



MAIJOMA, MY SISTER

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**First published in We The Intertwined
Volume 1*

I.

The views from the backseat window were of scant brush and jagged thistles, passing flora marked by its thirst for rain. My dad was driving the last leg of his homeward journey in silence while my mom napped in the front seat. The city of Ojinaga was in our rearview mirror. The orange trees that lined its streets diminished from sight as my dad drove, its swatches of dust and sepias, like old photographs of relatives, specks in the reflection as we took the highway to my father's hometown. We were driving through the Mexican state of Chihuahua, about an hour from the city of Ojinaga, to the pueblo of Maijoma, pronounced like "My Home Uh."

My skin stuck to the sunlit backseat as I shifted my position. The heat and discomfort made it hard for me to remember, to align the passing landscape with any memories from my childhood. It had been fifteen years since our family last made this trek to Mexico. A twenty-hour drive. Starting from my small hometown of West Liberty, Iowa, through the border city of Ojinaga, and to the even smaller, secluded village my dad grew up in.

Fifteen years ago, my older sister Maria was with me in the backseat. We were leaving a *quinceañera* we attended in Ojinaga for her. It wasn't Maria's *quinceañera* but, with her being fourteen years old, my parents planned it so we would be a part of the ceremony. They hoped she could get a taste of what she would be experiencing in a year's time. That it would excite her. All I remember of the celebration was that, at nine years old, I was too young to be an escort, a *chambelán*. I was happy when the formal pomp of the ceremonies were over and I could run outside the dusty dance hall with the other young boys. Away from the adults drinking and partying. Away from the teenagers playing dress-up. The *bailes* in Ojinaga were the same as the ones in Iowa. Dark and full of bodies. When us kids would open the doors to run outside, cigarette smoke

would billow out toward the night sky. I remember brushing sand onto the back seat of the car when the night's festivities were over. From my clothes. From my hair and shoes and onto the car floor. We were heading from the hall to Maijoma in the darkness. A couple years prior my sister would have dominated the rest of us in the muddy games outside the *bailes*. But now she was pristine and dressed up beside me. Her hair all bangs like Selena on *Johnny Canales*. She sat looking outside her car window. Her face coming into and out of the light of the passing street lamps.

It had been fifteen years and my parents were in the front seat driving the same drive from Ojinaga to Maijoma. The sunlight overexposed the views from our car. I was trying to remember. To think about what she could have been thinking. Was it about how when you leave Ojinaga, it feels like you're leaving civilization behind? A road off the highway leads to more and more unserved roads, until it feels like you're driving along paths that don't quite feel tended by any definitive entity but rather forged by the repeated treks of a select people, going to visit family.

It was spring break from college courses and my parents told me, "This could be the last time you see your grandparents before they die. You need to go." It was not the first spring break where they used this reasoning to entice me to visit Maijoma, but it was the first time the reasoning worked.

It had been a while since I'd even hung out with my immediate family, let alone the decade-plus since I'd seen *mis abuelos*. The spring break was a respite from the courses that I was taking. As the first one in my family to attend college, I was not taking the transition well. I wasn't failing or anything like that, but something seemed off. The last couple of times I walked up to the building of one of my classes, I slowed at the entrance. Fighting what I now know as panic attacks. I stood before the entrance, unable to cross, trying to catch my breath as others walked by me unaware.

I was at ease in the back seat of my parent's car in comparison, as I let the worry of school and life dissipate. As I tried to recall my memories. I was thinking of *mis abuelos* and my memories of this place. My dad slowed our car before a makeshift gate. I was thinking of my sister.

We'd been at this gate before, or at least it felt like we had. For all I knew there were thousands of gates like this one dotting Mexico's landscape. Wood posts and barbed wire erected by herders and ranchers, by families like ours. This could have been any other gate, but as my dad got out of the car, he approached it with familiarity. My memory aligned with my dad's confidence in movement. We actually had been here before. The last time we stopped here my *apá* was already at the gate by the time Maria and I got out of the car to meet him.

"Okay, *ayudame*. With this here. *Aquí*. Look," *Apá* said to Maria and me back then, as he pulled at the rotting wood post. We each grabbed part of the post and dragged it away from the fence, the attached barbed wire falling into a netlike mass, scratching a pattern along the dirt. We propped the heap of wood and wire along itself. My mom pulled the station wagon through as we stood under the desert moon and stars.

"*Ya*, let's put it all back up behind us." Our dad said after we got the gate closed, he directed my mom to turn off the side and follow him as he walked through the dust.

"We should get some gas here," he said as he stepped aside and waved my mom through.

"What are you talking about? There's no gas stations," Maria said as we walked alongside our *apá*. As I looked around, there was only the same desolation we had been driving through since Ojinaga. No signs of a gas station, no buildings or people of any kind. My mom laughed at our confusion as she got out of the car. My dad walked over and knelt down at a random spot with the same intent he had shown at the gate. He pulled at a hose emanating from the ground.

