

Losing Balloons

by Angel Vargas

The little boy walked hand-in-hand with his mother. The other hand held a string attached to a big red balloon. His banana-shaped smile was an indicator that his happiness was at its highest point. He didn't need a chocolate ice cream cone, a stuffed animal, or even a pet Chihuahua to make him happy—the balloon was all he needed. I kept following the little boy with my eyes. I kind of had a bad habit of staring at people, but it was in my nature to be observant of other's behavior. Next thing I know the little boy unexpectedly tripped and let go of his balloon. The smile disappeared from his face as fast as the string left his hand. His head tilted towards the enormous sky of nothingness with the hopes that it would return, but it glided through the air like a bird in the progress of its migration. He began to cry and the tears gushed from his eyes like a bleeding wound. His mother tried to console him, even offering to buy him another one. But at that point his glee depended on that particular balloon. I laughed at the stupid little boy while sitting on the park bench. I couldn't understand why he couldn't get over it. I wasn't a whole lot older than he was, but at least I knew when to let go of things. I felt a gentle elbow nudge from momma, "let's go little Ray."

Before leaving, I asked her if she could buy me some ice cream. I loved ice cream! The only flavor I didn't really enjoy was vanilla—it didn't have any color to it. She said no of course, but I wasn't going to leave it at that. I always got what I wanted. Before I knew it, we were walking home and I was licking my rainbow sherbet ice cream on every side while it dripped around my hand like lava from a volcano. I was happy. I began to ask momma a bunch of questions and she responded with simple answers—mostly yes and no answers. I also noticed that she wasn't smiling very much; actually, she wasn't smiling at all. But I continued to smile. We went on with our talk. I told her that sometimes I wish I was dead. I didn't mean it in a bad way, but more in an honest and innocent way. She immediately chided me and told me that we should never wish for death. She asked me why I would even think of such a thing. I had no idea why she was so upset. I just remember people always saying that when we die we will go to this happy place called heaven and that it will be a million times better than Disneyworld. If this is the case, then I want to be dead right now! I mean, I've never been to Disneyworld, but I heard it's amazing.

Even though I still thought about this thing called death, I never told mama that I wanted to die again for her sake. We arrived home. My face and hands were filthy from the ice cream I was eating. Momma told me to go wash my hands. I threw a fit and told her I had licked the ice cream clean off my fingers, but she threatened me with the possibility of whipping me with the belt, so I headed straight to the potty room like a silent lamb. I closed the door behind me. I decided to take a wiz while I was at it. I aimed dead-center towards the toilet bowl, but I missed—again! Shit! I didn't say it loud enough because momma would slap the shit out of me if she heard me. I grabbed some toilet paper and wiped down the areas where the piss shouldn't have fallen. I washed my hands and began to play with the soap. I stared at the mirror and noticed some of the dried up ice cream on my face. I laughed and pointed at myself in the mirror.

I noticed the missing front tooth, the goofy, bowl-haircut, and the little snot that was peaking through my nose. No wonder people think I'm adorable! I turned off the faucet and light and wiped my wet hands on my shirt and pants.

I stepped into the living room and found momma on the phone. I didn't bother her; I just stood there listening. She was speaking in Spanish. Momma once in a while spoke to me in Spanish, so I only understood some of the things she was saying. She was sobbing. Something was wrong, but I didn't have a clue what it might be. I didn't go up to her and hug her and tell her it was going to be ok. I simply reached for some paper towel and placed it in her hand. She received it and began to pamper her eyes while staring at the ground. She didn't say thank you, but she didn't have to. I knew she was appreciative just because of the way she softly rubbed my face.

The conversation didn't worry me though. I was just a kid—free from stress and all adult responsibilities. I began to play with my toy cars. I mostly had racing cars. I had at least one car for every color. They were all beat-up, but entertaining nevertheless. I was on the floor with my legs crossed and I had a car in each hand. I dragged the cars on the floor and pretended to follow an imaginary snake-like road on the ground. *Vrooooooom*. I imitated what a car sounded like in real life. I was lost in my own imaginary world. I pretended there were people inside the cars. I copied the sound of the initial screech of tires before you hear the actual crash of an accident. Then the explosive *pssh!* Man, I bet nobody survived that one! I turned around to look at momma, but she faced the wall in an attempt to hide her rainy eyes. I looked at the wall in the direction where momma was facing and saw the picture of Grandma on the wall. The image alone made me as happy as stuffing myself with ice cream. She looked very old in the picture, but beautiful. I noticed that what I believe to be beautiful isn't the same thing for older people. Beauty is something that makes you happy. Ice cream, old beat-up toy cars, and old wrinkly people are a thing of beauty to me. Come to think of it, maybe it made sense why that stupid little boy at the park was acting like a little girl when his balloon slipped from his hand and faded into the sky. Maybe that was his beauty.

