scared me the most about such questions wasn’t that I had none of the answers my mother so desperately sought. No, it was that it didn’t seem possible for the questions to be asked without consequence. What would my mother do if I couldn’t manage to console her? “Doesn’t anyone understand that things have to change?” she’d wail. “That something will happen to me if they don’t?” (44)

Russo writes and displays for the reader the extreme sense of understanding he had for his mother, and for the close relationship they had with one another. For that reason, I felt
that this memoir really resonated with my own thoughts because of the continuous parallels between Richard Russo’s life and my own. Although Russo had his own unique mother and connection with her, in his memoir he articulates the strong sense of responsibility that he felt as a son. An example of this can be seen in the second and third sections of his book titled “A Good Talking-To” and “A Diagnosis.” In these sections Russo depicts instances where he had to continuously help his mother move in and out of different apartments, helping her look for a job and get her back up on her feet. Russo does this as a child and he does this as he goes through his college years and as an adult with a family.

The reason why these two sections stood out for me is because it gives me inspiration to write about certain moments in my own personal relationship with my mother or family where I felt a sense of responsibility fall on my own shoulders. In my own narrative I show when I talk about becoming certified as a PAL counselor (51). Whether I personally place the burden on myself or whether it’s placed on me, it is an important part of my character to depict in my own narrative. That was one of the main aspects in Russo’s memoir where I truly felt connected with the author.

One other author who I looked to emulate in my writing is J.R. Moehringer and his memoir The Tender Bar: A Memoir. Moehringer’s writing background consists of being a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist for the Los Angeles Times. The Tender Bar is a coming of age memoir about a young boy who grew up in Manhasset, New York, living in a crowded household consisting of his single mother, his uncle, grandparents and several other family members. Moehringer’s journalistic style of writing provides very detailed, rich imagery. Moehringer does this through descriptions of the characters, places and moments living in a crowded household:
With one useable bathroom and twelve people, the waits at Grandpa’s were often excruciating, and the cesspool was constantly backed up (‘Shit House’ was sometimes more than a flippant nickname). The hot water ran out each morning in the middle of Shower Number two, made a brief cameo during Shower Number Three, then teased and cruelly abandoned the person taking Shower Number Four. (15)

Since he was a child Moehringer has searched for his father, and in lieu of that male companionship he turned to the bar that his uncle worked in and its male inhabitants. Moehringer adopted this bar and it became a constant in his life. This was interesting for me as a writer because there were aspects of my childhood that I felt I needed more of and I sought those in other places and people as well. The Publican’s Bar is where he got all of his life advice. Similarly, I received advice and life lessons from people outside of my family. In my narrative I show this when I give a great amount of attention to the Boys and Girls Club daycare and my older female friend, Pat, who played a large part in my development. Just as Moehringer has accomplished in his memoir, I strive to show the younger Marty who has made me who I am today by showing myself following my passions, and with the telling of my relationship with my family and where I lived.

Art speaks to art. By this I mean works of art in all forms inspire other creations so that there becomes a continual building of influences that drive art forward. I see my work as in dialogue with other creative nonfiction authors, but also with certain musicians. Music is portrayed in this literary memoir as offering points of inspiration in my childhood and adult life. Those mediums moved me and “spoke” to Marty as a character in this memoir.

This process of writing started long ago, when I was thirteen and sitting in the bathroom late at night. I composed a musical poem about my longing for Yosemite after taking a week-long field trip there. I found the act of painting a scene through descriptive words fulfilling. It completely let my emotions out of my mind and body. I then began writing and
emulating Fleetwood Mac songs, pretending I was Lindsey Buckingham and Stevie Nicks and writing lyrics that one day might save the world. The reason why I mention this is because every single one of those songs that I listened to with an unrelenting passion—from Fleetwood Mac, to Peter, Paul and Mary, to Simon and Garfunkel—feed into this memoir. As much as I have made those bands a part of my life, I am a part of theirs: as a fan, and as an admirer of their words. Through the telling of my story I give my own response to their work.

In my writing I talk about what their music meant to me, especially with the inner dramas of each of those individual bands. In middle school which I was at one time or another bullied. It was Peter, Paul, and Mary’s activism and outlook on life and bullying that sustained me at times and definitely gave me hope. Fleetwood Mac has been known for their soap opera personal lives. For me, as a high school student going through love and love’s loss, I listened with all my might and understanding to the lyrics of the three main singers and songwriters who wrote about their own personal lives. I tried to embody those characteristics and those personas. Their passion for life fueled my own and in turn got me through a lot of turmoil in my own reality.

For example, I show Marty inserting himself into an imaginary world where he becomes a part of the band Fleetwood Mac:

I stood there in the bathroom memorizing every note that Lindsey played, moving my fingers in unison to his sound. I would pretend that I belonged to this band family. Pretending to be Lindsey on guitar, I would occasionally look to my right, staring at the chipped walls, imagining that I was looking at Stevie during the second verse of “Go Your Own Way,” or to Christine McVie, making faces with her when she sang “You Make Loving Fun.” (57)

I try to weave into my work these iconic figures because I want to create an artful piece of literature as a response to their work, a gentle nod in their direction, letting the world
know of the majestic influence and the meaningful difference their work has had on me. In turn, I add my own piece of art into the world as a response. My memoir continues this beautiful pattern of art speaking to one another and, more importantly, speaks to individual readers who can take away ideas about society from my narrative.

Spread throughout my memoir is my unique sense of humor which makes the narrative charming and meaningful at the same time. My memoir is heavy with emotions, but I contrast those moments with humor to give the reader a sense of grounding, and not completely bombard them with emotional moments. Since I have covered my childhood from adolescence all the way up until high school, there are many moments of pain and emotional intensity that I discuss in my memoir. Weaving my own humor and comedic timing throughout my narrative helps to give the reader a full sense of the young Marty. My comical dry wit humor and comedic observations about life make Marty’s tragedies and triumphs easier to read, and invites the reader to become friends with the Marty character. One of the moments this can be seen in my writing is when Marty talks about his self-conscious body issues:

As I stepped onto the scale I held my breath and sucked in my stomach hoping not to get my full weight recorded onto my ID To my dismay, I learned that no matter how you step on a scale—either with one foot or both, or stomach sucked in or not—the weight recorded would still be the same as when you would step on it with both feet. This same disappointment also followed after I tried sleeping with play dough molding on my face to change the shape of my teddy-bear-button nose to a straight, perpendicular facial feature. (26)

The use of my humor gives the readers a window into my own thoughts on the world and me. The moments where humor appears is when I feel the most vulnerable on the page. When Marty does observe his own person it is self-deprecating, but deeper than that, it is a meditation on insecurity and longing for something else—an identity to be proud of.
Market Considerations

I write because I want to bring into conversation my own unique family and how they inspire me and what they do to inspire me. I want to draw attention to these people who have had triumphs and trials but held their jobs and worked hard. This is my way of wanting to give back for their sacrifices.

In order to begin thinking about my place in the literary market I must first think about what my narrative is trying to accomplish overall. This narrative is a coming of age story. Currently there is a healthy market for creative nonfiction memoir. In this memoir one of my focus points is high school. It was very much a large part of my development and it is where I grew close to my interests and delved deeper into music than I ever had. It is where I grew up outside of my home in a different way. I grew socially and learned who I was among all of those other students; school gave me a chance to be who I was and to dive into other interests as well. The contrast of my life at school and my life at home was very different, and at times school was where I felt safe and understood. A memoir such as this I believe will appeal to a young audience interested in pop culture and finding themselves questioning their place in their family or society. I have very big aspirations for my story. Because my story is unique in its own right, but at the same time can be universal for many who are coming of age, I believe it is possible for my memoir to reach a large readership.

Underlying all of this practice of form is the key strand or thread that I attempt to weave throughout my writing as well as my research, which is my perception of myself as a Mexican-American. This is another key thought that is important to address when thinking about my place in the literary market. In the beginning of my story I talk about my realization that I was Mexican and the differences between me and the other students. I mention this at the
beginning of the narrative as my character begins developing: “It wasn’t until kindergarten when I began to realize what being Mexican meant and that there were differences between me and the other kids in my classroom” (2). My personal prose also offers readers a lens into Southern California, and specifically Orange County.

By looking at the ethnicity and geographical content that I focus on, this would help me to promote my narrative to publishing houses that focus on geographical content or ethnic writers. Today, many publishing houses pay attention to writers of color. I do not consider myself a writer of color. I am a writer who writes about being Mexican-American, but that is not the sole topic of my writing. Although I do address the topic of Mexican-American heritage, I write about finding my place as a musician, writer, son, grandson, and a brother. I do not want to marginalize myself into one corner of the market, but I do want to be acknowledged for my work writing about the Mexican-American culture.

As a developing professional artist who’s looking at a literary marketplace which has differentiated itself into various constituencies, I am considering an independent press. Two presses that come to mind are Wings Press and the University of Arizona Press. Wings Press is a smaller publishing press established in San Antonio, Texas. Although I don’t consider myself a writer of color, I might consider publishing through Wings Press because of its work and dedication to getting Latino writers and voices out to the readers. This particular press would introduce me to a market that I could approach where I can talk about the differences in the ways that I distanced myself from the Mexican culture and the aspects of the culture I embrace and how. An independent press also appeals to me because I would have a lot more say in the process of my future publication and where I want my writing to go. An independent press also
uses author readings and book tours to promote publications, which are a part of the publishing process that I am looking forward to.

The University of Arizona Press would be another publishing press on my list due to its long list of Latin writers and book publications that understand the importance of being a Mexican-American. Being published through a university press would also benefit me in the job market as well by having a publication that has been peer-reviewed. The other advantages of a University Press would be the financial stability of the publishing house. A non-profit press may cause some hindrances in this aspect. Being affiliated with an academic institution, my publication would have the benefit of commercial advertising in the marketplace.

The final product is a memoir that cannot only speak to those of certain ethnicities, but evolves into a universal book that encourages and enlightens anyone who feels out of place. I hope that anyone looking for insight into identity can take something away from my personal narrative. My reader could be a young person looking into my life and appreciating the thought that whatever he or she may be going through they are not alone or it could very well be an adult introspectively doing the same thing or just admiring the strength of another citizen of the planet.

**Conclusion**

Phillip Lopate writes in his Introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay* that, “The hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy. The writer seems to be speaking directly into your ear, confiding everything from gossip to wisdom. Through sharing thoughts, memories, desires, complaints, and whimsies, the personal essayist sets up a relationship with the reader, a dialogue—a friendship, if you will, based on identification, understanding, testiness, and companionship” (xxiii). This is something that I strive for within my writing and my relationship
with the reader. I hope to encourage readers to look into their own lives and find that there is always room for personal triumph for themselves and for whoever may be in their own life.

If I were to take Lopate’s advice from above I would say into my reader’s ear: you are not alone in your experiences; you will learn about the people in your life and how to think carefully about their past actions and words. Have the courage to talk about your family in ways that others may not be able. In writing about my family in this memoir I may refer to them as characters, which in this nonfiction literature they are, but for me it was always important to remember that they are very real people with thoughts, feelings and a story of their own. The people that I discuss have all touched and shaped my life in ways that they may have never known. My writing is as much for me an introspection as it is a way for me to thank those people who have influenced, angered, inspired, saddened and created the person I am today.
PART II

LONG JOURNEY HOME
LONG JOURNEY HOME

From the beginning, I was unique. A distinct baby without an identity. My three legal names on my birth certificate, Martin Alejandro Salgado, precede me. My first name is my father’s name and Alejandro is my maternal grandfather’s name. These names belong to families with roots that existed long before I was even a thought. The certificate features my foot and hand prints, undoubtedly my parents’ DNA. I can’t help but feel that I was born into the right family, but why? The day I was born my mother said it was a sunny day; my father said it was gloomy. Was this my parent’s faulty memory or merely the perception of their feelings the day I was born? Either way I was scheduled to arrive on December 4th, 1990, possibly one of the only appointments I ever arrived on time for.

