

Chapter 2

Picadome

Danny and I leaned against the chain-link fence on the far side of the baseball diamond. “We’re going to Venezuela,” I said, reaching down to pluck a blade of grass.

“Venzoo-ayla? Where is that?” He folded his arms and squinted, his upper lip curling to expose two oversized front teeth.

“Venezuela,” I corrected. “It’s in South America.”

“Why are you going there?”

“I dunno.” I didn’t know a lot of things about why we were moving, even after Dad had explained we had joined the Peace Corps.

“Why do we have to move away?” I asked him after he announced it to the family at dinner one night.

“They need people like me to help,” he reasoned. Dad worked in a hospital, though he didn’t wear a white coat like the doctors. Mom called him an administrator. I didn’t know what that meant other than he had a big office and I liked going there with him. I’d sit in his big leather chair and push the large clear buttons on his phone until he

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told me to stop. When I would tire, I'd curl beneath his feet and fall asleep to the sound of one sided phone conversations.

"What about my friends?" I asked. Venezuela sounded too far away to imagine.

"You'll make new friends Ricky."

"I think it will be fun," Christine added.

I shot her a dirty look. I still didn't want to leave.

The local newspaper called to do a news story on us and visited the house to photograph the family. Mom and Dad made us get dressed up, and they asked Dad a lot of questions while they took pictures. He answered energetically while Mom sat quietly listening. Dad showed us the article later that week, featured in the 1969, *Bellevue American*. Dad looked handsome and confident; Mom stylish with her Marlo Thomas *That Girl* hairdo and a wary smile; and my sisters and I, frozen in the camera flash like possums. The picture looked like us but seeing myself in the paper felt creepy.

"Can I have your fort?" Danny asked as we walked back to class. We had built it the year before, behind his house near Bovee Park. Well hidden, we had built it beneath the cover of a rhododendron. We kept collections of our most prized possessions in the fort; old issues of Playboy kyped from Danny's Dad, pop can pull tabs strung together like garland, and Gerber baby food jar-lid bracelets. I stacked a pile of dirt clods by the entrance, ready and waiting just in case the teenagers who partied in the clearing nearby discovered us.

"I guess," I said, chewing on my grass blade, sucking the bitter juice from the stem.

As our departure date neared, Dad shared more details. We would move first to Lexington, Kentucky for six months of orientation and training before moving to South America. Mom said it would be like going to school.

“Do I have to go to orientation?” I asked. Multi-colored maps of the US and South America were sprawled across the dining room table for inspection. I traced my finger from our current home in Bellevue, Washington to Lexington, and then to Caracas, Venezuela. Even on the map, Venezuela appeared to be a long way from home.

“You kids will be in school,” he said.

“Why?” I whined, slumping back in my chair, swinging my legs anxiously. I won’t know anyone and then we’ll have to move anyway. I looked to Mom for support but she remained silent.

“This is stupid,” I huffed behind crossed arms, kicking the table leg with the toe of my Jack Purcell.

“Oh Lord, Ricky,” Dad sighed.

While my friends were getting excited about the coming summer, I spent the rest of June trying to spend as much time as I could hanging out in my fort. The day before we were to leave, I gathered my model airplanes and hung them from the plywood ceiling with mom’s sewing thread.

“Why are they all speckled?” Danny asked. The models were covered with lime green dots.

“My dad hired my older brother, Harris, to paint the inside of our house. ‘He needs the money,’” I mimed in a whiney voice. Poor or not, he had done a lousy job. He

painted over the switch plates and left my models attached to the ceiling as he rolled out the paint. It made them look stupid.

We arrived in Lexington the next day, arriving to a large southern style mansion called the Dillard House, located adjacent to the University of Kentucky campus. Three other Peace Corps families shared the house with us and I felt relief when I saw there were other kids to play with.

We were shown to our rooms and I bounced on the bed with glee. While we had our own rooms, we had to share the bathrooms and the kitchen with the other families. Mom's face lit up when we discovered a large sitting room facing Limestone Street with enormous glass picture windows rippled with age. A grand piano stood in the corner.

After we finished unpacking, Mom set up her paint easel by the windows. I helped Dad make the blank canvasses, stapling fabric in place as he stretched the material over the homemade frames. Sizing the fabric with gesso, we lined the walls of the room with the blank canvasses to dry while Mom filled the room with the smell of oils and acrylic. She sang as she mixed paint, making up random melodies.

¿Adonde vas? ¿se vas?, ¿se vas?

¿Adonde vas? ¿se vas?, ¿se vas?

Our munchkin voices bounced off the oak floors and ten-foot ceilings while Dad plunked sharp notes on the piano. Mom painted, her profile radiating a halo of magnesium fire from the sun streaming through the age-rippled glass. She looked like an angel and for this moment, the uncertainty of the move disappeared.

I soon made friends with one of the other kids in the house. The same age as me, Jeff had a baby brother, Dylan, who kept his mom busy all the time. Jeff's dad scared me. He had a loud voice that boomed through the hallways and he filled the doorway when he entered a room. I only heard him laugh after dinnertime when the dads drank Bourbon and talked about sports or complained about politics. Mostly though, Jeff's parents ignored him. He floated from room to room looking for someone to talk to like a dust bunny blown around the drafty house.