I kept staring at the picture on the wall. Grandma had more wrinkles than a map had roads. I could almost see toy cars driving at very high speeds in between those road-like wrinkles. Her skin tone was amazing though; maybe because it reminded me of butterscotch ice cream. A bigger grin spread across my face. Her hair was never straight though. It was almost like it wanted to be straight, but it just kind of curled off at the ends. There was also a small, yet distinguishable birthmark right above her upper lip the size and color of a chocolate chip. It stood out, not in a disfigured way, but in a way that enhanced her already charming face. It also reminded me of the moon at night. In this town, you can't see the stars at night for shit, but you can see the beautiful, shining moon in the middle of the dark enormous sky.

Momma kept her back towards me. I asked, "what's wrong mamma?" She didn't say anything right away. She kind of gathered herself a little, and with a choked-up voice she said that Grandma was very sick. I didn't see the big deal. I told momma "why don't we just send her some medicine?" That's what momma always gives me whenever I'm sick, and it makes me go sound to sleep. Momma tried to explain that it was a different kind of sickness. Something about Grandma getting something called the cancer. The cancer? What could that be? I tried to picture in my mind what that could be. Grandma lived in Mexico, so maybe it was a different type of flu.

Maybe she had too much ice cream. Maybe she was just sick of life and all she needed was a nice trip to Disneyworld to cheer her all up!

Momma told me that we were taking the trip to Mexico to go visit Grandma. She said we were leaving tonight. Woohoo! I love Mexico, and I love visiting Grandma. Although we usually went to Mexico about two to three times a year (I used my fingers to count), I knew that this trip was not a regular trip. We normally planned ahead and chose a pretty season to travel. But it was late October and the weather was becoming cold and gloomy. Anyway, I remembered to pack some Nyquil for Grandma. I told momma again that we should take her something for her sickness, and I could tell she was getting ready to tell me again that it was useless, but she allowed me to take Grandma the medicine.

Momma helped me pack my clothing. She never told me how long the trip was going to be, but seeing the mass amount of clothing she was stuffing my suitcase with, it looked like we were basically moving there. She packed my undies, my cartoon painted t-shirts, and jeans that were either torn or faded at the knees. “Mom, don’t forget my superman pj’s!” I was super excited, but I noticed that momma wasn’t too happy about the trip. She was usually in good spirits every time we visited Grandma, but not this time. I wish she would be as excited as I was.

We were packed and ready to go. I didn’t know what time it was, but it was beginning to get dark. We headed out the door and walked to the bus station. Momma didn’t say much. I attempted to have a conversation, as usual, but I was talking to myself. Maybe it was also that momma had a long day at work. If my father hadn’t left when I was a baby maybe she wouldn’t be so tired. She worked at a factory and I assume it gets exhausting there.

We were about two blocks away from the bus station. By this time it was completely dark, except for the city lights. I looked towards the enormous black sky in an attempt to find a single star. I thought stars and planets were fascinating, but it upset me that I could not see them. However, I did see half a moon, looking kind of like a big piece of white cheese that somebody took a bite out of. *Thu-thump*. “Shit!” I stumbled over my little suitcase and landed on the concrete. Momma turned back, “What did you say little Ray?” She said half-disappointed and half-concerned about my fall. “Nothing momma, I fell.” I did the best to cover up my misdeed, and groaned louder. I looked at my torn jeans and noticed some blood starting to seep through the fresh wound. I told momma I was ok. It hurt like hell though, but I should be used to it because I’m always falling and hurting myself. Momma took a closer look and examined it like the stupid doctor that I would go to all the time for check-ups. I told her I was ok again. She told me we would wash it off at the bus station.

