A photograph of a family with three children and a man, overlaid with a piece of aged paper containing text. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with green grass and a blue sky. The paper is a light tan color with a slightly textured, deckled edge. The text on the paper is arranged in a centered, vertical layout. At the top is a quote in a serif font, followed by the author's name and a reference to another book. The main title is in a large, dark blue serif font, with the word 'of' in a smaller font size between 'Sound' and 'Gravel'. Below the title is the subtitle 'a memoir' in a smaller, dark blue serif font. At the bottom of the paper is the author's name in a bold, red, sans-serif font.

“A portrait of real courage.”
—KELLY CORRIGAN, bestselling author of *The Middle Place*

The
Sound
of
Gravel

a memoir

RUTH WARINER



The Sound *of* Gravel

— *a memoir* —

Ruth Wariner



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For Kathy and her kids

Prologue

The room feels crowded, the attention overwhelming. A swirl of women in chocolate-and-sage dresses surrounds me. They fasten the satin-covered buttons on my gown, adjust the ivory flower in my hair. When they've finished their fussing, I stare at my reflection in the mirror, centering my veil at the crown of my head. Over my shoulder, I see my sisters perched on the edge of the bed behind me.

"Are you ready?" I ask.

"Ready." The three look up at me; stand up tall and straighten the hems of their dresses at their knees.

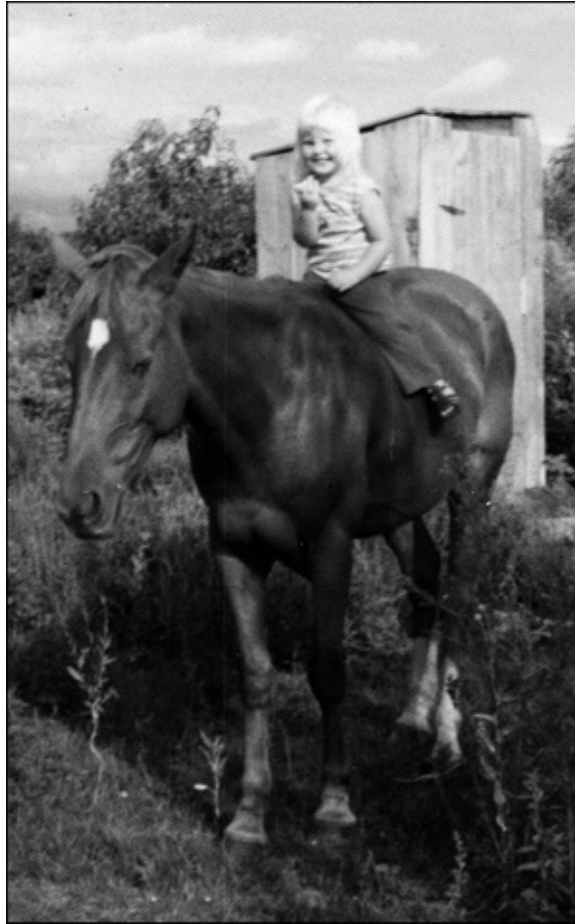
They might be ready, I think, but I'm not sure I am. I grew up dreaming of this day. I fantasized about the handsome prince who would carry me off on his white horse, whisking me away into the sunset. And now here I am, convincingly regal in my lace gown and shiny ivory-and-silver slippers. There is a flowering-pink dogwood tree right outside the window of my dressing room, just as they should be, and birds are actually singing in it. I hear their song as I give myself a final once-over.

It is a wedding day just like every bride dreams of, at least until I climb the steps leading to the next room, where my large, loud family waits for me impatiently.

I feel my heart racing in my chest, the blood pulsing in my neck. My face turns warm, and I become flushed. It must be nerves, I tell myself. But I know it's more than that. I know what I will see when I turn that knob and walk through the doorway.

PART I

THE PROMISED LAND



1

I am my mother's fourth child and my father's thirty-ninth. I grew up in Colonia LeBaron, a small town in the Mexican countryside 200 miles south of El Paso, Texas. The colony, as we called it, was founded by my father's father, Alma Dayer LeBaron, after God sent him a vision. In that vision, my grandfather was walking in the desert when he heard a voice that foretold of a place that would one day be populated with trees dripping with fruit, wonderful schools, beautiful churches, bountiful farms, and happy, faithful people. My grandfather had grown up in a fundamentalist Mormon family and he always believed in the polygamist teachings of Joseph Smith. When the vision came to him, he knew he needed to move to Mexico and establish a community that would be a beacon of hope, an example of what comes from living righteously.

My grandfather and grandmother LeBaron established the colony in 1944, and other polygamist families soon followed. Before long, the dry Mexican earth was cleared of mesquite and planted with orchards, pecan trees, and gardens. Cattle were brought in to be raised, and the town grew and flourished. My grandfather boldly predicted that someday people from all over the world would make pilgrimages to the town, and that the work being done there would be of the utmost importance to the realization of God's kingdom on earth.

My grandfather died before I was born, but I entered childhood in the community that was his legacy. I took my first steps on the dirt roads that ran through the small farming community, tired from rocks and dry dirt getting stuck between my toes and piercing the soft soles of my feet. The trees my grandfather planted offered the shade that first cooled and protected my pale, freckled skin from the harsh desert sunlight. I ran through the peach orchards with my siblings, drank fresh milk from the cows on our dairy farm, and ate vegetables from the gardens my grandfather had first seen in the vision God sent him. My family and I always tried our best to be the happy, faithful people God had promised would come to populate the colony.

* * *

"RUTHIE," MOM YELLED to me from the hallway, "Get up quick. We'll be late for church." I rubbed my eyes and pulled myself out of the small bed I shared with my sister Audrey. Even though she was five years older than me, she wore a cloth diaper that often leaked during the night. I took a towel and dried my damp legs as Mom told me to hurry and get dressed. "There's not enough time to get Audrey

and your brothers ready,” she hollered. “Matt’ll stay here and watch the kids and you’ll come church with me.”