Playing outside one day, we explored a carriage house that sat on the back of the property. It had a storage room above the carriage bays that still had pegs on the wall for the horse tack, and we instantly turned it into our fort. Jeff found a stash of old magazines in the corner with pictures of naked people wearing dog collars and leather clothes that didn't cover their privates. Giggling as we looked, we hid the magazines under some musty blankets for safekeeping. Eventually the girls found the room and we battled them daily for dibs on the space, racing up the stairs after each breakfast to see who could claim it first.

Though Mom still looked unhappy, I enjoyed the Dillard House and felt glad that we had moved. Until we were introduced to our babysitter, that is.

With long dark hair and a permanent frown, Carlotta yelled at us constantly.

"Cuidado, ninos! You will get hurt," she would exasperate through her broken English.

We roamed the backyard oblivious to her warnings to behave. Occasionally she would gather the kids together to teach nursery songs in Spanish but Jeff and I paid no attention. We'd whisper to each other, making fun of her until she'd separate us. One

day the girls found the magazines and showed them to Carlotta, pointing fingers in our direction. She shook her head in disgust, throwing them in the garbage.

“*Ninos malos*,” she muttered with flat black eyes.

As summer heated up, Jeff and I were allowed to venture into town to explore the five and dime variety stores. That is when I began to notice the real differences between Kentucky and Washington. People talked funny: Can sounded like *cain*, boy sounded *boah*, and I had no idea what *dad-burned* meant. With the warmer days came the humidity and even eating breakfast caused us to sweat so we headed to anyplace that had air-conditioning. The Kentucky Theater with its high ceilings, velvet draped movie screen and wool seats that smelled of buttered popcorn became our favorite place to go. The floor squeaked with every step down the aisle, but no one cared. We’d hunker down during the hottest hours of the day with a double feature movie of *The Lone Ranger*.

One sweltering afternoon we headed home after the movies, chasing pools of shade. The air thick and silent save for the constant hiss of the cicadas, even the sound of a car door shutting sounded dull in the heat. We cut through a parking lot and came upon two guys arguing. Ducking behind a Sassafras tree, we listened for a few moments and then ran home. I arrived first, exploding into the kitchen with my clothes paper mache’d to my skin. Mom stood in front of a bubbling pot on the stove.

“Mom, what is a *nigger*?”

Her hand froze above the large black iron pot. “What did you say?” she asked, her almond shaped eyes suddenly round.

“*Nigger*.”

“Where did you hear *that*?” She asked, facing me. Pearls of perspiration dotted her forehead.

“On the way home from the movie. A man yelled it at another guy. He used the *f* word too.”

I knew what the *f* word meant. One day last year I heard Tommie Pratt call his older brother the *f* word on the school bus. The Pratts were towheaded boys who looked like twins because their mom dressed them in matching clip-on ties, sweater vests and Hush Puppy suede shoes. When we got home, Christine and I played a game of tag in the house as mom prepared dinner. She tagged me just as I reached Mom. I told her it didn’t count because Mom played home base. Christine said home base couldn’t be a person so I called her a fucker and Mom washed my mouth with Lava Soap. That’s how I learned what the *f* word meant.

“Honey,” she said now, pausing to choose her words carefully. “The *n* word is another word you should never use. It is ugly and hateful.”

“But what does it mean?” I pressed.

Mom sighed, wiping her forehead. “*¡Carajo, que caliente!*”

“Mom?”

“Honey, we live in the South now. For a few more months at least until our training is complete. They do things differently here. People are not treated the same. Especially black people. But times are changing and some people, like the man in the parking lot, don’t like that.”

“But why?” I asked, spying the large cookie jar on the counter behind her filled with vanilla wafers. Mom rarely had cookies for us, let alone store bought cookies, but the other moms did.

“It’s complicated, Mijo,” she said, wiping her forehead. “I need to finish dinner, honey. Go outside and play.”

* * *

Shopping for new school clothes and supplies marked the transition from summer to fall. I raced up and down the aisles of the variety store, convinced I could run faster in my new Converse sneakers. Armed with No. 2 pencils, double-rule paper and a plastic zip pouch, I wondered, what would my class be like?

The remaining weeks of summer flew by quickly and Mom walked me to school on the first day. I fingered the tip of my shirt collar nervously as we approached Picadome Elementary, an old brick building with freshly waxed concrete floors. A wall of kids fought for airspace in the tightly packed hallways as we headed to the office.

“You’ll be fine,” Mom reassured as she handed me off to the secretary. Pausing to measure my expression, she patted my cheek and then turned on her heel and disappeared into the crowded hallway. I kept my eyes trained on her through the office windows, hoping she would look back but she didn’t.

