Return of the Lost Son
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Return of the Lost Son

CHRISTOPHER GONZALES

In the summer of 1988, I was riding in a car with my family, somewhere in Texas. In the backseat, I leaned my head against the window, watching the mile markers sailing past. I was sixteen years old. Beneath me, the tires hummed along the highway. Ahead, the engine was running smoothly. We had a full tank of gas. The day was burning, and bright, intense sunlight invaded the car.

My father, fifty-three years old, wore 1930s classic aviator sunglasses as he drove our station wagon. In the front, my mother fumbled with a map. My sister Heather, nineteen, had hung a Grateful Dead T-shirt over the window, folded and pinched between the rolled-up window and frame, to block the relentless sun. Like my father, I wore sunglasses, but mine were futuristic, wraparound.

As I looked through the window at the orange-brown prairie grasses, thoughts repeated in my mind: this was the trip to find my father's parents. He hadn't seen them in twenty-five years. We had been traveling for several days since leaving our home in upstate New York. We had hours to go before we would reach our destination: Austin, my father's hometown.

The car turned, our bodies swayed, the engine noise slowed down, and the tires bumped on the gravel of the off-ramp.

"Rene, why did you exit?" my mother asked my father.

"This is the way we're all going."

"I don't understand. Stop the car."

We all looked at my father. He seemed to think every exit was his exit. Every time he came to an exit, he took it. We pulled into a gas station parking lot. The engine cut. I heard the highway buzz and cars clacking over the pavement gaps of the off-ramp.

"Are you all right?" my mother asked my father.

Everyone got out of the car. I stood near the rear passenger door, stretching my numb legs. Several yards away, on the other side of the car, my mother was clutching the map, in tense conversation with my father, but I could not hear. She seemed impatient, exasperated; he seemed bewildered. A few minutes later, Heather returned from the mini market carrying a cup of cold soda. My mother announced it was time to go and she was driving.

"Where are my sunglasses?" I said. I opened the rear passenger door and looked inside. They were gone.

"Dad's looking for his sunglasses," Heather said.

"No, wait, it's me," I said. "*I'm* looking for my sunglasses." I opened the front passenger door, bending inside, and began looking under the clutter of paper napkins, guidebooks, and maps. I had left them right on the seat. Where had they gone?

I stood and looked up. I heard the distant roar of the highway. My father was walking around the car, toward me on the passenger side. My father was a slender man with prominent cheekbones, a bump on the bridge of his nose, his hair curled and streaked with distinguished gray. He was wearing my sunglasses.

I could see myself in those sunglasses at that moment: a tiny, funhouse-mirror warped silhouette. My father looked like an aged version of me, or a ghost from the future, me as a father who had traveled back in time to visit my younger self. If my father was lost, so was I. I tried to make sense of what was happening to him, to us, recalling hints from the last few days of our travel together. He muddled his words. He answered my questions with, "I don't remember," "I'm not sure," or "I don't recall." He couldn't find his keys, his cigarette lighter, or the right map. These clues were gradually building into a larger idea. It crept around in the back of my mind. When I saw him wearing my sunglasses, it crawled to the front. Something was wrong with my father's memory. Something was wrong with my father's mind.

As a teenager, I made only three journeys to Texas with my father and my family. As an adult, I made many such journeys—in person, and through histories and photographs—to understand *his* childhood. I came upon a collection of photographs from 1939 of Taylor, my father's boyhood home before his family moved to Austin, displayed at the Library of Congress website.

Along the road a sign shaped like bolts of cloth says, "Welcome to Taylor, the world's greatest inland cotton market." Another sign says, "Sixteen million acres destroyed in Texas by erosion. Terrace to protect your farm." Two Mexican-American farmers, withered and thin, wearing rugged clothing, presumably unable to find work during the hard economic times, sit on a curb, talking. A businessman is sleeping in a hotel lobby on a couch, a hat on his tilted head, newspaper in hand, eyes shut. In the brilliant sun, two mules stand in an enclosure, bony ribs showing. Farm buildings recede along the road, bordered by utility poles, a few scattered trees, farm wagons, barns, and sheds. Two men in overalls paint the metal housing of a traffic light. A young black man washes a store window displaying goods he cannot afford, yet he provides no suggestion he wants them. A magazine rack displays *Detective*, *G-Men*, *Time*, *Collier's*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Ghost*, *Western*, *North-West*, *Football*, *Sports*, *Air*, *Sky*, *Lone Eagle*, and *Phantom Detective*. A woman in a plaid skirt sits at a soda fountain, legs