At five years old and with four siblings, having Mom’s undivided attention was a rare privilege. I threw my pink cotton dress over my head and tried to run my fingers through my tangled hair. Mom put my baby brother Aaron in his playpen and called to my older brother Matt, asking him to keep an eye on things. Then she grabbed my hand and pulled me along behind her. I scurried to keep up, taking three steps for every one of Mom’s long strides, happy to have been the one chosen to accompany her. The cool morning air was pungent with the scents of the freshly irrigated alfalfa fields, the dairy cowshed behind our house, and Mexican sage brush.

Every place in LeBaron was within walking distance of every other, and each unmarked, unnamed dirt road led to the church at the center of the colony. As Mom and I made our way to the simple, single-level adobe structure, pickup trucks sped past us, stirring up clouds of dust in their wake. As we got closer, we heard the strains of a piano and singing voices flowing through the two black wooden doors. “We’re already late, Ruthie,” Mom said, looking down at me through the plastic frames of her glasses. I was used to hurrying at her side; we were always late to everything.

Mom and I rushed past the few saddled horses tied to the crooked, wooden posts that held up the barbed-wire fence surrounding the churchyard. The singing voices grew louder as we entered the church and Mom searched the large, white-walled room for empty seats. The black wooden benches were full of congregants—women in Sunday dresses, nude nylons, and high heels, men in cowboy boots and Western shirts tucked into tight jeans under leather belts with big, silver belt buckles.

We crowded into open seats as Mom pulled out a hymn book from a wooden pocket on the back of the bench in front of us, cocked her neck forward, and squinted to peek over someone’s shoulder to find the right page. I loved standing next to her in church. I was mesmerized by her eyelashes, which were usually so blond that I couldn’t see them, but on Sundays she wore light brown Maybelline mascara and pearl-pink lipstick that she dabbed over her lips and onto her cheeks.

After playing three hymns, the pianist retired to a pew as a man stepped forward to utter a prayer, which a second man translated into Spanish for the Mexican parishioners on the opposite side of the building.

“Make sure no one can see your underpants, Sis,” Mom whispered, straightening the hem of my dress over my knees as the elder called for someone to come up and offer a testimony.

Lisa, my stepfather Lane’s sister, walked slowly, her head held high, the wooden heels of her strappy sandals tapping hard against the floor. She stood tall and spoke with confidence. She told us how thankful she was for all the blessings that our Heavenly Father had given her. She talked proudly about her devotion to the cause. She said that even though it was hard to share her husband with her sister wives, even though she sometimes felt jealous, she knew in her heart that she was obeying God’s will by living polygamy. Lisa said she loved being a mother and that she was grateful to be the caretaker of the beautiful spirits the Lord had sent her. Then she thanked Him for giving her a good, righteous man to father her children. “After all,” she said, “it is better to have ten percent of one good man than to have one hundred percent of a bad one.” The women of LeBaron were always saying that, and Mom always nodded her head in agreement.

As Lisa spoke, I gazed at the three large, black-and-white photographs that hung behind the re-

carpeted pulpit. The middle photo, bigger than the other two, was of a man with a round, shiny forehead and a square jaw. His dark hair was combed straight back, a few thin strands stretched flat over a bald spot. He wore a crisp white shirt buttoned to the top with a dark tie and matching jacket. His full lips were closed, and he didn't smile, but he had kind and happy eyes that stared out with confidence and authority.

This was my father. He had been the prophet of our church. He died when I was three months old and no matter how many times I begged Mom to tell me about him, I could sense that there was a lot about my dad that I'd never know. Did he like playing board games and hiking in the Mexican hills like me? Did he like chocolate ice cream or did he prefer my favorite, old-fashioned vanilla? Everyone always said my dad was the kindest, most faithful, God-fearing man they knew. I wished I could remember what life had been like when he was alive.

After the service ended, Mom and I walked back to the farm slowly, relishing the warm sun on our shoulders and stopping to say hello to our friends and neighbors along the way. Very few of the homes in LeBaron had telephones and Sundays were a good chance for everyone to catch up. Mom stopped to talk to Lisa, who was not only my step-dad's sister, but she had also been one of my dad's wives. Even though she was much older than Mom, they were still good friends.

"I loved your testimony this morning," Mom told Lisa. "It really inspired me."

"Thank you, Kathy. Why don't you bring the kids over next Saturday and we can have dinner at my house?" Lisa smiled, her skin wrinkling around her eyes.

"That sounds great," Mom said. "I'll bring dessert."

Mom and Lisa said their good-byes and Mom grabbed my hand, pulling me toward home. "We'd better get back to Audrey and your brothers," she said. The streets were quiet as we walked past adobe homes with spacious yards and gardens surrounded by barbed wire fences.

The farther we got from the center of town, the more spread out the neighborhood became. Eventually we walked past our neighbor's farm and reached the tall earthen banks of the reservoir. Five hundred feet long and fifty feet wide, the reservoir brought water to our irrigation ditches and those of the neighboring farms. Young willow trees lined its perimeter, and we could usually hear families of frogs croaking from its banks. It had been built as a community water supply, but it served as the colony swimming pool too. Adults and children came from all over to frolic and swim in the open-air tank, diving into it from a giant pipe that pumped freshwater from a deep well.

Our house was on the other side of the reservoir, at the end of a long gravel driveway. A tall barbed-wire fence surrounded my stepfather's property. Unlike some of the houses closer to town, ours didn't have any flowerbeds or a lawn. Mom was never able to get anything to grow. Except for her Volkswagen Microbus, which was usually broken and parked beside the kitchen door in the side yard, the house sat stark and solitary against the dry Mexican landscape.