“Follow me,” a voice commanded as a teacher’s assistant appeared at my. She led me purposefully through the clogged hallways, expertly parting the bergs of chattering kids. Depositing me in a classroom doorway at the top of the stairs, all eyes fell on me as I entered the room. Quickly scanning the rows for Jeff’s familiar face, I didn’t find it.

The bell rang loudly above my head and I jumped, hearing muffled giggles from the class room. My face became warm and itchy as I prickled with embarrassment.

“Find an open seat quickly young man,” the screechy voice from the back of the room commanded.

I took a seat toward the back of the room, near the windows. Heels clicked loudly on the polished concrete floor as the teacher walked to the front of the room.

“My name is Mrs. Larch and this is the second grade,” she said, the cords in her neck sticking out and her Adam’s apple bobbing up and down. Tall and spindly, her long arms were linked with knobby joints. Beneath her skirt she wore flesh-colored stockings that bunched at her ankles. A starched white collar pinched the top of her neck. Her head looked like it would fall over if she moved too quickly.

She scanned the classroom with wild-eyed scrutiny and continued. “I am certain we are going to have a well-behaved class this year, aren’t we?” she asked without waiting for an answer. Her teeth hung like yellowed stalactites below her bright lipstick and her accent sounded as thick as dried bacon grease on a pine cone. I couldn’t understand most of what she said. Once, I asked a boy next to me to repeat her instructions.

“Can I help you with something?” she said with her menacing smile. Everyone looked at me.

“I didn’t understand what you said,” I responded weakly.

“Didn’t understand? Are you dense, little boy?” Only the last word came out like *boah*. She glared at me under blue painted eyelids.

“N-no.”

“Well, you must be. Everyone else can understand.”

It didn't ask for help anymore. From then on I picked up what I could, but my schoolwork suffered, as I became her favored target. She made me an example of laziness to the rest of the class as she handed me graded homework graced with large red D's and F's.

Mom asked about school after dinner one day. “It's okay,” I said. She held her gaze for a few moments to see if I really meant it, and I wilted under the attention.

“She yells at me, Mom. All the time.” Tears leapt down my face.

“The teacher? She yells at you?”

My throat felt hot and dry. I nodded my head affirmatively.

“*Mijo, lo siento*,” Mom said, stroking my chin. “Your father will talk to Mrs. Larch tomorrow.” She looked over at Dad. “Won't you, dear?”

Dad looked up from his paperwork on the coffee table. “What? Oh yes, of course. I'll talk with her,” he said, returning his attention to his work. I went to bed hopeful, with visions of Dad marching into the principal's office and demanding Mrs. Larch be fired.

I woke up early the next morning and ate breakfast while patiently waiting for Dad while Mom hurried to get the girls ready for school. Dad rushed into the kitchen glancing nervously at the clock then quickly poured himself coffee. Scanning the morning paper on the kitchen table, he finally noticed me.

“Why aren't you on the way to school, Ricky? You're going to be late.”

“But Dad,” I squeaked, “You were going to talk with my teacher today.” I gripped my Superman lunch box and swung my feet nervously above the speckled linoleum floor.

“Oh Lord,” he said glancing at his watch. “I don’t have time to take you this morning, Ricky. I’m running late for an appointment.” He gulped his coffee and stared at the yellow-stained wall for a moment. “This will have to do,” he said with a sigh as he leaned over and began to scribble on a piece of paper.

“Give this note to her.” Dad folded the paper in quarters and thrust it toward me. I stared at the folded note for a moment and then slowly closed my hand over it. “She’ll understand, Ricky. Tell her I can talk if she needs me to.”

He drained his coffee and shot me a forced smile as he slipped his arms into his blue seersucker jacket. He didn’t want to talk to Mrs. Larch anymore than I did. “You’d better get going, Ricky,” he said, leaning over to kiss me on the forehead, blanketing me with a wave of Bay Rum aftershave.

The scent of after-shave lingered after he left the kitchen. I remembered how we used to shave together. Dad had given me an empty razor handle and standing side-by-side in front of the large bathroom mirror, we swiped the cream from our faces as his whiskers spun into the drain. He splashed Bay Rum on his face, then mine. We laughed.

We lived back home then, in Washington State, where I could understand what the teachers said when they talked to me, like Mrs. Bright, my first grade teacher who drove a green MG convertible. I had a crush on her. I fantasized driving her around in her sports car while I held a lit cigarette between my fingers, gripping the leather-wrapped steering wheel. I’d say something funny and she would throw her head back laughing, her immaculate teeth gleaming in the sunlight. I laughed along, exhaling smoke in perfect white puffs.

I stuffed the note in my front pocket and quietly walked out the kitchen without saying goodbye to Mom. I stopped for a moment and looked up at the windows of the carriage house, tempted to go and hide out. I didn't want to face Mrs. Larch. I hated this adventure.

I walked through school, the squeak of my Converse tennis shoes echoing down the empty hallway. In the classroom heads were bowing studiously over their books while Mrs. Larch perched at her desk, leering at the class like a vulture, ready to pounce on the first misdeed. A boy ground on a pencil with the sharpener at the rear of the room.

