

**SOMEWHERE
BETWEEN
HEAVEN & HELL**

Memories of Yore

**Armando and Fernando
Garcia-Davila**



McCAA BOOKS • SANTA ROSA



McCaa Books

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Dedications

Fernando dedicates this book to Jan, the best wife a man could ask for, I love you honey, also for Ma and Pa and for Antonio, Holly, Jacob, Katie, Cally, Josh, Davila, Voytek, Aurora, Ana, Ken, Raul, Ana Marie, Cory, Jamie, Garret, Vinny, Jessica, McKenzie, Jordan, Carolyn, Bill, Kenny, Kim, Stephen, Nicole, Natalie, Barbie, Kelly, Page, Jenna, Jake, Katie, Kyle, Mia, Martha, Wayne, Aaron, Desiree, Payton, Olivia, Adam, Anthony, Lynne, Aiden, Mateo, Gabe, McKenzie, Mack, Eliana, Jacob, Damien, Alicia, Tony, Armando, Emilio, Cecilia, Carlos, Enrique, Mila, Carmen, Jim, Michelle, Pete, Frances, and Carmelita.
Whew, that's a load off my mind.

Armando dedicates this book
to Sister Marie Lucille.

Forward

Armando and Fernando

“Mom, what was it like raising twins?”

—Fernando Garcia

“Ay, sometimes I go to bed crying.”

—Carolina Garcia

MOST OF WHAT ARMANDO and I have written in our stories is true. We used poetic license in the sequence of events to give the reminiscences a logical flow. The author of each chapter is identified below the chapter title.

We attended St. Jude Academy for the first two years and St. Rita’s Catholic Grammar School for the rest of our elementary education. Armando and I received enough sacraments during our primary-education years to guarantee us a shot at getting into heaven in the event of our untimely deaths.

By the time we reached age of five, Ma must have rejoiced when she walked us to our first day of kindergarten and could look forward to a few hours of peace, Monday mornings through Friday afternoons. Between the ages of six months and five years, we had already put her through a lifetime of worry. Before my first birthday, and while living in a migrant worker camp, I swallowed some kerosene from a glass jar that Ma kept near the lamp. I had mistaken the clear liquid for water. While I spent a day in the hospital, my sister Martha spent the day on her knees praying for me. She likely regretted it a few years later when I sneaked into her bed one night and scared the hell out of her.

Forward

An exciting new world lay before my brother and me when we learned to walk. We climbed into the cab of dad's 1948 GMC work truck, somehow released the parking brake, and coasted out of the driveway and down a hill. My brother stood on the seat playing with the steering wheel. I sat on the floor pushing and pulling the clutch, brake, and accelerator pedals. Ma realized a moment too late that her house was unusually quiet and noticed that the front door was open. She stepped out to see my brother standing inside the truck as it rolled away. She chased after, waving arms and screaming. The truck came to a stop when it turned into an embankment. Fortunately, it didn't turn in the other direction crossing a street heavy with traffic. Our Aunt Mary, Ma's sister—not to be confused with Aunt Mary, my father's sister—found our little adventure riotously funny.

On another occasion I stood on a ladder rung and dropped a half-pound lead weight on my twin to see what would happen. He cried and got a pot knot on the top of his head. Ma gave him a treat, I got a whack.

Armando and I played with an old quilt Ma had discarded in our backyard, which in and of itself was highly unusual as Ma rarely threw anything away. I wrapped him in the quilt, allowing his head to stick out, and pushed him down a knoll. He laughed gleefully as he rolled until his head hit a piece of broken concrete protruding out of the ground. When he came to a stop, I grabbed the end of the quilt and rolled him out. He cried as blood pulsed from the wound. He came home from the emergency room missing a patch of hair and four neat cat-gut stitches closing the wound.

When we climbed a rickety wood fence in our back yard, my brother grabbed a fence board, which gave way, and he fell nose first onto the ground just as Pa was pulling into the driveway from his work shift. Pa saw blood flowing onto his chest and ran to him. Pa covered his nose with a handkerchief and

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rushed him to the emergency room. For the record, I did not push him off the fence.

Armando got mad after I took away the broom handle that was his rifle. He sunk his teeth into my shoulder blade. Ma had to pry him off as I screamed.

We got caught, with our neighbor Genie, playing with matches and nearly burned down his garage. Ma smacked our hands with the backside of her hairbrush; Genie got a whipping.

I shot my brother in the back with our neighbor Mikey's BB gun that he kept just inside their back door. The BB imbedded itself into my brother's back. I begged him not to tell Ma and Pa but he snitched.

When Ma called us for dinner, we raced, trying to get there first. I tripped my brother. He landed open mouth on the concrete stairs from the lower yard and knocked an impressive-sized chip out of one of his front teeth.

This was an era before behavioral scientists and child psychologists trying to reason with your kids or modern helicopter parents that hover over their children. Ma used her Old World system of threat, guilt, *El Cucuy*, (the Mexican boogie man), and the devil, as tools for keeping us under some semblance of control and discipline.