"Yeah, it's still here. They still got it," he said to himself. He put his mouth around the hose until he spit out what looked like oil. The dark fluid poured from the hose as my dad beckoned for Maria to bring a gas can closer. On the transition, the fluid splashed and soiled Maria's shirt as we laughed. This felt like a secret treasure, an X marked on a map somewhere, for families to show themselves as they drove through the isolation. After my dad finished filling the gas can, it began to rain. Big, fat drops that stung with cold.

"Bet I can beat you to the gate and back. Bet," I said to Maria, already limbering up for the race. Maria, having used the rain to wring out the oil from her shirt, was trying to cover her hair. She hadn't yet realized it was a lost cause.

"Nah, I'm good," she replied, distracted.

"What, you think you can still beat me? Not anymore," I said to her as I skipped away, gaining a head start. Maria looked up at the sky as the rain picked up. The drops of water left streaks across the makeup on her face.

"Alright then. Go!" she said as she started to sprint and closed the gap between us. We ran through the rain, kicking up dirt and mud. Since that time, I can never remember another instance of us running full sprint together. I was happy then, in that moment. We both were.

"Ay, Angel! *¿Was a ayuda to apá or no?* You gonna help!?" my mom said, snapping me from my memories.

"Oh! Oh, yeah. Sorry." I got out to help my dad, who was already halfway through unwinding the gate. As I walked closer, I reflected at how similar it all was. Even though there had been no upgrades to the gate, the wood didn't feel older or more rotted but rather at the same degradation as my memories. As we navigated the same gate process from fifteen years prior, with my mom pulling the car through, I remembered the secret hose. My memories of this place were in soft focus. Memories of memories. The last couple of years I'd thought of us racing from the spot my dad siphoned gas from the ground and I'd come to dispel it. There had been a couple shower sessions where I stood under running water, preoccupied, trying to think back on the hose and answer the question, "How exactly did my dad stop the gas from coming out? When it was all said and done?" I wouldn't ask this question of my parents or my sister, for fear they wouldn't know what I was talking about, or worse, tell me it was something I saw in a movie once. Was this another reason I wanted to come back to Maijoma after all this time? To figure out what was real. There was excitement in my throat as we went to close the gate. I prepared myself to look for any signs of our clandestine fuel stop.

As we finished closing the gate, my mom called out to my dad

from the car.

“¿*Que es eso?*” my dad said as four uniformed men with large black guns approached us. The kind of guns one holds with two hands, like in the movies.

“Wait, is this another border check? But it’s so far from the border? I don’t remember this,” I said to my parents as the men approached our car from all sides. One of the men started asking my parents questions in Spanish. They talked fast. Faster than my Iowa-Midwestern “took Spanish in high school” Spanglish could comprehend. The man’s sentences were rapid fire but punchy. Short bursts of questions and commands. My parent’s responses followed rhythm. I caught something about moving our car forward.

“*Mucho gusto y gracias,*” my dad said as he went to shake the initial man’s hand. A USD bill transferred from one palm to the other mid-handshake. My dad and I joined my mom in the car. We pulled up and over a man lying on his back in a trench. Our car straddled the two sides of the hole in the ground as the man checked the undercarriage for whatever it was the uniformed men were looking for. We waited. Until finally one of them rapped on our trunk, signaled to us, “We’re done here.” The rest of the way to Maijoma was silence. The inside roof of our car replaced the scrolling landscape as I sprawled across the back seat. My dad’s secret hose forgotten in blurred memories of passing mesquite and cacti.

II.

THE LAST HURDLE to get to Maijoma is a small stream in a valley running across the trail. Depending on the season, and how much the rain has affected the valley, it could mean getting your car stuck in mud and sediment. There was one time we had to wait before the rain cleared away, our parents stating that it would be too dangerous to attempt the crossing. Maria and I took turns skipping rocks on the water while we waited at the riverbank.

On this trip, the dirt at the bottom of the valley was dry and caked, as if the region hadn’t seen rain since we last ran through it. We made quick work of the valley and turned onto the only trail

that Maijoma called its own.

Along this trail, the first sign of a return to civilization was the school my dad went to as a child. Its courtyard doubled as the community center and makeshift volleyball court. Follow the trail past the school and you’d walk by a handful of adobe shacks. Then my grandparents’ shack. There was a pigsty by the house and a tool shed that my father and *tíos* made themselves. Across a dirt road from my grandparents’ shack was their neighbors’, whose living room doubled as the town convenience store.

Right next to the store was a hill with the town’s single white church at its peak. The church at the top of the hill was accessible by three sides, though rocks and cacti punctuated the paths. The north wall of the hill was a cliff, the walkway before the front door of the church had deteriorated and fallen away through time, leaving the only entrance to the church inaccessible. If you opened the door, it would swing over the valley below. I thought about children navigating the sharp edges and holds up the cliff, scattering rocks as they ascended the wall and pulled up to the front door.