Those names were placeholders, my mother said, until my parents decided on what they really wanted to name me. In the end my family kept those names but didn’t use them. After a time of not being called by any of my legal names, I was simply “Baby.” The popular quote from the movie *Dirty Dancing* is that nobody puts baby in a corner, but that’s where I was born. There was no chance of gaining a name until I went to elementary school. It wasn’t until kindergarten when I began to realize what being Mexican meant and that there were differences between me and the other kids in my classroom. I refused to go by Martin because my teachers would pronounce it as Mar-teen. In my mind when I heard that I automatically felt labeled as a Mexican. I wanted to be viewed the way I saw myself—normal.

I spoke English, my native language, and I spoke it as well as any other six-year-old could, and although there were other students who were Mexican, they didn’t sound like me. They had accents and they dressed differently. My mother usually dressed me up in clean shirts
and in pairs of denim pants. The other Mexican kids wore dark blue sweats (the kind I would wear as pajamas at night), and white or red T-shirts with bootleg drawings of American cartoons. I didn’t look like them, yet those kids and I both shared the same ethnicity. After observing the other students, I developed an understanding of the importance of a name.

My mother’s name is Diane, my sister’s name is Jessica and my father’s name is Martin but pronounced as Mar-teen. I wanted to separate myself from any stereotypes such as being poor or not being able to speak English, so I Americanized my middle name in kindergarten and went by Alex. By the end of fifth grade my teacher suggested going by Martin because she said it sounded more studious. In sixth grade when my name was called for roll a girl turned around and said, “Your name’s Martin? Can I call you Marty?” Marty! I immediately saw that name in neon lights and I loved how it sounded. It was American, unique, and interesting. From then on I was known as Marty. Now, as I look back on my childhood, I’m aware of many of the identity issues I was having and I did my best to deal with them at such a young age. As a child my life was riddled with many paths that aimed for a spot in society. A way to make my mark on this world.

In the second grade all of the students received I.D. cards in case we ever got lost, I guessed. The laminated cards resembled a driver’s license, complete with a picture, an address, and a listing of our height and weight. As I stepped onto the scale I held my breath and sucked in my stomach hoping not to get my full weight recorded onto my I.D. To my dismay, I learned that no matter how you step on a scale—either with one foot or both, or stomach sucked in or not—the weight recorded would still be the same as when you would step on it with both feet. This same disappointment also followed after I tried sleeping with play dough molding on my face to
change the shape of my teddy-bear-button nose to a straight, perpendicular facial feature. But my physical features weren’t the only thing I felt insecure about. I was also self-conscious of the fact I was Mexican.

College View Elementary School was a predominantly white school. In my view there was a clear difference between which neighborhood each student came from. I wanted to be accepted and fit in with the white students because, in my mind, that was having class. I had this feeling of inadequacy when I compared myself to them and I didn’t understand it. I was light skinned with freckles and red hair, so it was easy to conceal myself even though inside I knew I was not like those other kids—I was Mexican.

My mom would pack my lunch before I went to school and put everything in a plastic shopping bag from the Stater Bros. grocery store chain. The Stater Bros. grocery store had a Sixties look to it: inside the color scheme was dark brown, with a light brown tile. The store’s employees wore white-collared shirts, brown ties, and brown aprons. It had the best deals and prices for groceries—I saw it as the outdated “cheap” family store. How could I show up to school with a cheap brown plastic bag from this grocery store? I would quickly, when no one was looking, change out the brown Stater Bros. bag for a white Albertson’s grocery bag that my mom probably brought home after picking up last minute groceries from the Albertson’s near her work. Albertson’s had white tile, and blue lettering. The store seemed bright and inviting, with wide aisles, and tall walls of white, a very high class market. The food was a little more expensive, and as a child I believed only people who could afford the higher price would shop there, making the store seem more elite to me. The Albertson’s employees didn’t have ties, but their uniform was a casual short sleeve white-collared shirt, and a blue apron—less professional
than Stater Bros., but more modern. When I got into the car one morning with my lunch, my mom asked, “What happened to the other bag?” And I just made the excuse that there was a hole in the other one.

I always felt like there was a distance between me and all of the other children that only I saw and whenever I felt like I was closing that gap, it only seemed to widen. As a kid I attempted to try out for sports despite my insecurity and overwhelming shyness. I began playing soccer during lunch with all of the other kids. I didn’t know the rules, just the general direction the ball should be kicked. I wanted to try out for soccer, so one Saturday morning my parents took me to the regional tryouts to see hundreds of kids in black, white and green uniforms with spiky shoes and tall white socks on the field at the middle school. My parents saw the long line of parents waiting to get into the room with all of the paperwork. My parents asked me one more time if this was something that I wanted to do. I became so overwhelmed and nervous I never made it to the field. In fact I never made it outside of the car. We drove by and I felt like I missed my chance.

I gave myself another chance to become involved with a sport. I went out for roller-hockey. I could barely make myself roll, let alone play hockey. As I struggled rolling with my skates and all of my padding—which my mom searched for late the night before at Wal-Mart—a kid with a mean face and spiky brown hair rolled up to me with a sarcastic smirk and asked, “Did you really think you were going to make this team?” I didn’t. But I didn’t respond as I struggled to keep up with everybody else on the rink. I walked away from that roller rink having decided that sport wasn’t for me.

I gave myself one last shot seven years later when I tried out for volleyball in the
seventh grade. Every single ball I tried to serve either flew backwards, landing behind my body, or barely over the net to the other side of the court. And with some sort of strange twist of fate in that gym, another boy with brown hair came up to me and asked, “Did you really think you were going to make this team?”

After everybody had a chance to rotate around the court all the people who were there for tryouts huddled around in a circle as Mr. Painter, a short stocky man who looked as if his hair was stuck in the Eighties and he just got older, looked at all of us preteens and said that he would call the names who made the second round of tryouts. I walked away from that gym, once again feeling defeated. I went going back to what I knew best: music and reading.

Even now when I think about my younger self, the inside dialogue of childhood Marty was always full of wonder, music, and sarcasm. I always felt as if I viewed the world differently than most. I was always kind and polite whereas the other kids I went to school seemed self-involved. I always knew the emotions of everybody in a room. If somebody was sad or angry, I knew it, and I felt an obligation to go to those people and talk to them through their emotions. I always felt conscious of everybody in the room and always self-conscious about myself. The only people I felt I could relate to were always the adults. I was plugged into a music player most of my life like an old lady to an oxygen tank. And just like that old lady, if taken off life support we would both find ourselves drowning in our surroundings, gasping for air.

Just as much as I enjoyed keeping up appearances at school by controlling how I dressed or how I looked physically, the one thing I couldn’t control was my living situation. Being Mexican I was afraid that I would be labeled by the other students as living in the
Huntington Beach “Slater Slums”: a barrio between Slater and Warner streets with the biggest cross street being Beach Boulevard. The busiest street takes you all the way downtown to the beach. The “Slater Slums” consisted of a collected row of one or two bedroom apartment buildings attached to one another with old, chipped, white-and-beige paint. Those apartments consisted of either two Mexican families or one large family. Inside the neighborhood tract were tiny houses that were built in the 1970s, with cartoon bed sheets for curtains and black wrought iron gates dividing the end of the yard from the sidewalk.

While driving to school, I would pass this neighborhood in the morning. On one side of the street were mobile homes and on the other, Mexican men standing, talking, and waiting for somebody to drive by and ask for help. I didn’t want to be perceived as Mexican because I felt that I would be associated with these men.

The other neighborhoods in Huntington Beach did not look like the Slater Slums. They were full four bedroom homes with lawns that were kept neatly. I imagined the insides of the homes to be neat as well. Even though I didn’t live in the Slater Slums, I still didn’t live where all of the other kids lived. My family and I lived in my grandmother’s one-story, three bedroom house with light brown exterior and dark brown trim. The house was located in Norwalk, California, a hot city in L.A. County. It was in this neighborhood where my mom grew up. The house was about an hour commute away in heavy morning traffic going to or from Huntington Beach. Most of my memories of the commute are set in the backseat of my family’s green Toyota Tercel or in the back seat of our red Toyota Tacoma truck. It was always a time for me to unload everything that I had kept in all day. I would talk and talk and talk, and my sister would be annoyed, “Tell him to stop talking!” she’d yell.
The sounds of the drive that come to my mind when thinking about that commute, and the city of Norwalk, is the music of KEARTH 101. Dubbed as playing “the greatest hits in the world,” the sounds that I became familiar with were 1960s Motown groups such as The Marvelettes, The Ronettes, The Temptations, Martha and The Vandellas, and The Four Tops. Listening to Diana Ross and The Supremes sing “Come See About Me” while listening to my mom talking to my dad is how I remember those drives. The neighborhoods in Norwalk and the city in Los Angeles resembled that of the post-World War II baby boom era. They all had a 1950s design to them. The homes were in tract neighborhoods, and were cookie cutter versions of each other. Each house had the same driveway, same roof shape and the same lawn. Large

I loved looking out the window watching the cities roll by and catching glimpses of neighborhoods from the freeway with kids playing in the street. We were always in transition going to school, being picked up from school and always waiting.

Growing up I had trouble making friendships with the other students. I found myself having to make an effort to listen to music and watch the same movies that they watched. There always seemed to be a distance between me and the other students, and as funny as it sounds, although we were the same age, I would now label that difference as a generation gap.

In 1999, Bill Clinton was in his second term of office, and the music world was in transition with a new generation of pop. Ricky Martin was “livin’ la vida loca,” Christina Aguilera was our “genie in a bottle,” and Marc Anthony needed to know something. I found myself sitting in the backseat of my father’s Red Toyota Tacoma truck one day after school when over the traffic on Beach Boulevard I heard the most intriguing sound on the radio. It was an electronic sound wave with simple quarter note beats on the high hat of the drum kit, and out
all of that came a deep intriguing voice that I had never heard, a mixture of pop and electronic sounds and lyrics singing about “life after love.” I quickly jumped up from the backseat, still buckled in, and grabbed hold of the passenger seat in front of me. I asked my mom and dad who sang that song. My dad didn’t know who was singing, but my mom said, “I think it’s Cher.”

Wow, somebody named Cher. I was fascinated. She had a voice I had never heard before on the radio. I was infatuated with the sounds.

As a child with working class parents who had different schedules to handle, including the children’s school schedules, I was always in transition in the car, listening to the radio in the morning while going to school, waiting to pick my sister up from school, or waiting in the car with my mom and sister at night waiting for my dad to get off of work. But no one ever got my attention the way Cher did.

There’s nothing exciting for an eight year old boy to be like about Cher, but I did. I thought of Cher as this parental figure in my life. Sometimes when I would wait for my parents to pick me up after school, the parking lot would be desolate, empty. Other kids would be able to walk home because they lived in the school’s neighborhood, but I didn’t have that option. Sometimes if I was lucky there would be other kids waiting and I would talk about how Cher was secretly my mother or aunt, and how she would be there any minute to grab me, and pick me up in a helicopter. She would come to the rescue.

During the summer of 1999 I would call in to KISS FM, L.A.’s number one pop and rock radio station, and request the song “Believe,” and when it came on I would record the song on a cassette tape and play that over and over. Eventually the first CD I ever bought was Cher’s album *Believe*. CD players were a must have for music lovers in the Nineties and expensive. The
fights that would occur between me and my sister about who would get to use the CD player were exhausting. One night on our daily commute home from Huntington Beach to Norwalk, a one hour drive, my mom became so tired of hearing my sister and I argue that we stopped at Target and I got a brand new CD player.

Listening to those CD’s was a coping mechanism. In the backseat of the car, I was attempting in some way to make a connection to my life and its place. My eyes would watch the world pass by me from the backseat windows watching other kids play in the neighborhoods and parks as I passed them on the freeway, but inside my mind I was in a different world. In my mind I would be onstage as a musician singing these songs with Cher, sharing great duets and fame. In another scenario I’d be backstage waiting for Cher. I would sing those songs in the backseat of the car during each commute to school, and going home. I entered a world of my own between the left and right headphones: a world that consisted of Cher and those electric sounds, a world within a world that was always loud. If didn’t hear myself sing, I wouldn’t be embarrassed.

One time my father made a joke about Cher and her history of plastic surgery. He and my mom used to say that Cher would pull all of her skin to the back of her head and tie it up with a rubber band. I was mad because I felt like they were not only making fun of Cher, they were also making fun of me. My dad asked me why I would get so defensive about someone I don’t even know. I thought, what do you mean I don’t know Cher? This celebrity became an extension of family for me. Listening to Cher was my way of coping with my feelings of being out of time and wanting to be in a different time era.

