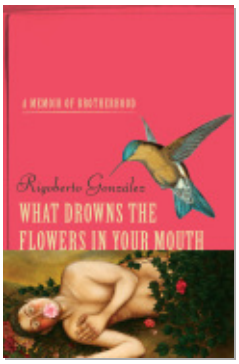
A Complicated Man



A warm rush came over me because I finally understood that Azucena had seen in me what my father and grandparents and even my brother had refused to see or name. Even worse, she had used that as a weapon, as an excuse to hurt my brother. I felt a renewed sense of love for Alex. I dug into my duffle bag and pulled out the pair of earrings.

"Take these to your mother," I said to the boys. "Tell her I picked them out just for her." One of them snatched the earrings and ran out of the house, and the others chased after him.

"Fried chicken okay with you?" Alex said.

"Perfect," I said.

Only the two of us now, we sat in silence as he marinated the chicken with mustard and pepper. But suddenly my brother blurted out with conviction, "Women. Who needs them anyway?"

I thought about my mother, my father's quick remarriage, my uncle's desperate search for a woman after he divorced his wife—one disappointment after another that he would drown out in alcohol until he met Mari. I thought about Vikki and my impulsive fantasy of surrendering to this notion of heterosexual happiness that for the González men was limned with heartbreak. I thought about my poor brother, devastated by his first venture into that González tradition of finding and then failing to keep a mate. My eyes watered. I had no idea what my brother was thinking about, but his eyes watered too. Who needs women? The González men certainly behaved like they didn't.

Less than a year later, he told me over the phone that he had found someone else. "What is her name?" I asked.

"Guadalupe."

"Guadalupe," I repeated. Such poetry in her name.

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Do you remember . . . ? my father liked to ask, quite unexpectedly, usually breaking the silence in the room or in the car. *Do you remember your mother? Do you remember Zacapu? Do you remember that time we went to Disneyland?* These were not meant to start a conversation; they were more like musings. Lost in the geographies of his daydream, he would suddenly realize I was within earshot, and so I became his temporary anchor to the waking world. I would answer with a simple *Yes* and then he would drift into thought again. Except that on this second journey, he would take me with him because I did indeed remember and so I followed him through the now-lighted corridors of memory.

My father was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 2000, though we had long suspected there was something wrong. We had observed him slow down over time, but we had blamed it on the years of alcohol abuse, on the grief of widowerhood, and, after his second marriage, on the years of distress over his oldest stepson, who had become involved with drugs, fathering children he refused to recognize. This was also the year of the birth of Alex's first child, Halima—a name I had picked out, and that Guadalupe loved. "It's Arabic," I explained. "It means something like *she who sings and dances even in times of sorrow.*" So I made it a point to visit

Alex and his family more often, now that the baby brought renewed peace to his household. As with his previous union, the inability to conceive had troubled his relationship. But somehow, this miracle happened. I had moved to New York City a few years prior and didn't have the money or the time to make the long trek across the country, so my communication with Alex had been over the phone.

"So much has changed. Maybe now's the perfect time to come," he said.

I borrowed money from my boyfriend at the time, and bought a plane ticket to LA. And then I took the bus from LA to the border—a lengthy, uneventful ride through the desert. Traveling though the Coachella Valley, however, brought back the memories, pleasant and devastating. It was a feeling I didn't get from visiting Michoacán anymore, because southern California had become my new homeland. When the bus dove past the vineyards of the little town of Thermal, I had the urge to point out to anyone who would listen that my father had razed this land where the vineyards grew. And those onion fields on the left, my family had harvested those each summer. But I suspect these were not unusual stories to anyone on board since we were all Mexicans headed to the U.S.-México border. No one was excluded from the farmworker stories. As we spilled out of the bus in Calexico, Alex was already waiting for me at the station.

When I arrived at El Rancho, I became nervous about the kind of reception I would get from Guadalupe, but my fears were assuaged before I even stepped out of my brother's car. Guadalupe met us at the gate, cheerful and vibrant, holding Halima in her arms. And when I noticed my niece was wearing the miniature version of her mother's shoes, I gushed with giddiness.

"How was your journey, brother?" she said, handing me the baby, and I almost wept with gratitude. I was also pleased to see that she took good care of my brother: something spicy was

cooking on the stove, the living room was tidy, the laundry room was orderly and neat—nothing like the chaos I had encountered when Alex was living with Azucena.

Since it was customary to pay my respects to the elders, I didn't let too much time pass before I said my quick hellos to my uncle and my grandparents. That's when I realized how much had not changed. The complaints were nonstop: my grandfather said my stepbrothers played their music too loudly; my uncle said my brother kept cutting down too many branches off the tree they shared; my uncle's second wife, Mari, said my stepbrothers parked the cars too close to their lot; my grandfather said Mari kept flooding the yards; Mari said my sister-in-law was letting the dogs dig into the fence they shared; my grandmother kept pointing out incessantly how late Guadalupe slept in after my brother went off to his shift at the gas station at five in the morning. I thought about how much wiser the Alcalá family had always been—each unit living in a different town, close enough to visit but far enough to maintain privacy.