Our stories were written to give you an insight into what is was like growing up in this era. We sincerely apologize if we have offended any friend, classmate, neighbor or relative, whether they be Mexican, American, Chicano, gringo, gay, straight, transsexual, transvestite, bisexual, bilingual or bipolar, with our writing. If you feel slighted, know that it is unintentional. We will never, however, apologize to Sister Mary Constance the principal and Mother Superior of the convent at St. Rita's School. You will soon find out why.

Introduction

Armando and Fernando

IT WAS TWO THOUSAND FIVE HUNDRED and two steps from the front door of our home on Euclid Avenue in San Diego, California, to the plain red-brick entry of St. Rita's grammar school. I know this because my twin brother, Armando, and I made the daily trek with our older sister Martha for two years until she graduated and went to join our older sisters, Ana and Carolyn, at Regina Coli Catholic High School for Girls. We then made this walk eight hundred and forty times. It should only have been seven hundred and sixty-eight times, but an extra year was added to our sentence since we both managed to flunk third grade. We did first and second grades at St. Jude Academy before moving to St. Rita's Parish.

We were all-weather trekkers: rain, fog, hot and humid, hot and dry, cold and rainy. A rarity was white frosty dew on roadside weeds during short cold snaps. Walking or riding bikes to school was the norm in the 1960s. A few kids took the St. Rita's School bus. I wondered what it would be like to take a bus. The daily twenty-five-cent two-way fare was beyond our family's means.

The walk took us downhill and past Horton Elementary School where our neighborhood friends went. The little pagans didn't have religion class in their school; they were fortunate to have my twin and me as neighborhood apostles to instruct

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them on the benefit of knowing the damning consequences of sin and the glorious rewards of heaven.

We walked past a large roadside billboard and decided whether the current advertisement merited a dirt-clod assault. Our targets included scantily clad women or ads promoting smoking or drinking. Mud grenades were preferred after a rare rain, as they stuck, making our attacks more effective.

We were moral crusaders rescuing an unsuspecting public from the devious entrapments of the devil that could result in one burning in the fires of hell for eternity. We were in the middle of doing our moral duty one morning when a driver pulled over long enough to yell, "Hey!" His misplaced admonishment was effective enough to stop us from meting out our just punishments. It was a relief to see him drive off. We shrugged our shoulders and left him to his grim fate.

We crossed Market Street, then on toward the railroad tracks, and past a Jehovah's Witness temple. Martha speculated once that they were like Communists. "I think they don't even vote," she said. I was not quite sure why not voting was wrong, but since she thought it important enough to bring up, it must have been unpatriotic and therefore sinful. The poor lost souls of Jehovah didn't have a chance of making it into heaven. Believers in any religion except Catholicism were doomed to limbo, or worse, in the afterlife. Limbo was a place of neither inconceivable suffering nor heavenly bliss where the poor slobs who weren't exposed to the truth, like us, went to experience eternal boredom.

My twin and I discussed a myriad of topics on our way to school. "Who do you think is the prettiest girl in our class?" "Who are the nicest or meanest nuns in school?" We wrestled with philosophical questions. "If God is all-powerful, can He create a boulder so heavy that even He can't lift it? If you found a bag of food on the street and gave it to a poor person and the food was poisonous and he died, would you be virtuous or

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sinful?” We were blessed with the gift of trying to figure out the deeper meaning of our life on earth.

MA, CAROLINA DAVILA, was born on December 27, 1915, in Hermosillo, Sonora, just south of Arizona. She came to the United States at eighteen to help Aunt Helen with her children. Although Ma lived most of her life in the United States and developed a strong English vocabulary, she never lost her accent, so yellow was “jello” and him was “heem.” She also brought some Old World healing methods. Ma applied a hot cloth to an ear for an infection and liberally applied Mentolato (Mentholatum) in nostrils, on chests, the bottom of your feet and on the forehead for colds or coughs. It was rubbed into arms and legs for sore muscles and into any bodily orifice in need of healing. After washing cuts with soap and water, she applied straight alcohol and ignored our screams, keeping a firm hold as we wriggled futilely. She used an enema bag filled with hot water and salt to cure my brother and me of worms. Ma believed drinking iced drinks or walking barefoot could cause a cold and not washing well could invite cancer, as could breathing in cat hairs and scratching scabs. The list was endless.

When we began to lose teeth we put them under our pillows so *El Raton*, the tooth Mouse, would exchange them for a nickel.

Like many of her contemporaries, she lost her teeth at an early age. I was born when she was thirty-four and have no memory of her not wearing dentures. Having brought seven children into the world, she lost the figure of the slim young woman in her wedding picture. Ma, like the rest of her siblings, was a devout Catholic and had an undying devotion to Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, as well as a handful of favorite saints.

Ma put a holy medal of St. Martin de Porres under our pillow when we got sick and prayed to St. Jude, the saint of lost causes. Things weren't looking good for my cousin Tony Alvarez when he was born. My Aunt Helen, knowing that Ma

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had a profound faith, asked her to pray for Tony to survive. Ma got busy and lo and behold Tony made it, even though he spent most of his life behind bars. Be careful what you pray for.