At the end of my second grade year I heard that there was going to be a school wide talent show. I decided that this was my chance. My big break into the entertainment industry. I
would sing “I Got You Babe” by Sonny and Cher. I had sung it in the backseat of the car. I knew the lyrics; I knew the slight pauses and chord changes. As the talent show grew closer I began to be more and more nervous. What had I gotten myself into?

The day of the talent show came and a girl with pudgy cheeks and brown hair made me a wreath of yellow dandelion flowers that she’d gathered from the field so that I could wear it on top of my head when I went up to sing. We all lined up in class and marched to the playground where rows of chairs were set up on the blacktop in between the handball courts and the brick building classrooms. At the front of all those chairs was a full PA system with two large speakers on both sides of the “stage.” I immediately regretted signing up for this talent show. All day I mishandled my CD, hoping that I would scratch it enough for it not to play. When my name was called, I went up to the front of the school, conveniently leaving my wreath at my seat. I threw as much negative energy as I could toward the PA system operator so that the CD wouldn’t work. In the end my plan worked. The CD was so scratched it wouldn’t play! At long last I was relieved that I no longer had to perform in front of the entire school of College View.

I thought I had dodged the bullet, but all of the second grade teachers felt bad for me, so about a week and a half later I got my own show in the multi-purpose room in front of the whole second grade. When the pudgy brown-haired girl heard about my performance, she said, “Perfect, now you can wear the wreath and not forget this time.” Bewildered that I got all of the second grade classes to go out there and watch me sing, I stood up on the blue carpet of that stage with the wreath on my head, silently embarrassed. The track began and I heard the pulsing of the tom drum, the shakers in unison and the round dream like sound of the pulsing keys in the
background playing quarter notes. Did everyone expect me to sing a one man duet? Sonny and Cher began singing but I didn’t. Overwhelmed and nervous, I looked out at the students and out of the crowd I heard one of the kids saying, “Is he supposed to be singing?” After the first chorus of “I got you babes” I timidly began to lip-sync both Sonny and Cher’s parts. By the end of the song I slipped off stage with tears down into the audience. As I walked through the crowd multiple classmates patted me on the back telling me that I did a good job. The bell rang to release everyone for the weekend. I was the last act of the week.

I was hanging out with one of my friends in second grade named J.J., and in one of our conversations Cher’s song “Believe” was mentioned. I was excited that someone else my age liked Cher, too. Cher was touring that summer, and I had to go and I wanted to take my friend with me. So, during an open house when all of our parents were in the same room, I kept bugging my mom to ask his mom if it was okay if he could go with us. After J.J.’s parents said yes we headed later that week to the Ticketmaster outlet at the music store called The Wherehouse. The summer of 1999 consisted of a lot of waiting. During that summer I would climb up on the kitchen table chair to look at and hold the Ticketmaster tickets that were in an envelope in the shelf in the kitchen. It read “Cher: Tour ’99 Do You Believe? Anaheim, California at Arrowhead Pond Arena, Saturday, August 21, 1999.”

The night of the concert we got to our seats and enjoyed an overpriced arena Carl’s Jr. hamburger. We sat next a man with his wife and their friends and he said, “What are you guys doing here?” He offered us snacks as he shook a box of Cracker Jacks in front of our faces. While waiting for the concert to begin, Cyndi Lauper warmed the audience up. Every time Cyndi would disappear and come back to sing I would get so excited thinking that the next
person that would appear would be Cher. As she sang and danced through the aisles of the audience on the floor all I could think of was being backstage. When the lights finally dimmed a montage video played of Cher’s career. Familiar music video clips and pictures were shown, and then the lights came up, there was a slight pause and then she elevated from backstage donning a huge red wig, belting out a rendition of U2’s “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For.” I couldn’t believe she had appeared for me and that I was seeing her with my own eyes.

Although I was ecstatic to see her, I was disappointed because I didn’t know that song and had never heard of it. I was afraid I wouldn’t know the rest of the songs. That whole year for me had been dedicated to her music and movies. Sitting there in the arena, I wondered if she knew I was there. I thought about what would happen if I was called out in front of the whole audience. After the intro, she sang a song from her Believe album. After that I knew every song. I was so proud of myself. As she went from costume change to costume change, Cher took the audience through each of her greatest hits, and even more than that, each of her identities from the different eras of her career. At one point in the show she descended from stairs protruding from the top part of the stage, wearing a long sparkled dress and a long shiny dark wig representing her Seventies look. She sang a medley of “Half-Breed,” “Gypsies Tramps and Thieves,” and “Dark Lady.” I knew all of the songs and video references during her video montage of her movie career—I couldn’t have felt more at home. I didn’t dare take my eyes off the stage, only glancing occasionally at the video screens.

During the concert I looked over at J.J. from time to time and would see that he had fallen asleep. I thought to myself, “How could he fall asleep!” So I would nudge him and point to the stage and say, “Look!” Once again, it seemed as if I was the only one who understood the
music, the melodies, the sounds, the person. At the end of the concert Cher came back for her finale, and I heard that electronic wave sound weaving in and out of the audience. She began to sing “Believe” as she was elevated high above the stage wearing a tight metallic suit—her tribute to her latest era. I was so excited to see how she was going to sing that song live and all the way through I was fixed on her every word, every intonation.

In the Cher: The Greatest Hits booklet, I examined all of her photos, the people inside of them, and matched their outfits within each time period of their lives. I wanted to be there in those pictures with Cher and all of those celebrities. I wanted to sing alongside them, and show them that I also had talent. I woke up the next morning feeling unreal, thinking how surreal it was to have seen someone who I had listened to on the radio, had seen on TV and stared at pictures in a CD cover booklet. Although Cher’s Believe album was a huge pop album in 1999, her catalogue spanned all the way from the early Sixties to the Nineties and that was the world I explored. I gained a perception of what each year looked like from the Sixties to the Eighties. I wanted to wear what Sonny Bono was wearing. Although I liked knowing about an artist that no one else my age knew, it further distanced me from the other students, widening that “generation gap” that I felt I had procured for myself. It wasn’t until later in my life that I realized this gap. Therefore, I began to believe I was different than the other students my age, making me a precocious personality. I had something in common with the adults, and they became my friends. The adults thought it was great that I was familiar with all of the artists that Cher introduced me to: Bette Midler, Elton John, and Tina Turner. From those artists came tendrils that drifted off into other eras of music and celebrities. All of the Seventies rock musicians and movies widened
my horizon of actors and actresses beyond my time: Jack Nicholson in *The Witches of Eastwick* and Meryl Streep in *Silkwood*.

Still, I longed for a connection with my peers. I always felt lucky when I was invited to birthday parties. I wanted to be invited to the other kids’ houses just so I could feel accepted and wanted. If I hadn’t been invited to a person’s birthday party I believed it was because I wasn’t good enough. It also hurt a great deal when the other kids came back to school from the weekend with inside jokes about their sleepovers. I was constantly comparing my life to the other students and when I saw similarities, I was thrilled. I tried to like the same movies or cartoons that the other kids watched. I was always listening, watching, and too shy to say anything unless I had confidence that a joke would be funny, or had valid commentary about whatever was going on in the schoolyard. Whenever I was invited to a party, for a brief moment in time, I would feel like a part of a family that I wasn’t ashamed of. I would be in a house and pretend that I belonged there.

I was so excited when I was invited to Matt Fox’s birthday party! Matt was the guy everybody liked in my fourth grade class because he was the class clown. All of the teachers liked his mom because she volunteered to make posters for class events since she knew how to write calligraphy. His mom seemed hip and cool, and I had a jealous feeling because all of the kids got along with her. She was young and outgoing enough to interact with us by making jokes or asking us questions about our hobbies and catering to what ten-year-old kids liked. The biggest difference between his mom and mine was that she had the time to do this for her kids. Matt’s birthday party was after school and me and the other kids got to play on the trampoline in his backyard. If you jumped high enough you could see over the fence to our school. I’d be out
on the field at lunch or recess and daydream about living in a house in the surrounding neighborhood. Matt not only had an awesome family, and lived in a house, but it was also right next door to school.

I saw his dad come into the house after work. It was like a scene out of a Fifties sitcom show. His dad came in with a briefcase. Matt, his mom and even the dog came over and greeted the man of the house. He was tall, had beige pants and a white striped collared shirt, and he looked beat. Later on that evening, I went to the bathroom and saw Mr. Fox sitting in the den with the blinds shut halfway. I could see he still had his brown diamond business socks on while his feet were propped up on the recliner, reading the newspaper in the dimly lit den. I remember thinking, “This is what a family is supposed to look like.”

Our family, in contrast, was not so fortunate. At the end of summer in August 1999 when there was a knock on the oak front door. I ran to it with curiosity, and a man in a tan suit and sunglasses stood there. My mother came up behind me quickly and shooed me away. I was eight years old.

What I gathered soon after was that The Man in the Tan Suit had told my mom that the bank was foreclosing on the house. I didn’t know what a foreclosure meant or what that meant for me or my family but soon after my parents started looking through old receipts and papers for the missing payment that the Man in the Tan Suit had demanded.

“What have you or Jessica seen a piece of paper that looks like this?” my mom would ask. The mood in the house changed. There was a sense of panic and I kept hearing words and phrases like “losing the house,” lawyers, receipts, and “saving the house.” Although I didn’t remember seeing the receipt in question or knowing what it looked like, I wanted so badly to find
it. I felt that if I found that piece of paper then maybe my parents wouldn’t have to worry about “losing the house.”

When my parents asked my sister and me to help look for the receipt that they had lost I felt a heavy sense of responsibility and I questioned myself—could I have been the person to misplace the receipt? What if I threw the receipt away one day while doing my chores? I could have thrown that receipt away but I wasn’t sure. Was the whole losing of the house my fault?

For months my mom, my grandma and my aunt met with a lawyer who said that he would try to help us “save the house.”

On a Saturday afternoon my family and I waited outside of the Norwalk Courthouse at the City Civic Center. The Norwalk Courthouse was one of the Superior Courts of California in Los Angeles County. The Norwalk Civic Center was located in the middle of the city surrounded by shopping centers and busy streets. The buildings seemed to be at least four stories high and the architecture of the courthouse resembled a very stoic personality with a Seventies aesthetic. My grandmother was there that day to defend herself against the realty company who was suing her and my uncle for not making the payments to the mortgage. The people all around me wore dark-colored suits and skirts and they all wore serious faces. I stood and waited outside the courthouse with my mother and my sister and, to my surprise, my grandfather. My grandfather came as he usually has throughout my life, making a guest appearance for support and never hanging around too long. As we stood there he walked up to my mother and as they began to talk my restlessness set in. I walked around the short planted trees in the middle of the cemented Civic Center and looked up at the blue sky. As I looked at the white clouds my attention was drawn back down toward the building as my aunt and my grandmother came of the
courthouse. My grandmother was wearing a black pant suit and a white blouse. As she approached us my mother began to comfort her as my grandmother began to cry.

“Why would that man go up there and lie like that?” she asked through sobs. “He went up there and said we never gave those payments,” she said angrily through her tears.

My aunt was off to the side talking to the lawyer who was going to help us “save the house.” For years afterwards, that phrase was used to describe that era for my family, “When grandma was trying to save the house.” Or we referred to the lawyer who failed our lawsuit defense as “that lawyer who was supposed to help us save the house got his degree out of a Cracker Jack box.” Throughout the course of looking for missing receipts, my parents filing for bankruptcy, and the whole litigation proceedings, I didn’t fully understand the process but I understood the situation. As I watched my grandmother being comforted by my grandfather I knew there wasn’t any good news to be had.

Soon after that, a mountain of my family’s life possessions began to be stacked high in the middle of the living room. It seemed like months after the courtroom scene that we were packing, but when talking to my family their recollection was that we had only two weeks to leave our house. This gap in memory could be due to me being young and unaware, but it is funny how a short two week period could play out as two months in my young mind.