An irrigation ditch of steadily flowing water ran along the front of our property. My stepfather had dug out the ditch at the beginning of our driveway so that it was wide and shallow enough for cars to drive through without wetting a car's engine. But when we weren't in a car, we had to leap across the ditch's narrow edge to get to our house.

Mom held my hand and we jumped across. As we landed on the opposite edge, clumps of wet earth crumbled underneath our feet and splashed into the running water.

When we got inside, Mom went to nurse my baby brother, Aaron. I pulled out my Disney coloring book and stubby crayons and made myself comfortable on the living room floor. Matt and Luke went out to play, while my older sister, Audrey, sat on the couch pulling at the cotton threads in her shirt, staring off into the distance, a quiet moaning sound coming from the back of her throat.

“Hush, Sis,” Mom said, patting Audrey on the shoulder as she passed back through the living room. “Ruthie, come help me with these beans.” I jumped up from the floor and hurried to Mom’s side. She pulled a large gunnysack of pinto beans from the corner of our small, square kitchen. “It’s important for you to learn how to cook. You’ll need to know what to do when you’re married and have your own kids.” She spilled a pile of the speckled, brown beans onto the kitchen table. “When I married your dad, I didn’t know how to make beans or anything else because my mom never showed me.” I climbed up onto a chair and began imitating Mom’s movements, carefully taking a small handful of pintos and spreading them out in front of me.

“How old were you when you and Dad got married?” I didn’t much care for boys, but I knew that I would get married one day. Celebrations were an important part of life in LeBaron. We had lots of rodeos, horseback rides, campouts, bridal showers, baby showers, birthday parties, and Friday-night square-dance lessons at the church. But weddings were the most important.

“I was seventeen.” Mom scanned the pile of beans from behind her thick glasses, shooing away the flies that had infested our kitchen. My siblings and I loved hearing the story about how, on one of my dad’s mission trips to Utah, he climbed to the top of a mountain where he was visited by several resurrected prophets, including Jesus, Moses, and Joseph Smith. They told my father that he had been selected to lead a congregation with Colonia LeBaron as its Zion. Out of this visitation, Dad’s church, the Church of the Firstborn of the Fulness of Times was born.

My father believed that polygamy was one of the most holy and important principles God ever gave His people. He preached that for a man to reach the Celestial Kingdom—the highest level of heaven—he had to have at least two wives. If a man lived this principle, he would become a god himself and inherit an earth of his own, one just like our earth. Women who married polygamists loved their sister wives, and had as many children as they could would become goddesses, which meant that they were their husband’s heavenly servants. Salvation came from freeing oneself and others from the moral turpitude of Babylon. My dad had visions in which God foretold the destruction of the United States, which my dad believed was a modern Babylon. That’s why he ended up doing much of his missionary work in the Babylon among Babylons: Las Vegas. That was where he first noticed my mom.

“When we were living in Las Vegas, your dad asked Grandpa if he could court me.”

“Court you? What’s that?”

“It means that he wanted to get to know me so that he could marry me.” Mom slid more beans across the tabletop. They sounded like plastic pieces moving over a checkerboard. “I was fourteen years old when I first heard about your dad. We were living in Utah, and your dad and his brother Ervil were on a mission trip there. One day, they put a pamphlet on Grandpa’s windshield. Grandpa saw the pamphlet, took it out from under the windshield wiper, and brought it home.” Mom paused to take another handful of beans from the sack. She spread them out on the table and picked out the rocks and dried weeds before sliding the beans into a pot on her lap.

“That pamphlet changed my life. Not long after Grandpa read that paper, he started asking questions at church, questions about Joseph Smith’s original teachings and why polygamy was no longer a part of the Mormon way of life. Not long after Grandpa started asking those questions, he was excommunicated from the Church. That’s when we moved to LeBaron.

“When the bishop made your grandpa leave the Church, Grandpa took it as a sign from God that your dad was right, that the LDS Church had lost its way. He bought property in LeBaron and moved us down here.”

“Did you like moving to LeBaron?” I asked, trying to imagine a time before my mom lived on the colony.

“Well, Sis, it was a real shock for me. I really missed my friends in Utah. I had always been shy, so it was hard for me to move to a new place.” Mom looked down at her pile of beans with a somber expression. “But our time here didn’t last long. It was too hard for Grandpa to support us in Mexico, just like it is hard here for a lot of people even now. So Grandma and Grandpa eventually moved us to Vegas. A lot of your dad’s followers were livin’ and workin’ as builders and painters in Vegas. Grandpa and Grandma bought a diner there and called it the Supersonic Drive-In. I worked there as a waitress—a waitress on roller skates.”

“And that’s where you met my dad?”

“Well, I knew about your dad before he first saw me at the diner. Grandpa had been going to your dad’s church for about four years by then. I had a dream about marrying your dad and I told your grandpa about it, so he said yes when your dad asked to court me. Our wedding was just a few months later. I became your dad’s fifth wife in a small ceremony right here in a living room in LeBaron.”

In our dark, bare-walled kitchen far from the lights of Las Vegas, I watched Mom’s lightly freckled arm slide another clean pile of beans off the edge of the table into the pot and thought about how different her life was now. Mom had five kids—my older sister, Audrey, my older brothers, Mark and Luke, and the baby, Aaron. Mom always seemed worried and exhausted. I liked imagining her skating around a diner, serving hamburgers to my dad.

“But, Mom, didn’t you like Las Vegas? Why did you want to leave?”

The sound of the hard beans hitting the metal pan echoed through the kitchen. “Of course I loved parts of our life in Vegas, Ruthie. I made lots of friends there and I loved music and dancing, but I felt like I wanted more. That’s when I started to like your dad. I was only seventeen, but he inspired me to live a life for our Heavenly Father’s purpose. I wanted to be a part of his big family and help with his work in the church.”