"Come here Ricky Thomas," she said locking her eyes on mine. I approached her desk and my eyes watered with the scent of her perfume. It smelled like mothballs.

"Do you have something for me?"

"Yes Ma'am," I said, trying my best to fit in. Everyone said Sir and Ma'am in Kentucky, though I noticed it didn't mean being nice; people used it to be mean sometimes. I dug the tardy slip out of my front pocket along with Dad's note and handed both to her. She opened a drawer on her desk and pulled out the attendance log. Scanning down the list of names with her bony forefinger, she stopped at mine, then traced across the columns to the date.

"Late," she said aloud, accentuating the *t* as she scribed a tidy red check mark, then placed the book back in the drawer, sliding it closed with an authoritative thump. The folded note lay on her desk like a coiled snake. I shouldn't have given it to her.

Spreading the notepaper flat, she read, her eyes moving rapidly from side to side. Tiny whiskers twitched on her upper lip.

She shifted her smoldering gaze back to me. “Yellin’?” she said loudly as the cords in her neck drew tight. “You think I’m yellin’ at you?”

“S-s-sometimes,” I said, barely audible.

“I. AM. NOT. YELLIN’,” she yelled, launching spittle torpedoes from her mouth. “You ungrateful little boy. You are most unappreciative of the extra attention I’ve been giving *you* trying to *he’p* you while the other kids in this classroom go without. I can see now it is a waste of my time. Go on back to your seat and don’t let me hear a peep outta you or I will send you to the principal’s office.”

I shuffled back to my desk in dread. The note only made things worse and my stomach hurt thinking about how bad she would treat me from now on.

I laid low for the first few days, expecting reprisals from her. Surprisingly, they never came. Mrs. Larch all but ignored me the rest of the fall. My schoolwork kept coming back with failing grades but I didn’t care. I threw it away along with my report cards with sternly scrawled notes warning of my poor performance and uncooperative attitude.

One night, Mom asked how things were going.

“Fine.”

“Fine?”

“Yeah, fine,” I reassured, pasting the best smile I could manage on my face. Mom looked at me for a long moment, as if measuring my words with my expression. I thought for sure she would push further but she returned to Yolanda’s plate, cutting the meat into kid-sized bites. Dad conversed with one of the other parents, leaning back in his chair with legs crossed while perching a glass of wine on his knee, oblivious.

Later that night, as I climbed into bed, I could hear Mom and Dad arguing in their room. I didn't know which made me more afraid—their arguing or fear that the other parents would tell them to quiet down. I listened in silence as they finally stopped. Mom came into my room soon after and sat on the edge of my bed. The light from the hallway cast her features in partial relief. Her cheeks were wet and her voice unsteady. She brushed the hair away from my forehead.

“Ricky, I know this move hasn't been easy for you kids,” she said, looking at me intently. “We will be moving soon and all this will be behind us, no?” She attempted a reassuring smile.

I nodded and closed my eyes, leaning into her open arms. She placed her hand on my cheek. Her palm soft and cool to the touch, I pressed into it while curling into a ball on her lap.

“You are getting too big for this, Mijo!” she laughed, taking away her hand to wipe her nose.

I didn't want to be too big. I wanted to be small. To be protected by a Dad who didn't back down from mean teachers and a Mom who never took “fine” for an answer.

She kissed me on the nose and silently left the room.

Chapter 3

Invisible

In December we moved to Valencia, a large city two hours west of Caracas, the capital of Venezuela. We moved into our new home, a single-story stuccoed building in an older section of town that covered the entire city block. It faced the street with shuttered windows behind rusting iron bars, and peeling plaster exposed weathered brick walls. My room also faced the street. At night I would listen to street traffic beneath the netted tent, the mosquito coil filling the room with its musky scent. Slitted light raced across my wall from passing headlights. The bloodthirsty attackers whined, circling the netting for an opening.

Soon after unpacking our bags and becoming familiar with our surroundings on the block, Dad walked me through the single-lane cobblestone streets to the local corner grocery store. This was definitely not like home. There weren't any suburban style ramblers or 7-11 convenience stores. Dad explained to the shopkeeper that I would be by from time to time to buy groceries. I began making the trek regularly, filling with my large burlap bag with eggs, cheese, mangoes, an occasional beer for Dad, and of course my favorite, Orange Fanta soda.

“¿Que mas Señor?” the man behind the counter asked with a gold-toothed smile.

“No mas, ¡gracias!” I would answer proudly as I handed over the Bolivares and counted exact change in centavos.

I enjoyed the routine and Mom would beam when I returned with the groceries.

“Mijo, mi hombre grande!”

I loved it when she was proud of me.

* * *

A few months into our stay, Dad suggested a trip into the countryside.

“Somewhere away from the heat, in the mountains,” he said.