The last night at my house, I helplessly watched my mother and father lifting heavy furniture from the living room to the truck outside, preparing to take one of the final trips to the storage unit in Huntington Beach. After they moved the heavy brown China Hutch and the last couple of boxes, my sister and I were left alone in the house for the first time. We were told not to answer the door and not to go outside.
When my parents came back it was already cold and dark outside. We only had suitcases and a couple of black trash bags filled with clothes. My mom, dad and sister were already out in the truck, but I said I needed to go to the bathroom before we left. I used the bathroom as an excuse to walk down the hallway and through each room one last time. As I walked from the car down the sidewalk and up to the front porch, I saw the patch of dirt running along the sidewalk to the front steps of the house where I had planted some pumpkin and sunflower seeds. I walked through the front door past the living room and started heading towards the bathroom.

As I walked through the hall, I walked in knowing that I would never see or be in that house again. Past scenes of summers and getting ready for school in the morning danced around me like ghostly images. I looked around me at all of the fixtures and white porcelain. I went to the bathroom and flushed the toilet, then running the water from the faucet over my hands for one last time. There was a stillness in the air. An emptiness in the house. There was nothing inside of it besides me and the fold-out couch bed in the living room that we left behind. Like that couch, the house seemed lonely and forgotten. It no longer held any feeling of the past forty-two years that my family had lived there.

That house is a staple in many of my family’s stories. In my mind it’s the place that I recall so vividly and often when I hear a story about my mother’s childhood, or when my grandmother would talk about her beginnings as a mother, aunt, and a wife. That place only exists now in 35mm silent films with my grandfather sitting in the living room next to my aunts and uncle, or my grandmother talking to her brothers and sisters during a holiday party. My grandmother told me that she never turned anybody away from her house if they needed some
place to live. If one of her brothers or sisters had an argument with a spouse, they stayed there. Countless of my mother’s cousins stayed there under the hospitality of my grandmother’s goodwill.

As I walked through the hall back out to the main living room I ran my fingers along the white plastered wall and I tried to linger as long as possible, looking at the carpet and feeling it underneath me. This was the first time I had to say goodbye to something so big and prominent in my life. Something that held meaning for me. I am so grateful that I was able to be a part of that landmark for my family. I was the last person to leave that house. I didn’t know where I was going with my family next, I knew I’d hold on generations of my family’s memories.

When I walked back outside I asked my mother, “Where are we staying tonight?” She looked at me and said, “I don’t know.”

From the back seat I could see intervals of light and dark made by the street lamps sending a type of S.O.S. pattern onto the window. We drove up to a motel with a faint neon light flickering in the nighttime. It flashed Vacancy. Little did I know that that would be the word my family would search for in the next year in order to find shelter. I hadn’t understood it then, but we were homeless. The definition of homeless, after all, is one without a home, and that was my family.

The next day we had to move immediately due to other travelers’ reservations that the motel couldn’t cancel. So that night we checked into a Motel 6. I sure was glad they left their lights on. We stayed at the Motel 6 for two weeks, and then we went searching for another motel to live in. We were gypsies, walking away from everything that was familiar, stepping into a world full of questions. Not knowing why I left my home in the middle of the night was
confusing. As a child, I trusted my parents. I believed that they knew what they were doing. Now, I think they felt just as lost as I felt.

We never knew what each motel would be like. Sometimes there were fleas, sometimes ticks. Sometimes we had angry motel managers who would tell us to leave because we had stayed for far too long. It’s really something to not have a house. Dinner at Denny’s and the Westminster café were not too bad, but I’m sure it was one of the many decisions that led to an unhealthy weight gain for my family. I felt lucky when we were able to get a small motel room with a kitchenette, but I always felt bad for my parents because I knew that paying extra for that kitchenette fastened the financial belt just a little tighter. When we didn’t have a kitchenette we relied on the continental breakfast in the motel lobbies. I soon came to realize that continental breakfast meant community loaves of bread being toasted in toasters so filled with bread crumbs that had you really push down hard on the lever.

One morning of the continental breakfast, my mother was paying for the next night at the motel while I was eating burnt slices of toast. The Asian manager looked at me when he gave my mom her receipt and he pointed at me. He reached over the counter to grab my ears and said, “You be rich one day, you have big ear lobe, mean you have lot of money when you older.” This was possibly one of the best things I had ever heard while standing in a motel lobby. I thanked him for the prophecy, and for his burnt toast.

When I wasn’t busy being told prophecies, I was attending Mrs. Bennett’s third grade class. I missed a couple of “5-a-day” math homework sheets, and Mrs. Bennett told my mom.

Then the lying began.
My mom waved it off and told my teacher that we had just moved, and my teacher looked at my mother and said, “Oh, I’m sure it’s tough on him. I bet you’re unpacking and everything is everywhere.”

She didn’t know the half of it. I stood there as my mother lied to my teacher. When Mrs. Bennett asked where we had moved to my mother said, “Buena Park,” which was the city where our motel was located. My mother lied, which caused my teacher to believe we had probably just moved into a nice little house somewhere in that city of Buena park, but the reality was that we were staying at the Gaslight Motel, a motel located down a large boulevard, with an Indian cuisine restaurant oddly placed in the middle of the motel parking lot.

Summer time came and my sister and I were dropped off at a Boys and Girls Club daycare, miles away from my mom and dad’s work and the motel. A real commute. I disliked day care and just as I had felt different from the other kids at school I felt even more shy and distant. The kids at daycare were different than the people I went to school with. It was a conglomerate of different students from different schools. And we were all in the same boat, just waiting for our parents. The only thing that made it bearable was the friend I had made, a staff member named Pat. Pat was in charge of the “Kindergarten Room,” a rambunctious room full of kids running around, screaming and playing board games and building Legos. Although labeled the “Kindergarten Room” it was mostly comprised of seven-to-nine year olds.

I hadn’t realized it then, but Pat was a lesbian with a short, bleached-blonde haircut. The moment I realized that Pat and I had the same sense of humor was when she took a Woody doll from the Disney film Toy Story and stuck Woody’s little plastic right hand into his tiny toy blue jean pants, simulating Al Bundy’s signature move on the couch from the TV show
Married...with Children. “That’s just like Al Bundy,” I said. She seemed surprised that I knew what she was referencing and then felt embarrassed for making that reference. After that moment she and I began to bond over TV shows, music, and Cher. Every day I looked forward to sitting with Pat wherever she was. Soon after that Pat was relocated to watch over the “Activities Room.” This room was meant for older kids to play board-and-card games and store their backpacks in the cubbies along the wall. The games would be locked up in a cupboard that could only be unlocked by Pat. There were three large shelves that held games like Clue, Sorry!, UNO and Connect Four. My favorite game to play with Pat would be Mancala. I was good at Mancala, but Pat was even greater at the card game Speed. When I would win for the fifth time in a row in Mancala she would angrily look at me and say, “Dammit, you’re cheating!”

I wasn’t cheating, but then I would let her win. Between those two games Speed seemed to be our favorite. We could play several times in a row. I learned how to shuffle and deal cards in that room, and to make sarcastic jokes. Pat encouraged my precociousness as a child as she talked to me and made jokes about all of the other kids. There were always different kids coming up to talk to Pat about nothing, or just acting strange. She told me once after a kid walked away, “Geez, man, I always attract the weird the ones. I don’t know what it is about me but they like me.” She quickly excluded me from that statement and then we would continue talking about what happened on The Drew Carey Show the night before, or make references to old episodes of The Simpsons or Malcolm in the Middle. Pat became one of my greatest childhood friends.

I once told her that I didn’t have cable TV, but let slip one day that I watched something at home on HBO because every motel has HBO. I slipped up on my lie and she
caught me, but I played it off by saying we got a free hookup. Stealing cable seemed to be a better excuse than telling her that my family lived in a motel. It was then that I realized the art of lying that I had adopted. My mother asked me if I wanted her to tell Pat about our living situation, and I gave a quick “No! We can’t tell her—that’s embarrassing!”

I always imagined the other kids going home and relaxing in their huge living rooms, and having a snack in their nice white kitchens. Then I would go home and not even have a room to sleep in. One motel that we had stayed at only had one bed, which my sister usually slept on, or my parents. I never wanted to take the full bed because I would feel too selfish. I learned how to layer the blankets on the floor, behind a wall partition, so that there was enough padding from the hard concrete that was only half an inch below the carpet. There I slept on the floor next to whoever didn’t make it onto the bed that night.

My living situation was only one of the differences in my childhood. I also thought that the people in my life were just as equally misplaced and as interesting and insecure as I felt. There was a strong female presence in my life growing up with my mom, my sister and my grandmother, but buried beneath all of their dominant personalities was my father. My father’s name is also Martin Salgado (without a middle name). He pronounced Martin as Mar-teen. He was a quiet man and was never as outwardly spoken as my mother and grandmother or as antagonizing as my sister.

The first time I ever realized my father couldn’t read was when I was three or four. It was in the middle of the afternoon and I wanted my father to read me a story. I walked over to the tall white Ikea bookcase and picked out a Disney book. Using the wooden bedposts to pull myself up, I positioned myself on the twin size bed where my father was already laying down
taking a nap. The bed sat underneath a window. Afternoon sunlight shone into the room. I handed the orange-covered book to my father and asked him to read it to me. From the illustration on the cover, the story was about the wolf and the three little pigs. I lay down on the bed under my father’s arm, his brown skin smooth and black hair darker than it is now. He opened the book and began telling me the story. I was an avid *Sesame Street* viewer at that age, and was always excited to follow along with the songs. I would follow the words as they lit up in different colors on the TV screen, or watch a ball bounce on each word as it was being sung or read. I did the same following along when my father began the story, but each time I moved my finger to the next word, something wasn’t matching. He would either not say enough words, or said too many when there weren’t enough words left on the page. At that young age before I could even read, I realized my father couldn’t read either. I looked at him and felt sympathy in that moment. My father wasn’t reading but was pretending to, for me. I played along as if I hadn’t noticed anything.

I playfully said, “Stop, you’re not even reading,” but he smiled and said, “Yes, I am.” I pretended to believe him and I watched his face as he told the story in his own words. I saw him looking at the illustrations and basing his story off of the pictures on the page. I went along with the sweet gesture, and simply enjoying my father, with his own way of “reading” to me.

After spending seven months living in motels we had been looking for a new apartment and had finally found one in the summer of 2001. Before the apartment became ours I went with my parents to take a tour of the complex and our new potential home. When I first walked in I was ecstatic with the thought that we would finally be able to live in one place, we
would finally have privacy. As I walked from the large living room to each of the two bedrooms, the wall-to-wall white carpeting seemed luxurious.

After the tour I pleaded with my parents to get the apartment. They both assured me that they were going to try and rent it, and that all they needed was to sign the lease agreement. In my young eight-year-old mind I didn’t understand the slow-moving paperwork process, but the apartment was empty and ready to be lived in. What reason was there to wait? Soon after that, my parents borrowed money and, with my grandmother as co-signer, the apartment was ours. At least until the next new year lease renewal.

Our new apartment building had light-pink stucco and blue trim on the roof. The balconies were lined with black bar railings featuring a flower-like design which made the complex look like the French Quarter.

Everything that we had in storage while living in motels was placed inside the apartment. The apartment soon became packed with beds and people. There were two beds in my parents’ room, one for myself and one for my parents. When we first moved in they voluntarily took the small room and left the big room with the full bathroom and shower to my sister. My sister had the larger room all to herself until the summer of 2002, when my grandmother’s bed moved in, and then her sitting chair, and then her gold-colored iron TV shelf and TV, and then, eventually, my grandmother.

I was twelve and my grandmother, the matriarch of the family, moved into my family’s two bedroom apartment. Once again my family would be living with my grandmother but instead of us living in her house, she was living in ours. Among the women that I grew up with my mother and my sister were the most vocal. My grandmother had the most severe effect
on me in a lot of areas. Besides my parents and my sister, my grandmother is one of the people who sticks out the most in my memory. Her name was Frances Herrera Martinez and she was a certain kind of lady, with pride and charisma. There was something about the way she walked with her head held high and a beaming smile that made you trust her, and with good reason. Her resting face, with slightly raised eyebrows, made her look content about everything. When she talked, it was with sharp authority. When she told stories, she told them so vividly that I never doubted the accuracy, imagining every detail just as she described it. Although her demeanor seemed arrogant she had the ability to be genteel, treating everybody with kindness.