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crossed. At the feed mill, a farmer unloads a trailer of corn. Inside, a worker stands at a grinding machine. A poster displays the prices for meal, wheat, and feed. The proprietor, wearing an apron, weighs sacks of grain. In front of the post office, a sign commands, "Travel. US Army." Illustrating the message, a scout waves his hand from the deck of a ship. The tropical South Pacific surrounds him: a beach with palm trees, a steamboat navigating a river, and a Japanese temple. A seagull soars over the ship's bow.

In one family photograph from Taylor, Rene, seven years old, wears his school marching band uniform, his bass drum positioned upright on his belt. A field marshal cap and tassel crowns his head. His expression is proud, seeking approval. He has tipped the cap back slightly, exposing his face and a streak of black-pearl hair. One hand rests on top of his drum. He holds the other hand behind his back.

After school Rene climbed out of his mechanical pedal car in the yard at the side of what was then the family home in Taylor with its wooden porch facing the street. He stood and tilted his head, as if asking a question, squinting in the afternoon sunlight, looking up toward his father Andrés with the camera.

In another photograph, Rene sits in the pedal car, wearing his school marching band uniform. His body and a nearby barren tree cast long shadows. It is a day in early spring. The grass is dry and beaten down.

In one photograph, Andrés is bringing Rene, aged seven, to a park along the San Gabriel River in Taylor, where perhaps he has asked a bystander to take their picture. The youthful Andrés is handsome in a tightly buttoned suit and wide tie. Rene is wearing his school marching band uniform, minus the cape and field marshal cap. He places one hand on his hip and cocks the other fist under his left rib. The stance of the boy is serious, as though he imagines himself possessing responsibility, an air of adulthood. It is late afternoon and a barren tree casts long, spindly shadows. He turns to his father and smiles. Rene displays a certain youthful pride. He appears to imitate his father Andrés: confident and urbane.

In another photograph, Rene and his father are walking along the Congress Avenue Bridge in Austin. A car with a 1930s sloped-back design crosses north toward downtown. It is afternoon. Perhaps Andrés has recently completed his business in Austin and now strolls about with his son. Rene poses near the low, cement rail. His shadow stretches behind him. Andrés wears a short-sleeved white shirt, unbuttoned, with crisp, dark trousers and suspenders. His striped tie hangs loose around his neck. In the distance, the Austin skyline looms. Cars hurry in both directions.

Already the evening rush hour had come. Rene looked up at his father, laughing, and swept his finger to chase the path of a passing car.

I kept looking for Rene's pain in these photographs—some clue as to why he left his family for twenty-five years—as if the photographs would provide some reason why he denied his family through his willful forgetting. I wanted some small poignant moment, a pinprick, but I could find no pain, no early sign of disease or rot in his childhood that would explain what happened to him and his family. The absence was more painful to me than finding a moment of anguished catharsis.

WITH MY MOTHER DRIVING THE CAR, and my father now relegated to the passenger seat, we came to a broken-down neighborhood in Austin. Through the car windows I saw boarded-up storefronts, scrawls of graffiti, broken glass, cassette tape streamers, and tall grass growing through cracked sidewalks. I had never met my paternal grandparents, and I kept expecting my father would say, "We're here," and they would be huddled among the tough men holding paper bags in the shadows.