Ma had been taught by no-nonsense nuns in Mexico. No matter the cost, no matter the sacrifices that Pa and she had to make, Ma insisted on sending us to Catholic schools, believing that Catholic education was superior to public school education. She was adept at mending torn school uniforms and making nutritious food on a commoner's wage and still found a way to contribute to the church.

With the church's strict stance on contraception, she and her sisters had large families. Ma bore seven children; her sisters Mary and Emma had fifteen and eight. Interestingly, Ma, Mary and Emma all had identical twin boys.

Pa, Antonio Mendoza Garcia, was born in Mazatlan, Sinaloa, on September 16, 1913. In 1923, when his mother, Antonia, was abandoned by her husband, she decided to bring Pa and his two siblings to the United States. Pa was ten years old, his brother Sam was twelve and their sister Maria fourteen when they made the seven-hundred-mile trek from Mazatlan into El Norte. Pa, born in a coastal city, never lost his love of the sea, loved to fish and swim in the salty water. As long as Pa fished, we never went hungry.

When Grandma Antonia got to the Mexico-Arizona border, she was informed that in order to cross they had to prove that they had an intact family, that is, at a minimum, a male head-of-household and a wife. She found a man wanting to cross and they agreed that he'd pose as her husband. Afterward he went his way and they went theirs. She enrolled her children in American public schools, and they quickly became bilingual.

My parents met shortly after Ma came to San Diego. She fell in love with the tall, handsome man from Sinaloa who had no fear of gringos. My father, out of respect, wrote a letter to his future in-laws in Sonora asking for their daughter's hand in

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marriage. They gave their blessing and Ma and Pa were married in 1937 at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Logan Heights barrio, a few blocks east of downtown San Diego. Our brother, Tony, was born the following year, followed by our sisters, Ana, Carolyn, Martha, then Armando and me (Fernando), with our little sister, Carmen, who was born in 1953.

Pa opened a grocery store in Old Town. Tony's Market prospered for a few years, but he decided to sell his business and home and start a trucking company in Nogales, Arizona, hauling freight across the border. This business failed and he lost everything. He moved our family to work in the agricultural fields of Southern and Central California. He worked tirelessly long days, barely keeping our family fed. At one point he worked irrigating fields for a farmer. The farmer allowed Pa to move his family of eight into a water tower. Oblivious to the dire circumstances of our condition, my older siblings saw their humble dwelling as another adventure. Ma tired of following the crops, living in labor camps and her children bouncing from school to school, and she talked Pa into coming back to San Diego.

THE POST-WAR ECONOMY of the '50s and '60s was strong and jobs were plentiful. Pa landed a job working the graveyard shift, from midnight to eight in the morning, at a trucking company. He took on a Saturday afternoon job at the *San Diego Union* newspaper company delivering bundles of their Sunday morning edition to grocery stores, liquor stores, hotels, bowling alleys, and diners, etc.

Mexican culture values hard work. A truly macho man fathers children and does a good job as a provider. His life-long duty was tantamount to doing God's work. Pa never complained, always maintained a positive can-do spirit and never lost his sense of humor. All seven of us learned from his example and took pride in being able to add to the family's income. We all started working in our early teens. And this is how a

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family bordering on poverty pays tuitions for seven children to attend Catholic school.

THE SCHOOL SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME, headquartered in St. Louis, Missouri, was the order of nuns dedicated to teaching grammar schools. The Church considered California missionary country overrun by Mexicans, Filipinos, black people, mixed-race couples, the unbaptized, divorcees and the decadent Hollywood lifestyle. It was the sacred duty of these dogmatic Midwestern women of God to save California's children, who unbeknownst to them, were merrily skipping down the road to perdition. The nuns tasked themselves with imparting their value system on these unrefined people. The Sisters had no knowledge or appreciation of the cultures or mores of the children that they were to teach and indoctrinate.

My brother and I were two little brown-haired, brown-eyed power plants of energetic enthusiasm. We ran rather than walked and rambled more than talked. Our home was a brew of Californian pop culture and the chaotic festive Mexican culture of music, food, laughter and language that didn't mesh with the authoritarian discipline of a group of introspective Anglo-Saxon religious women who were hellbent on infusing us with the infallible teachings of the Church and what they deemed as acceptable behavior. A child would be severely admonished for merely uttering the word *fart*, or any other word having to do with bodily functions.

So we invite you into the world of our home, neighborhood, friends and school where two cultures, one Midwestern American conservative, the other a hybrid of New World America and Old World Mexico collided.

Inasmuch as there is cataclysmic upheaval when continents collide in the natural world, there was dreadful disruption at St. Rita's Grammar School between the nuns and the Garcia twins. We hope you enjoy our side of the story.

1.

Kindergarten

Armando

*“A good teacher covers the material well,
a great teacher shows you her stuff.”*

I WAS FIVE WHEN WE MOVED into the Logan Heights barrio of San Diego, in the summer of 1954. ‘Logan’ was a series of small one- and two-bedroom single-story custom-built houses. The neighborhood was a mix of Anglo and black families, but mostly Mexican-American. The Rodriguez family lived on one side of our house on Acacia Street and the Gastelums on the other. The Washington’s, a black family, lived next door to them.