Her hair was always dyed a dark auburn. She wore her nails long, and kept them natural, not painted, which in some way made her hands seem like dangerous tools you would not want her to use. Her nails always came in handy with a cigarette in her hand. She would hold the Benson and Hedges cigarette in her right hand between her index and middle finger, and with a quick flick of her thumbnail ashes would descend to the ground.

Driving with her would be the same story. Driving and smoking. She was the last person I ever knew to use the lighter in the car for its original purpose. The clouds of smoke billowed to the back, where I sat among a heap of soda cans with promotional coupons printed onto the aluminum that had already expired. The car as a whole smelled like smoke and an old box of crayons.

Before, when my family lived with my grandmother in her house, there were times when I felt unvalued. This may have come from my knowing that she did not like my father, and some of that anger deflected onto me. But whenever my mom, my sister and my grandmother would go shopping, I would go. I would always be a quiet observer of the three women. My
sister always seemed to ask for things and got what she wanted. I felt like I came in second to my sister as a grandchild. My suggestions weren’t heard when deciding where to go, or where to have lunch while spending time with my grandmother. Although I felt like she cared more about my sister, I wanted her to like me too. Now ten years old, I got to spend every day with my grandmother that summer. This gave me the opportunity to be heard, and to feel appreciated.

She sat upright on the bed all day watching re-runs of the *Golden Girls*, falling asleep. Then another re-run, and another nap. No one was spared from her sharp tongue and harsh criticism, which was always passive-aggressive. “I’m not your typical grandmother,” she once told my mother. She was so far beyond typical that I don’t think she knew what a typical grandma was. I was always afraid of her, but at the same time I found myself wanting to be accepted by her. Consciously I thought about it as a game. “If I serve her every need, and always prove to be there for her, she will like me better than my sister.”

Once when I was seven years old I said “no” to one of her requests. She replied, “What did you just say to me?” Then she chased me outside to the garage. As I ran in the garage I told my father, “Don’t tell her I’m in here!” I sat guarded in a fortress of boxes, under my father’s protection. Because she didn’t care for my father I knew she would not press any further, and turn away to go back inside. I was surprised at myself for being able to muster up enough courage to talk back to her. I had built up anger not wanting to run her errands and do things for her anymore. I felt that I had never seen my sister being asked to do anything, and I just wanted to play without having to worry whether I had done the chores properly or missed one of her beckoning calls.
In memory it was always, “Mijo, could you do me a favor and get me a cup of coffee?” or, “Could you make me lunch?” I would slink away from the computer or wait until a commercial break and head to the kitchen to make my grandmother a cup of Folgers Classic Roast Instant coffee. I microwaved a cup of water for two minutes, then took the red cap off of the plastic see-through container and dipped a spoon into the instant coffee crystals, which I dropped in the hot water. I stirred the spoon as I watched the mocha colored swirls in my grandmother’s cup of coffee. When my grandmother complimented me it was always passive-aggressive. After I made her an egg-salad sandwich for lunch, I asked her how it was, she just said, “It was good, eggshells and all. Thank you.” But soon these favors would become ways for me to gain her love. Soon I was completing each and every task. I caught on to her passive-aggressiveness and began to see the dry humor within it, and I began to play back. With eagerness leaving her room, I would always say, “Call me if you need anything, Grandma.” And she would reply with a simple, “OK, thank you, Mijo.” What turned into a game for love and affection from my grandmother resulted in a friendship.

We began going places together in her car, listening to music from the Fifties and Sixties. With The Chordettes harmonizing on the radio to “Lollipop,” or listening to Thee Midniter’s yelping screams over their Chicano-American rock instrumental “Whittier Boulevard,” we would drive down that very same boulevard and go to places in the cities of Anaheim or in Orange. We always ended up having lunch at a diner or getting dessert at an ice cream shop. These drives became times where we bonded about our family history, discussing everybody’s good and bad choices in life according to her viewpoint, and I listened to her. We were partners in crime and we became confidants—we became friends. She would tell me about
her life, and I made her a mix CD of Sonny and Cher music. The dread I felt while driving with my grandmother when I was a child was soon replaced with excitement about conversations and music. I felt heard and valued. If we stayed at home we would take simple walks to the 7-Eleven. Holding her hand we would cross the large intersection on Warner Street near the apartment, on our way to get her a pack of cigarettes and a couple of twelve ounce Slurpee cups. She taught me a life lesson on those many trips, one I think she kept close to her heart. Whether or not we had transportation or money she was always up for anything, just to have the chance to do something or meet somebody new. This simple thought was how my grandmother stayed positive in her life, and these memories have a special place in my heart.

As a boy growing up through puberty a distance grew between me and my parents, mainly between me and my father. I shared my thoughts about what I didn’t like about my dad in hopes that grandmother and I could have something in common, and it worked. Struggling with my identity, I blamed my father for making me a Mexican. I blamed my father for not making enough money. And although my grandmother and my mother were also Mexican, they were very Americanized, and I blamed my dad for not being able to do that either. During the days that summer, while we would be at home milling around the apartment just the two of us, I would follow my grandmother outside on her invitations or my own so that she could have a smoke. The backyard was a tiny patch of land behind the apartment. The way out there was through a sliding door in the kitchen. Where there was supposed to be grass, there was dirt covered by planks of wood and patches of dirty carpet for walking space. The window to the room my grandmother and my sister shared faced the backyard. If anyone in that room wanted to look out or hear what was happening in the backyard, they certainly would be able to. Since a lot
of our belongings did not fit in with us inside of the apartment, my parents packed our life up in blue and grey storage containers, lined everything up outside the opposite wall of the kitchen, along with my father’s tools and lawn mowing equipment, and pulled an industrial sized tarp over it to cover it from the weather. Under that tarp mixed in with all of my family’s belongings were boxes full of my grandmother’s life as well: boxes of her years as a single lady, as a married woman, and as a mother.

Always sitting on her left, we sat on a pair of plastic green chairs placed along the wood paneled fence enclosing our apartment from the complex parking lot. As I looked up at her, she would face straight ahead. I saw her strong profile of her father’s nose and my family’s signature mouth, shaped As she drew on her cigarette, her cheeks would sink, showing her cheekbones. Then air billowing out of her nose like a prominent dragon, she would ask if my mom and dad had been fighting the night before and what it was about. I told her insider information, feeling proud that I could bring something to this friendship between my grandma and me. She would tell me that my father was pretending to not have money, and that he secretly hid it from my mom. Whether this was mere speculation or insider information, hearing that accusation made me angry at my father. There was also a part of me upset with my grandmother for knowing this information and for including me in it. I didn’t realize it then, but this wasn’t information for me to hear. I was used to knowing things that I shouldn’t know and it was normal for me at the time. I wasn’t aware that a young boy of twelve shouldn’t be talking about his mother’s and father’s marital troubles behind their backs, but I felt like I had a friend. I felt comfortable talking about these emotions and my frustrations. I was too young to be involved in my parents’ issues, but for some strange reason I also felt privileged that she would share such an
adult conversation with me. She would tell me that my father needed to get an education and that he was just “a dumb Mexican.”

Before meeting my father, my mom had her first marriage which resulted in her having my sister. Having my father come into the picture was not what my grandmother had in mind for my mom and my sister. “Things were fine before you and your father came along,” my grandmother said, as I sat next to her on her bed while syndicated shows ran in the background. Many times I heard either my mother or my grandmother wonder if their lives would have been better if they hadn’t met my father, leaving me to wonder how different my mother’s life would be if he hadn’t come into her life. This made me think about what would happen if I had never been born. If you erased my dad, you erased me.

That was a damaging statement to hear at the age of ten. Although it was said to me offhandedly, as if she were just chatting to a friend about her family, it hurt me because I was more than a friend. I was her grandson. A grandson who felt he’d gained her trust through his loyalty, by fetching her coffee, by making her lunch, by accompanying her wherever she wanted to go. Yet, even though I felt betrayed by those words, I understood her. After countless afternoons listening to her life story I could see that my grandmother was angry that my father stole her daughter away. She felt that he did not properly care for my mother. I understood the chronic pain and heartache my grandfather instilled in her after leaving her for another woman. Most of my grandmother’s life, I think, was sitting in the dark, depressed and sad after my grandfather left her, and she was probably depressed sometime even before that. Even though I understood her, she brought that insecurity into our lives, and especially into mine. She brought
accusations, blame and pointed fingers which she directed towards different members of the family.

Living in such close quarters, it was impossible to hide anything from one another. There was no privacy. Everyone was constantly involved in everyone’s relationships. As time wore on, I needed privacy as a young growing man, and that was exactly what nobody had. My parents’ relationship was out in the open, and I shared that same atmosphere. Before my grandmother moved into my sister’s room, my sister was the only one with privacy; and even then she and my grandmother seemed to have a secret bond that no one else could touch. They shared a closed door to their room and whispers about the rest of the family. Although I tended to have the same bond with my grandmother I was still partial to my parents’ feelings and empathetic towards their situation.

I found solace in books, television, music, and the only room with a door other than the entrance to the apartment that had a lock: the bathroom. Whenever my parents’ arguments flared up, there was a sense of awkwardness, sadness and anger of not knowing what to do. I cared about these people, but at the same time did not want to hear or witness any of their verbal attacks. I tried to continue watching TV or reading. Then I would escape to the bathroom to be by myself and to get away from all of the screaming. Heart racing and body tense, I would begin to read, hoping that the argument didn’t come to the bedroom. As cabinet doors slammed I turned on the bathroom fan to drown out as much as I could.

When you entered the bathroom the toilet was to your left and a sink with two mirrors hanging above were right next to the toilet. The large mirror was usually dirty, flecked with spots of toothpaste and water. The smaller one of the mirrors was connected to a tiny door of the
medicine cabinet. Further crowding the space was a plastic Rubbermaid hamper with a top lid that wouldn’t close due to a constant overflow of dirty clothes spilling out onto the floor. Surprisingly, the room smelled more like dirty clothes than urine. Along with the yellow overhead light and cheap paint chipping off the walls, that bathroom became my sanctuary, almost a friend.

It was the room situated right in the middle of the apartment, connected to both bedrooms. It was the heart of the apartment. I could spend one to two hours in there, not using the room for its purpose but simply as an opportunity to get away from everyone. In the bathroom I found a whole other world. It was where I honed my air guitar skills, listening to Paul Simon trickling his notes on steel strings and Art Garfunkel singing beautiful words that I grew to understand and care about. They calmed me down. Peter, Paul and Mary’s words taught me that being hurt in life was okay, and that there was always enough space for love to give and receive.

My favorite band that I felt the most connected to was Fleetwood Mac. Although I knew some of their hit songs growing up, I never cared about them until I heard their live album *The Dance*. I was mesmerized by these five famous pop culture figures. There was something about the high-pitched finger-picked solos of Lindsey Buckingham, the whimsical storytelling lyrics of Stevie Nicks, and the deep husky-blues vocals of Christine McVie that enamored and inspired me with love and longing. I stood there in the bathroom memorizing every note that Lindsey played, moving my fingers in unison to his sound. I would pretend that I belonged to this band family. Pretending to be Lindsey on guitar, I would occasionally look to my right, staring at the chipped walls, imagining that I was looking at Stevie during the second verse of
“Go Your Own Way,” or to Christine McVie, making faces with her when she sang “You Make Loving Fun.”

I explored the whole world of Harry Potter. I was that boy who had nothing but was destined for something greater than himself. It was a story about my life and my soul. I believed it. I had to believe it. I grew to be sensitive in that bathroom, listening to faceless voices talking beyond the door, analyzing the relationships in the household and trying to find my bearing within it all. In my imagination that bathroom could be as wide and as tall as Madison Square Garden, or as small and intimate as a coffee shop. It was a place that I could transform with my mind.

I also used the outside of the apartment complex as a way to find privacy. I would call my friends constantly, until they were tired of my voice. I chatted away on the phone as I walked underneath the car ports, watching my feet walk in patterns. Sometimes I sat on a swing in the tiny playground of the apartment complex, until I felt I was being watched or listened to by the neighbors.