The next day we visited the campus of the University of Texas at Austin, and I sat beneath the winding oaks. Did my grandparents come here, under the trees? In an open field on the campus, I saw a blacktail jackrabbit: long, black-tipped ears, a brown and shaggy body, and large rear legs. Another day we walked inside the grand Texas Capitol. My mother told a story of my father as a teenager, a Mexican-American page, one of the first, an aspiring political leader, running administrative paperwork through the building's corridors. I wondered whether my father's ancestors appeared in the building's murals of

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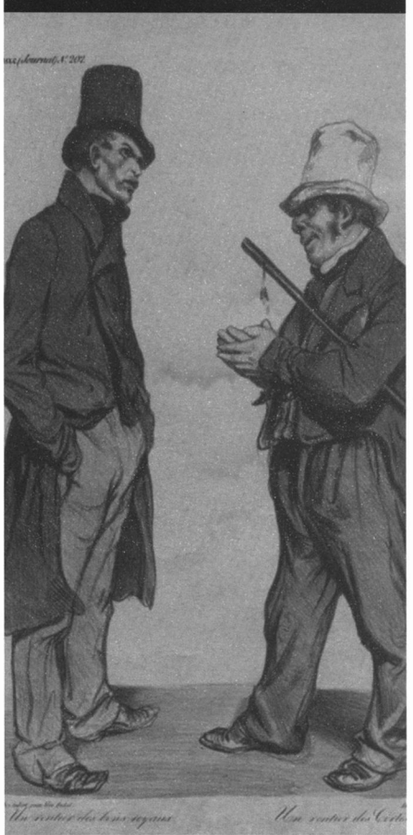

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democracy, of the Republic of Texas, of its Independence Day in 1836.

Austin's mix of skyscrapers, low brick buildings, cactuses, riverfront, fluorescent billboards, and Tex-Mex restaurants tugged at my imagination. I so badly wanted to understand my father, his family, Texas, and Austin. But as we walked around the popular tourist sites, I cringed like an outsider and a failure. We had traveled halfway across the United States. But what I remember was my father approaching me in the wraparound sunglasses, something not quite right about him.

When I was six, on long walks in the Adirondacks with my father, carrying his compass and guidebooks, he taught me names of the trees: oak, birch, sugar maple, and ash. He led our family on a bicycle journey to the Sheep Dip, a swimming hole on the Kayaderosseras near our home in Middle Grove. In the water he turned onto his back and swam a gentle backstroke, his face calm, having released all tension from the ride. Without our knowing, a prankster had let the air out of my bicycle tires while we swam. My father raced off on his red ten-speed—I was surprised at how fast he went—returning thereafter with the car to collect my bike and me. In Austin, no one was coming to rescue him, or us.

ANDRÉS, MY FATHER ONCE TOLD ME, was a tough father, a bitter drinker, and an angry man.

My curiosity about my grandfather Andrés began long before I learned of his death. When I was growing up, my father seemed to want to forget his father. Only after Alexis, one of my father's three children from his first marriage, found my father and reunited us with our Austin family did I begin to glimpse Andrés as a person whose memory was shared by others.

The mother of Andrés, when she was pregnant with him, around the beginning of the Mexican Revolution, crossed from Mexico into the United States. As a youth, Andrés kept his American citizenship, yet crossed back into Mexico. He and his beloved, my grandmother Minnie, knew each other growing up together in Burgos, Mexico. When I was seventeen and hearing these stories for the first time, I kept getting lost in the complications. Only much later could I tell the story of how my grandparents came together, giving me a sense of meaning amid the quiet of my father's failing memory and denial of his history.

Andrés was born in Brownsville, Texas, on November 30, 1910: ten days after wealthy liberal politician Francisco Madero announced his opposition to despotic president Porfirio Díaz and called for a national uprising. The violent convulsions quickly spread across the country and marked the start of the Mexican Revolution. Around this time thousands of Mexican refugees who had lived in the northeastern Mexican provinces of Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas crossed the ill-defined border northward to Texas, seeking the political stability and economic promise of the United States.

When I was in my twenties, I admired the photographs collected by Anita Brenner and George R. Leighton in *The Wind that Swept Mexico.* When I thumbed its pages I saw my great-grandparents:

The mother of Andrés was riding in a wagon with her husband, her white dress stretched over her swollen belly. The air was cool and pleasant in the late morning. She and her husband traveled in a caravan of horses, buggies, and carts, rumbling in the dust and rocks on the dirt road. They climbed out of the wagon, leaving the caravan, and began walking in a group along the railroad tracks. She saw the wide desert, vast stretches of thorns and scrub. Her feet began to hurt. A strong thirst bit at her mouth and throat. When the railroad tracks ended they walked along another dirt road. Her weary face was creased with exhaustion.