The unkemptness of this church, its forbidden entrance, suggested apostasy. Of townfolk decades past gazing upon vistas after mass. Our family would have fit right in. As a child I went to church with my parents every Sunday, though large parts of the all-Spanish mass lost me. I don’t remember when we stopped going. There wasn’t any one single event that caused it, but over time we became ex-Catholics. The last thing I remember about faith is getting yelled at in *el nombre de Jesús*.

The hill and its church loomed over my grandparents’ house as we pulled up next to my *abuelo’s trocka*. As we looked closer at the ancient truck, we saw our grandfather in the driver’s seat, napping. Sunbeams accented his dark leather skin and shone through his straw cowboy hat. Our car doors slamming shut woke my abuelo from his slumber. His gaze revealed cloudy and cataract-wrought eyes. “Ah, *ya llegaste?*” my *abuelo* asked as he lumbered from his ancient pickup truck. It was the same truck Maria and I stole in our last visit.

“Sorry for waking you. A lot of things have changed,” my dad said in Spanish as we gathered our things from the car.

“They always do. Like Angel here. You’ve grown!” my *abuelo* said as his eyes locked on mine. The bottom row of his teeth were a mash, specks of yellow bone and enamel. “Come in, your *abuela* is inside with Concha. She can help you bring in your things.” My *abuelo* set the pace as we followed behind his ancient shuffle. A pack of baby ducks scurried along our feet as we opened the screen door to my grandparents’ shack.

My *Tía* Concha, along with some other people I did not know, greeted us from inside. Everyone took turns shaking everyone else’s hand, a strict custom that, growing up, my mom would be sure my sister and I would adhere to under her breath. “*Saludan a todos . . . a everyone, Angel!*”

As the salutations crossed onto one another, my attention turned to Concha, who was walking toward a bed in a room next to the kitchen. My *tía* picked up a spoon and began to feed a woman lying on the bed. The woman was old, older than *mi abuelo*, an invalid looking up at the ceiling, crumbling onto herself. Her skin creases on creases. An electric shock of emotion ran through me as I recognized the woman as my grandmother. What remained of *mi abuela*. Concha recognized my reaction as she wiped some food from my grandmother’s chin.

“Yeah, it’s been too long since you’ve seen your *abuela*, Angel. *Abuelita*. It’s Angel.” My grandma looked over at me in slow motion. Looked past me.

“*Mucho gusto*,” she said, introducing herself. She strained to lift her hand in greeting.

Comparisons of the grandma I knew flooded my memory. During our last visit, Maria came up with the name “Ghetto Granny.” Maria and I would walk around my grandparents’ shack, bemoaning the lost comforts of our modern Midwestern home. “No Nintendo to play games on, no VCR to watch movies, not even a TV itself!” It was in this state that we came across my grandma, sweeping the dust from the house.

“Check out Ghetto Granny, she tough as shit walking around doing all this work,” Maria whispered in my ear as we passed by. Both my grandparents were stoic people, but my grandma had what looked like a permanent scowl on her face as she worked on the

household chores.

“*Cuidado . . .* you kids don’t know nothing!” she would yell at us in Spanish. She would warn us about staying away from cacti. Tell tall tales to scare us away from misbehaving. Invoke Christ to protect us from ourselves.

“Man, I’m a go find out what there is to do around here,” Maria said to herself. I ran behind, catching the screen door before it slammed shut. Outside, we found out that compared to West Liberty, with its swimming pool, movie theater, parks, and friends, Maijoma was a lonely place for two siblings. We walked the dirt road to the end of the village and back. Walked the trails to the boarded-up church. Found what entertainment two kids from the Midwest could muster in a *pueblo* lost to time.

“Man, I wish there were some other kids here. Kids that we could play with,” I said as I trailed behind my sister.

“You’re always trying to play games and do kid stuff, Angel. It gets old fast,” she replied over her shoulder.

“I mean, what are we supposed to do here? Mom and Dad are having all the fun with Dad’s family. We’re only here ’cause we can’t stay at Iowa by ourselves.”

“And what would you do if we were still in Iowa without Mom and Dad, Angel? Go ride bikes with your friends? Play hide and seek?”

“I mean. That sounds like fun, no?” I said while I tripped on some rocks. Maria stopped replying as she continued walking ahead of me. “What’s your problem? You’ve been quiet and weird this trip. Since the *baile* in Ojinaga.”

“It wasn’t a fucking *baile*, Angel, it was a *quinceañera*,” Maria said.

“What’s the difference?” I asked.

“Nothing. Let’s go back and mess with Ghetto Granny,” Maria said as she kicked away a rock on the trail. As we came upon our grandparents’ shack, our grandpa met us before the door.

“*Espersen. Mirar*,” my grandpa said to us. He extended his work-weary hand to give me a gift. Maria looked on as he presented me a handcrafted toy. He had gathered and carved sticks to make a gymnast, held between two poles. If you squeezed the bottom of the

poles, the gymnast would somersault up and return to the bottom. And if you squeezed them just right, he could do a handstand at the top, suspended between two points.