Upon arrival momma noticed that the bus that we were going to take was almost ready to go. She told me to hurry. She forgot about helping me wash the wound, but it didn’t matter. She paid the clerk and received two tickets. We headed up the steps of the bus—I went up before momma. “Hello sir!” I said to the driver with great enthusiasm. He smiled like a jolly good fellow and told me “welcome.” The driver was a guy with unattended hair like a mad scientist, a huge smile that allowed for his crooked and yellow teeth to be seen, and an enormous beer-belly that reminded me of Santa Claus. He was a likeable guy though because he treated me like a little adult, and seeing him smile made me have a reason to smile as well. I turned around to make sure that momma was behind me. I noticed she ignored the driver even after he greeted her

and continued to walk through the bus somberly. I don't get it. She teaches me these manners but never carries them out herself. But momma was not happy and I left her alone.

We found a seat towards the back, and I made sure I got the one next to the window. Momma maintained her silent demeanor; there was nothing to be sad about. I looked around at the other people who were already seated and those still coming in. I was the only kid on the bus. It sucks that there was no one to play with or talk to, but I was kind of used to it because I didn't have any brothers or sisters. Momma asked me if I was hungry. I told her I was fine and that I had a peanut-butter and jelly sandwich before we left the house. I love momma. She is always taking care of me. I sometimes wished she would talk and smile more, but I was just glad that she took care of me and provided everything I needed—especially the ice cream! Momma's tears were all dried up by this time, I didn't even notice when she stopped crying.

The bus took off and I peered through the window. The town seemed almost deserted. Normally people would still be out by this time, but it was cold and sad outside. I didn't blame the people for not being outside walking or riding their bikes. Not even ten minutes had gone by and I was already feeling antsy. I was almost tempted to ask momma to go to the restroom. I didn't really need to go, I just wanted to move around and do something.

Two or three hours passed by, or maybe it was one hour, I don't know, I still have trouble keeping track of time. I reached for my backpack and took out a notepad and pencil. I preferred pens, but mom said I wasn't ready to use pens because I always mark my clothes or end up with ink all over my hands. I could live with that, but if there was something I loved, it was drawing! My stupid teacher always sent letters home to my mom about me drawing while in class—I hated the old hag for that. I wished she could sit in her own class and see what it was like to sit-in in her own teaching. Anyways, there was something about drawing that was so relaxing. I sucked at drawing, but it was one of the few things that I found to be of great pleasure.

The notepad was still blank. I looked out the window and into the sky. I saw nothing, just darkness. Just a big empty space with stars that cannot even be seen. At that moment Grandma popped into my head and I was determined to draw her. I had trouble at first. I didn't know how to even begin. How about her face? I drew a big circle. I still had difficulty. I began to tap the end of the eraser against the side of my head in an attempt to wait for inspiration. Now what does Grandma have on her face that I can begin to draw? Aha! I began to draw wavy lines all over the circle that looked like the wrinkles on a giant raisin. I could never give Grandma enough wrinkles on her face. I attempted to draw her eyes, one came out noticeably bigger than the other, but that was okay. I drew a little dot above her upper lip—there was no way to draw grandma's face without adding her chocolate chip birth mark. I think I was almost done, but she definitely needed hair. That was easy because I didn't have to draw straight lines for that. I just drew wiggly lines that kind of curved at the ends like fishing hooks. I looked at the final product and was very proud. If only I had a little bit of butterscotch ice cream to paint her face.

At some point momma had fallen asleep, but I woke her up because I wanted her to see the beautiful work of art that I had produced. She gave it a look and squinted. It was a bit difficult to see inside the bus because it was pretty dim. She asked what it was. "What do you mean what is it!? It's Grandma!" Momma's eyes continued to stare at the picture and I could tell her eyes were becoming watery again. Her lips trembled while saying it was nice and she

repositioned herself and pretended to fall asleep again. I looked at her and was convinced she was asleep. I found it interesting how even when people sleep they still breathe. How do people remember to keep breathing when they're asleep? Her chest would expand and come back down, and continued as she slept. I turned my head towards the drawing and began to erase it. I erased good'ol Grandma from my page. As much as I hated pens, at least pencils allowed me to sketch things, erase them, and start all over again.