"¿Será difícil cruzar?" "Will it be hard to cross?" the mother of Andrés asked her husband.

"No, mi querida. Es poco profundo y no muy lejos." "No, my dear. The river is shallow and not very far."

They arrived at the Rio Grande, called by Mexicans the Río Bravo del Norte. It was late afternoon and the overhanging trees cast long shadows over the muddy green water. The river at this geographic point was nothing more than an arroyo, a trifle, a rivulet a few dozen yards wide, set between shallow embankments.

The mother of Andrés, with her bulging tummy and her feet stinging like nettles, dipped her feet into the water. She took

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one or two cautious steps, slipping into the stream. Her skirts floated up as the river swirled and eddied around them.

"Mi amor, el bebé viene," the mother of Andrés cried. "My love, the baby is coming."

In the hospital in Brownsville, the mother of Andrés held the infant, who cooed and gurgled softly.

In Austin in 1988, my family and I wandered through the city like tourists. We had traveled 1,840 miles from upstate New York to reunite with our grandparents and got no further than a few places on the map from the tourist office. It was as if we had come all that way to find a blacktail jackrabbit, and the creature darted in and out of the shrubs on the edge of the field, then slipped away, through the bushes. The understanding I had wanted of my father was as elusive as this wild animal, out of place on a university campus.

At the end of three days in Austin, my mother said we were leaving. I know my father tried hard to find his parents. He truly wanted to find them. But at that point, it was my father's search, not mine. My father flipped through the Austin phone book, finding so many people named Gonzales, unlike upstate New York, where we were the only ones. He couldn't find the names of his mother, father, or siblings. He didn't know whether his parents were alive or dead. "We drove around the neighborhood," my mother said. A quiet thief had been slipping jewels from my father's memory. My father couldn't remember the name of the street where he had lived. And we didn't find his parents.

Less than a year after we returned to Middle Grove, his family found *him*. I already knew my father had three children by his first marriage, and I even imagined one day one of them would call us.

One evening, the phone rang, and I answered it.

"Hello, is Joe there?" a woman asked in a hesitant voice. "I'm trying to find Joe Gonzales."

I knew something was odd because only people from a long time ago would call my father Joe. We called him Rene. She said her name was Alexis. She suspected she'd found her dad. She believed she and I were brother and sister. I had a strange feeling, as if I had always expected this phone call and now it was happening. She was calling from Oklahoma City. She'd been looking for her father for nineteen years. He had family in Austin looking for him.

"We just drove to Austin," I said.

"His mother lives in the same house as she did when he left," she said. "But Austin has changed a lot."

I didn't mention we were beginning to see failings in my father's memory.

She said my dad got a speeding ticket in Virginia. That's how she found him. I told her we got pulled over on our drive back from Texas. My dad was driving sixty miles per hour where the speed limit was fifty-five. My sister Heather said the Virginia State Police had singled us out because she had hung a Grateful Dead T-shirt in the car window.

"Is your father home?" Alexis asked. "Could I talk to him?"

My father was sitting at the kitchen table, working on *The New York Times* crossword puzzle. He loved crosswords and liked to use their eccentric words and phrases; he often told me my behavior was *uncouth*. He said that I was made of *sterner stuff*. He insisted that I must respect my schoolteacher as though the rules were *sacrosanct*. But when I handed him the phone with his daughter Alexis on the line, what I heard was muffled and almost silent.

"Yes, I am Joe Gonzales," he said. It sounded strange. This designation was a bridge to his past, and I wanted to cross it. He said he had just taken a trip to Texas to try to find his parents. Oh, he winced. Just like that, he winced. It was quick as a pinprick. He cleared his throat and said, "I had a feeling my father had died."