“Thank y—*gracias!*” I said as I immediately started to manipulate the toy. Maria walked past us, through the beaten-up screen door.

That night the adults lit the oil lamps that looked like flowers. Started having conversations over dinner. I walked into the guest room Maria was staying in. She was facing an oil lamp on a pink nightstand on the opposite side of the bed, hunched over. Maria startled as I rounded the bed to find one of her legs crossed, pant leg up to expose her ankle. She had a sewing needle in her hand.

“Whoa,” I said. “What are you doing?”

“Shhh,” Maria whispered as she looked to make sure no one followed me. I looked at her ankle to see foreign symbols, numbers, and designs. Extravagant. Beside the oil lamp was a small container of ink. “For real, Angel, you can’t tell anyone about this.” My smirk exposed the thoughts of small blackmails I could lien against Maria in the future. Some of my *tíos* and male cousins had tattoos, inconspicuous things in easy-to-cover places. But it was a sin for any of the women in our family to get tattoos, let alone a tattoo so pronounced as the one Maria was working on. “Angel! For real, I’m fucking serious. You can’t tell anyone. Promise?” She put aside the needle and extended her pinky.

“Okay, okay. I won’t tell anyone.” I said as I reciprocated my pinky in promise. Maria grabbed the needle between her thumb and index finger with intention. She dipped the needle in the vial of ink and brought it to her ankle. She punctured her skin with methodical rhythm. You could see the skin rise with each prick as it left the ink on its ascent. Dot by dot, prick by prick, she was shading in a big X, which was part of a bigger design I couldn’t see past her cuffed jean leg. The tattoo danced in the oil lamp’s flame.

“How long have you been doing this?” I asked.

She replied with a question of her own. “When you go out in West Lib with your friends, riding bikes and spending the night at their houses, you don’t have to tell our parents where you go, right?” She surveyed her progress, never wincing or revealing if there was any pain. I thought about her question, about the last time I spent

the night at Josh’s and only told my mom about it the day after. “Well, I don’t get to do that. If I’m out past six they have to know everything. And. They tell me I gotta be back by nine, no matter where I am. So . . .” She gestured to her leg. “I get lots of time to work.”

A shriek in the kitchen interrupted Maria right as she was in the middle of a needle puncture. The noise caused her hand to slip and puncture her leg way past the point of the needle. She yanked the needle out and covered her mouth, stifling a yell of her own. In the commotion I knocked over the ink on the nightstand, the black splashed against pink. An instant Rorschach. We bumped in the dim light, composed ourselves, and went toward the source of the shriek.

We found my grandma running around her bedroom, faster than any old person I’ve seen move. Her yelling was a result of putting on a slipper and feeling an *alacran* wiggle among her toes. As my sister and I came upon my grandma, she had a rolled-up paper in her hand, on the hunt for the scorpion. My sister was about to calm our *abuela* when she slammed the paper down on the scorpion. Maria jumped back from the sound as the rest of our family ran in, calming the situation down. Calming our grandma in hysterics. I looked at Maria and onto her now rolled-down jean leg. A spot of blood and ink was running through the denim of her Levi’s.



I remembered the effort my family had to make to calm my grandmother down. The speed and calamity that she evoked in killing the scorpion before us. It was difficult to reconcile that force with the husk of a woman that lay before me, who did not remember me. Vicks VapoRub, lit candles of unfamiliar saints, and the sour smell of my *abuela* herself filled my nostrils as I got close enough for *un saludar*. Her fragile bones waited in mine before she lowered her hand, turned her head, and fell asleep.

I retreated to the room where I had discovered Maria tattooing herself. I rubbed a splotch on the nightstand, trying to gauge whether it was the same ink that I knocked over. Maria never told

me that the key ingredient to homemade tattoos was India ink. In junior high, a lot of us kids would try to emulate the tattoos our older siblings gave themselves. We would blow the ink out of ballpoint pens, but tattoos with regular ink deteriorated over time. Which we're thankful for now as the design and general look of our "scratchers" were atrocious. It must have been how methodical Maria was with her tattoos, but her work could pass for professional grade. Ours looked like chicken scratches, like the work of kids with unsure hands. It got so bad that the school admins got our classes together to warn us about the stupidity of our newfound hobby. They told us, "Wait until you're old enough to get professional work done." Which was good advice, but it's hard to curb kids trying to follow in their older siblings' footsteps.

The splotch on the nightstand rubbed off with ease. It wasn't the India ink, only accumulated grime or dirt. I walked out of the room and through the kitchen toward the outside screen door for some air. Before I reached it, my mom hollered at me from the table.

"Angel, can you go next door *a comprar botellas de soda por nosotros?* *La Coca* and *Esprite* for us tonight?" she asked.

"For real?"