No one actually expected me to do anything but listen since I was not there to offer solutions or take sides. I was simply a fresh set of ears, the family member who hadn't heard the thorough account of what was going on. And without exception, each run-down was punctuated with the threat of leaving the González neighborhood, though I knew no one would ever dare.

The only evident change was that everyone was getting older and weaker. Tío Rafael had suffered a stroke that left him bound to a wheelchair, though this did nothing to tame his temper. In fact, it worsened, enraged by the fact that he couldn't express his discontent the way he used to—storming out of a room or hurling objects against the wall. Now he simply tensed up and cursed his luck, imploding within the confines of the metal. The only saving grace was that the old generation of farmworkers—my retired grandparents, my uncle, and now my father, who began to collect

disability insurance—was finally having its rest. But now they sat around and drove each other crazy.

I skipped my father's house. Alex had warned me there was a feud between Guadalupe and Amelia, and in this case my loyalty was to my brother's household.

"Apá will come around anyway," my brother assured me. We sat outside the house drinking beer. I had arrived in the summer, and it was cooler outside with the breeze than inside with the wimpy ceiling fan. Plus, Guadalupe had just taken the baby in for a nap, and I didn't want to disturb her rest with our talking.

Just then our half sister Nancy, a teenager now, walked in front of the house, holding a little girl by the hand.

"Is that our beloved father's granddaughter?" I asked Alex, referring to the toddler.

"Well, not really," Alex said. "I thought I had mentioned it before."

I turned to Alex. "What do you mean?"

He started laughing. "That's actually your second sister."

"What the fuck?" I almost dropped the beer in my hand. "Are you kidding me?"

"Nope. Hey, don't feel bad, he didn't tell me either. I think he was too embarrassed or something."

I shook my head in disbelief. My father was in his midforties, my brother was in his late twenties, and both of them had baby girls.

"What's her name?" I asked.

"Laura."

The name did nothing for me. And neither did the revelation that I had a second sister. If the birth of the first one didn't please me, I was completely indifferent to the news of the second. I only hoped that he was being a father to his daughters in ways he hadn't been a father to his sons.

Despite the fact that Nancy had not even bothered to wave

hello, it was clear she had seen me and reported back to my father, because a few moments later, Alex spotted him walking over.

"Brace yourself; here comes our father," Alex said. "Just don't lend him any money, Turrútut. He'll drink it."

Watching my father walk the few yards from the gate to the front door of the house was devastating because he now moved in slow motion, using a cane for support. Alex had prepared me for what to expect: he had a slight limp and was losing muscle control over his arms and head, a side effect of the cheap medication he could afford with his disability insurance. Since he could not feed himself well, he was losing weight, but he was stubborn as ever about his drinking and refused to quit.

As he walked up to us, I began to suspect that he was exaggerating his debilitated gait as a strategy to disarm me. We had little to no communication over the years. I never called him and he never called me. No message was ever delivered through my brother, who didn't give me updates on my father's family because I didn't want them. That was why the news of his second daughter remained unspoken until now. I didn't really care to know. When he finally made it to the porch, my father came up to me and planted a kiss on my head. He smiled and kept showing his broken front tooth. This too, I thought cynically, was on purpose.

"How are things?" my father asked.

"They're fine," I said.

"That's good."

The exchange was so detached from emotion that it made me want to get up and kick something. After all these years, I had not let go of the heartbreak I felt when he abandoned us as teenagers, and that pain had turned into rage.

"How are things with you?" I asked.

"I've been sick," he said. "And so has the little one."

At the mention of his second daughter, he struck a nerve, which made me see past his disability and those distracting movements

of his neck and shoulder. From the corner of my eye, I saw my brother tense up. Never one to let an opportunity to get back at my father pass me by, I seized on it.

"I don't see how your little one is my responsibility," I said. "She's your child, not mine."

"But she's your sister," my father pushed back. "Just like Nancy."

"Are you hearing this man?" I turned to my brother, which was my way of pressuring him to side with me, though I knew he wouldn't. Since he had been living close to my father all those years, he had an opportunity to repair some of the damage in the relationship. I didn't have that advantage.

"What?" my father said. "I'm not saying anything that isn't true."

"That little one is no more my sister than you're my father," I said. "That's the truth."

My father's face darkened. I thought I heard my brother whisper something like "Calm down, Turrútut," but it did nothing to diffuse the situation.

"So you're not going to lend me any money?"

"Oh, shit," I heard my brother mutter in the back.

A scene flashed across my mind: My mother crying at the kitchen table because my father had not come home. It was payday. He would stumble in late that night, drunk and penniless. He would come over to check on me, hoping I was awake so that I would greet him with the compassion my mother didn't. But I would pretend I was asleep because that's the best way I knew how to reject him—by keeping my eyes closed.

My voice cracked as I finally mustered up the energy to respond. "I don't understand you, Apá. Didn't you learn anything from your first failure as a father? You want your drinking to ruin your second family too?"

"What do you know about me?" he said. "You abandoned me a long time ago."