I left the room. I wanted to stay and listen to my father's half of the conversation, but I felt I was a trespasser into my father's hidden life, an interloper. Even though my father did not ask me to leave, the news of his father's death made me weak. I walked away to give him privacy with his daughter. Once, when I asked my father what he wanted for his birthday, he said he wanted to be left alone. I understood this to mean he wanted neither to receive nor to give back. I responded with my own silence. When I heard my grandfather, whom I had never known, had died, I gave my father his distance. I did not touch

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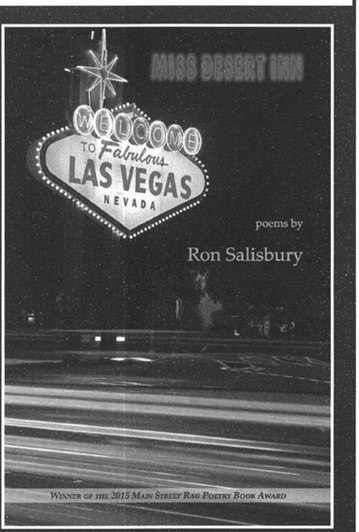

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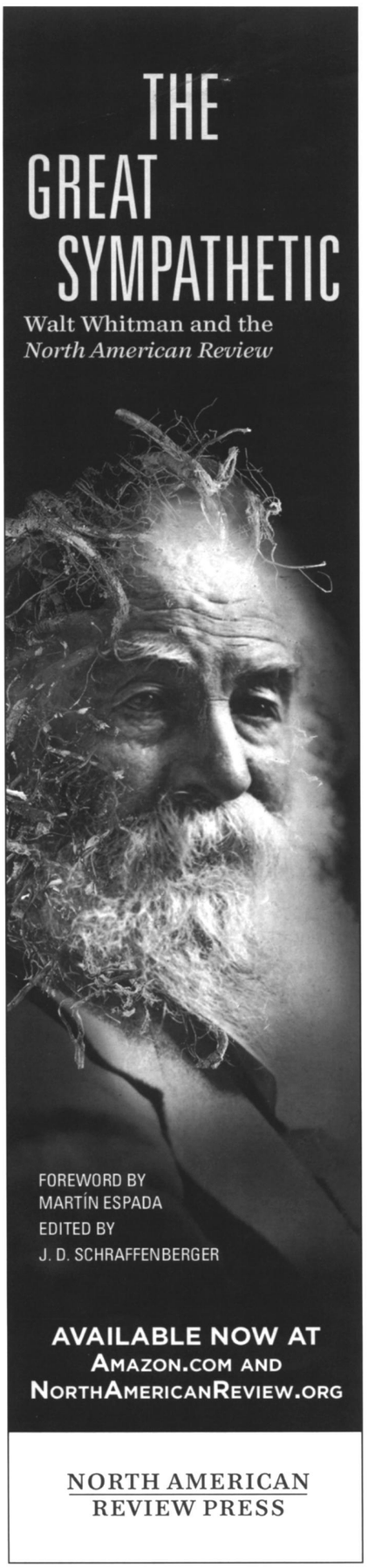

him, I did not comfort him. But I knew we would go back to Austin and finally meet the rest of his family. The clarity I had wanted regarding his family would come. That night, Alexis would telephone the Gonzales family in Austin and bring them into our lives.

One by one—first Uncle Gus, then Aunt Mary, then Aunt Jeanne, then Uncle Jaime—his brothers and sisters telephoned to welcome the return of my father.

I am working hard to remember how the next pieces of the story fit together. The year was 1988. The birthday of Rene's mother was approaching. On June 17 she would be seventy-eight years old, and her children planned a large family gathering. My father traveled by himself to Austin, where the family reunion and birthday party took place. I later saw a videotape in which Rene, unbeknownst to his mother, Minnie, had come. He stood before her. She grasped her chest, as if suffering a heart attack, a serious one. Someone offered her a chair and she sat down, stunned, mouth opening and closing, almost in tears, slowly fanning herself. As I watched this tape, it seemed cruel to me that they did not let her know Rene was coming.

In the summer of 1989, one year after we had chased the jackrabbit in Austin, my father, mother, sister, and I drove to Texas a second time.