Mom stopped cleaning the beans for a moment, sat back in her chair, and rested her thick brown hair against its back. She always cut her hair herself, and always just above her shoulders, in short, feathered layers. She smiled as a faint whiff of fresh cow’s milk drifted through the kitchen window. It mingled with the scent of the green alfalfa fields outside and the cheese curds we kept in a pan on the stove. Except for when it rained, when all we smelled was wet dirt from the adobe bricks and stucco that made up our small, five-room house, the kitchen always smelled like the little mice that scampered along the walls, the cows in the fields outside, and the Mexican sagebrush on the nearby mountains.

“You know, Ruthie, your dad was the most humble man I’d ever met. He always practiced what he

preached, and he never turned away anyone when they came to him for help.” Mom thought for a moment. “When he asked me to marry him, it was the happiest day of my life. We were sittin’ alone in a car at night. He kissed me and it felt right. Even though he was twenty-five years older than me and already had four wives, I knew I was makin’ the right choice. I had never wanted to marry another man till then.”

Mom swept the last pile of pintos toward her with swollen, stubby fingers; she chewed her nails down to the quick, her cuticles red and raw. “Your dad and I hadn’t been married for very long when it was my turn to have him spend the night. You know, I only got to see him once a week, and then only if I was lucky. With five wives, his mission trips, and his work, there just wasn’t time. Anyway, when it was my turn to have him over, all we had to eat were pinto beans. So I put some water in a pot and then I filled it all the way up to the top with beans. To the top. I didn’t know that beans swell up!” She paused and laughed at the memory. “The beans started boilin’ and swellin’ up and overflowin’ out of the pot. I had to pour half of them into other pots. By the time I was done, we had three full pots of beans, and I had to throw half of them out because they soured before we could eat ’em!” She laughed again and flashed her hazel eyes at me, which dazzled with speckles of green when she was happy and turned the color of mud when she wasn’t. “Bein’ a housewife was all new to me. ’Cause nobody ever taught me how, Ruthie. That’s why it’s important that you start learnin’ now.”

Mom pulled herself out of her chair to pour herself a glass of water from the pitcher on the counter. I couldn’t imagine a time when she didn’t know how to cook. I couldn’t imagine a time when she didn’t have kids. “But, Mom, if Grandpa gave my dad permission to court you, why aren’t he and Grandma still a part of our church?”

“Well, Sis, everything changed after your dad died.” Mom took in a deep breath and shook her head. “It was just such a mess. After your dad died, so many people turned their backs on him and left the church. Grandpa and Grandma lost faith and so did Aunt Carolyn and Aunt Judy. They all sold their property in LeBaron, moved to the States, and didn’t come back.”

“Is that when we went to live in San Diego?”

“That’s right. I took you and Audrey and Matt and Luke to go live with Grandma and Grandpa for a while. But I knew I wanted to come back to LeBaron. This is where you kids belong.”

I focused on my little pile of beans, continuing to separate them from the dirt and rocks that were in the bag. I didn’t remember living with Grandma and Grandpa, but there was a part of me that wished we were still there. I knew we were doing the right thing living God’s purpose in the colonies, but I envied my cousins in California. They lived in nice houses with bathrooms and they always had new clothes and toys. Sometimes I’d lie awake at night thinking about what it would be like if Mom had never married my stepfather and had never brought us back to LeBaron.

Mom met Lane when I was three and she became his second wife a few months later. Mom’s grandparents and aunts were invited to the wedding, but they didn’t believe in polygamy anymore so they didn’t go.

Mom said Lane was handsome. He had sandy-blond hair, olive skin, and light blue eyes. He wore his hair slicked back behind his ears with long, perfectly trimmed sideburns. He had been an apostle in my dad’s church, which is what my mom said she loved most about him. The people of the colonies called him Brother Lane.

After they married, Mom moved us onto Lane's eleven-acre farm. Our little house had two bedrooms and one unfinished bathroom that Lane was always promising he'd fix. Until he did, we used a wooden outhouse in the backyard. Lane's first wife lived in another adobe house a quarter of a mile from ours, at the opposite edge of the farm. Mom's house was separated from her sister wife's by a barbed-wire fence, several acres of alfalfa, and a small peach orchard. We didn't have electricity—we were too far out of town, and power hadn't yet reached that far into the countryside—but Lane said it was coming.

Lane was the only father figure I'd ever known, but I never liked him. Whenever he was at church or with other churchgoers, he was happy and friendly, always offering to help them fix their cars or their broken appliances. But when he was at home, he was always cross, threatening to spank me if I cried for Mom's attention. Mom never spanked or hit us, and Lane's temper scared me.

Two years after Mom and Lane were married, she gave birth to my brother Aaron, who I adored instantly. Having a baby around was like having a new pet. Right after Mom came home from the hospital, she told me I could be her little helper, and I was thrilled. Matt and Luke went to the Mexican public school across the highway from LeBaron, leaving me at home on the farm with Audrey, Mom, and baby Aaron. Even though she was the oldest, Audrey didn't go to school. Mom said Audrey was too much for the teachers to handle. I hated being stuck at home with my sister, but I loved helping Mom take care of my baby brother.

Her beans all clean, Mom stood up and scooped my little pile of pintos into her pot. She knelt down underneath the wood-framed window and filled the pot with water from a spigot that sprouted right out of the cement floor. Mom put the pot on the propane stove and lit the burner with a match. The stovetop hissed and the air smelled like sulfur. Mom stirred the beans a couple of times, then went to go check on Audrey, telling me to watch to make sure the pot didn't boil over.