My older sister Carolyn told me that Fernando and I would be starting school in September and how exciting it was going to be. “You are going to meet lots of kids,” she said.

A week later Ma dressed my brother and me, told Ana, our oldest sister, to watch little Carmen, saying that we would be back before long.

“*Vamonos, cuatitos,*” (Let’s go, little twins) Ma said.

“Are we going to school?” I asked.

“*Todavia no.*” (Not yet.) We walked to a big one-story building a few blocks from home. There was a white sign on the front lawn with some black letters on it. We walked into a room that was filled people sitting in chairs; most of them were women with kids. Ma stopped in front of a lady sitting at a big desk, talked to her, then took us to chairs along the wall, and

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had us sit on either side of her. She told us that we had to be quiet. Moments later a lady in a white dress and shoes opened a door and called out a name. In her arms, she cradled a board with papers attached to it. A lady got up and reached for the hand of the little girl next to her and followed the lady in white through the door. My legs dangled from the black chair, Ma sat quietly, periodically giving us a sad look. I got bored and wanted to get up.

“*Paciencia,*” Ma whispered. I knew better than to challenge her. I looked at the big clock on the wall, not sure why it was there. I had never seen such a big clock. I heard a girl cry from behind the door. The lady and little girl that had gone in came out into our room and walked out the door as the girl whimpered. The lady with the board and papers opened the door to our room with the big clock and called out, “Mrs. Garcia.” Ma told us to follow her. The lady led us down a hall to a small room. The room had white walls and two long white lights on the ceiling; the room had a nasty smell that kind of stung my nose.

“*No quiero que lloran.*”

I nodded hesitantly. Why she didn’t she want us to cry? There was a bed on a tall stand in the room and a picture of an outline of a body showing its bones and another picture of a body showing the insides. I didn’t like the way it looked.

A different lady in a white dress, stockings and shoes walked in and said, “Good morning, Mrs. Garcia.” She sounded nice.

“Goot morning,” Ma replied. I didn’t remember ever hearing Ma speak English.

“What are these two handsome boys’ names?”

“Dees ees Armando and dees ees Fernando.”

She smiled. “Hello, Armando. Would you come here and sit on the bed for me?” Ma told my brother to stay in his seat, then walked me over, lifted me, and sat me on the bed. The lady in white took a cotton ball and wiped the top of my arm with

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it. It was cold and had the same nasty smell as the room. The lady turned to the table and picked something up from under a white cloth.

“Look at your mother, honey.” I turned and felt a deep sting on my arm and wanted to cry but Ma told me not to.

“All done,” she said and put a round Band-Aid on my arm. She put me on the floor. I ran back to Ma and buried my face in her side; my arm hurt. The lady asked Ma to take my brother to her. He didn’t want to go but she took him and put him on the bed. He didn’t cry either. I saw Ma wipe a tear from his cheek. I wanted to cry for him. We walked out of the smelly room, down the hall, and out the front door.

“Mami, why did we have to go there?”

“*Porque tienen que ir antes que entran escuela.*” (You have to go there before going to school.) If we had to do this before going to school, then I didn’t want to go to school.

Early one morning a week later Fernando and I rose from our Army Surplus mats on the living room floor. The blankets where Tony had slept were folded and sat in a corner of the room. Tony used the couch for his bed and our three older sisters and cousin Ana Berta slept on twin beds in the second bedroom. Ma and Pa slept in the first bedroom with one-year-old Carmen in her crib.

Ana, Carolyn, Martha, and cousin Ana Berta were getting ready for the half-mile walk to St. Jude Academy. My brother and I were apprehensive about our first day of kindergarten at Balboa School, two blocks from our house. After the experience with the lady in white I was nervous about going to school.

Fernando and I stood naked, not sure what to do. Ma was in the kitchen putting sack lunches together. Pa was at his job at the freight company. Tony was on the bus heading to St. Augustine, an all-boys Catholic high school. The girls walked from their bedroom to the bathroom to an ironing board in

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the living room where they pressed the pleats in their school uniform skirts.

On a trip between rooms Martha, four years older than us to the day, looked at Fernando and me, wrinkled her nose in disgust, “Yuck. Would someone please dress them?”

“Carolina,” Ma called from the kitchen.

“*Mande!*” Carolyn answered.

“*Vistealos,*” (dress them) she ordered.

“*Sí, Mami,*” Carolyn answered and appeared from the bathroom, sighed, and took our hands. She was patient with us. Carolyn was slim, had dark short hair, brown eyes, and a slight gap between her two front teeth.

“Ay, come on, *cuatitos.*” Her hand was warm and felt good as she led us back to the dresser in her room. The house wasn’t warm yet and the cold morning air gave me a chill.

Carolyn stood by her bed and searched out underwear, T-shirts, and socks from a drawer.

“You two are old enough to dress yourselves,” she muttered, hurrying as she pulled up my pants.

Ana, Carolyn, Martha, and Ana Berta soon left the house with their hair perfectly groomed and uniforms clean and ironed.

Ma made Fernando and me scrambled eggs with chorizo, buttered toast, and a glass of milk for our first day of school. After eating, she took us into the bathroom and combed our hair, making a neat part to the side.