When my grandfather Andrés was four years old, the revolutionary hostilities moved southward toward central Mexico. As a semblance of peace returned to the northern provinces, in the United States increased political pressure came to push immigrants in border towns back into Mexico. In 1914-15, hundreds of people of Mexican ancestry were persecuted and killed by Texas Rangers in poorly organized border patrols. During this wave of border violence, many immigrants returned southward to their native towns in Mexico. Andrés retained his American citizenship and in the mid-1910s he and his family returned to the town called Burgos in Tamaulipas, Mexico.

Burgos was a rural, agrarian town set on the eastern edge of the Sierra Madre del Oriente, on the old road from Matamoros to Ciudad Victoria, near where the Conchos River joins the San Fernando River and drains some seventy miles east into the Gulf of Mexico. Many of the immigrants to Burgos, including the Gonzales clan, came from the city in northern Spain of the same name. Although they were citizens of Mexico, they closely identified with the traditions and character of the Spanish city.

The Gonzales family of my grandfather and the Villa Fuerte family of my grandmother considered themselves Spanish and white, although their status as white would be upset when they eventually entered the society of the United States.

The woman who would become Andrés's wife and lifelong companion, Maneulita "Minnie" Villa Fuerte, was born in Taft, Texas, in 1911. Her family also claimed ties to Burgos. I heard family stories: Burgos was a rural paradise. The families of Minnie and Andrés spent much time there together.

Andrés and Minnie, adolescents, were swimming in a tributary stream to the Conchos River, under the shelter of leafy trees. Their white garments, which kept them cool in the sun, clung to their bodies. They splashed, made rapid strokes with their arms, and turned in the water, laughing.

"Tengo el cinturón," Andrés sputtered, closing his fist around the cloth belt, pulling it from her waist. He waved it just out of Minnie's reach.

"¡Dámelo!" she shouted, her skirts floating in a cloud on the water's surface.

In Burgos, many of the people were connected as neighbors, friends, business associates, and family. These ties also linked Burgos to towns farther north in the Rio Grande Valley where the families of Andrés and Minnie would establish roots: Brownsville, Corpus Christi, San Antonio, Kingsville, Raymondville, Taft, and Taylor. Eventually Andrés and Minnie would leave Burgos for the United States, go their separate ways, and meet again in Kingsville, Texas.

In a photograph from this time, the youthful Andrés is poised in a pinstriped suit, conservatively fastened with all three buttons. He wears a broad tie with a tight knot. In his left hand he holds a cigarette. His head is tilted, relaxed, giving him a sophisticated air. Minnie, in her twenties, shines like a movie star, a flapper. She stands in a

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white dress with her hand on her hip, insouciant. The long sleeves are drawn at the wrist, with a black ribbon on the cuff. Three ruffled skirts drop just below her knee. Her expression is confident and coy. A curl of her hair is pressed to her forehead. The square neck of her dress opens to the collarbone. Three glossy ribbons encircle the collar. A shell necklace sparkles. Her face reveals her youth, but she seems to desire a greater authority of age.

I imagined Andrés and Minnie, in their twenties, in a public garden, dressed as I had seen them in these photographs:

"Minnie, ámame, cásate conmigo." "Love me, marry me," Andrés pleaded, kneeling on one knee, his suit rumpled around his frame, his hands folded as if in prayer.

"No," Minnie replied, her arms crossed, head tilted down. Her necklace of shells glinted.

Minnie left him and went home to her mother. Her mother reminded her that times had been hard for them since her father passed away. Minnie had three siblings. Her mother supported her refusal to marry, but she herself alone was in a difficult position to care for her four children. Andrés would not accept this refusal of marriage. He persisted, and eventually, Minnie agreed to marry him; they were wed on February 12, 1933, in Kingsville, Texas.

In 1933 the city of Kingsville dominated the Rio Grande Valley as the main economic power in South Texas. Set near the Santa Gertrudis Creek, the only source of moving freshwater in the midst of the Wild Horse Desert, the city of Kingsville supported the sprawling livestock, cotton, and land enterprise the King Ranch. In 1934, the year Minnie became pregnant with their first child, the family-run King Ranch became a corporation and sold oil and gas rights on the entire 1.5 million-acre property to the Humble Oil and Refining Company, now Exxon Mobil. On November 6, 1934, in Kingsville, Minnie, with Andrés outside the room, gave birth to their first child, a boy. They named him Jose Rene Gonzales.