"*Como no? No te vayas caer again, right? You no gonna fall,*" she said with a smirk.

The screen door slammed shut as I heard my family already begin their side of the story. The story on the series of incidents between my sister and I that led to us almost killing each other. And how it all started with a pack of baby ducks and a case of Coca-Cola.

III.

IT WAS THE NIGHT after the scorpion incident during our childhood trip. After I discovered the hints of my sister's secret life etched on her leg. The adults were celebrating for no reason. I peeked around the kitchen to watch my grandma. She had cracked open a beer and was laughing with my parents, telling them a story. My eyes grew as I noted the way she would stop her story with a drink. She would raise her finger to let people know she would get

back to it, taking deep sips of her beer with her eyes closed. My grandma caught me watching after I got too comfortable and leaned around the corner far enough for her to see me. She shifted her expression and placed her beer away from view.

After composing herself, she ordered me and my sister to go next door and get some cases of pop for the festivities. It was a common thing for the elders to ask such an errand of the children at parties, usually because all the adults had been drinking and couldn't drive. In West Liberty this meant getting on our bikes and traveling across town for the errand. This wasn't the case in Maijoma, since the convenience store was in the living room of my grandparents' next-door neighbors' house.

My sister was already across the dirt path, among the rocks and cacti, up to the neighbor's door.

"Hey, wait up for me!" I yelled out as I navigated the terrain after her.

Now is a good time to describe my sister's and my physical stature fifteen years ago. Until recently, we were both small and skinny kids. But in the last year Maria had hit her growth spurt. She was taller but looked even skinnier, her limbs at the awkward, spindly stage of puberty. Despite still having to acclimate to her growing legs, Maria could hold her own on the junior high volleyball team. She wore knee-high socks to conceal her ink. My nine-year-old body was on the other side of puberty. I was a tiny kid with a big head, who would rather play on my Gameboy than join West Liberty's flag football leagues. These growing, spindly kids were the ones who stepped from rock to rock to make it up to the convenience store.

I joined my sister inside the store and used the opportunity. "So how long have you have the tattoos? Did they hurt? Like for real for real? Are you in a gang?"

"Angel. Shut. Up," Maria replied among the Mexican candy and snacks. "You promised not to tell."

The dark face at the counter kept his attention on a portable radio playing *Norteño bandas*.

"Like this guy can even understand us or knows who we are," I said while picking out favorites among the *Pelon Pelo Ricos*, *paletas*,

chicharrones de harina, and other treats we recognized as the same ones in our Mexican *tienda* back home. “Okay, okay. One question. How do you get it past Mom when you have to wear dresses?”

“When’s the last time you saw me wearing a dress?” Maria asked as we hit the back of the store and bottles of soda. It was a good point. Both my sister and I had moved away from the style of clothes our parents had bought for us as kids. If you were to look through our childhood photo albums, I would be in cowboy boots and hats. Like the clothes kids in Ojinaga wore as they wrestled at the *bailes*. Maria was clad in all manner of ornate dresses and fabrics, a little doll. As we figured out ourselves among the other ’90s Iowan kids, we ditched the Mexican wear for tennis shoes and rad neon clothes. Only now, Maria started getting into flannels and Dickies, like in the movie *Mi Vida Loca* that she would always watch, about *cholas* in Echo Park. She would finish the VHS, immediately load it into our race-car tape rewinder, get to the beginning, and watch it again.

“So you’re not going to wear dresses no more?”

“I don’t know. We’ll see,” she replied as she bent over to carry two cases of soda on each other. She strained to get them over to the counter. We handed the man our parents’ money, coins we had never seen before. They made sure the pesos were the right amount before we left the party. Maria attempted to pick up both cases for the trek home.

“Here, I can get the bottles of Coke,” I said as I hoisted the top crate. The bottles were so tall they blocked my view.

“Yeah, right. You can’t even see above them. Let me take them, kid,” Maria said, emphasizing *kid*. I propped the door open with my foot, then turned and backed out of the store, case in hand, without saying a word.

Outside the store, we began the precarious journey back with our cases of bottles. It was halfway through the rocky terrain and into the dirt road when Maria saw the flock of ducks. A chain of yellow clumps, stumbling over themselves. Maria stopped, perplexed by the trills and chirps emanating from their tiny reed beaks. We looked on as the baby ducks climbed up the trail, toward the church on the hill. “Where are they going?” my sister asked herself as she

turned and began to follow.

There was a beat as I looked toward our grandparents’ shack and then back at Maria, who was now in line with the ducks. They were picking up their pace, in a hurry, like they were late to church.

“Hey, wait up—” I tried to say as I turned and followed the group. But as I pivoted, my feet tripped on themselves and I fell. Face first. Onto my case of Coca-Cola bottles. The glass and soda exploded as the rest of my body collided with the rocks that were at my feet.