I sat in the kitchen thinking about how different my life would be if my dad hadn't died. If he were still alive, Mom would be happy and would stop worrying all the time about how much it cost to feed all of us and how Audrey seemed so troubled. If my dad hadn't died, maybe my grandparents would still live in the colony with us. I just couldn't understand why my dad had been killed. I knew my uncle Ervil had him shot. Everyone in the colony knew that. Ervil and his followers sent lots of letters to our church elders threatening to kill more people and bomb the town. Mom said that Uncle Ervil was wanted by the FBI and that they had people looking all over Mexico and the United States for him. Each time we got a new threat, Mom would tell us to keep the doors locked. "And if I'm not home and you hear gunshots and explosions," she always said, "take your baby brother and run to the peach trees, cover him, and lie down in the dirt so no one can see you." Uncle Ervil was like a ghost haunting us. Knowing that he and his followers were still out there terrified me. Would Ervil come back for me? And what would happen if he murdered my mom the way he had murdered my dad?

2

One constant in my family's life was traveling. We had to go back and forth from Mexico to the United States every month to collect food stamps, Medicaid, and cash assistance. Mom would bring me along with her on rickety, old Mexican buses while Lane stayed and worked on the farm. Mom was a US citizen, after all, and in the eyes of the government, she was a single parent. Because Mom was Lane's second wife, their marriage wasn't recognized outside the colony. Lane had a friend who let Mom use his address in El Paso to qualify for welfare.

Everyone in the colony was always saying how Lane had a strong work ethic. He spent every day milking cows, planting and baling hay, fixing tractors, trucks, and other equipment—all of which broke down regularly. But in spite of all his hard work, he never made enough money to provide for his eleven kids and stepchildren. So Mom said we had to help out by going to El Paso every month. Although Firstborners, as members of our church were called, believed firmly that the modern-day Babylon to the north would soon crumble under the weight of its people's wickedness, Lane said it was just fine to take advantage of Babylon's beneficence.

Lots of women like my mom—the American wives of polygamists raising their kids in Mexico—would travel north and collect government assistance checks. Many of the men in our colony did construction work in border states such as California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, which provided plenty of addresses for the women to use when it came time to pick up welfare checks, and lots of places to stay too. Mom said that we had to learn to live modestly; that we might be poor, but we were rich in spirit. Being faithful sometimes meant doing without. And we were doing the Lord's work, so why *shouldn't* US taxpayers fund our efforts? Which is how we found ourselves waiting for the bus back to LeBaron from Juárez on a cold, rainy morning in late December.

We huddled together for warmth in front of the Juárez bus station. Above us, a huge Mexican flag flapped furiously in the wind. Juárez was a border town of cars with broken mufflers and loud horns coming from every direction, men on rusty bicycles dodging potholes as the rain poured down, and dilapidated, old trucks that expelled smoke so thick they turned the sky from indigo to black.

Skinny Mexican children, their parents nowhere in sight, huddled on street corners in muddy and torn shoes, each waiting for the chance to sell treats and knickknacks to passersby. They peddled Chiclets, candy, brightly colored ceramic piggy banks, cookie jars, and more. Black-haired boys shoved each other aside for the chance to converge on cars that lined up outside the bus station. The

held their hands out to us as we walked by. The chaos frightened me, but Mom seemed completely ease, numb to it all. She fished a coin purse from her tattered, navy-blue bag and pressed a few coins into the hand of a child selling *banderas*, coconut candies that looked like miniature Mexican flags. We would have preferred gum, but Mom always said no, reminding us of all the times she'd had to cut it out of our hair. Plus, Audrey would put enormous wads of gum in her mouth and swallow the whole.

Inside the station, chaos reigned. A Spanish announcement barked at us from a speaker in one corner, and a radio blared from another. In her left arm, Mom held nine-month-old Aaron and a large black garbage bag full of Christmas presents she'd bought for us at garage sales and in thrift shops. Her right hand kept a tight grip on Audrey. My sister's skin was as fair as mine, but she had Mom's brown hair cut into a square bob.

Mom said she had never seen a child like Audrey before. One day Audrey would do something harmless, like grabbing my pigtail, but the next she'd yank on it so hard my neck would jerk to one side and I'd fall to the ground. All at once she'd bite my shoulders and pinch my forearms for no reason. But other times she kept to herself and sat quietly on a chair or the living-room couch rocking forward and backward for hours, staring straight ahead off into the distance. Behind Audrey, my brother Matt, a rambunctious eight-year-old with strawberry-blond hair parted down the middle, dragged our one hard-shelled suitcase across the muddy floor. Luke and I carried our clothes in plastic bags. Even at seven, Luke looked like my father, with a strong, square jaw, perfectly straight teeth, and a wide smile. Mom said Luke was developmentally delayed, but unlike Audrey, he was quiet and predictable, full of smiles and softness.

Families with cinnamon-colored skin gave us quizzical looks as we shuffled by, especially the mothers, who tittered to each other in Spanish, their thick, black hair pulled tightly into ponytails. I couldn't help but stare right back, at their bright red lipstick, thick, black eyeliner, stockings, and high heels, and at the men in white straw cowboy hats, their silver belt buckles cinching tight jeans that always led down to fancy boots.

"Hang on tight, Sis," Mom said as I gripped the waistband of her polyester pants. She looked down and smiled, her glasses inched down her nose so far she had to crinkle it to keep them from falling off altogether. "I see an open seat where we can all sit down." She led us to a nondescript bank of green plastic chairs. "You kids stay put," she commanded, and handed Aaron off to Matt. "I've got to catch Maudy's store before we leave."

Maudy's was LeBaron's general store. Maudy sold snack foods, *paletas*, and soft drinks out of a room built off the front of her house. Maudy's also served as the post office in a town where none of the homes had addresses, and it housed the only public telephone in a town with almost no private ones. You could call Maudy's from anywhere and leave a message for anyone in town. I listened as Mom called and left the same message she had the day before: to tell Lane that the six of us needed a ride home from the bus stop in LeBaron.

"*Cero-uno-uno-cinco-dos-seis-tres-seis.... Sí, por favor. Gracias,*" Mom said in her thick American accent as she winked and smiled at us. Mom never learned to speak Spanish well. I sometimes thought she was only pretending that she didn't speak Spanish so that she wouldn't have to talk to Alejandra, Lane's first wife, who was Mexican and barely spoke English.