“*Que bonitos se ven,*” Ma said, kissed us on top of our heads, and walked us to school for the first and only time.

“*Se van a portarse bien.*” (You are going to behave yourselves.)

“We will, Mami.” I said.

“*Hace lo que te dice la maestra.*” (Do what the teacher tells you.)

“Okay, Ma, we will.”

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I had to take two steps for each of Ma's. She wore her navy-blue dress with puffy sleeves that ended at the elbow. The dress had small white polka dots and reached below the knee. She had applied a dab of lipstick and a pink-colored powder to her palm and rubbed it into her cheeks.

"Ma, where're our sisters?"

"*Se fueron a San Judas.*" (They went to St. Jude.)

"Can we go there, too?"

"*No hasta el proximo ano.*" (Not until next year.)

I didn't know that we were going to a different school. I learned later that Ma saved the tuition money she would have paid at Catholic school.

The front of the school was a beehive of activity. Parents walked or dropped off their kids. I held Ma's hand tightly. Most of the kids were older than us and we recognized some from the rec center.

We walked to the end of the school building and into a cavernous room. A lady with a red dress greeted parents and children as they entered. Unlike Ma, her short-sleeve dress showed her knees. She smiled when she saw us. I shrunk back. Boys and girls our age sat at munchkin-size tables and chairs, some talking and giggling, others sat quietly, some looked dazed. One boy sobbed in a lady's arms.

"Oh, my goodness, twin boys. This is my lucky day." I looked up at her, not sure what to do. The lady wasn't wearing a white dress or shoes and wasn't holding anything in her hand. She squatted and looked Fernando and me in the eye. I took a half-step back behind Ma.

"I can tell by looking at you that you are well-behaved."

"Oh, jes," Ma said. "Berry good boyce."

Still smiling, the lady stood and pointed toward a table, "Find yourselves seats, please." Ma walked us over. A boy was seated there and a girl with shoulder-length blonde hair sat across from him. I didn't want to let go of Ma but she grabbed

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my wrist, pulled my hand loose, and nudged us to our chairs. Ma and the lady exchanged a few words, Ma turned, looked, smiled, and abandoned us. I stared after her, then turned to make sure Fernando was still next to me.

Parents left and the lady stood at the front of the room. “My name is Mrs. Smith and I will be your teacher. Welcome to your first day of school. We are going to have fun.”

I sat not knowing what to do, if I should look around or keep my eyes on the teacher. I ventured a glance at the blonde girl next to me. She was pretty and smiled. I looked away.

The boy who had been sobbing settled down to sniveling. The teacher had hugged him, given him extra attention and a tissue. His mother wiped her eyes when she walked out.

Fernando looked my way and whispered, “Crybaby.” I tried not to laugh. Tony called us crybabies when we cried or whined. We didn’t like being called that but today it sounded funny.

Things really improved when Mrs. Smith brought out a box of Graham Crackers and small cartons of milk. I had never seen such a small container of milk. Pa always bought quart bottles by the case at a dairy. Mrs. Smith showed us how to fold down the top of the carton to make a spout. The crackers and milk tasted good. Crybaby just looked at his snack sitting on the table. I wanted to take it but didn’t.

Mrs. Smith told us we needed to be quiet when she spoke. Her voice was soft and nice. After the snack she walked to a corner of the room and lifted the lid off of a big red wooden box and told us to take an instrument and sit in a circle on the carpet in the middle of the floor. I took a horn, my brother a tambourine.

At her signal we played our instruments. I blew my horn and Fernando hit the tambourine against the floor. Seconds later Mrs. Smith asked us to stop and put them away.

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“Children, it’s time for recess. You may go out and play in the yard. When you hear the school bell, it will be time to come back.”

My brother and I raced out the door and were first to get to the swings. Some kids stood gawking, not sure what to do. Others climbed monkey bars and used the slide. Blondie got on a swing next to me. I jumped off my swing and walked in front of her. “Hi,” I said.

She smiled and said, “Hi.” I walked behind her and pushed. When she got high enough, I walked back around and lay down just out of reach of her feet. They missed me by inches. Tony taught me the trick over the summer in the big kids’ playground. Blondie laughed and it made me happy. The bell rang and we saw Mrs. Smith come to the door of her classroom and motion to us.

Once inside she told us to sit on the carpet and Blondie sat next to me. The teacher brought out a book with a picture of a princess and a castle on the front. She told us to be quiet and read us a story that was just an okay story. Tony told us really good stories about big heroes.

“Now, children, I want everyone to lie down for a nap. Please be still and I will tell you when it’s time to get up.” My brother lay next to me; we looked at each other with our noses nearly touching. When he turned his back to me, his face was inches from Crybaby’s butt. He turned to face me again and pinched his nose. I tried not to laugh. Mrs. Smith looked at us and put a finger to her lips.

In a little while Mrs. Smith spoke softly, telling us it was time to get up.

“It’s almost time to go home. You all did a wonderful job today on your first day of school. I am looking forward to seeing you tomorrow.”

The noon bell rang. It was lunchtime for the big kids and time for kindergarteners to go home.