"You abandoned me first! You're the one who fucked it up for all of us!"

"That's enough." My brother finally stepped in.

Like wrestlers after a scuffle, my father and I slumped in our seats in complete silence.

Sadly, this tense exchange took place each time I visited up until August 2006, the last time I saw my father alive. By then, I was numb to his pitiful pleas, especially since these became more desperate over time.

On one occasion, he had gone down to Michoacán with his family for a long overdue visit. I had nothing to say on the matter until my brother called me in New York City to tell me that my father had called him with an outlandish story.

Apparently my father had gone down to the cemetery in Zacapu, where my mother was buried, to drop off some flowers and to say hello to his former in-laws who lived nearby. My father was shocked to discover that my mother's grave was damaged and that it appeared to have been opened. When he asked my maternal grandparents about it, my grandfather confessed that my grandmother had stupidly agreed to allow someone else to be buried in that same tomb with my mother's remains. My father was beside himself, so he asked my brother to ask me to wire him the money so that he could take care of it before he left town.

"And what exactly does he plan to do?" I asked my brother.

"He says he wants to have her remains moved to the church," my brother said. "Apparently there's a wall there where people can entomb remains for a fee."

After a lengthy silence, I said, "I don't believe a word of it."

My brother was outraged. How could we let them do this to our mom? How could I not believe it? It was too bizarre to be

made up! But I insisted. And to prove it, the next chance I got, I booked a flight to Mexico City, took a six-hour bus ride to Michoacán, grabbed a taxi in downtown Zacapu, and rode directly to the cemetery. My mother's grave was intact.

When I dropped in on my maternal grandparents unexpectedly, I told them about what my father had reported. They shook their heads in pity. It was true my father had come to visit them, but he came to ask them for money, and to tell them that I was the most ungrateful of his children, a college professor making good money, but that I refused to help my impoverished father all these years. I sat in silence and absorbed the rage. I held it all in until I returned to Mexicali and related to Alex what I had found.

"Are you going to let him have it?" he said. I detected some anticipation in his voice.

I did not confront my father about his lies because I knew I could not restrain myself. I was afraid I would physically attack him for manipulating our weakest point like that. My brother kept quiet about it as well, and my father simply kept coming over to his house as if he had never made that phone call.

Perhaps it was this silence, this long pretense that gave my father courage to repeat the same crazy story the following year, when he made another trip down to Michoacán and ran out of money. Since he knew my brother and I would not bail him out just like that—especially since we had heard about the extravagant parties he was throwing to impress his in-laws—when he made his phone call, he told my brother, "This time I'm telling the truth!"

When my brother told me, there was no anger in his voice this time. Only sadness. And I thought, at least my brother won't be deceived anymore. And I considered myself luckier because I didn't live two doors down from the man who had injured me.

"How do you deal with him being so close?" I once asked my brother. And my brother gave an answer so devastating that it

dried my mouth: "I just pretend he's my neighbor and not my father. It gets me through it."

Do you remember Quiroga, you?" my father asked, breaking the uncomfortable silence. He had taken a seat on an upturned bucket instead of a chair. His mustache was thin and already graying, but I couldn't imagine it would reach Abuelo's bristly stage until another decade or two. He explained that a bucket was much more comfortable for a man of his height: five foot two. He took his cane and propped his right hand over it, facing the street. On the other side, where a field of beets used to grow, a low-income housing complex was under development. The tiny units were beginning to sprout like mushrooms. My father looked the place over: a miniature king surveying a miniature kingdom.

When I didn't reply at first, my brother glared at me. I read his mind: *Don't be an asshole. Don't give him the silent treatment.*

"Yes," I responded and my mouth began to water. To remember Quiroga was to remember carnitas, the pork slow-roasted inside an oversized copper pot. La Plaza Principal is the main artery of Quiroga, and carnitas sellers line the street tempting clients with samples. Tables are provided free of charge, but patrons have to buy their own tortillas sold by enterprising Purépecha women walking about with large handwoven baskets. The pork meat, skin, and fat explode in the mouth.

Alex took a swig of his beer. I was certain he too remembered Quiroga, though he had been there only once. I had made many visits. As had my father. Those carnitas beckoned us back each time. Quiroga, Michoacán, was only a forty-five-minute bus ride from Zacapu, my father's birthplace, where my brother and I spent our childhood, where our maternal grandparents still lived. But the women who sold tortillas reminded us of Abuela María, my father's mother. She wore the same colorful aprons. She too was Purépecha, but from the village of Nahuatzen.

"Do you have carnitas in New York?" my father asked.

I wanted to say that carnitas were everywhere. I had tasted them in California, in Texas, in Chicago, and yes, even in New York City, though the only place worth ordering them was at a restaurant on the Upper West Side. Still, nowhere like Quiroga. But what made carnitas tasty in Quiroga was the place itself. The entire plaza was one large kitchen with one large dining table serving a single item. The smell clung to clothing, to hair. The taste-testing along the street was just for show. Each free sample was as delicious as the next.