My sister’s protective behavior didn’t allow for anyone in her bathroom. This proved a problem for me because I was left sharing the half-bathroom with two other people. So, I could only stay in there for so long listening to Simon and Garfunkel serenading a whole arena with “The Only Living Boy in New York,” or reading chapter after chapter, before the yelling came in my direction. Fists pounded on the door so that somebody else might find a chance to weep inside.

My mother saw a calling for altar servers in the Holy Spirit Church's Sunday bulletin. She told me that she had always wanted me to be an altar server, so I became one.
The trainings took place on Sunday afternoons and the program was run by Mrs. Peters. Mrs. Peters was an older woman with thick lenses in clear plastic frames and fraying grey-white hair. She wasn’t large but she wasn’t small. She was retired. Her duty was to coach the altar servers and teach us about the importance of the different sections of the church and the many details and maneuvers of the mass.

Mrs. Peters lined us up in pairs at the back of the church, shoulder to shoulder, and made us practice walking in all the way up to the altar. A loud noise would emanate from her body, a hummed version of “Hail Holy Queen,” which I only recognized because it was the very first song Whoopi Goldberg jazzed up as Sister Mary Clarence in *Sister Act 1*. “Da dah da duh duh hm hm hmm hmm, Oh, Maria,” she would hum and half-sing. I would start my path straight to the altar to her retired cadence. Not forgetting to keep three pew spaces between me and the person in front carrying the cross, I remembered to bow before climbing the steps to the altar. I learned how to hold the red prayer book, embroidered with gold lines, which made the book look holy. I held it out in front of the priest as he read the opening and ending prayer for the mass.

As time went on I moved from the back of the altar server procession, holding candles, to the front, where I carried the cross into the Catholic Church. My job was to lead the procession in arriving at the altar even before the priest, placing the cross on its stand, bowing towards the center of the altar, then turning about face and heading to the line of chairs hidden behind the wings of the church on the side of the altar.

Growing up Catholic, at least the way I did it, was not such a drag. The only terrible part about being an altar server was getting up for the 7:30 morning Mass. On a good day I would get up at 7:00 in the morning, otherwise I would get up and scramble at 7:15 and be
dropped off in the front of the church, car still moving, and make my way to the back of the church. I threw on my robe, tied the cord and scooted on down, asking God to forgive me for my sins before I made it to the altar so that I could be worthy of serving that morning. It was my choice as an altar server of when to serve mass, and I would sometimes serve up to two masses on a Sunday morning. I even became the Sunday school teacher’s assistant. The youth group at my church consisted of kids from schools that I didn’t attend. I didn’t want to make church friends, and instead chose to be very private about my faith.

To my surprise, after all of the volunteer work and private devotion, I had a run-in with a Sister at the church. Sister Anna was an Asian woman and didn’t wear the traditional habit. Instead, she and the other sisters wore white or cream colored skirts and sweaters with tan nylons and sandals. She seemed to be a kind woman, but when it was time for my confirmation she became very hesitant. She told me and my parents that I wasn’t ready for the rite of passage. She may have taken my shy withdrawal from the youth group activities as a sign that I wasn’t ready to share my faith with the world, but I couldn’t be stopped. I was confirmed Catholic and a couple of years later she was transferred from the church for not allowing an adult gay member of the congregation to attend a retreat.

To this day I am still a practicing Catholic. I lean on my faith just about as much as I did as a child, and I have never concerned myself with the larger, controversial aspects of my faith. Today, I grapple with some of those questions, but my need for hope goes far beyond those issues. When I was younger I used my religion as a way to find peace and hope in my life when I felt there was none, and I was able to share this faith with my parents and grandmother. During times when I felt like my parents would never stop arguing, or it seemed as if I would never be
able to solve my family’s problems, it always seemed to be my faith that I needed and it was one of the few things that got me through those trying times.

I remember seeing my mother cry for the first time when I was ten years old and then I began crying.

She asked, “Why are you crying?” I didn’t know why, I just felt sad hearing my mother weep. I knew what was making her sad: it was my father, but I did not know what to do. It would always be another fight about money, another fight leaving my mother feeling unloved, insecure, and financially stressed. The only way I found that I could help her was just to be there. So, I began listening. Listening to the fights would help me understand why these two people would argue and hurt each other. I listened to her side of the story, enveloping her pain and anger. I understood her, and from then on I always took my mother’s side.

While listening I also tried to understand why. Why would my parents call each other awful names and voice nasty phrases to one another? My tiny body would try to find some way to get out of their way and hide from the vibrations of the words being said. It became routine to my mind and body as I tensed up, turned off the television, and tried not to make eye contact as they fought. If I was in the living room I would escape to the bedroom I shared with my parents. I stared blankly at the black glass screen of the television until my mother came into the room, slammed the door, and sat on the bed. The only thing I could say was, “I’m sorry, Mommy,” as she began to sob.

The tension I felt from my mother when she walked in would be from worrying that she was going to yell at me for not doing the dishes, not doing the laundry, not cooking dinner, not cleaning, or for being on the computer since I got home. These to me were valid reasons to
be upset. Why did I not clean? Why did I not do this for her? There were times when I felt that if I had cleaned up the house, then maybe the whole family would be okay.

Looking back, I wonder why I felt such an extreme amount of guilt for my family not getting along. It might have been because I knew the house was dirty but I didn’t want to clean up. I knew the dishes needed washing but I didn’t want to be the one to do it. I was young, lazy and uninterested, but I still cared. I felt like I gave my mother so much emotional support I didn’t have to do chores. In my mind it was up to my father and sister to hold up that end of the household. I felt like they owed that not only to my mother, but also to me.

The problems worsened in the apartment with three adults and two growing children. I’ve contemplated why the communication was difficult and I think it was because communication itself was nonexistent. My father’s lack of reading or writing skills made it hard for him to relay his thoughts, his feelings, and his frustrations. As my grandmother told my mother her speculations about my father, my mother listened as a daughter. And after all of that the bills were difficult to pay on time, and so the electricity and cable were turned off every now and then.

Inside our apartment you could cut the tension. As you walked in from school or from work, you never knew what the fight was going to be about that day, or to whom you would have to say “excuse me” to as you passed in front of the television.

Would it be my dad watching loud Mexican game shows, the ones with the girls in bikinis? Or would it be my grandma watching *The Laura Bozzo Show*, a Peruvian female Jerry Springer, or *The Cristina Saralegui Show*, the Cuban Oprah Winfrey?
If my grandmother walked in from work and passed in front of the television as my
dad was watching, she would give a clear and quick “Buenos dias,” or “Perdon.” The only time
she ever spoke Spanish was to my father, or when someone walked into a room where she was
on the phone gossiping. I saw it as demeaning when she would speak to him in Spanish.
Everybody else in the house spoke English to each other except for those two.

I believe speaking Spanish was a verbal and mental defense for my grandmother.
When my grandmother found herself in an awkward situation around the house, such as bumping
into my father when she was leaving the kitchen and my dad was entering, she would pause,
stand up straight, lift both eyebrows, and speak directly to my father. These were actions of
authority. They both became strangers to me in those moments. As years went by my father
stopped being nervous around her, and when he would reply he would give quick responses with
no emotion as she attempted to make an everyday conversation with a man she despised.

My father was a hardworking man, with brown skin and a Spanish accent. Every day
he walked through the door at 3:30. His skin was hot and dark brown from being in the sun all
day. The white carpet was stained with caked mud from my father’s work boots and uniforms.
He walked through the door in his long-sleeved, button-up work shirt and dark green pants, the
standard uniform of a landscaper in Southern California. My relationship with my father as a
thirteen-year-old boy was strained and sometimes nonexistent. He would attempt to say hello to
me, but I always brushed it off. I believed he was keeping money from my mom. I thought he
was holding my family back from moving out of our tiny two bedroom apartment. I also had an
angry feeling about being Mexican, and felt that it was his fault. These were thoughts and
feelings that I couldn’t understand. When I would try to explain them to the only person that I
could, my grandmother, she would just encourage the anger.

After writing out every bill she needed to pay, my mother would put her paycheck
together with my dad’s, only to come up short. My mother would begin arguing with my father.
After a few rounds of verbal exchange I would join in the argument as well because I was given
such power to listen to conversations about this topic behind closed doors with my mother and
grandmother, I felt like I had enough say, power and knowledge to join in the domestic
arguments.

Looking back, it seems like it was just a big bully fest against my father. Three
women and his son against him. I now feel that in those moments I was turning my back against
my father and yelling at him just because everybody else would yell at him. But even then I
didn’t feel like I had to pick sides. I heard my mother calling him names, saying, “Why don’t
you learn how to speak English right!” I joined in, saying, “You can't even speak English,” and
mocking him as he spat out stuttered remarks in the wrong tense. Only when problems like this
arose did my father’s drinking problem come to fruition. There were times when I actually heard
my father tell my mother that he didn’t have any money to give her, but then I would see a large
amount of cash in his wallet. That money could have been saved for a purpose that my mother
knew about, but my instincts kept me wondering.

My parents tried to give me a normal childhood, but it was filled with a lot more
worry than any of the other children I went to school with. I didn’t know what normal
relationships were like. I saw the parents of my friends and saw their lives in contrast to mine. I
saw how other families worked and then I saw my family, where my parents only fought about money and complained about work—the only thing they had in common.

That affected me and my relationships with my friends, with my sister, and with my future love life. I didn’t know how to be sweet or how to court somebody. I didn’t know what love looked like in the context of relationships. I knew what motherly love was, which I thanked God for, and that’s the only love I knew, but I didn’t know that deep romantic connection of love or how to attain it. I only knew to watch out for myself, and how to get along doing things alone. I learned that if I ever meet my mother-in-law I should be suspicious that she will hate me and fill my wife’s head with thoughts about me, that my wife won’t trust me, and that I won’t trust my wife. I learned how to be insecure and how to not be happy with myself. I learned how to eat and shop when things were bad. One of the places where I felt safe most of my life was school. I enjoyed getting out of the house to go shopping and eating, but school was a separate world that gave me hope in myself.

I pulled open large heavy brown doors and stepped into the communal area of the school.

Looking at the orange carpet with black gum spots dues to years of decay, I guessed that the school built in 1976 hadn’t changed a bit. I grew up listening to music from the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties. These were the eras of my parent’s generation. Going into high school I had been an avid Simon and Garfunkel and Fleetwood Mac fan. Yearning to know and understand the time period of those two music groups, I felt right at home surrounded by brown and yellow painted walls. I walked around campus thinking about Fleetwood Mac’s *Rumours* and all of my other favorite albums. At one point in history that music was brand new, played by
students who went to Ocean View High School. I thought about the people and the music the walls of that school had heard and seen. This was my new school. I felt this was my new home.

It was an early August morning as I found myself attending Ocean View High School’s freshmen “Week of Welcome,” or as the enthusiastic student body and PTSA called it, I was attending “WOW” week. “WOW” week was an orientation, introducing incoming students to the social and academic life of high school. It was led by Principal Gilden, a very round woman with a short brown hair and a face like a Pekingese dog. Although a very kind and stout lady, she reminded me of Mrs. Puff, an overly cautious and paranoid pufferfish on the cartoon *Spongebob Squarepants*. At the end of the first day of the week long orientation, the whole class of 2009 was seated in the indoor amphitheater as Principal Gilden began her welcoming speech. While I can’t recall most of what she said there was one piece of advice that I do remember. Something that held such power for me, a thought that changed my course not only as a student, but as a teenager who was about to enter the world of high school.

“All of you are coming together from different schools and there are a lot of people you don’t know,” she said, holding onto the mic and looking around. “Take this chance to reinvent who you are. Nobody knows who you were in middle school. You can be anyone here at Ocean View. It’s a brand new start for you.”

She may have been reflecting on her own thoughts, reminded of what it meant to be a freshman in high school in her lifetime. As she walked off to the side of the stage and resumed her normal conversations with all of the other adults, she left me with a new and profound outlook on this chapter of my life. These words of advice lingered with me as everyone else dispersed for lunch. My fourteen-year-old self had a goal, and I remember making a mental
checklist to achieve it. I wanted to be popular and I wanted everybody to like me. Those were simply the goals I set for myself. Thinking about my tormented middle school years, I no longer wanted to have my lunches in the library, and I no longer wanted to be friends with the teaching staff and the librarian or, at least, not only with the teachers and the librarian. I looked around the campus and decided that I was going reinvent the person I had been.