Mom left her a message and rushed back to tell us that we needed to head outside to get in line for the bus. Mom had been running from the moment we'd arrived in El Paso, the five of us kids struggling to keep us as she collected our food stamps and waited in long lines at the bank to cash the government-assistance checks. But as soon as we stepped out into the wet December weather, Mom stopped us, transfixed by a refrigerator-size cardboard box on the sidewalk, open at both ends. *What does she need that box for?* I wondered.

"Is someone sleeping inside there?" Mom called out to no one in particular. She stopped and squinted through her glasses to get a better look. She let go of Audrey's hand and tiptoed closer to the open flaps. Sure enough, there was a boy inside. He looked about ten years old—barefoot, no coat, no blankets, no pillow, nothing.

We must have woken him. He bolted out from the box's other end. His T-shirt looked three sizes too small and was full of holes, and the cold had turned his lips dark purple. In Spanish, Mom asked the boy his name. He just stared at her motionless with fear, the way an animal might, the way Audrey sometimes did.

Matt took off his jean jacket and asked Mom if he could give it to the boy.

"Are you sure you want to give your jacket away?" Mom asked. "It's the only one you have, and you might get cold on the bus."

Matt nodded and Mom said okay. My brother walked up to the boy and wrapped it around his shoulders. The boy slipped his arms inside the sleeves and zipped it up quickly. I was impressed by Matt's generosity, even as I said a silent prayer of thanks that my coat was too small for the boy. Mom unzipped our suitcase, pulled out one of my brother's sweaters and a pair of socks. "Here, give these to him too." Matt did as he was told. The boy gave the barest hint of a smile and then crawled back into the box. Matt shrugged his shoulders in his wool sweater, shivered, and stuffed his hands in his jean pockets.

We got on the bus, and Mom handed Audrey a tattered deck of red cards. Card shuffling was one of my sister's favorite pastimes, and one of the few things that Mom could depend on to keep her from pulling at the threads in her clothes. I took off my coat so I could use it as a pillow and thought about the refrigerator-box boy and the children begging and selling candies on the streets of Juárez.

I was jealous of my cousins in the States. They used to live in Mexico too, but after my dad died Mom's sisters moved to California, not too far from where my grandparents lived. When her Microbus was working, Mom would take us to visit my grandparents at Christmas. Then we'd drive a couple of hours south to where my aunts lived to celebrate the New Year with all of my cousins. Mom's sisters were like her best friends when they were together. My cousins lived in warm homes that were already completely constructed; they had electricity, soft carpets, warm water that came right out of the faucet, washing machines, telephones, televisions, and they even had video games that we took turns playing on their TV. Whenever we left my cousins' house and went back to LeBaron, I felt embarrassed about how we lived. Our little house didn't have electricity or even a bathroom that worked, let alone a television with video games. I was so sad that this year we wouldn't be spending Christmas with my grandparents, aunts, and cousins. Mom's Microbus was broken again and she said there was no way for us to get to California. But leaving Juárez, I realized things could be much, much worse. I could be living in a box, wearing torn-up shoes, and selling candy to strangers. I felt sorry for

the Mexican children of Juárez, and for a while I forgot I was poor.

3

The bus drove through miles of mesquite, cacti, and tumbleweeds, and eventually the Sierra Madre came into view. We called them the Blue Mountains because of the way they looked in the afternoon sunlight. Along the road, I saw rain-soaked farms and cattle ranches ringed with barbed wire; one- or two-room adobe buildings that served as homes; small adobe restaurants; and adobe garages for mechanics. But my favorite view from the bus was of the little adobe structures that looked like tabernacles or doghouses but had faded statues of the Virgin Mary or Christ on the cross tacked to their roofs. Candles burned on small wooden tables inside the entryways. Mom explained that they were shrines where Catholics went to pray for safe travels during road trips. I was so used to sharing our small five-room house with my mom and my four siblings that I liked to imagine playing house in one of those warm, cozy little shrines.

As the dark day turned to an even darker evening, the bus came to a stop in the middle of Casas Grandes. Thirty-five miles north of LeBaron, Casas was the closest town to the colony, home to grocery stores, the hospital I'd been born in, as well as our favorite *tortillería*. There, we often found ourselves in long lines as we waited for a dozen hot corn tortillas wrapped in newspaper-thick paper packages. Back home in LeBaron, Mom would smother the tortillas in homemade butter and roll them up into little butter burritos. There was nothing better.

For some reason, the *tortillería* didn't have a line that afternoon, so Mom had time to pick up a dozen during the few minutes it took Casas passengers to get on and off the bus. Steam rose from the paper as she doled out our one-tortilla allotments. I gobbled mine down as the bus inched away from the city center and back toward the highway. Then I fell into a deep sleep, not waking up until we began our steep descent into the valley of LeBaron. I was never able to sleep through the stomach-dropping sensation of that part of the trip.

I yawned, sat up, and stared out at a slate sky. The clouds looked as if they'd all been made from a single piece of cotton that had been stretched by the wind until holes appeared. To my right, over Luke's sleeping head, LeBaron spread out for a mile on the west side of the highway. During the spring and hot summer months, the colony looked like a quilt stitched out of large patches of dark green, yellow, and orange fabric. But now, in the winter, the patches were nothing but different shades of brown.

As we descended farther, prickly barbed-wire fences that separated farms and neighbors came in

focus—the quilt’s silver and brown-threaded seams. I lifted myself up by the arms of my seat and looked over at Matt, who was rubbing his eyes. Outside the window behind him, adobe houses with flat, tar roofs nestled against rocky, golden-yellow hillsides—homes of the local Mexicans we often hired as farm and ranch hands.