"One kilo, please," a buyer will say, finally surrendering to one of the sellers. And the butcher slices and dices the meat into delicate bite sizes using a big clunky cleaver.

"No," I replied, finally. "There are no carnitas in New York." This was a fib. But it pleased my father to hear it. It made Quiroga that much more special. And it made this attempt at reconciliation much easier.

My father gave me a satisfied nod and smiled. He then turned his gaze toward the street and drifted into thought.

"He does that a lot more nowadays," Alex said to me in English, concern in his voice. After all these years, we still switched languages when we wanted to speak privately to each other.

We sat in silence for another fifteen minutes. Guadalupe popped her head out for a second and asked my father if he was staying for lunch. When he didn't reply, she simply shrugged and went back into the house, as if this wasn't the first time my father retreated so far into his head, he became lost.

Without warning, my father came to all of a sudden and said, "Well, I'll see you both later." He got up and started his slow trek back to his house.

Alex and I watched patiently as he baby-stepped out of the driveway and turned left, using his cane for balance. When a couple of schoolgirls appeared, they surpassed him easily, as did anyone else walking the same direction.

"He was never the same after the meat incident," my brother said.

"What are you talking about?"

According to Alex, to keep him feeling useful, my stepmother would send my father on small errands. One time she sent him to the butcher's to buy skirt steak. In México, the butchers wrap any purchase in clear plastic, making the item quite visible from a distance. As my father lumbered home with the meat in his hand, an opportunistic thief on a bicycle came up and simply snatched the meat from my father's grip. My father could not run after the thief and the thief knew this, mocking his victim by rolling away without even increasing his speed. It was a humiliating experience for my father, who refused to run such errands again. Now he simply walked back and forth from his house to my brother's.

Guadalupe stepped out of the house again, this time holding the sleepy child in her arms. I was still charmed by how much Halima resembled her mother. Without saying a word, Guadalupe placed the child in my brother's arms and then went inside. My brother cooed and baby-talked as the child pressed her face into his body.

"You just missed your abuelito," I said to the little girl.

My brother, quick to the punch, pointed to the street. "No, you didn't, *amorcito*. *There* he is! Wave to your abuelito."

I looked out, and indeed a body was still visible on the street. But it didn't look like my father at all, not the way I remembered him, not the way he wanted to be remembered, I was sure of this. So I took my eyes off that slow, pathetic shape of a man and stared at the sky, searching for the mountain of a man my father used to be in other towns, in other times.

We never did this as children, but as grown men, my brother and I began to lie down next to each other in bed, look up at the ceiling, and talk. It became a kind of ritual during my visits. The first time Guadalupe walked by the bedroom and saw our bodies

stretched across the bed, she muttered, "You two are weird." After that, she caught on that this was a private meeting between brothers and didn't interrupt our sessions. That summer, a moment of reckoning arrived: I was going to come out to my brother.

I signaled to my brother that I was ready for one of our sessions by taking my place on the bed with the door open. As soon as he saw this, he walked in and lied down beside me.

"I really like Guadalupe," I said. "And Halima is beautiful."

"Yeah."

After a brief pause, I jumped in. "Hey, so I want your wife to be comfortable around me."

"I don't think that's going to be a problem; she's different."

"I'm glad to hear that. I can tell," I said.

Another pause.

"So I'm writing another book," I said finally. "About our family, our father, and what happened to us."

"Okay."

"But it's a book of memories. And I'm revealing all kinds of personal things."

"Like what?" Alex said.

"Well, about getting involved with drugs, about my depression."

"Okay."

"And one more very personal thing."

"What?" Alex said, but I couldn't spit it out. In fact, I began to hyperventilate to the point that my brother propped himself on his elbow to look at me. "What is it? What is it? You're scaring me."

"I—I—I'm gay!"

My brother dropped his body on the bed. "Ah, you stupid bitch, you had me worried. I thought you were going to tell me you had cancer or something. I knew you were gay since we were kids."

I started to laugh. "You did? Then why didn't you say anything?"

"Because it's not for me to say. It's for you to say. And I'm glad you finally told me. And when I told Guadalupe about it, she said she suspected as much because of the gifts you picked out for Halima. She said no straight man she ever knew had such an eye for pretty things. She doesn't care. She grew up with gay friends."

Relieved, I took a deep breath and wondered why I hadn't come out to my brother before. It was such an anticlimactic moment that it wasn't worth the wait. So I decided on another direction.

"Do you think our father knows?"

"I don't know," Alex said. "You know how it is around here. No one talks about those things. They still ask when you're getting married."

"Yeah, I know. Abuela still asks about Vikki." We chuckled together.

"But seriously, don't you think he suspects?"

"Maybe," Alex said. "I did catch him looking at your pierced ears."

I touched my earlobes. I had forgotten about them completely. They didn't make me more gay than before, but people thought they did make me *look* more gay. For the longest time, I refused to pierce my ear because every male in the family had done it—my father, my brother, Tío Rafael—so when I finally caved in, I decided to be different and pierced both.

"In any case," I said, "That's the least of our worries. We have so many other issues to work out before we even touch that one."