“Oh, shit!” my sister said as she dropped her case of bottles and ran to me. The immediate aftermath of my fall was a daze. There was glass all around me. The liquid in the bottles mixed with the dirt and created a sticky paste of glass and muck. I managed to get a view of the ducks as they hurried toward the church, startled by the sound of sixteen bottles of Coke all breaking in unison. My sister must’ve yanked me up and carried me to our grandparents’ house. She bypassed the adults hanging out in the kitchen through a side door to her guest room. Next thing I know I was at the foot of her bed.

“Angel. Angel! Please, please. Don’t cry. You’re okay. I can fix this,” my sister pleaded with me.

“What? What are you talking about, why should I cry?” I asked in a daze. And in that exact moment, when those two questions came out of me as I looked at my sister, the blood from the gashes burst forth as if on cue. Like the soda that had exploded from the bottles outside, the blood poured out from my cuts. From a nasty gash on my right eyebrow. I cried like I had never cried before.

“*Ama!*” I said at the top of my lungs.

“Shit, Angel, no!” My sister put her hands over my mouth but it was too late. This wasn’t a stifled yelp but a full-on scream. My parents and *abuela*, moving with the same quickness that she had done the night before, were with us in the guest room. They stumbled on the shock of my sister with her hands over my mouth, stifling my hysterics as we both were now covered with dirt, dried soda, and blood. *Mi abuela* appeared next to Maria as my parents tended to my wounds. Later they would recall pulling shards of glass from their nine-year-old son’s face.

Maria looked up to find Ghetto Granny over her.

“Qué biciste cabrona!” *mi abuela* said to Maria as she grabbed her chin.

“Nothing! It wasn’t my fault, he wanted to carry them too!” my sister said as she struggled to free her face. My grandma was unrelenting in her grasp. In the panic of the room, my sister forgot that my grandma couldn’t understand English. She might as well had been speaking in an alien language.

“Get off me!” Maria said with extra oomph as her struggles turned to a shove. My *abuela* stumbled back in surprise. Even I took pause from my bawling, realizing how big of an affront it was for a kid to touch a parent. After her surprise, my grandma scanned the room in silence, with contempt. My mom, still preoccupied with my wounds, yelled out to my sister to apologize to our grandma. Maria ignored her requests and pushed her way out the side door of the shack, to Maijoma’s moonlit night.



It was late. The errand to get a case of Coke in my adult years was less eventful. Like the soldiers that accepted my dad’s bribe, the neighbors accepted my U.S. dollars as payment. We were close enough to the border that both pesos and U.S. currency circulated freely. When I entered the store, I realized two things: that the place was tiny, and that they no longer even sold bottles. They had the same cans of pop we had in Iowa.

In the guest bathroom, the dull light bulb over the mirror flickered as I looked at myself. About ten years after my run-in with the case of Coca-Cola bottles, the government surveyed the 160 townfolk of Maijoma. The 80 men and 80 women deliberated whether they wanted a cellphone tower or electricity for the town. They chose the more foundational of the two options.

I thought about their decision as I pulled out my phone, a glorified brick in my hand here. I noted that there wasn’t anything even resembling cell reception out here. My thumb flicked the phone open as I scrolled through my contacts. The scrolling names

landed on “Maria.” Quick, to not take it back, I deleted the contact and flicked the phone shut. My eyes took a moment to adjust past the grime in the mirror as I stared at my reflection. My hand lifted, over to the scar on my eyebrow.

Immediately after my sister walked out of the room the night of the Coke incident, my grandpa got out some tools and an apple. He pantomimed for me to turn my head and take a bite at his go. As I bit into the apple, he used a needle and thread to sew up the gash on my eyebrow. Halfway through the procedure, I dropped the apple and panicked.

My grandma snapped at me as she recovered the fruit. *“Cálmate, Angell!”* I calmed down at the threat of added punishment from Ghetto Granny.

Looking over his work in the bathroom mirror, I have to say that *mi abuelo* did a good enough job. Most people don’t notice the scar until I point it out.



A couple of days passed before my sister and I started talking again. The oppressive boredom prevailed over our reluctance to hash out the aftermath of my fall. Staying in Maijoma was like being on a permanent Sunday afternoon. Those Sundays where the excitement and fun of a sleepover were behind you. Your friends were back at their own homes. There was nothing on TV to watch. The looming ennui of a Monday school day clung to your every action. Fighting or not, my sister and I didn’t stand a chance against perpetual Sunday by ourselves. Well, that and the questions we both had as we crossed each other on the paths leading up to the church on the hill. Where were those baby ducks going, and where were they now?

Maria gestured to my stitches. “Did it hurt?” I didn’t regale her with the story of dropping the apple and bawling like a baby until Grandma calmed me down.

“Nah not too bad . . . but are you mad at me or something?” I asked as we synced our strides up the trail.

“Yeah, I’m mad, Angel. You didn’t do shit when that lady got at me. It wasn’t my fault. I never asked you to follow me,” Maria said as we made short work of the trail and reached the dilapidated church, scanning the ground and listening for peeps. We set off to descend from the opposite trail down the other side of the hill.