Valencia lay in a large basin, bordering the Andes Mountains to the northwest of the city. The Andes were home to Angel Falls, the world’s highest uninterrupted waterfalls, Dad explained. Excited for the coming trip, we packed the night before and left early the next morning in a borrowed VW microbus. We drove for several hours, winding our way through the city and then the suburbs, the switchbacks and narrowing roads indicating we had left the sprawling population behind. The micro bus groaned as we climbed in elevation. Soon we were in the clouds and the road became slick with mist as we entered a small village straddling the road. I gazed out the windows at the passing donkeys laden with burlap bags and weathered riders wearing colorful sarape’s. People looked different in the mountains—almond shaped eyes packaged between high cheek bones and tiny foreheads.

We pattered slowly through the village, passing a couple of young guys hitchhiking. They looked different than the locals. One, tall with an angular face and

intense eyes; the other shorter with a large round face and broad nose. They extended their thumbs a little higher as we drove by without stopping. I locked eyes with the tall one and he smiled, as if sharing a secret with me as we pulled away.

“Honey, pull over” Mom said as Dad began accelerating up the hill.

“Why?”

“Those boys need a ride.”

“They could rob us blind!” he protested.

“They’re kids honey. We’ll be fine,” she said. Her dark eyes were shining.

Dad slowed reluctantly as Mom rolled down the window. The boys broke into a jog to catch up to us.

“*A donde vas?*” she asked. The tall one responded enthusiastically, his unshaved face producing a stream of unbroken Spanish as he pointed in the direction we were heading.

“They are going to the next town,” Mom translated as she leaned back to release the sliding door. As the two hitchhikers piled in, Dad stared straight ahead, his knuckles turning white as he gripped the steering wheel. My sisters and I retreated to the back of the microbus as Dad pulled back onto the wet road, forcefully working through the gears, the engine roaring in protest.

“*Me llamo Gustavo. Mucho gusto,*” the tall one said to me as he held out his hand, introducing himself.

“Nestor,” the round faced companion said, raising his hand to say hello.

“*Mucho gusto,*” I responded, shaking his hand. Nestor nodded silently.

“Muchas gracias por la vuelta, Senor,” Gustavo said to Dad. He downshifted in response, lurching the bus forward as the engine raced. The microbus slowly climbed the winding road as Mom chatted energetically with the passengers. The conversation was too rapid to understand, but Mom’s expression said it all. She was enjoying herself.

“Ask them if they know where we can find a hotel,” Dad said, grudgingly breaking his silence. The stream of sing-song Spanish continued, Mom’s melodic voice garnishing Gustavo’s baritone delivery. Occasionally Nestor would interject a gravelly response to her questions, *“Si Senora, Si.”* I eventually drifted to sleep to the drone of the engine beneath my seat and woke sometime later as the gravel popped beneath the tires. We pulled into a single pump gas station on the side of the road. It appeared abandoned until Dad cut the engine and a small, hunched man appeared at the side of the microbus. His face like an ancient raisin, he spat dark juice onto the dirt as he pumped the gas. I watched Dad through the side glass, miming his words slowly to the raisin. The old man nodded as he spat more dark juice onto the ground.

“Porque no vienes quedarse con nosotros?” Gustavo asked Mom. He was inviting us to stay with him. “The house is large. There is much room.”

Mom leaned out the window and explained the offer as Dad paid the attendant. His lips drew tight as he counted out the Bolivares.

“Gracias Senor,” The Raisin thanked as Dad started the microbus, ignoring the courtesy. Grinding gears, he pumped the clutch and spit gravel as he drove onto the highway. I didn’t get why he was angry. I thought the invitation sounded cool.

Dad followed Gustavo’s directions off the main road onto a single-lane dirt track, deeply rutted and walled with jungle canopy that arched across the top of the road like

stretched fingers. Bouncing our way over the ruts, we eventually broke into the open, approaching a turn-of-the-century colonial mansion overlooking a large plantation. From a distance it looked grand, like the large antebellum homes in Lexington. As we got closer it was less like the old homes I remembered from Kentucky. The white paint was stained and peeling. Balusters were missing from the railings and the dark green vegetation was overtaking the building, engulfing the structure in a leafy cocoon.

Gustavo leapt from the van before it had rolled to a stop, greeting people enthusiastically. Dad parked the minibus and Gustavo lead us into the house. Entering a large kitchen, he introduced us to a group of old women preparing food. He spoke to one seated at the table peeling yucca root, motioning to us. Her face was deeply lined and she wore a braided ponytail, tightly woven down to her waist. Her hands worked the knife expertly as she nodded, looking us over briefly and returning to the peeled yucca. “*Esta es La Senora*,” Gustavo announced. “You are her guests.”

We then followed him down a hallway to a vacant room in the rear of the house, passing several rooms filled with bedrolls haphazardly scattered on the floors and crazy art on the walls. I imagined what the original occupants must have been like—wealthy landowners who hosted big parties and had servants wearing white gloves, waiting on them hand and foot. Now it housed scruffy travelers whose arrival went unquestioned. As if it were expected.

I caught up with Gustavo after we unpacked and tagged along with him for the rest of the day. He seemed to know everyone and would stop and visit, occasionally sharing a hand-rolled cigarette. I watched the interactions with fascination, especially as

some of them passed around an open jar that they raised to their nose and inhaled deeply. One of the guys held the pungent smelling jar to me.