"I'll say," Alex said. And then he added, "So do you have a boyfriend back in New York?"

I blushed. It was going to take some getting used to.

"I do," I said. And then I talked about my love life as if it was the most normal conversation in the world, because it finally was.

—Do you remember that time we spotted each other at the plaza in Zacapu, Apá?
—I'm not sure. What trip was that?
—I was staying with my mother's family and you were staying with your wife's family.
—We always split up like that. It could have been on any trip.
—It was that time we took a bus together to Michoacán. I was nineteen. We went our separate ways, but many days later, we spotted each other.
—Did I see you?
—You didn't? I waved and I thought you waved back.
—I think I remember. Was it in front of the big cathedral, just outside the gate? Was it in the evening?
—No. It was at the bus stop across the kiosk of the smaller plaza. It was morning.
—Then I don't remember, you. Are you sure it was me?
—I'm sure. Then who was it that you were waving back to in front of the cathedral, just outside the gate that evening?
—Well, that's the funny thing, you know. I thought I was waving at you.

I had one more heated exchange with my father before I left. Alex and I were sitting in the front porch as usual, bringing up old memories of El Rancho with our cousins, when I saw my father's oldest stepson walking arm in arm with a pretty young woman. As far as anyone knew, he had fathered two children already and with no job and no education, his future wasn't very promising.

"And which of the two baby mamas is that?" I asked casually.

"Neither," Alex answered. "That's a third one."

"You're shitting me," I said.

"Nope."

"And he doesn't even pay for diapers?"

"Our father does, sometimes."

My face grew warm. So when my father came over that afternoon, I confronted him about it.

"What control do I have over that boy?" he said, visibly shaken that I had the audacity to bring it up.

"Well, you raised him," I said. "Didn't you teach him better?"

"And what business is it of yours, anyway?" he said. And I had a perfect response to this as well.

"I know you've been supplying those girls with diapers and baby formula. And then you come around asking Alex and me for money. Why should we pay for your goddamn stepson's mistakes?"

"And *you're* perfect? At least he's giving me grandchildren. Between the two of you, I've only gotten one, and she's probably the only one I'll ever get to see!"

"You respect my brother," I said. "At least he's not a fuckup like your stepsons."

"Sons who love their father. Do you love yours?"

"I don't have a father!" I said.

That's when my brother got up from his seat and stood between us, as if our father and I could actually come to blows. Alex told us to be quiet, that we were dishonoring his house. He told our father to go home and he told me to cool off in the guest room. When Alex came by to check on me, I was in tears.

"Turrútut, I just can't stand to even see him anymore. I don't know how you do it."

"I can't stand it either sometimes," Alex said. "But I don't have a choice, do I?"

There was an accusation in his statement that stung me. But he was right. I had chosen to run away and to stay away. And when I packed my bag to head back to the U.S., it felt like an escape, and it felt so good.

By the time I was back in NYC, I was already making travel plans with college friends of mine who had moved back to

México. After dreaming about it for years, we committed finally to visiting Cuba that December.

"They won't stamp your passport if you're an American," they assured me. "Especially if you fly in from México. Everybody does it."

The arrangement sounded simple enough: we would all meet in Mexico City, buy our plane tickets in cash, and live out this bohemian fantasy. My friend from Iran was particularly eager to show me the dazzling display of cultural richness that so scared the U.S. government. As a politicized Chicano, this clandestine trip was the ultimate badge of honor since the Chicano community aligned itself philosophically with Fidel Castro. But in all honesty, I simply wanted to keep being a tourist. My modest professional success had allowed me to visit Spain, Brazil, and Costa Rica. I was excited about the next possibility, and Cuba seemed like the right place. I had invited my boyfriend to join me, but he was nervous about being caught since he was in the U.S. with a green card. "I'd rather not risk it," he said. "You go. Have fun."

At the time, I was teaching at an undergraduate college in Manhattan. Each class session was one day closer to the end of the semester and to the beginning of winter break. I was becoming obsessed with Cuba, looking up websites in my office between classes and catching up on Cuban literature. The exhilaration intensified because this was a secret trip and no one around me other than my boyfriend knew I was going.

Then one afternoon, as I walked into the apartment, my boyfriend casually said, "Hey, there's a message for you on the answering machine. I think it's your father."

I froze. "That's impossible," I said. "My father has never called me. He would never call me. He doesn't even have my number."

But sure enough, it was my father's voice on the machine, speaking a series of short, awkward sentences that didn't express

alarm or concern. He was just saying hello. I immediately called Alex at work.

"I didn't think he was going to call," he said.

"But what does he want? If he starts calling nonstop, asking for money, I'm going to kill you."

"That's not why he called," my brother said confidently.

"Then why?"

"Well, I told him you were gay."

I almost fainted. "Oh my God."

"I had to, Turrútut; he kept coming over bugging me about why you had moved so far away and why you hadn't married. You basically tipped him off with your pierced ears. So I think he wanted me to confirm it. So I did. I told him you had moved to New York to be with another man."

"And what did he say to that?"