Andrés traveled frequently in southern Texas, and as a result his children were born in different towns. As I grasped the names and birthplaces, they read like a book of the Old Testament: *Now Benjamin begat Bela his firstborn.* Jose Rene, in Kingsville in 1934; Mary Silvia, in Raymondville in 1937; Gustavo Homer, in Lockhart in 1939; Alejandro, in Taylor in 1940; Margaret Jeanne, in Taylor in 1942; Graciela, in Taylor in 1944; Jaime, in Austin in 1950.

In Austin in 1989, our family station wagon came to a stop in front of the low-slung ranch house on Schieffer Street. On the front lawn of my grandmother's house I had my first glimpse of my Austin relatives. *He had broken contact with them for twenty-five years.* Men wore formal business suits and ties; women wore frilly blouses and breezy skirts. I felt embarrassed in my khaki shorts and T-shirt as this family encircled us and welcomed us with a respectful awe. My father climbed out of the car, slowly, unsteadily walking toward the house of his mother. My Austin relatives pulled me in after him.

There were so many uncles, aunts, and cousins I could not keep them straight. I kept coming up with mnemonics like Uncle Alex had thick glasses, Uncle Gus had wise, thoughtful eyes, Uncle Jaime had the round face of a boy, Aunt Graciela was thin and reserved, Aunt Jeanne was spirited and warm, and my cousin Gloria looked like a fashion model. Her sister Gina had energy like a whip. Then there were the confusingly named twins, my cousins Diana and Deanna, in their twenties. Aunt Mary had a down-to-earth charm.

I remember sitting on the sofa in my grandmother's house, my cousins in a circle in chairs around me and next to me, looking at me with curiosity. Of all the questions and stories, what I remember most was that my cousins wanted to talk about our grandfather Andrés, who had recently died. Uncle Rene had been lost for so long but had returned. And we were the ones who had come all the way from New York.

I had always thought of my father as all-American. He spoke English with a broadcaster's accent. He looked like everybody else to me. We spoke only English at home. I suppose I had never thought of my father as Tejano, or Mexican American, until I went to Austin and was surrounded by all of his Tejano relatives. I tried to see something Spanish, Arab, or Native American in the shape of their eyes and skin and

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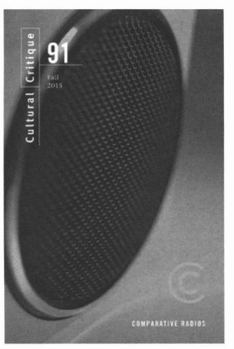

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hair color. I heard snippets of Spanish, which before then I had heard only in a classroom. The house was ornately decorated. A lacquer cabinet with gold details contained a silver ornamental tea set. I was struck by the Catholic art: crucifixes, a print reproduction of Leonardo's *Last Supper*, and angels. Seraphim visited me. White cherubim with wings, blue-eyed and blonde messengers, spirits of imitation ivory and onyx, and guardian angels all called on me. For an instant I saw a young woman, with dark skin, wearing a blue cape, surrounded by light, speaking to me in a strange tongue. A mechanical clock played "Ave María." I had been raised going to a Methodist church whose main adornment was a barren wooden cross towering over simple pews and empty walls, lit by stained glass windows, and I was unaccustomed to theatrical religious artworks.

We must have spent five or six nights in a hotel, visiting my grandmother's house each day. I remember the first morning my grandmother Minnie brought into the dining room a tray of colorful *pan dulce*, sweet breads coated in dusty pink and yellow powdered sugar. Minnie had an air of sweet-tempered formality, a kindness I could see beyond her pale skin, curls of sea mist hair, and large circular glasses. I remember the first time, for lunch, she offered me a *tamale hecho a mano*, a handmade tamale which I accepted. She looked on approvingly as I unwrapped the corn husk from the doughy mass inside. The tamale tasted savory, filled with slow-cooked pork, onion, garlic, and chili.