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“I think I like school,” Fernando said.

“I really like school.” We walked through our small front yard and into the house.

“*Se portaron bien?*”

“Yes, Ma, we behaved.”

“What did you do?”

We told her about Crybaby and how we didn’t cry, about the Graham Crackers and milk and the swings in the playground and the musical instruments. I told Ma about the smiley blonde girl that sat next to me and that I found out her name was Julie Mills and I was going to marry her one day. I don’t know why Ma laughed about it.

“Good boys, change out of your good clothes and come back for lunch.”

By the end of the first week my brother and I settled into a routine. We were a hit with the rest of the kindergarteners. We roughoused with boys and were good at making the girls laugh, like we did with our Ma and sisters.

I lay on my mat that night thinking about Julie Mills. I wasn’t sure how old I had to be before I could marry her, but I was willing to wait. I held hands with her on the playground the next day. It felt good holding hands and making her laugh.

I saw her holding hands with a boy the following day. Made me mad. She tried to make it up by trying to take my hand but it was over as far as I was concerned. I pushed Julie’s hand away. When Mrs. Smith had the class lie on the rug in a circle for our daily nap, Julie lay just above me. I was next to Fernando. I felt something loose in my nose, I breathed in, it flapped up. I breathed out, it flapped down—up, down, up, down. I stuck my finger in and pulled out a green corn flake. I showed it to my brother, then wiped it on Julie’s leg. Julie looked down at me. She must have thought I was just tickling, she giggled. Fernando told me on our walk home that she had it coming.

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“*Y como esta la Julie?*” Ma asked when we got home. My first girlfriend was big news in our home.

“Okay,” I said, not wanting to tell her the bad news of the breakup. I wasn’t sure why our sisters and brother thought it funny that I had a girlfriend.

One of Mrs. Smith’s routines for us was an imaginary trip to Toyland. She had us form a circle as she said, “Chug, chug, chug.” We followed her, pumped our arms, and marched, resembling a locomotive. We pulled the cord and tooted our steam whistles along the way. After a lap around the carpet we arrived at Toyland.

“Okay, children, now let’s build a tower.” She began to stack imaginary building blocks and invited us to do the same. The tower started on the floor and worked up and up, past our heads until we could barely reach the top. It got so high that it became unbalanced, teetered until it came crashing down onto the rug. She fell, along with the invisible blocks, and we fell, too.

After a few trips to Toyland, my brother saw something he wanted to share with me. He made sure we were at the teachers feet when the tower toppled. He nudged me and pointed up Mrs. Smith’s dress. We saw nylons reach up to a girdle with snaps and big white underwear just like the ones we saw on Ma’s clothesline. We giggled. Mrs. Smith rose with a big smile, happy that my brother and I were having a good time.

Between Graham Crackers and milk, musical instruments, fairy tales, and new friends, school turned out to be a lot of fun, not to mention we were learning a lot more than Ma could ever guess. At the end of the school year we said good-bye to Mrs. Smith with a little sadness, realizing we would probably not visit Toyland again.

30.

7th Grade—The Kiss

Armando

“The best part about a first kiss is right before the first kiss.”

—Brett Davern

IN SATURDAY AFTERNOON’S MOVIE, the cowboy hero grabbed the beautiful woman who had been wandering the prairie in a covered wagon. He pulled her into him and kissed her. She didn’t like him and tried to fight him off by pounding her fists against his chest. He kissed her all the more until she went limp. Then, she wrapped her arms around his neck and out-kissed him, kissing him harder than he was kissing her. By the end of the movie, she couldn’t live without the handsome, gun-slinging stranger that had ridden into her life.

I took the glass of strawberry Kool-Aid from Fernando and finished it off. We got up from the couch and I turned off the TV. “Ever wonder what it’d be like to kiss a girl?” I asked as we walked out of the house.

“Only about a thousand times a day.”

“I’d sure love to kiss Patricia,” I said. “But how could I get myself in a position where it could happen?”

“If you did get in that position,” Fernando said. “Think you’d have the guts to actually do it?”

“Don’t know.”

Patricia had been in our classes since my brother and I transferred to St. Rita’s School in the third grade four years

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ago. I'd always noticed her and thought that she was okay, but something happened to me this year in the seventh grade. She looked pretty, really pretty. I had developed a crush on her. Patricia had short, sandy-blonde hair, and blue eyes.

I started taking the mile-long walk to church for the Saturday morning Mass at St. Rita's just to say hi to her. I think that she liked me, too, because whenever something funny happened during class we'd look at each other and laugh together. It felt really good. Anyhow, I walked to church on Saturdays, waited at the entry, and looked down the street until I saw her walk around the corner and come my way. I felt my heart palpitate. When she got near I'd avert my eyes, too shy to look her in the face, then I'd wait until she was at the church door and glance up. She'd shoot a quick look, smile, and we'd both give a soft "hi." I'd wait until she entered the church and followed her in and sit a few pews behind, daydreaming of kissing her. I'd make her mad at me then wrap my arms around her. She'd pound her fists against my chest, then melt in my arms and out-kiss me. Wow. When Mass ended she'd step out of her pew and pass me on her way out. Our eyes would meet and we'd smile. I'd follow close behind her. She never looked back, probably too shy like me. Why couldn't I get the guts to say something? Instead, I'd just stand there looking at her walk away, wishing that we could talk. Then came the mile-long walk home.