"He said you had made your way through the world without him, so he had no right to say anything about it, but that he worried other people might. And then he asked me for your number. I didn't think he would call."

But he did. And I didn't feel compelled to call him back. Not right away. I had to think about what it would mean to share such intimate knowledge of myself with the man who had abandoned me when I was thirteen. That exchange became more pressing when, a few days later, as I was ready to book a flight from New York to Mexico City, I got a somber call from my brother.

"Dad's in the hospital."

"Oh, God. It's not because of the gay thing, is it?" I said.

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing."

"It's the drinking," he said. "I think it's serious this time, Turrútut."

"Do you think I should see him?"

"It's up to you if you want to come," Alex said. "I know it's

been rough. I've got his number at the hospital if you want to call him first."

My body contracted. I didn't want to call my father. I was afraid that the first thing out of his mouth was going to be a plea for reconciliation. And I needed to work a few things through before I even thought about a reunion.

"Let me think about it," I said. "Can I call you again tomorrow to talk about it some more?"

I called my brother every day for a week, going back and forth on whether I was going to call, let alone visit. During that time, my father's health improved, though he was now more disabled than before since he had done more damage to his liver and gall bladder. I finally did call my father on the day before he was due to be released.

"I know we haven't been good to each other," my father said. "And I want us to change. I want us to be father and son the way it should have always been. I want us to have something beautiful before I die."

My body melted on the other end of the line. There was such sincerity in his voice that I believed it, so I made a drastic change in my itinerary and decided to fly to California instead of Mexico City that holiday season. I postponed my trip to Cuba and prepared myself for the Big Reconciliation, what I had secretly hoped for all these years. It would happen finally. On the flight to the west coast, I felt an unburdening, as if I were stripping off chains. With the actual clouds next to me up in the sky, I couldn't shake off that I was truly inhabiting a cliché, but it was the truth: I was happily on cloud nine.

I arrived in Ontario, California, on a Saturday, and my best friend Sandra in Riverside picked me up at the airport. She had heard about the troubles between my father and me over the years, so she was glad that this lengthy battle was reaching a truce. I couldn't contain my excitement and I kept repeating, "It's enough

to make me cry." I made plans to take the Greyhound bus the next morning for the three-hour ride to the international border. My brother would be waiting at the bus station in Calexico.

On the way from the airport, my friend and I decided to spend the day doing silly stuff like shopping and going to the movies since I needed some distraction. But no sooner had I finished dropping the heavy luggage in my friend's living room when my cell phone rang. It was Alex.

"Hello?"

"Hey," he said. "I've got some bad news. Our father's gone."

I went pale. What a cruel punishment. I had made up my mind to see my father, to let go of all the resentment and pain, to travel across the country, only to discover I had arrived too late. Maybe this was the cosmic payback, some higher power's way of letting me know I had paved my own path toward tragedy via my pride and wrath—two of the unforgivable deadly sins. I would now have to carry this new burden through the rest of my days. I was never meant to walk the earth without some huge psychological weight over my shoulders.

"When did he die?" I asked.

"Die?" my brother said, sounding confused. "He didn't die. He chickened out on the reunion and took off to Michoacán."

I had to reposition my emotions before I started yelling into the phone.

I became so disoriented, I lost my balance and collapsed on the floor. I told my brother I was still planning to go down to see him and my niece, and I left it at that. But when I let it all out in front of my friend, she was stunned, not at my father's audacity but at the intensity of my rage. I was on the verge of a breakdown. I could feel my skull cracking and I pictured my brain bubbling like lava. For the rest of the day, my body trembled.

That night, I didn't sleep, and I concentrated on the rattling of the ceiling fan, hoping the fixture would dislodge and send the

blades hurling down like a propeller to shred my body. I drank an entire bottle of wine before getting into bed. Eventually the tears stopped and I fell asleep. By the time my brother picked me up at the bus station on the border the next day, I had hardened myself more than before: never again.

The following year, Abuelo passed away in the spring after a yearlong stroke-induced paralysis. I had seen him briefly on my last visit to El Rancho, and the damage to his facial muscles and speech was evident. He had just been released from a surgery to clear an artery, and there he was, sweeping his front porch, wearing his hospital gown and identification bracelet like badges of honor.

"That man is going to outlive us all," I commented to my brother.

But a few months after the surgery, my grandfather suffered another stroke. This time, he was left unable to swallow or speak. I received updates from my brother all year long: he's now hospitalized in California; his hair is completely white; he's thinned down, almost skeletal; he's now in a convalescent home; my grandmother attempted to feed him a burrito and he almost choked.

"Why did she do that?" I asked. "Didn't she know it was dangerous?"

"She said she felt sorry for him. You know Abuelo's greatest pleasure was food."

Family members from Michoacán and long-lost relatives from southern California came forward to pay Abuelo a visit at the home. I was the only one who remained stubbornly at a distance, unwilling to see my grandfather in such an emaciated state. The truth was I was afraid of feeling sorry for my grandfather, or worse, of softening my emotions and setting aside all the years of torment he unleashed on most of us. It seemed unfair to expect me to show compassion to a man who was responsible for so much of my grief. I had not forgiven Abuelo for his abuse or my father for his

neglect, and I still couldn't understand how my brother could stand to live between them all these years.