“*Hoye!*” Gustavo retorted, pulling me away from the outstretched arm. “*Lo que esta mal con usted? El es simplemente un chico!*” (What is wrong with you? He is just a little boy!) Gustavo said angrily, leading me away. “These people here,” he explained, “are harmless, but a little loco. Stay with me and you will be okay.” He gave me a wink and I fell in behind him as he continued touring the plantation.

“We grow all our food on the farm,” he explained as we walked through the cultivated rows in the field. I stepped over the knee-high stalks of corn wondering whether Charlie was here also.

“Who are all these people?” I asked.

“Friends and students. From La Universidad. We come up to the farm for a rest from the classes.”

“Who owns this place?”

“*Hijo pequeno!*” he said with a smile, ruffling my hair. “You ask a lot of questions. La Senora in the kitchen is the owner. She is the grand daughter of the man who built this farm many years ago. She did not marry and has no family. She says we are her children.”

Toward evening one of the kitchen ladies banged a metal spoon against an iron pipe hanging by the front porch and people began to gather for dinner. Everyone ate together, seating family style in several tables setup in the large room at the front of the house. I inhaled the food. Grilled chicken, black beans and yucca root were served on

large platters and I listened intently to the table conversations, trying to pick out familiar words. After dinner a bonfire was lit in the fire pit off to the side of the house and random groups began to surround the hot fire. Several guitars appeared along with a small ukulele-like instrument called a *cuatro*. I knew that is what it was because Dad had played one at the Mercado Central in Valencia when we first arrived. Dad was amazing that way. Given a little bit of time, he could play any instrument.

Suddenly tired from the travel, I looked for Mom and found her engaged in a conversation with several other women. I lay down on the wool blanket, placing my head in her lap. She stroked my cheek and I fell asleep in the glow of the bonfire, listening to the unintelligible conversation and Venezuelan folk songs. I woke in our room the next morning alongside Yolanda not remembering how I got there.

Breakfast was similar to the communal dinner, though much more subdued. People mostly kept to themselves, quietly drinking coffee or mate, a tea drink served in a gourd and sipped through a straw. After breakfast I asked Dad if I could look for Gustavo. I liked hanging out with him. He was friendly and treated me like a grownup, including me in his conversations with his friends.

“I want you to stay with the family today, Ricky,” Dad said.

“But why?” I protested.

“Because...,” he paused searching for words. “Because we just need to be together.”

“But, Dad.”

“Enough, Ricky. You are staying with us today.”

While it happened rarely, Dad did occasionally put his foot down and there was no point in arguing. As if he were a modern day Walter Mitty, acting as if a defiant stand against a seven year-old kid was a noble act on principle. Once he reached this conclusion, he could not be reversed, no matter how menial the issue.

I traipsed along behind Mom and Dad for the rest of the day. Spotting Gustavo at lunchtime, he waved and smiled and I returned them halfheartedly. I really felt like crying though. It wasn't fair. Following Dad around wasn't the same as Gustavo and his friends. Dad tried hard to fit in with the young students but I cringed at his stiff attempts. He attempted his Spanglish nervously on the various guests and they were kind in their responses, but the chasm between them was glaring: one big-ass white gringo among the stoned-out Latino hippies. Mom, on the other hand, glowed with confidence. She nestled into the floor pillows as Spanish flowed from her like an artesian well. She folded in with the dark haired and olive skinned guests, soon becoming more them than us. She even answered Dad in Spanish when he spoke to her. He didn't like it. It made him angry and he bristled at her responses.

"We should be leaving soon," he spat, stomping off.

After dinner the second night, the bonfire was lit and everyone began to gather. I asked if I could sit by Gustavo and Dad relented. "I suppose, since it's our last night here."

"What? We are leaving tomorrow?" I asked looking at Mom. She avoided my gaze, picking at the hem of her skirt.

"In the morning, after breakfast," he answered before she could say anything. "I need to get back to work."

I walked glumly to where Gustavo was sitting. Unlike with my family, there was laughter here. They were having fun, not worrying about having to get back anywhere or be embarrassed by a dad that didn't fit in no matter how hard he tried.

"Hola, mi amigo!" Gustavo said, noticing me standing on the edge of group. I stepped over legs and laps and dropped heavily beside him. He mussed my hair and returned to his guitar. I sat quietly listening as the light of the fire cast the faces in partial shadows, Gustavo and his friends laughing and chiding each other. Mostly I could not understand, however I could tell they were discussing leaving the next morning to Maracaibo, a beach town to the North.

"Cante con nosotros, Ricky," Gustavo said as the group broke into verse. "Sing with us."

I woke the next morning smelling smoke. I was still in my clothes from the night before and they smelled like the fire. Yolanda and Christine slept soundly beside me, but the bed was empty. Mom and Dad were already up. I slipped out of the room and found them on the front porch drinking coffee, talking with La Senora.

"Have you seen Gustavo?" I asked Mom.

"Yes, earlier. He may have already left, however. He was packing up to leave and said to tell you goodbye."