I got a call from my friend and classmate Roger toward the end of our seventh-grade year. His house was across Euclid Avenue a quarter mile up a hill where people with more money than my family had lived. Roger said that his parents agreed to let him have a dance party on Saturday and he wanted Fernando and me to come. He was inviting, among other girls, Patricia. Roger said that he knew that I liked her and that he had heard from her girlfriend Cathy that Patricia liked me, too.

I lay in my bed all week playing the scene over and over in my mind. I'd start off at the party dancing a few fast dances

with Patricia, then I'd ask her to slow dance. And that's when it would happen. We'd kiss, she would go limp for a moment, and then the fireworks would start. The heavens would open, we'd levitate, spinning slowly, and the more and harder that she would kiss me, the faster we'd spin until we ascended to the stars in a sparkling swirl. A kiss that would change our lives forever.

"I'm going to try and kiss Patricia at the party," I said to my brother that night as we lay in our beds.

"No fooling?"

"Yeah. I've been wanting to kiss a girl for a long time, and we like each other. So if I can pull it off, I'll try."

"Man," Fernando said. "You've got guts!"

"I'll only have guts if I can actually do it."

I asked Ma to wash and iron the clothes that I wore for Sunday church the day before the party. I shined my shoes and asked my sister Martha if there was anything she could come up with that would help me be at my best. She had gone to lots of dances in high school and told my twin and me about them and the kinds of boys that she thought were cool. She was also a really good dancer and taught us the latest moves. Martha went to the bathroom and came back with Pa's aftershave. She shook a few drops into her palm, rubbed them together, and tapped my cheeks. "You sure that's enough?" I asked.

"A little is nice," she said. "Too much is gross, and don't go to the party early. Be stylishly late."

"What's that mean?"

"Everybody notices the kids that come in late, and they'll be excited to see you, especially if they thought that you might not make it."

I gave up on trying to understand how the world worked and asked Martha, "So how long should I wait?"

"At least a half hour, but an hour is better."

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The party was to start at 6:00. Fernando and I left at 6:30. We walked across the street, down the dirt road to the bottom of the flood control channel, and then started the climb up the hill toward Roger's house. It had been a warm day in June and the breeze felt cool against the sweat on my face.

"So are you going to try and kiss her?"

"I'm going to try, and don't say anything."

"Okay, I won't."

We made it to the top of the hill and as we got to Roger's house I could hear Jimmy Soul's song coming from his garage. "If you want to be happy for the rest of your life, don't make a pretty woman your wife."

I rang the doorbell. Roger's mom answered. I'd always thought that she looked too young and pretty to be a mother. She was nice and I liked her. She fed us whenever we came to play with Roger. She gave a warm, welcoming smile. "Come on in boys, the kids are in the garage." She led us through the house over a gold-colored shag carpet, by a dark wood dining room table that shined brightly, and a piano against a wall. Roger played piano at a school talent show once and wowed the audience. Fernando and I followed her to the kitchen where Roger's father was standing at a counter mixing lemonade in a big plastic pitcher.

He looked up. "How're you doing, guys?" He nodded toward a door. "Party's in there."

Roger's mother opened the door. The garage ceiling was hidden by balloons butted up against each other. A table along one side of the room had two record players and a chair where Roger's older brother, Danny, sat with music albums and 45-rpm records in stacks. A second table had bowls of potato chips and cookies and stacks of paper cups. "Easier said Than Done," by the Essex, started playing. A few couples were dancing neither fast dancing nor slow as the tempo of the song was somewhere in between. A dozen or so kids stood apart talking,

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boys with boys, girls with girls. Patricia and her best friend, Cathy, stood in a darkened corner.

“The twins are here!” somebody yelled over the music. Most everybody ran up and surrounded us. Guys patted our backs. *Martha knew what she was talking about*, I thought, enjoying the attention. I glanced toward Patricia. Our eyes met. I smiled. She smiled back. Danny, maybe feeling the positive vibes in the room, played “Heat Wave,” by Martha and the Vandellas, a great song for fast dancing. Kids partnered up and danced with great energy. Some were well coordinated and danced with grace, others looked like they were in an epileptic fit. But no matter, everyone gave it their all. Except for Patricia. She wasn’t one of the popular kids because she was too shy and her mother never allowed her to go to private parties for kids. I later learned that she had lied to her mother and told her that she was going to spend the night with Cathy and got into big trouble when found out.

I really, really wanted to kiss her, but how? I thought of my plan to do a couple of fast dances with her, then a slow one, and then see if I could make like the cowboy gun-slinger and kiss her. I was nervous about asking her to dance because she was so shy, and I’d never really had a conversation with her, it was mostly glances and smiles during classes. Other girls like Maria, Cynthia, Lulu, and Ginny were good friends and easy to dance with.