If my brother held any ill will toward them, he didn't show it. He accepted his role as resident ambulance with dignity: if our grandfather didn't need a ride to the doctor, then our wheelchair-bound uncle did. Or our father. I once confessed to Alex that I never could have done any of it, not without griping. When he responded, "Well, it's family," I felt adrift at sea, straining my eyes to catch a glimpse of a landmass on which I would never set foot.

When my grandfather finally passed away, the death was anti-climactic. I felt no sense of release or catharsis. The day was like any other, except I felt a little guilty that I expressed no grief. I was the only one not present at the funeral, and if that made anyone upset, I never heard about it.

"It was sad, Turrútut," my brother informed me over the phone. "No one cried."

The point of comparison, I believed, was our mother's funeral, which had been gushing with grief and tears.

"And then the priest really blew it," my brother continued, "by going on and on about what a good man had left the earth, how he had given his family years of happiness and shit like that."

"How did the others react?" I asked.

"How do you think? People could barely contain their laughter. The only reason we didn't burst was out of respect for our grandfather's sisters who showed up. But even Abuela rolled her eyes."

Right after the burial, my grandmother withdrew the money from all the bank accounts and then locked herself in her house with ten dogs in the yard to keep the rest of us out. There wasn't much money in those three or four accounts my grandparents kept open over the years. Once I asked them why they did that, spread the money around like that, and Abuelo answered, "Well, what if somebody robs the bank with all our money in it?"

"She asked me to take her to Abuelo's grave before we left,"

Alex said. "She stood over it for a few seconds and then said, 'You stay there, you,' before she walked away."

Although we fantasized that the day Abuelo died, Abuela would blossom in her newly found freedom, she disappointed us by becoming a recluse, locked up in her house and refusing to take any visitors. Even when I called on her during my rare trips to El Rancho, she would only speak to me through the fence, and I would have to hold my tongue as she launched her complaints against Guadalupe and accused my brother of stealing money from her.

Alex took it all in stride. "She's getting old and senile, Turrútut. I'm not going to hold anything against her."

In moments like these, I wondered if my brother and I were actually related. He had this incredible capacity for sympathy toward those around him that I didn't. Maybe because I wasn't around them, because all I had taken with me were the terrible memories of the past. He had remained among them, experiencing the narrative grow into something more complex, more human, more worthy of understanding.

Once, on our way to the liquor store to pick up more beer, my brother and I were riding down the street in his truck when I casually pointed out that the old lady walking though the dusty road at high noon looked like our grandmother.

"That *is* our grandmother," he responded.

"What?" I said, in alarm. "Then let's pick her ass up; she's going to get heat stroke out there!"

"She won't get in the truck, Turrútut," my brother said, somberly. "I've tried it before."

And when we passed her by, I nearly burst into tears. I watched her tiny body become tinier still, and I felt such pity for the family we had become. My heart was heavy with sadness, because the stories I wanted to remember her by were the sentimental ones, like the time she received word from Michoacán that Mamá Lola,

her mother and our great-grandmother, had died. She walked into the room while my brother and I were watching television and said through a face full of tears, "You know what? I'm an orphan too." Or like that time, on our first day of school in the U.S., when she walked my brother and me to the bus stop. She saw that we were petrified, so she offered us the only solace she could muster by informing us that the word for *ventana* in English was "window," and then she walked away. An echo of that moment came to me when I was driving solo from California to Arizona to start a graduate degree. I drove out of the housing project in my compact orange Celica at five in the morning, because I had been taught by my family to travel that way—early. She stepped out to see me off and made the sign of the cross and started to cry, and I wept all the way to the highway because it felt I had someone who would miss me the way my father never did.

"Where is she going at this hour anyway?" I asked.

"To get her beer," Alex said. "She says it's the only thing that keeps her happy anymore."

"Ain't that the truth," I said. We pulled up to the gas station and I handed Alex some money to pay for the case of twenty-four.

—I got a question for you both.
—What, Apá?
—I look at my watch and it's *dos minutos para las dos*. How do you say that in English?
—Two minutes to two o'clock. Right, Alex?
—Right.
—Okay, then what if I asked you, at that very moment, what time it was on *your* watch?
—I would say, Two minutes to two o'clock. Same as you.
—But wouldn't you say, *también*?
—Oh, I get it. Two minutes to two o'clock too!
—But isn't there a more efficient way to say it?

—No.

—Yes, there is, right, Apá? I get it! I get it!

Alex got it.

—You mean, Two to two too?

—Two to two too! Two to two too! Turrútut, right, Apá?

—Right, Alex. Or better yet: Right, Turrútut.

Turrútut. I liked the sound of that.

When I saw my father again in 2003, then 2004, then 2005, each visit became shorter than the one before. Forty minutes, twenty minutes, and then ten. He slipped back into the familiar pattern of greeting me, then asking me for money and making me mad. In between those annual trips to El Rancho, I felt obligated to ask my brother for updates over the phone.