"*Te pareces tanto a Jose Rene*," Minnie said, as if touched by a painful memory. She said I looked so much like "Jose Rene," the name she used for my father. She spoke in Spanish and referred to my father as "Jose Rene." This name was another bridge to my father's past. At that moment I believed I somehow shared blame with my father for having broken contact with her for twenty-five years. I was part of the family that kept my father from returning to Austin. She had lost her son, and I was the one who had kept him. I was the child of an Anglo woman and my father. I was witnessing not only a family feud but a cultural war between Anglos and Mexicans. Even though she had welcomed me into her home, I was one who had trespassed. I found it hard not to think of Minnie as regarding me with a love that was struggling to overcome feelings of rejection.

Once during the reunion I was alone with my grandmother Minnie in the kitchen. She was telling me a story in Spanish, because I told her I was taking Spanish in school, but I couldn't quite understand the words. They were lost to me. I wondered if by some hearing loss she couldn't understand me. All I could catch was a whisper, repeating, "*Mi hijo, mi hijo*," "My son, my son," with unease. I had the impression she was telling a story of her child who went away and did not come back for twenty-five years. But perhaps instead she spoke about her son who *returned*, as I saw him, with something wrong with him, with his unsteady steps, his long periods of silence, his confused statements about time, location, and memory. Instead of her son returning home, a ghost who was barely able to speak or remember had come to haunt her. I have few impressions of the Austin family reunion as strong as those of my ghostly father.

I imagined I threw my arms around Minnie, saying, "*Pero regresó*," "But he came back," as if to console her. But I didn't actually do any such thing. Instead, I stood there in confused silence, reminding myself I was the one taking high school Spanish, wanting to understand my father, Mexico, Austin, and our family.

A year later, when I was in college, my mother called to tell me my father, at age fifty-six, had gone to see a neurologist. The doctors had ruled out everything else. No tumor. No encephalitis. No brain injury. No stroke. They'd done all the tests. Probable Alzheimer's was the only thing left. I was nineteen years old when he was diagnosed. My mother recorded in her diary the date when she learned of the diagnosis: September 11, 1991. She told me my father was making jumbled statements about the present, about the distant past. But he was speaking, was walking, was dressing himself, and was finding his way to the bathroom.

In 1997 he was admitted to Fort Hudson, a full-time care facility for patients with Alzheimer's. On November 12, the day of his admission, he could no longer speak, no longer dress himself, and no longer find his way to the bathroom.

I tell you these dates because with them I anchor myself in time and place and memory. My search and my story started in Austin in 1988, taking wrong turns on a highway, losing my sunglasses, and finding my father wearing them. In an open field on the University of Texas campus I tracked a blacktail jackrabbit. I know it was a blacktail because it was grayish brown with a black tail and rump and black-tipped ears. The jackrabbit slipped away into the bushes. Yet one year later, I was back in Austin, among Tejano princesses and guardian angels.

In 2009, I was working in my office in Ithaca, New York. I was thirty-seven years old. My mother called to say she was drawing up a living will for my father. He was losing his ability to swallow his food. He might not live much longer.

In an instant, the floor beneath me fell away. I saw the blacktail jackrabbit and the angels, the cherubim and the seraphim.

I was the survivor after my father's illness. As my father and his memory gradually disappeared, I gathered family stories, photographs, and letters. In my late twenties I began writing in notebooks almost every day. I couldn't stand losing my father to Alzheimer's and dreaded the idea that he would be lost without a word or a trace. I wrote to make my life of losing him bearable.

I was overwhelmed as we started to notice Dad was getting sick on our trip to Austin. In the joy of meeting his mother Minnie in Texas, despite her encroaching deafness, which meant we often couldn't understand each other, I saw reasons for hope. And I saw angels in my grandma's house. The pain of her deafness and my father's memory loss made me sad, but years later, it pleased me to think of my father and Minnie. Putting those memories into words made me feel stronger. If I had to tell you one thing to remember about visiting Austin, it's this. Don't feel so bad when the jackrabbit gets away, because if you carry on, if you live long enough, you'll get another chance to capture it. And so, when I tell you this story, when I'm standing with Minnie in the kitchen, and she repeats, "My son, my son," I'm going to say I threw my arms around her, saying, "*Pero regresó*." "But he came back." □

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