“I was kinda distracted,” I said to myself as I pulled out the wooden toy my grandpa made for me. It was still a challenge to get the guy to balance just right at the top.

“Well, it’s a good thing she didn’t try to do anything but grab me. I won the last fight I got into,” Maria said as she scooted around a cactus.

The gymnast fell limp between my fingers. “You’ve gotten into a fight?” I asked.

Maria ignored my question. We made quick work of the other trail and were now at the bottom of the hill, facing the cliff wall that composed the hill’s north side. The wall loomed over us as I strained to make out the church door overlooking the town. It was about five times our height. It reminded me of the cover of *Banner in the Sky*, a book Maria read for class, with a boy scaling a cliff among other mountaintops on the horizon. Maria surveyed the wall and looked over at me.

“Yeah, I’ve gotten into some fights. You wouldn’t know ’cause you’re too busy playing. Come on. Bet you they’re inside,” she said as she started to climb.

“Wait, what? We can’t climb that!” I said as I put the gymnast in my back pocket.

“Why not? What else is there to do?” Maria yelled out to me, already a quarter of the way up the wall.

“I can’t,” I said, defeated. By that time in my life, my fear of heights was palpable. I’d close my eyes and my palms would get sweaty every time my dad drove across a tall bridge.

“Fine then. Don’t expect me to tell you what I find when I bust in that church!” Maria yelled out. She was making quick work of the wall. Her sinewy arms moved fast and fluid. Her speed surprised me, caught me off guard. Before I knew it, she had reached the final stretch, and I realized that attempting the climb to catch up to her

was a lost cause.

“Wait!” I yelled as I ran up a side trail, careful not to trip on any rocks along the way. If I didn’t have the guts to climb the wall and see inside for myself, at least I could see Maria enter the church from the side.

As I caught my breath at the side of the church, I craned my neck around the wall to scan the entrance and cliff below. No Maria. Nothing. I hollered my sister’s name, hoping that she would reply from inside the church. Maybe she found a secret side entrance she could let me in from? No answer. I hollered a few more times before realizing that even if Maria could hear me, she wouldn’t answer back. She was gone. I walked back down the side of the hill to our grandparents’ house, ashamed I wasn’t brave enough to scale the wall with Maria proper.

My grandma interrupted my malaise as she snapped at me from outside the house. “Is your sister in our church?” she asked in Spanish.

I stammered out a “N-No. We were playing, that’s it!” My grandma ignored my answer.

“In the church? You better not have been in there. That’s a sacred place. No place for children who . . .” she trailed off, then said to herself, “I’ll wait for her.”

Maria, running toward the house from afar, interrupted my schemes to distract my *abuela*. She was hollering my name before she saw her waiting beside me. Maria dragged to a walk and stopped before us, dusting off her jeans.

“You were in the church,” my grandma said. It was not a question. Maria looked at me with accusatory eyes. I protested back to her in silence that Granny had ambushed me too.

“No, I wasn’t,” Maria replied. “I was walking around, checking it out.”

“That’s not what Angel said,” my grandma replied. “Admit it.” A chill ran up my spine. Maria’s accusatory stare dissipated, the fire and anger extinguished. She thought I had betrayed her. I should have protested. I should have yelled out that my grandma was lying. Instead, I put my hands in my pockets and looked away.

“I didn’t go in. I tried, okay? But I couldn’t get in,” Maria said.

That was enough for my *abuela*. “What use is that church if you kids don’t even believe in God?” she said. Spanish words spat out like acid as she rushed back to her house to talk with her son about us, navigating the dust and rocks with ease.

When she was outside of earshot, I immediately started pleading with Maria. “I didn’t say any—”

“Stop! It don’t even matter. You gotta check this shit out,” Maria said with youthful fervor. She was already running back the trail she came from. She got in the church. She must have. Flashes of treasure and mystery flooded my mind as I ran to catch up. When we got to the base of the cliff, I could see the church door was open.

“So, I can tell you what’s in there. Or you can see for yourself. What do you wanna do?” Maria asked.

Pangs of fear reverberated through my arms. In my gut. My sister was never one to let you off the easy way. I knew that if I let her simply tell me what was inside, something would be lost between us. I grabbed ahold of the wall above me and hoisted myself up. From my perch, I looked over, face to face with Maria.

“I can do this.”

“Okay. Let’s go. I’m behind you,” she said as she followed suit.

About halfway up the cliff, I realized I wasn’t as good of a climber as my sister. Besides some key trees in town, there weren’t many good climbing spots in West Liberty. Sometimes we would try to climb up the side of The Tornado, a spiraling slide in Kimberly Park that was not too far from our house. But we were already past the height of that slide and still had a ways to go. It was about twice as long as Maria’s climb, but we were inching our way up.