"How's Apá holding up, Turrútut?"

"Depressed, Turrútut," was the usual answer.

Knowing that my father was deteriorating was painful, and every year I dreaded having to scuffle with this opponent who every year became weaker and weaker. He was having such a difficult time walking now that I suggested to my brother we get him an electric wheelchair.

"Are you nuts?" my brother said. "He'll never go for that. He's too proud."

I remembered our poor Tío Rafael. He too had been too proud once, but after his stroke, he had no choice. There was no room for shame in these matters. I had just won an arts grant the year before, so I planned to use the money on an electric wheelchair.

As predicted, my father didn't go for it. In fact, he became offended and more determined than ever to prove he was still functional, so he continued to take the car out even though he no longer had a valid license, and he refused to ease his drinking.

As my father's conditioned worsened, Alex and I had managed to get better medication, which kept my father from shaking too

much, but it also slowed him down. When he ate, his movements were like a sloth's. He still refused to stop drinking, which got him in trouble once when he became temporarily paralyzed. The doctor told him he deserved it for not following instructions, and that the paralysis would wear off in a day.

"So the doctor told him to use that day to think about what will happen the next time he mixes the medication with alcohol," my brother reported.

In the summer of 2006, I received an advance copy of the childhood memoir I had been working on over the years. *Butterfly Boy: Memories of a Chicano Mariposa* recounted my tense relationship with my father up until I turned twenty. I had just turned thirty-six. I decided to share that copy with my brother but begged him not to tell my father. My father wouldn't be able to read the book in English, but neither did I want him to know it was going to be out in the world. I made a special trip to El Rancho to hand-deliver the book to Alex.

I was so nervous about that trip that I spent the three days before my arrival nursing an upset stomach. I was particularly anxious about seeing my father, as if he would be able to read in my eyes that I had betrayed him somehow by writing a book about my journey through adolescence, a coming of age made more difficult because of his absence. I didn't know it then, but that would be the last time I saw my father alive, and the exchange lasted no more than a minute. He didn't even bother with a greeting. He simply jumped right into it.

"Could you let me borrow a hundred dollars?" he said as soon as he walked in.

"No," I said. My mouth became dry. I wanted to say more, but I knew I wouldn't be able to spit another syllable out. On the coffee table sat a copy of the book, and my father didn't even notice.

He sat in silence for five minutes and then went home. I never saw him again.

"I was afraid he would see the book," I told my brother, relieved.

Alex picked it up and looked at it. "Then who did you write this for?"

The question startled me. "I guess I wrote it for us. I mean, some things are too heavy to carry by myself."

"Well, I'll tell you what I think about it. But don't call me until I call you."

For weeks after my visit, I was a wreck, waiting for my brother to tell me his response to the memoir. I had been very honest about my father's alcoholism, my relationship with an abusive lover, and my sexuality. Though I had come out to my brother many years before, he was now reading an account that showed me completely naked in other ways. When I didn't hear back from him for almost a month, I broke our agreement and called him.

"Did you finish reading the book?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

"I cried," he said.

"Well, that's understandable."

"For two days."

"Why?" I said, alarmed.

"It just brought back sad memories. About our mom."

And when I asked him if it bothered him to read all those things I wrote about our father, he simply answered, "Why should it? It's true."

"And it doesn't bother you that other people will read those things?"

"Not really. Maybe you're right. Maybe it's better for these stories to be out in the world than in our heads."

The week before I held a book launch for *Butterfly Boy* at a Manhattan bookstore, I got a call from my brother. My father had been hospitalized. I had been through this avenue before, and this

time I wasn't going to slip into crisis mode, so I simply called every day to see how my father was doing. Apparently he had fallen ill over the weekend, and my brother had to drive my father across the border in the middle of the night, since my father's disability insurance could cover his medical needs. Two days later, he went into a coma, and he remained unconscious most of the time until he passed away on October 1.

During my father's coma, I received plenty of advice about whether I should go visit him, but in the end I decided not to. Not only was I going to be just another body for my brother to shuttle around, but I felt I had to save money for whatever expenses came our way. Besides my brother, there was only me to foot the bill. Our stepmother was a farmworker, and our stepbrothers held low-wage jobs in Mexicali. Although a few cousins came forward with offers of financial assistance, my brother and I decided that we were not going to take money from anyone.

That week was an emotional one for my brother and me. We debated and argued about certain decisions, like the Do Not Resuscitate form. We were so distressed that nothing came out clear and we misinterpreted our tones as defensive and hostile. In the end, I let my brother make all the decisions since it was he who was out there driving Abuela and Amelia to and from the hospital and I was back in the safety of New York City.

Five days before the book launch in New York City, my father died. I felt relief for my brother, but I felt sorry for myself. There would be no more chapters in the complex relationship between my father and me. He was now committed entirely to memory. I called a few important friends and told them all I couldn't cry, and I never did.

"You're going to have to find a different way to grieve," one of my friends commented.

While I was on the road promoting the memoir, I lost fifteen pounds, and each time it became easier to open the reading of