As a child music was my world. I wanted to lead the life of a celebrity. I wanted to be famous for my personality, eccentricity, and my talent to make art. I wanted to sing and dance on stage or act in my own television show. But my humble, introverted self prevented that as a student in school. I was shy and always watched the other students get the recognition from our peers. The class clown would get all of the laughs, the smart kids would always have the answer, and I would always feel left out. The only people who would recognize my potential were the adults.

I was mindful and observant of my surroundings. This behavior led me to be a precocious character. My interests and tastes in music, television, and movies pushed me further away from the children my age. I felt closer to adults. In this way, I found my way of standing out. But my eccentricity made way for bullies. I may have been popular with the teachers and parents, but not with the other students my age. I didn’t mind feeling different than the other students. I was being recognized for who I truly was as a child.

On the first day of school, my nerves pulsed with courage and fright as I walked across the blacktop parking lot in front of the high school gymnasium. The painted mural of the words, Ocean View, were spread across the gym. A satisfied Seahawk head rested in the letter
“O,” with its strong light-brown feathers and one serious eye beaming down at me. Whatever a Seahawk was, I guessed I was one now.

On that first day, I looked for opportunities to become the person I wanted to be. I had a clear mindset of what I wanted, I just needed the opportunity. In high school we had two breaks throughout the day: nutrition and lunch. Nutrition was supposed to be the “adult” version of a recess, and afterwards we went to our next class and received the announcements for that day. Two students from the student body took turns reading the announcements for the day, and that’s when I heard about the Associated Student Body. The ASB was a collective group of kids seen as preppy, spirited people. I saw the group as a way to become involved, to make a change, to be noticed.

When election time came around for the student body I was determined to run for class president. I was up against seven other people. After a couple of days of planning, I had my campaign posters and strategy in mind. I returned to my mental checklist in order to achieve my goal. I had bright green and orange posters in order to attract attention and they were labeled “Party with Marty.” During nutrition and lunch I walked around saying, “Have a smartie, vote for Marty!” while passing out mini rolls of Smarties candies. One of my other worthy opponents was the beautiful Soraya. She was 5’5” with long brunette curls. Soraya had been a friend and also a secret crush of mine. Both of us being fans of the 2004 film version of *Phantom of the Opera*, with Emmy Rossum as Christine Daee, I used to call her Little Lotte. Soraya’s family was from England and her personality exuded that background. She was proper, kind, and very cute. Soraya relied on her notable skills as a young baker and left me in the chalky dust of my candies. She brought a glass plate piled high with homemade delicious brownies to ring in
voters. I chose not to have one of Soraya’s brownies because I felt it was a sign of concession, but just from the look and smell of those brownies, I would have gladly given her my vote.

Afraid of being bullied, I learned that I had to shield my unique interests in music and that I couldn’t talk about them publicly. In high school I thought that if I first introduced myself to a person and presented myself in a funny and confident manner, I could avoid making enemies and therefore prevent any bullying. I appeared as a harmless guy whose only problem could be seen as being overly friendly. This was not too much of an inaccurate portrayal of myself as a person, but I needed to make sure that people understood who I was. I felt that this was the best way to finally win over the students that I went to school with and not just the faculty. Inside, I felt like I was still the timid nervous guy that I always had been. I had to overcome those qualities to prove to myself that a guy like me could be well known and popular. I also felt that part of my goal was to represent all of those other soft-spoken and shy students.

After a week and a half of campaigning I went through my mental checklist, making sure that I had introduced myself to the different student groups on campus: the “Mexican kids,” the “band kids,” the athletic students.” I gave a speech to an enthused lunch crowd of students from freshmen to seniors. As each one of my opponents went up and did their best, the other candidates were snickered at. At one point, a candidate was hit by a tennis ball thrown from the crowd. Mr. Fairman, the student activities director, was in charge of the student body and running the elections. He was a large, bald African-American man. He was a teacher during the day and a bouncer at a nightclub called Hurricanes at night.

It was my turn to make a speech in front of the uncaged jungle of high schoolers. Mr. Fairman announced, “And last we have Freshman class president candidate, Marty Salgado!” I
walked up to the podium and I looked over with sympathy at all of the wounded and depressed candidates who had gone up to the microphone before me. Prepared with my speech but unprepared for any volatile actions or remarks from the crowd, I gave a clear “Hello!” and introduced myself. I made it through my speech, promising my care and attention to the class of 2009, and letting the people know that I would be there for them in whatever way I could. Of course I had to drop in my campaign line “Party with Marty as class president.”

The next day I sat in my algebra class as the whole school awaited the results for the election. I held on to the metal and plastic seat as I closed my eyes and listened with intent, imagining my name being called as a result for the freshmen class president. At the very end of all of the normal announcements Mr. Fairman’s large and boomy voice began to announce the election results. As he went down the list, beginning with the senior class positions, I was in agony. “And for the freshman class president,” he paused, “Marty Salgado.” I sat in my chair with disbelief as my math teacher, who I wasn’t even sure knew my name, congratulated me.

I felt like it was a triumph toward all the bullying and name calling that I received in my earlier years. I was becoming somebody big on campus and somebody to look up to. Although I was still this funny and shy little guy, I felt like I was the poster boy for all of the unrecognized people. Students who were made fun of for who they were. I was cool yet still understood both sides of the social scene. I was a man of the people through and through, and I was beginning the era of the “Marty administration” in the student body.

Soon after the announcement Mr. Fairman came to my math class, shook my hand, and congratulated me. Little did I know that during my time at Ocean View I would find out that Mr. Fairman was not such a fair man, and that I would be called into his office more than his
secretary due to differences in opinion, and would one day find myself being kicked off of the high school campus by him. Mr. Fairman invited me to the first ASB meeting and I went back to my desk to begin checking off my list of goals.

One of the other items on my list of goals for high school was to find a girlfriend. To my surprise one of the many people I had introduced myself to found me interesting enough to pursue.

It was September 2005 when I met my first girlfriend. We were both fourteen sitting on a low wall in the lunch area during our freshmen orientation week. She fell in love before me, but I soon joined her within the next month. Her name was Jordan. She was a little taller than me, with long reddish brown hair, a tiny smile, and a thin figure. She was always chewing gum. In my mind’s eye I always picture her in a teal shirt, her favorite color. Our relationship was one that I could definitely consider a real love. The first time I ever set eyes on Jordan was at the age of fifteen, and I had just given up the search of looking for somebody to love. We met through mutual friends at a Mexican restaurant named Don Ramon’s on the street corner near the high school we would be attending that year. Jordan sat on the green plastic upholstery in the horseshoe shaped booth. She wore a Jesus fish necklace. I casually commented on the necklace and joked about it mimicking an episode of *Seinfeld* in which Elaine questions her boyfriend Puddy about having a “Jesus fish” on his car.

Jordan was the daughter of the AP English teacher at our high school. Although she didn’t realize it at the time, we both had similar familial situations and problems. As a young fourteen-year-old I had a weak sense of how to show my interest and love to somebody, I did it the best way I could.
It was November and there was a slight chill outside from the sea breeze in Huntington Beach. In my mind I thought it would be a quiet day out on the football field, but that day proved otherwise. From afar we walked down the concrete slope that led from the upper campus lunch benches down to the football field. Three years earlier, due to my obsession with Simon and Garfunkel, I gained a keen interest in learning how to play the acoustic guitar. I wanted to bleed notes as beautifully as Paul and write lyrics that could take somebody to a different world. I carried my acoustic Epiphone guitar with a light honey wood finish, the smell of the wood still prominent from its purchase. My very first guitar to sing to my very first girlfriend.

Thanksgiving was in the air and I wanted to give her our first kiss on her birthday, November 23. I tried to think of a song that I could sing and play on guitar for Jordan to make the moment special. I considered Jim Croce’s song “I’ll Have to Say I Love You in a Song,” but the chords proved to be too difficult for me at the time. So, instead I treated Jordan to a nervously played song from the film A Mighty Wind called “A Kiss at the End of the Rainbow.” In the film there is a scene featuring the fake folk-singing couple Mitch and Mickey, who perform the song. At the end of the very last verse the line “There’s a kiss at the end of the rainbow” is sung, and Eugene Levy (“Mitch”) leans over and kisses Catherine O’Hara (“Mickey”) before finishing the line, “more sweeter than a pot of gold.”

There was no kiss for me or Jordan that day. Instead of me leaning over, I kind of just looked at her while she nervously looked straight ahead at the bleachers away from me. Rosy patches emerged on her white skin at the exact moment when I was supposed to lean in and give her a kiss. Embarrassed, we both looked around and saw high school couples leaning on walls,
fences, and each other’s faces. What was to be a nice romantic lunch date on the football field was interrupted by our awkward teenage selves.

After a while I began to receive nudges from all of the friends in our group. This was a friend group comprised of some people from my old middle school and some new people from other schools. Jordan got along with everybody, but I struggled to find common interests with this group. Looking back, there would have been no place or reason for me to hang out with that friend group. I was there strictly for Jordan. Elizabeth Chandler, a girl who was known for her gymnastic abilities, lightly encouraged me by asking if I had kissed Jordan yet, and she and I both knew the answer. Because Elizabeth was one of the few people I liked being around in our group, I was beginning to suspect that she was sent by Jordan herself. I decided that our first kiss needed to happen, but the young hopeless romantic in me believed that the moment of our first kiss needed to be at a special place.

One day after school it was a grey afternoon and light rain dropped on our young faces. I looked at Jordan once again, just as I had on the football field, and again she looked away from me.

I said, “You know where we are standing?”

She replied with a “Yes,” and I just confirmed to make sure she knew.

“This is where we met.”

It was really just a concrete ledge from a low fence separating concrete from dying bushes and Jordan kept staring off behind me towards the soda vending machines. I nervously stood there and from the distance across the lunch courtyard I heard snickering and laughter. As I looked over to my right inside of the student body activity room there were windows facing out
towards the lunch benches in clear view of me and Jordan. In the windows I could see my sister and her friends’ heads peeking out trying to watch the scene unravel.

I lost all of my nerves and awkwardly said, “Well, uh, you know what we’re doing here, so...”.

She gave me a cheeky smile and said, “No, what?”

The tension was building and I just wanted to stop being nervous and leave. I didn’t care anymore. I couldn’t do it. I didn’t know how to. I reluctantly gave up on myself and just gave her a hug. We held hands as we walked through large wooden doors into the main part of the school with rows of lockers and administration offices. She walked me to the band room where the marching band was already practicing “The Magnificent Seven.” We walked down the hallway and as I got my music folder and closed up my locker, both of us feeling dissatisfied, I reached for the doorknob to enter the band room and Jordan yelled, “Wait!” In a strawberry blonde flash she ran to me and gave both of us our first kiss. I could taste her strawberry lip-gloss. As I walked into the band room and watched Jordan walk away the band burst into the first couple of bars of music for our fall marching band season.

I think my large attempts to be the most romantic fourteen-year-old boyfriend placed a lot of pressure on me and hindered this moment for myself. I am not sure whether my romanticized thoughts of the situation were shared by Jordan, but I wouldn’t have wanted it any other way. I am happy that I tried to make that moment special, even if I couldn’t go through with the kiss myself. Although Jordan went all the way through with our first kiss, I would like to think that I was the one who started that moment.
I remember crying into her arms at a beach bonfire one night, sobbing the night my grandmother told me, “We were doing fine before you and your dad came along.” That night everyone in my household was upset about something, and I sat there in the sand with Jordan under the lifeguard tower watching everybody else have fun. Jordan was one of the first people who opened up to me, and to whom I slightly opened up. I say slightly because I never let anyone in resulting in our relationship dissolving during the summer of 2007. I then spent the next two years of my life by myself. Ostracized by the friends I shared with my now ex-girlfriend and sought refuge in the Fleetwood Mac’s *Tusk* album, and Mitch Albom’s memoir *Tuesday’s with Morrie*.