I put my notepad and pencil away. I began to think of Grandma. I thought about the last memory I had of her. I was playing outside of Grandma's house one day with one of my cousins and she stepped outside for a smoke. It was the first time I saw grandma puff away like a chimney. I don't know why, but it was an amazing sight. My momma told me all the time that smoking was bad for you—she never smoked herself, but Grandma was being the true rebel. I wasn't shocked that Grandma was blowing away on a cigarette. It made me happy to see her enjoy herself. I could never stand the smell of smoke though—it was extremely irritating to my nose. But I noticed there was something about having a smoke that made people become so relaxed and at ease and I enjoyed seeing Grandma peaceful and stress-free. I don't know what it is about cigarettes. Maybe they contain some kind of magic ingredient in them that causes people to forget about everything and not worry. Sometimes ice cream makes me feel like that. I almost remember what Grandma was wearing too. It wasn't hard because she seemed to always wear the same thing. She used to have this worn out apron with fading flowers on it. I think it was blue and white—like the color of the sky with clouds. It had two pockets on the front and she seemed to always be carrying something in them—like change, handkerchiefs, and, I guess, now cigarettes.

Yup, that was the last time I saw her. But now I'm going to see her again and hopefully she'll have another smoke! I started to become sleepy, like I had just taken some Nyquil. I didn't know what time it was, but I think it was my bedtime. I turned to look at momma and she was sound asleep, but her chest was still rising and falling. She looked so quiet and relaxed. I laid my head against her shoulder and I felt her warmth like a campfire in the middle of a cold and dark night. I felt at ease and secure—almost like the way Grandma must feel when she smokes her magical cigarettes. I too fell sound asleep.

I opened my eyes to a beautiful sunrise—it stood above the earth like a gigantic scoop of orange sherbet ice cream. I looked over to get a glimpse of momma's face—she was already anticipating for me to turn my head towards her. She smiled down at me. Well, it was a forced smile, but I'll take it! Her smile was as beautiful as a banana split ice cream flooded with chocolate syrup and decorated with bright red cherries. "Good morning momma" I said with my usual boyish grin enhanced by a missing tooth. "Rise and shine little Ray," she said in a soothing and comforting voice. She told me we were almost in Mexico. This was where momma was born. I was born on the opposite side of the border. I guess I had two homes.

From far away I could read the huge sign before crossing the border: *WELCOME TO MEXICO*. We crossed the border and it felt like we had arrived to a completely different planet. There were kids walking around barefoot, dirt roads all over, people were selling almost everything you can think of from candy to big, funny-looking Spanish Cowboy hats—I think they called them *sombreros*. Even the air smelled different, as if something was burning, dying, or rotting. My tummy growled, reminding me that I needed food—I agreed.

I thought about Grandma's cooking and I think it made the roar of my tummy louder. She makes the most amazing food. She would make tamales, Mexican scrambled eggs, and a bunch of other food that I wasn't used to. I was used to the fast food stuff, Mac and Cheese, and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. But Grandma seemed to make all her food from scratch and her food had some sort of magic to it. "Hey momma, is Grandma going to cook for us when we get there?" She told me that Grandma was too sick to cook and that she needed all the rest she could get. She said we would stop by somewhere to get food. I wanted steak tacos with guacamole and a soda pop. She looked at me with one eyebrow raised. "Please momma." I gave her my puppy eyes followed by a toothless grin. She gave a sigh and rolled her eyes as if to say "what am I going to do with this kid!" She responded, "Yes little Ray, but it'll be the only soda that you will have today." I never understood why mothers were always so anti-soda, anti-candy, anti-ice cream, anti-everything! It's true that I usually got what I wanted, but I always had to work for it.

The bus made a stop. Momma had my aunt Esther pick us up from the bus station. She made me smile too and was a wonderful woman. We walked off the bus and she honked the horn while smiling and waving her hand. She got off the car and greeted me first. She gave me a kiss on the cheek, which I always hated, but still felt the love. She spoke to me in Spanish and I acted like I understood every word she said and just grinned and nodded. Then came momma's turn and they embraced a lot longer than usual. My mom's eyes began to rain again. I told myself, "Here we go again." I could have interpreted the extra long embrace and repeated tears as an emotional reunion, but I knew it was more than that. Something was wrong.