Then, as we rounded a corner, the *L* came into view. High above LeBaron’s humblest homes, on the tallest of the hillsides along the east side of the highway, jagged rocks and round stones had been assembled to create a giant letter *L*. Painted white, it was always visible, but never more so than at dusk, when it seemed to glow. Mom always told me that my father himself had painted the rocks of the *L*.

The road began to flatten out just as we reached the colony. LeBaron was too small to have its own bus station, so residents disembarked at a stop on the highway. As soon as my feet touched the gravel, the cold stung my face like a slap. By this point, the gloomy sky had given way to a starry night. Rainfall from earlier in the day made the air smell like moist dirt. A stiff breeze hit the back of my neck. I shivered as the driver opened the undercarriage door and we gathered our things. Matt threw the bag of gifts over his shoulder like a young Santa Claus.

The bus pulled away and left behind nothing but darkness. The taillights became dots, the motor hum faded in the distance, and suddenly all I could hear was the trickling of water through the irrigation ditches that ran the length of the colony. The rows of tall willow trees lining the ditches swayed in the breeze. The town was so quiet I could hear myself breathe.

Mom looked up and down the highway, and I watched her expression melt from expectation to disappointment to weariness to acceptance. Lane obviously wasn’t coming. “He probably didn’t get my messages,” she mumbled with a sigh. “It’s no big deal. We can walk home.”

She balanced Aaron on her hip, threw her purse strap over her shoulder, bent over to pick up the suitcase, grabbed Audrey’s hand, and prepared herself for the mile-long walk home. The rest of us followed silently, watching and listening as Mom took a wide step over the highway shoulder and onto the dirt road, the gravel crunching beneath her footsteps, the sound of home.

As we walked past the adobe homes that led to the farm, I envied the bright and buttery glow emanating from the few that were wired for electricity. Interspersed among those warm, well-lit homes were houses where the light flickered and ghostly shadows bounced against every wall. These were the homes with kerosene lamps, homes like ours.

But ours wouldn’t even have flickering lights at the moment. It would be utterly dark, distinguishable only by Mom’s broken-down van parked outside.

Alejandra’s house was on the other side of the property, farther from town than our own. As we walked that night, I could see through the bare peach trees and across the alfalfa fields the faint light from my stepsisters’ bedroom window. I was always curious about my stepsisters’ lives, but that night their kerosene lantern was too dim to reveal much.

We reached the long gravel driveway leading to our house. I could hear the water flowing through the irrigation ditch, the small house standing cold and dark on the other side. The windows were so black they gave me a feeling of emptiness. I dreaded going inside.

Mom handed me Aaron, his wet diaper squishing against my waist. She and Matt pulled the gate open, and we all moved out of the way except Audrey, who just stood there bending her upper body

forward and moaning with her fingers squeezed tightly together. On instinct, I moved some distance away, but when Mom walked back and patted Audrey softly on the back, the moaning stopped and Audrey stepped out of the way of the gate.

Mom was the first to jump over the ditch. She climbed onto a soggy dirt mound, lifted Aaron from my side, wrapped both her arms around him, and jumped. Aaron's head bounced and his hood fell off when Mom's feet landed safely on the other side. She wobbled a little but righted herself to avoid falling backward into the mud.

She looked back at us, her glasses perched on the end of her nose. "Let Audrey go," Mom insisted. "Go ahead and jump, Sis," Mom told my sister in the kind, patient voice she always used to address Audrey. Audrey hunched her head forward, straightened her rigid legs, leaped, and landed smack in the middle of the ditch. The cold water reached all the way up to her knees. She moaned as Mom helped her out of the muck. The rest of us were well practiced, so we safely cleared the ditch and made our way to the house.

The smell of wet alfalfa was strong as we walked around the Microbus and approached the black wooden side door that led into our kitchen. It didn't have a real lock, just a long, bent nail that hooked over the inside doorknob. Still, it kept the door closed and could only be opened from the inside. Mom had to climb through the one unlocked window into the kids' room at the back of the house. He yanked the window open, jumped inside, and soon we heard the nail twist away and the door opened.

We stepped into a dark, frigid kitchen, which reeked of mice droppings. Audrey's teeth chattered as she rocked from left to right, and Aaron started to cry. Mom passed him to me while she went to retrieve the pair of kerosene lamps and matches she kept in her bedroom. She set one of them in the center of the kitchen table and lit it, the smells of sulfur and kerosene masking the mouse stench. The lamp's flame brought light to the gas refrigerator and the stove, our white table and the four plastic chairs that surrounded it.

My stepfather seldom completed any of his projects. The inside of our house hadn't even been finished before the outside began to crack and crumble. The house had been intended for Lane's original second wife, who had taken their two children, left him, and moved to the States a few years before Mom married into the family and became Lane's second second wife.

Even though it was just two days before Christmas, no decorations were in the kitchen or any other room. In better times we'd bought Christmas trees in El Paso and brought them down with us, but this year we had neither the money to buy one nor a working car to transport it.

I felt fresh mouse droppings squish under my feet as I followed Mom into the kids' bedroom where she set a lamp on the small, white dresser we all shared and pulled on it with all her might until the top drawer came open. She found a flannel nightgown and helped Audrey change into it before wrapping a white cotton diaper around her bottom, securing it with two pins, then covering it with a pair of clear-plastic underpants.

I opened my drawer, took out a red-and-black flannel nightgown, and shook off the mouse droppings. I shivered as I put it on over my head. Like the rest of the house, the kids' bedroom was unfinished. The two outer adobe walls hadn't been stuccoed inside or out, and small animals and insects lived in and crawled through the holes between the dirt bricks. That night, the chilly wind whistled through the cracks and made our clothes, which hung from a silver pipe attached to wires

the wooden ceiling, sway in the breeze. The wind hardened my skin with goose bumps and rattled my bones. I slipped cotton socks over my feet and ankles and put my jacket back on over my nightgown.