I ran back into the house in a panic, racing to his room. The floor mats were empty of the bedrolls and backpacks that littered the room the day before. Tears flooded my eyes as I ran onto the porch, and then I heard his laughter. It was unmistakable,

coming from the side of the house. Racing in the direction of his voice, I found him loading his pack on the roof of a jeep with a few other people joining him.

“*Ricky, buenas dias. Que pasa?*” I tried to respond but the words were stuck at the top of my throat. Trying my best not to cry, the tears flowed anyway. I looked away as a sob escaped my mouth.

“My friend, why so sad?”

“Please,” I asked. “Can I come with you?”

“Ahh, yes,” he laughed. “The adventurer.” He ruffled my hair and knelt down, pulling me into his embrace. His stubbly beard scratched my cheek as he hugged me tightly. His scent filled my nose, incense, sweat and hair. It smelled like home to me.

“But your parents will miss you, *mi amigo*. Your place is with them. They need you.” He looked in my eyes with his black pupils and wiped my tears dry. “We will meet again, Ricky. Perhaps in Maracaibo—you will visit me, no?” I nodded my head though I didn’t know how or when we would.

“*Andale*,” Nestor said, climbing into the jeep. Gustavo climbed into the drivers seat and started the engine, producing a voluminous blue cloud from the exhaust. Giving one last wave, he drove away in a clash of gears as I felt a hand rest on my shoulder. It was Mom and she cupped my chin in her hand. I leaned into her, the sadness settling over me like a fog.

“Come Mijo. Let’s get something to eat.” I didn’t feel like eating. I wanted to go home.

Packing after breakfast, Mom bade tearful goodbye’s to her new friends. Dad and the girls were happy to leave while I sat in the car kicking the back of the drivers seat.

The trip back to Valencia was made in silence, the sewing machine rattle of the air-cooled engine the only constant noise. Arriving home late in the day, I went straight to my room, skipping dinner. I laid in silence in the dark room, listening to the traffic outside my window. Awhile later, the door creaked open shooting a beam of light against the far wall. Mom walked quietly into the room, shutting the door behind her.

“Mijo?”

I paused, contemplating whether to fake sleeping or not.

“Yeah, Mom?” I finally responded.

“Are you okay honey?”

“I guess.”

“Why so sad?”

I couldn't answer what I was really thinking. How could I tell her I was ashamed of my family? Why were we so weird? We weren't like anyone else. We didn't fit in with people white people like Dad and weren't like Mom's Hispanic friends. We were something in the middle. Something invisible and indescribable.

“I'm just tired I guess.” She stroked my cheek and kissed me on the forehead. I rolled over and tried to fall asleep, counting cars that passed by my window.

* * *

Things quickly reverted to how they usually were before. Dad was in control. Mom was quiet and distant, staring sadly out the windows. I mostly thought of Gustavo and his friends on the beach in Maracaibo, laughing as I imagined them singing around the bonfire, playing bocce ball and eating fresh oysters.

Mom and Dad began arguing a lot, and late into the night. First I would hear his voice, then hers, then Dad sobbing.

Dad disappeared one night after really bad argument. “Your father is out of town on business,” Mom told us. “He will return soon. Do not worry, Mijo,” she reassured, though doubt lingered in her face.

By the following week Dad still wasn’t home. “He had to go back to the states,” she said. “More business.” Her mouth was tight, eyes wide as they flitted beneath her almond shaped lids. She cooked the meals in silence as we played quietly.

One day after school, she packed us onto a city bus and we traveled an eternity to the Peace Corps office across town. My sisters and I sat in the lobby as Mom met with the Director behind closed doors. When she came out, her eyes were red. She clutched a wadded tissue in her hand.

“Alicia,” the director said, his voice almost pleading as if trying to make her see reason. “At least let me give you a lift home.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly. We piled into his car and I fell asleep on Christine’s shoulder as he drove us home.

Three weeks later, Dad appeared out of the blue full of smiles and with an armload of gifts. The girls and I hugged him tight as he gave us each a kiss on the cheek. He was freshly shaved, smelling of Bay Rum and his eyes were bright and smiling. Dad reached a hand out to Mom. She turned away, her face rigid. He bent forward and kissed her on the back of the head anyway as she walked into the kitchen. I opened my gift. It was a metal statuette of Simon Bolivar, the liberator of Venezuela. He was seated on his white horse with one hand perched in the air as if to signal the troops to march on. Simon

confidently returned my gaze with hand painted eyes. I went to sleep wishing I were Simon Bolivar.

* * *

The fighting got worse. So bad that I thought the neighbors would complain. One night another Peace Corps couple joined us for dinner. Dad was drinking too much wine and began saying mean things about the Peace Corps director. He said the director didn't like him and was out to get him.

"Bob," Mom kept saying sharply, wishing he would shut up.