“Keep going, Angel. I’ll break your fall. If you fall, I fall,” Maria kept saying to me, like a mantra. The spoils of a forbidden church motivated me more than the idea of us falling together. My forearms ached as Maria coached me on the last couple of holds to get to the top.

“Almost there,” Maria said to me. Right before she reached up her hand for a hold, a tarantula scurried from the rocks she brushed away. *La araña*. She let out a yelp. The sound of her surprise is forever

associated with the image I saw as I pulled myself over the top of the cliff. My eyes adjusted to the church door wide open before me. Here is what I saw in that split second, burned in my memory.

It is a jungle. Verdant. Foliage bursting from the walls. Big caricatures of leaves. Imagine taking a jungle and stuffing it into a tiny room. There are wood chairs overcome by vines. A thick carpet of moss adorns the back wall like a fresh patch of sod uprooted from the ground and grown on its side. Poking out among the moss and foliage is a skewed crucifix of Jesus. The cross is so sideways that it looks like the nail in Jesus’ wrist holds up his figure. He wears vegetation like a blanket. And there they are, the baby ducks, bathing in a pool on the ground. Shaking and chirping with life. This is it, the promised treasure.

Words escaped me as I looked down at Maria, who no longer was right below me but rather lying lifeless at the base of the hill.

“Maria!” I cried out as I half climbed half slid half fell down the cliff. The rocks and edges scratched me, tore into my clothes. Cuts and bruises covered my body as I reached my sister. “Maria!” I said again as I shook her awake. She cried out in protest, wincing from the pain.

“Careful, careful,” she said as she sat up. “Shit, that hurt.”

“What happened?” I asked.

Maria told me about the spider. How she lost her hold and tumbled down the wall, tried to regain her grip and smacked her head along the way. The area around her right eye was pink. It would turn into a black eye by the end of the week. I helped Maria to her feet as we surveyed the damage.

“Did you see it?” Maria whispered.

Before I could answer, our grandma was on us. She had gathered the rest of our family. She wanted to catch us in the act of breaking in to the church, to expose our nefarious schemes to our parents. Instead, they came across two beat-up and bloody kids far away from home. My parents immediately pushed past my grandma and went into damage control mode. They asked if my stitches were still in, took turns looking at my sister’s eye.

Amid the commotion, I noticed some sticks by Maria’s foot. It was the toy my grandpa made. Mangled and broken. My stomach lurched as I realized what the pile actually was. I hunched over to

pick up the remains, and saw that Maria's jeans had ripped during her fall, from the cuff to her knee. A snag on some foliage among the rocks. Her secret tattoos laid bare.

I tried to warn her while stuffing the broken toy in my pocket, but it was too late.

"¿*Qué es esto?*" my grandma asked with alarm. She staggered back from the sight of Maria's leg. All eyes on that bare leg. My parents joined in my *abuela's* shock.

Now, here's the thing. By that time in our short lives, our parents spared my sister and me from any real corporal punishment. My cousin Freddy would extol the virtues of packing your wallet with baseball cards to buffer any spankings from my *tía*, but our parents didn't get at us too bad. It's become something of a joke, the concept of Mexican grannies and *la chancla*, but when you're a kid and you really mess up, the last thing you want to see is a pissed-off grandmother. Maria's exposed tattoo was a mess-up beyond anything us kids could imagine. Maria braced herself as my *abuela* moved on her.

It must have been the adrenaline, from climbing the cliff, seeing an oasis, or thinking my sister was dead, but I blocked Maria from impending doom. My arms stretched wide as I shielded my sister from the beating she was sure to get. My grandma shoved me away as she got a better look at the sacrilege etched on her granddaughter's leg. I shut my eyes for the ensuing smack that would be echoing from the cliff walls.

Only it didn't. What emanated from our grandma was much worse. When the sounds of violence never came, I opened my eyes to find my grandma in tears. Slow at first. Then her tears turned into a wail I had never heard before. *La Llorona*. Deep, resonant sobs from her belly.

"No. ¿*Por qué?* ¿*Pobrecita, por qué!* What did you do, *chamaca?*" she said between her cries. "¿*Aye Dios, no sabe que hizo!*"

Our *abuelo* comforted the convulsing woman. I looked at Maria for a sign on what to do, how to react to this outpouring. We had made adults mad before, furious even, but we had never broken anyone. Maria returned my glance. She had tears in her eyes. The tears of a kid who realized she crossed a point she could never come

back from.

Maria steeled herself, wiped her tears away. "Fuck this," she said, and ran back to my grandparents' house. My family let her pass as they went to calm the woman in hysterics. I thought about going to *abuela* too but remembered it, our secret jungle. I ran after my sister.

Before I could get to the shack, I found Maria in our grandpa's *trocka*. She was waiting for me.

"What are you doing?" I asked, thinking she was in enough trouble.

"Let's go. Let's get the hell out of this place. Only for a bit," she said, looking forward to the road ahead. Her dried tears had made streaks down the dirt on her face.

"Let's go then," I said. And I got into the passenger seat.