While Mom dressed Aaron for bed and nursed him to sleep, Matt brought a kerosene lamp back into the kitchen and sat it in the center of the oval table so we could all play a game of Go Fish. The lamp's small flame created tall, bouncing shadows that played on the bare white walls, and I had to squint to see the numbers on my cards. A dark purple sky was visible through the uncovered, wooden-framed window above the table, and dim moonlight shone down on us.

Audrey shuffled the cards, of course, and stacked them into a perfect pile before dealing them to Matt, Luke, and me. For some reason, she never needed help with Go Fish. She knew all the rules, how to pair her mates, and never forgot who had the cards she needed. She also seemed calmer when we played card games, although her concentration would periodically waver. Sometimes I'd look up to find her staring straight ahead at nothing in particular, and Matt had to call her name or tap her shoulder to remind her it was her turn. He always had the most mates on the table by the end of the game; then he would often throw his head back and laugh fakely with one eye closed, acting superior as if to remind us that he was the smartest.

With Aaron now asleep in his crib, Mom made us quesadillas with the rest of the tortillas she'd bought in Casas Grandes and with her own white cheese made from the milk of our cows. The cheese was stringy and always melted perfectly; the grease oozed from between the tortillas onto our fingertips and mismatched plastic plates. As Luke chewed his food, he opened his mouth and grunted—a dinnertime habit. “Lukey, eat with your mouth closed,” Mom said for the thousandth time, but Luke never learned.

The night grew darker and colder. Given that, and how tiring the day had been, Mom decided that we should all go to bed. Audrey and I tramped back to our room, where I lay down next to her, still in my coat. My head was at her feet and my legs prickled with goose bumps as they slid across the cold plastic bedcover that protected the mattress from Audrey's leaky diaper. I moved next to my sister for warmth.

The bed that Matt and Luke shared was opposite ours, up against the windowed outer wall, although Matt preferred to sleep on the green-and-white couch in the living room on nights when the wind howled through the walls of our bedroom. The wind didn't blow through the living-room walls the way it did in our room. Matt took the lamp with him when he left, and for a time the three of us lay in pitch-black darkness. Soon, thanks to the heat from Audrey's body, I stopped shivering and took my jacket off. I listened to the sounds my home made, of Aaron's whimpering on the other side of the single plastered wall, of the whistling outer walls as the winter breeze blew through them. I held my pillow tightly, pulled the blankets over my head, and drifted off to sleep.

* * *

THE WALLS WERE whistling again when I woke up on Christmas Eve morning, my legs freezing and damp from Audrey's leaking diaper. I had barely opened my eyes when I heard a bloodcurdling scream from the living room. Throwing off the blankets, I bolted over Audrey's sleeping legs and ran in the direction of Matt's voice, my feet almost burning from the cold of the cement floor.

My brother's eyes were still shut and he was shaking his head from side to side. “There was

mouse on my head!” he screamed. “There was a mouse on my head and he was chewing on my hair!”

“Where is it?” I yelled as my eyes scanned the floor.

“It ran into the kitchen.”

Now Luke was up, and the three of us ran in that direction. Matt grabbed a broom and swept it handle wildly under the oven.

Luke’s face was panic-stricken as he begged Matt to stop. “Don’t hurt it!” he cried.

“What the heck are you guys doing out here?” Mom asked as she walked into the kitchen in her old, blue robe. “The baby’s still sleepin’. You’re gonna wake him up.”

“Mom, he was chewin’ on my hair!” Matt said.

“I heard. Quiet down. I’ll pick up some mousetraps when I go to the store later.” Mom took off her glasses, exposing swollen, tired eyes. “You and Luke—go bring in some wood and start the barrel heater.”

“I don’t want you to kill de mouse, Mommy,” Luke said meekly. He didn’t always pronounce every word correctly or speak in complete sentences. Mom was already out of earshot, silent padding to her room in search of our ragged, old cotton sheet with little yellow flowers. She attached it to the walls between the kitchen and the hallway so that the warmth from the barrel heater would concentrate in the living room and the kitchen.

The heater was a rusty, fifty-five-gallon petroleum barrel into which Lane had cut a circular hole so we could load it with wood. He’d also attached a makeshift door that half covered the hole and made several coin-size holes in the barrel so the fire could breathe. A silver metal tube rose from the top of it and up through a hole in the wooden ceiling, the hole being at least a quarter inch larger in diameter than the tube. As a result, we always kept a silver milking bucket next to the heater to catch rain when it fell into the house.

The ramshackle heater stood in the far corner of the living room to the left of an old upright piano that Lane had originally bought for the wife whose place Mom had taken. Even though it was out of tune and most of its glossy black finish had faded and flecked away long ago, I loved that piano and played it more than anyone else. My grandmother LeBaron, my dad’s mom, gave me piano lessons twice a week at her house, which was about a mile from our house.

Within minutes, my brothers had come back inside with chopped wood in their arms. Matt filled the barrel and wiped his dirty hands on his faded jeans. Then he stepped back as Mom poured kerosene over the wood, struck a match, and threw it into the barrel. Flames burst out of the hole before she closed the round door, and Mom reminded us for the umpteenth time to watch Aaron so he wouldn’t burn himself on the heater.

The smell of burning wood filled the living room. The entire family was up now, sitting on the couch or the living-room rug, all of us snuggled under blankets. Knowing we were still chilly, Mom left the oven and left its door open while she made breakfast. She filled a pan half-full of wheat berries that she kept stored in a gunnysack, then covered the berries with water and boiled them until they were soft and round. We ate the chewy, hot cereal out of plastic bowls at the kitchen table with milk, cinnamon, vanilla, and sugar.

After breakfast, once everyone was dressed and ready for the day, Mom placed Aaron into his round, hard-plastic walker in the living room as far as possible from the heater. While he rolled

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