The garage was dimly lit and the light softened more as evening set in. Most everyone danced after the ice was broken with Fernando’s and my entrance. The garage was warm from the summer sun beating down on it all day and even more so from the heat created by the roomful of gyrating bodies. I danced with the girls that were my friends and got a good sweat going, and talked and joked with my guy friends between dances. It was a lot of fun. Everybody danced and talked and laughed. How I wanted to dance with Patricia, but why was it

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so hard to go and ask her? It didn't make it any easier that she was a wallflower.

I had to raise my voice to ask Danny what time it was. "Eight-forty," he said over the din. The party was to end at nine. Darn, just twenty minutes left. I asked Danny to play two fast songs and a slow one. He nodded okay.

He played "Surf City" by Jan and Dean. I walked to the table with the treats and took a couple of napkins and wiped sweat from my face and then made my way over to where Cathy and Patricia were. I smiled awkwardly. Patricia smiled and looked down. I put out my hand. "Would you like to dance?"

Patricia kept her eyes downcast. I felt the fool standing there with my hand out. Cathy tapped Patricia's elbow and said in a voice loud enough to be heard. "Armando asked you to dance."

Patricia looked up, surprised. She waited a moment before taking my hand and gave a weak, "Okay." She wasn't a good dancer. She looked embarrassed—hands to her front against each other in fists while stepping from foot to foot and not at all to the beat of the music. The look of embarrassment turned pained. God, I felt sorry for her, but what could I do?

"The party's fun!" I yelled over the music wanting to distract her from her feeble attempt. She forced a smile and nodded her head but it was obvious that she was suffering. I took her hands, made eye contact with her and held her eyes with mine, then did a simple side-to-side step. She was able to follow. I felt the tension in her hands ease. I kept her eyes locked with mine and added a little bounce with each step and she followed. She smiled. Not a shy smile but a "this is fun" kind of smile. The dance came to an end. I asked her to stay on the dance floor with me and she did. I had just enough time to grab a few napkins from the refreshment table and wipe sweat again. It felt warmer. Danny then played "Denise" by Randy and the Rainbows.

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Patricia put her hands in mine and danced as we had the first time. Now she was really smiling. I noticed perspiration on her forehead. This time I added a back step. It threw her off. I tightened my grip on her hands and went back to the simple side steps, then gave her a little tug when I back stepped. Again she followed with little effort. From that point on she did everything I did. The smile never left her face.

I stared at her lips. Would I, could I kiss them? I didn't think so, but I had worked so hard to get to this point and I'd never forgive myself if I didn't at least try. The dance came to an end. "Will you dance one more with me?" She gave a happy nod. Trickle of sweat ran down the sides of her face.

I looked to Danny. He winked and played "Our Day Will Come" by Ruby and the Romantics. I took her hand and put my arm around the small of her back, brought her into me. She rested her head against my shoulder. Patricia was wearing a pullover sweater. Our bodies were hot; uncomfortably hot.

How do I maneuver her to get a shot at her lips? I gave her head a little shove with my shoulder hoping to get her face in front of mine, but she stayed pasted to my shoulder. Now what? And jeez, was her body hot.

"This party's fun," I said. She didn't answer. Was she too shy? "Are you having a good time?" I asked and felt her head pressing against me. I guessed that she was nodding her head. The dance was coming to the end. "Hey," I said into her ear. It worked. She backed her head from my shoulder and looked at me.

Okay, stupid, this is it. Don't chicken out! I closed my eyes, puckered up, and leaned into her. My lips hit her sweaty nose. I dropped down an inch or so and felt the softness of her lips. I also got the perspiration between her nose and lips all over me. God, it was hot and stuffy. I pulled back from the kiss and was glad to get a little distance from the heat and sweat. The kiss wasn't anything like in the movies, didn't even feel all that

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great. I looked around. Everybody was looking at Patricia and me and whispering. My stupid brother blabbed.

Somebody turned on the overhead lights and the room lit up. Roger's mom's voice rang out. "Thanks for coming, kids. I hope that you had a good time."

Thank-yous from thirty kids filled the room.

I turned to look at Patricia. "See you at church next Saturday?"

She grinned and nodded and walked to Cathy. Fernando and I followed them and the rest of the kids out of the garage, into the kitchen, and out the front door. Cars with engines idling waited for kids.

"You had to go and open your big mouth," I said on our walk home.

"What're you talking about?"

"You told everybody that I was going to try and kiss Patricia."

"I didn't tell everybody. I only told Donny."

"Boy," I said stiffly, "that went well, didn't it."

"Sorry," he said, "it won't happen again."

"No, it's not going to happen again because I'm not telling you anything anymore!"

"Okay, so I'm really sorry."

I didn't talk to my brother for the rest of the walk home. Later when we lay on our beds with the lights off he asked. "How was it?"

"How was what?"

"The kiss, man. How was it to kiss a girl?"

"Hot and sweaty."

"Hot and sweaty?"

"Hot and sweaty."

"Didn't she melt in your arms?"

"The only one who was melting was me, it was so darn hot, and she had on a sweater."

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I lay in the dark and couldn't get to sleep. I kept a little transistor radio by my pillow for times like this. I turned it on. "Then He Kissed Me" by the Chrystals came on. I turned off the damn radio.