He ignored her and kept on talking to the guests. The husband looked uncomfortable, keeping his head down and nodding to Dad's complaints. The wife smiled stiffly and tried to make small talk with mom, chasing her food nervously around her plate. As soon as the guests left for the night Mom and Dad started in on the arguing. I escaped to my room, shutting the door behind me to block out the shouting, but it didn't work. I lay in the dark room listening, not able to make out the words but the tone communicating everything -- Mom's voice, angry and accusing; Dad's high and whiny. A metallic clang rang out as a something hit the floor. It was followed by the crash of breaking glass and then silence. I burrowed into my pillow hoping it was over, but I heard sniffing outside my door—it was Dad. Whimpering through the sniffles, he was arguing by himself, much more forcefully now that Mom wasn't there to hear him.

"Don't tell me how to behave!" he said. "I'll really be gone and then what will you do?" He sobbed again as the front door squeaked open then slammed shut. Dad passed by my open window, still muttering to himself as his footsteps disappeared down

the street. For a moment I was worried where he was going, but then realized the house was quiet and I was glad. I soon fell asleep, wishing I were in Maracaibo with Gustavo.

I woke later as my bedroom door creaked open. It was too dark to be the morning and I lay with my eyes open, wondering if I had imagined it. Then I heard feet shuffling unevenly across the concrete floor. A sliver of streetlight snuck through the open shutter casting a profile across the figure standing beside my bed.

“Dad, is that you?” I asked.

He stood behind the mosquito netting, breathing heavily with the sour smell of alcohol hanging on his breath. Fumbling for the opening in the net, he fell in beside me, rocking the coil springs with his dead weight. *Why was he getting in my bed? Please go away I wished.* I turned away from him but kept rolling into his crater in the mattress.

I shut my eyes shut tight as he draped one arm over me and began to weep, speaking between sobs. He was slurring his words, his breath making me want to barf. “It’s not fair,” he kept repeating. “You don’t understand. No one understands.” I held my breath, not daring to exhale. *Please go away.* Dad kept whimpering unintelligibly.

The red glow of the smoldering mosquito coil in the corner of the room was the only indication of passing time. Dad eventually quieted while I balanced on the edge of the bed, doing my best not to fall onto the floor or roll into him.

Later, I woke to Dad touching me down there. He cupped me with his rough hand while he cried softly. I attempted to move his arm but he just squeezed tighter. It hurt. Dad lay there with me in his grasp, silent. Wanting him to say something to break the void, so I could scream, or cry, or tell him to stop. I couldn’t though. I was muzzled by the wordlessness until I could no longer take it.

“Please stop,” I finally managed to squeak. He didn’t respond. “Daddy, please stop,” I said again louder. *Gustavo, where are you?* Lying frozen, I numbly stared at the red glow orbiting the Coke bottle mosquito coil stand. Eventually it winked out and Dad released me. He rolled over, rocking the bed, springs groaning. I clung to the edge of the mattress wishing morning would come quickly. *This didn’t happen, I kept wishing. It was a bad dream. Tomorrow everything will be all better. Mom will not be sad and Dad will be normal.*

I woke with the bed striped in sunlight streaming through shutters. For a moment the foggy memory of last night was just a bad dream and I was relieved. Then I noticed Dad’s pants splayed on the floor, the dismembered legs confirming that last night was no dream. I lay in my wet spot, the familiar smell of urine filling my head as the bright rays slowly worked across the covers. The pit in my stomach grew with dread as I imagined facing Dad. *What would I say?* I watched the dust fairies levitate in the sunbeam, glowing in their gravity-defying dance. *I wish I could be a dust fairy, free from gravity and creaking doors in the middle of the night.*

The smell of breakfast eventually got me out of bed. I changed out of my wet pajamas and found Mom in the kitchen frying *arepas* on the black iron griddle. The smell of ground corn maize frying in oil filled the house. I sat at the table as Mom slid a plate in front of me, scrambled eggs heaped over the hot corn cake.

“Good morning sleepy head,” she said with a smile.

“Morning.”

“*Quieres Mango?*” She deftly peeled the football size fruit, picked from the tree in the backyard. We also had a lemon tree with lemons the size of softballs.

“No thanks.”

I heard Christine and Yolanda’s voices in the courtyard. I didn’t want to ask Mom, but I had to know. “Where’s Dad?”

“He must have gone to work early,” she said. “I didn’t hear him leave.”

I didn’t know what I would say when I faced him. Would he apologize? I hoped he would forget it.

Dad came home that night at the usual time and settled into the wicker chair with the newspaper and a glass of wine. I was playing *Life* with Yolanda and Christine. The game was going well for me. I was a doctor earning a hundred grand with a large home, a pink plastic wife and one each pink and blue plastic child sitting obediently in the second row of the yellow station wagon. I’ll bet their parents didn’t argue too.

“What did you do today, Ricky?” Dad finally asked over the top of the newspaper.

“Nothin’ much,” I said, turning attention to my next move.

“Hmm. That’s nice,” he said absently. Last night didn’t exist to him. Not anymore at least, as if a turn of the newspaper made it disappear. I realized then that the dad I thought I knew, the dad that swam out to save me, no longer existed. There was no one to protect me now. I was on my own.