The fights we began to have in our young relationship stemmed from my jealousy. I was always guarded and never let her in emotionally or physically. I never let her come over to my house because of my embarrassment for my living situation. Growing up, my family confused me on what love was. My parent’s model of a relationship confused me about how relationships worked. My parents were very loving to each other and to me and my sister, but there was still something different about them than what I saw in other people’s parents. The financial strain on my family made it so that money and stress were more important than love. By looking at my parents relationship it was secrets, money, and fighting for power that seemed to be a basis of a relationship. These were the aspects that I brought to me and Jordan’s relationship, but we were at an age where none of that mattered. I became a person who was controlling because that is what I saw in my mother. I kept secrets because that’s what my family’s apartment was built on.. I didn't know how to stay peaceful. I knew what arguing looked like and sounded like. Jordan knew from her parents as well. That's
why we got along. We were both children who were looking for somebody to love them, and I was lucky that she found me and I her.

One night two years later in my dorm room during my freshmen year in college I called Jordan to apologize. I texted her earlier that day asking if we could talk after I got out of my psychology course. That day in class we talked about abusive relationships. Many of the different manipulative behaviors discussed were patterns that I recalled at the age of sixteen and seventeen. I was young at the time, and I blamed it on my parent’s relationship model. After that phone call she thanked me, and said “Wow, I never thought we were going to have this conversation.”

I remember trying to save the relationship between my sister and my grandmother one night. After years of sharing a room with our grandmother, my sister, who was now a sophomore in high school, was tired of sharing a room with her. Looking back at this situation it is very clear to me what happened. My sister, being a young teenage girl, needed her privacy. This is something that I had realized for myself years before.

I had been a proudly certified PAL counselor, Peer Assistance Leadership, after weeks of training at Mesa View Middle School. I was instructed to resolve conflicts among students and eventually I used this skill for my family. They both sat on their beds across from each other as I sat in the middle of the room on the floor with my PAL packet full of worksheets with questions to ask during each session. I tried to repair the relationship by asking each of them to take turns in talking about what upset them and instructed them to not talk while the other was sharing their feelings. One of the remarks that I remember my sister making was about my
grandmother not taking her used towel out of the bathroom after her shower and then my sister using it to wash her face.

One of the most important things to remember as a peer counselor is to keep in mind not every situation can be resolved, and not everyone will end up being friends at the end of a session. It is also important to realize that it may take more than one session to resolve any conflict, if there is even a resolution to be seen. So I tried, but to no end. My sister and grandmother continued being roommates and continued quarreling. I am not exactly sure how I was able to convince them of letting me try to peer counsel them, but to my recollection that was the one and only session. I also peer counseled my mother and I tried to counsel my father. When I would not see results I often asked myself who would counsel the counselor?

I was eight, I was nine, I was ten, I was age eleven—now trying to save my mother’s relationship, trying to save my family from falling apart, trying to find a love of my own so that somebody could care for me and listen to how I felt. I imagined myself caring for a family the way my mother wanted to care for hers. There’s no doubt my family was unhappy, but that is just the result of everything we had to suffer and go through with each other. But if we can’t trust and be with family, who will we love and trust?

I felt like it was up to me to save my mother’s life. I was her aide, I was there to give her the best advice I could. I believed it was my job to save everyone from the screams and yells, the frustration, the anger, the animosity, the shame, the not-so-secret secrets. In close quarters like that everybody knows everything, there were no secrets held from me. Taking the strong faith that I had found by being an altar server and the formal methods that I learned about meditation I wanted to heal my family. I wanted to take away their pain and frustrations and
magically soothe their suffering until it dissipated. Later on I realized that I couldn’t change the people in my family but rather change the way I react to situations. I began to take a more understanding view of the people in my household and understanding their anger without trying to fix their situations.

Sometime around my sophomore year in high school I found myself focusing more on my own life, and working on school work so that one day I wouldn’t have to live the way my family was living. Because I took the route of being silent during my family’s arguments, that somehow made me the family’s peacekeeper whenever there was a fight. One night in 2007 my parents were arguing.

“You go talk to him,” my mother would say.

This became routine for me to enter these adult situations and become the messenger. A relayer of words and anger. I went into the living room, with a lamp in the corner between two walls casting yellow light onto our messy couches full of clothes. My dog ran into the closest room to hide under a desk or the bed. I asked my father what the matter was. He said, “Get out of here, all of you are the same.” I pressed on, keeping calm and asking him why my mom was mad.

Although I already had some idea, I wanted him to feel like he had a voice. Like he had a say in the situation. To let him know that he mattered.

I told him I wasn’t like my mother and that I was listening to him. I asked him to tell me how he felt. My father’s face scrunched up, and he began crying, hiding his face with his left hand. This was the first time I had ever seen my father cry.
“All of you are so mean to me because of that evil lady,” he said, pointing to the room where my grandmother slept. “All of you make fun of me, that I don’t know how to read, or speak English,” he said in his broken English. “You think it’s easy? It’s not easy. And you, you hate me because she tells you things about me,” he said, sobbing.

I jumped in defensively and said, “I’m sorry I did that. I know better now. I don’t listen to what anybody says, not even Mom.” I told him that I was sorry, and before I left I insistently asked him if he understood my apology.

I needed to hear that he knew that I was sorry. I needed to know that he understood.

He told me to just go. And I left.

I don’t remember where I went after that, but I made sure he knew I had apologized, and told him I would talk to my mom. I told him I loved him and left him there sitting on the couch alone, wiping away the tears that he had just poured out in front of his son.

Five years later on a bright afternoon in my family’s green Toyota Tercel I sat waiting for the green light in the car with my father. The radio was on, and he turned to me from the driver’s seat and asked, “What do you want to do with your life?”

The question confused me because I was already in my second year of college and he knew that I was studying to be a teacher. I asked him what he meant and if he meant for the rest of my life. He replied, “For the rest of your life to support you and your family.” I knew the answer and I quickly said, “I want to be an entertainer. I want to make people laugh.”

My father laughed, and said, “Well, you always make me laugh.” As if to say that I would have no problem supporting my future family as an entertainer.
Later on that day I kept replaying that conversation in my mind with the feeling of never wanting it to escape my memory, so I wrote it down. As I was writing it down I wondered why that moment meant so much to me. It wasn’t because of how accepting he was of my choice of profession as an entertainer, or how supportive his remark was, but it was more of that special feeling only a son can have with his father. I began to think about how we were able to get to that harmonious moment sitting there at the stoplight.

I thought about how sweet and kind his communication was with me in the car. A father genuinely asking how I would provide for myself. I thought about those missing years of communication and the reason behind it.

I view my grandmother, who has now passed away, differently than I had during my childhood. There was a period when I hated her because I felt she was the reason my father was never able to establish a relationship with me. Later, during college, I found myself sitting one afternoon with my grandmother at the kitchen table in my aunt’s house, where my grandmother then resided. I had just come back from a weekend trip to Las Vegas with a couple of my college friends. Since my grandfather lives there, I was able to visit him and his new wife. My grandmother was curious to know if he talked about her like a friend or as his ex-wife. She wanted to know if my grandpa seemed happy with his new wife. Hearing all of these questions made me sad. I looked at her as I saw her face glance off away from our conversation looking at the white wall where I could see her eyes projecting all the hurt from her past. It was a serene moment sitting there with my grandma, listening to her voice and watching the slight breeze moving across the lawn. The clear blue sky gave way to a bright sun as I sat with this woman who I later came to realize meant so much to my life in good and bad ways. I remember taking
the scene in, trying to understand the hurt she was feeling. All I said was, “I love you, Grandma.” In that one sentence I tried to think of all of the hurt and happiness she ever brought to my life and tried to capture hers as well. Although her response was brief, it’s something that I will forever replay and hold close to my heart.

“I love you too, Mijo.”

On Wednesday, August 19, 2009, my family and I made our way up to Chico, California. Two cars were packed with Space Bags, vacuumed thin and full of clothes and blankets that had been part of my life at home. My parents’ car, the Toyota Corolla, would drive away at the end of this big move and the other car, a 1997 dark green Mustang, would remain there in Chico with me.

I thought about this transition in my life, the people I would meet and about living away from my family for the first time. I had dreamt about this move for such a long time that I couldn’t believe it was happening. I thought about all of the people I would finally get to meet, and the possible friendships I would finally gain. America and I may have seen my dad as a yard worker, a Mexican busboy or a dishwasher. And he was all of those things, but he was also my father, still is and always will be.

Before we left for Chico my parents and I stopped to check the tire pressure on the cars and fill up the tanks. Sitting in the backseat I wrote down my thoughts about this experience. I watched my mom clean the windows of the cars, and my dad walking around the car, gently pounding his fist on the tire to check how inflated they were. As he continued around the car pulling on the retractable air hose, I thought about the two different worlds I would now have to balance in my life. I wanted to move on and to finally find myself, but in the back of my mind I
knew that while I would be away at school my family’s life would go on day after day even if I wasn’t in the home. As we pulled out of the gas station, I looked out at the city to see what I was leaving behind. Tall familiar buildings, the streets that transported me to school, but more importantly my family. My parents would age without me. Would they get fat? Would they lose weight? Would they move on and make big family decisions without me now that I was no longer living with them? Although my insecurity caused me to ask these questions, I’m sure my parents were doing the same questioning.

As we drove up the I-5 freeway, I looked out the passenger window and watched the green and brown fields roll by. I thought about being the first person in my family to go to college. I felt like this was a transition I was making alone because I hadn’t known anyone who had made such a big move in their life. Who would answer my insecure questions about my family’s life moving on without me? My family was supportive for my wanting a different life from the city and becoming educated, but doing the actual act and moving away from home is something that you have to experience to fully understand and know what that feels like.

There are a lot of factors that take place in one’s life to be able to make such a transition. In order to understand this, I drew inspiration from one of my favorite music icons, Tina Turner. I listened to Tina’s latest single, “I’m Ready.” The all-American hero sang about being ready for a change and claimed “I was happy with the fear, every moon was new, I was searching for myself.” Tina then goes on to sing about being ready to love somebody, being ready to feel something, and finally proclaims “I’m ready!” This was the statement that I proclaimed many times to everyone I talked to before I moved away.
At the age of forty-five Tina had one of music’s largest comebacks with her album *Private Dancer*. In 1986, Tina wrote her memoir, *I, Tina*, where she publicly talked about being abused by Ike Turner, her ex-husband and musical partner for the Ike and Tina Turner Revue. The public immediately clung to her, recognizing all of her accomplishments despite her abusive relationship. Spiritually, Tina claimed Buddhism as a way of coping with the abuse and the struggles in her life. It was a spiritual way of accepting things for what they were, letting it go, and moving on.

In 2009, Tina had just finished her fiftieth anniversary world tour and resumed her retirement in Switzerland, away from the land and people who gave her a start in show business. Tina moved to Switzerland because she felt that the audience appreciated her more in Europe than in America.

I felt this same way with California. I never felt that Southern California ever appreciated me or my family. I simply lived there and grew up there, but my family never felt complete. As a family we were always needing and wanting. We needed a place to live, we wanted to buy a house, we wanted to get along with each other. What I wanted was more than accolades. I wanted to know more about myself, and I could feel that Southern California wasn’t doing that for me.

I gave to everybody and constantly tried to keep my family afloat without ever really taking care of myself. Tina was a work horse, and then with her separation from Ike, she was able to take her own career into her own hands, move where she wanted, and give back to herself. Up until then, I had never had any strong connections with people, and much like Tina’s
lyrics I was ready to make a change and to finally meet and invite friends into my life in hopes of finally establishing real connections with them.

The people I encountered growing up acknowledged me and were very gracious, but in the end I always felt like I was constantly giving to my own family, and to people at school. I needed to escape for myself. I wanted to learn about myself, do things for myself. I thought about Tina’s move to Europe away from America, away from her past. I sought that kind of reclusiveness for myself, and saw Chico as my escape.

As I drove in to Chico I noticed the whole edge of town was surrounded by a wall of trees. There was a sort of exclusive feeling about this place. To me it was like a world within a world. A place in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by light brown hills with pockets of cattle and green pastures grazed by birds. I was greeted into town by a tall, dark wooden sign erected to welcome people into this small but mighty town of Chico. An overwhelming feeling came over me. I was five hundred plus miles away from where I grew up. I had never been away from family for more than three weeks. But there was an inviting feeling from the land that made everything seem alright. I felt I was finally home.
REFERENCES