We tossed our luggage in the trunk, hopped in the car and hit the road. I sat in the backseat and momma and Aunt Esther had a conversation in Spanish. I understood some of things they were saying. Something like "she doesn't look too good" and something about "making arrangements" for who knows what. Arrangements for what? Were we going to throw a party for Grandma to cheer her up? That would be super amazing! When I thought about parties I pictured music, cake, balloons, people, and food! I wanted to join the conversation and throw in some of my own ideas for the party, but I couldn't speak a lot Spanish, so I didn't say anything.

The roads were bumpy and it felt like we were constantly running over potholes and road kill. In Mexico everybody drives fast and they all make quick and crazy turns, almost like everybody is in a car chase or something. Good thing they don't drive as crazy as I do with my toy cars. I usually recognized the road to Grandma's house, but nothing seemed familiar. Maybe we were taking a short cut. I wanted to ask where we were going but I just tried to enjoy the ride. My stomach growled again. "Mom I'm hungry!" She smacked her head on her hand and held it there for a second. "Yes little Ray, we are going to stop by somewhere right now." She then told my aunt something. I think it was about my tacos. My aunt looked at my mom as if she was crazy. Momma shrugged her shoulders and raised her palms slightly as if to say "that's what he wanted to eat." My aunt looked through the rearview mirror to find me and smiled. I smiled back and showed her my missing tooth. We stopped and got my two little tacos with guacamole sauce and a coca-cola soda pop. The cashier saw my mom hand the food over to me and it left her mouth half-opened. Now this is what I call a fine breakfast!

We hopped back in the car. Momma reminded me to not drop any of my food while I was eating. Aunt Esther waved her hand in the air towards her as if she were swatting a nagging fly,

letting mom know not to worry about it. I stuffed my mouth with the tacos. Momma turned back and told me to slow down and remember to breath. I tried, but don't know how successful I was. I was done with the tacos. I licked my fingers as clean as I could get them. Momma turned back to look at me and caught me in the act. She just shook her head in slight disappointment. She hated when I did that. I drank some more of my soda pop, and while I was chugging away, the car hit a little bump and I spilled some of the soda pop on my shirt. "Shit." Momma slowly turned back again in the middle of her conversation and gave me that disappointed look again. I avoided eye-contact and my head dropped to look at my dirty shirt. Well, at least I didn't spill it on her seat.

Aunt Esther began to slow down. I noticed she was trying to find parking next to this huge big building with a big red cross on it. This wasn't Grandma's house. "Mom, where are we going?" She responded, "to visit Grandma." I was confused. Did Grandma move? Or is this where the party will be at? I wanted to ask more questions but momma was helping Aunt Esther find parking. The car was parked and we headed towards the big building.

We made our entrance and I saw all the workers dressed in white. I realized that we were in a hospital. It was not your typical hospital. Everything looked broken and unclean. The walls had cracks that looked like veins on an old person's legs. The floor was filthy as if they had used the hallways as a dump. Many patients sat in the hallways left unattended; some with open and bleeding wounds, some coughing their lungs out, and others in unbearable pain. It kind of looked like a big war movie where all the soldiers had just been crushed and severely wounded, and left stranded on the battlefield. I was afraid to touch anything in that place. I held on tight to momma's coat.

We reached the reception desk. I usually went to the hospital for little check-ups and also for when I was delivered as a baby, but I don't remember that. I never had to go because of someone else. Okay, so maybe Grandma is a little bit sicker than I thought. Maybe this cancer thing is pretty serious. Momma and Aunt Esther seemed to have a hard time with the receptionist and I could tell they were about to lose their religion. Maybe Grandma was popular in this place so everyone wanted to see her, who knows. All I know is that I couldn't wait to see her!

Finally they came to an agreement and we had to go to another floor. We looked for an elevator, but there was none, only stairs. We hiked up the stairs. I counted about 6 floors. We came to the room where Grandma stayed. They didn't go in right away. I don't know why but I was ready to dash through the door and give Grandma a big bear hug! They ruined my entire momentum and excitement. I heard Aunt Esther tell momma in Spanish to be strong. Strong? Strong for what? Were we gonna carry something? My momma worked at a factory so she was already strong.

We entered the room. My smile disappeared. I was shocked and confused. I looked towards momma, her hand was trembling over her mouth and her eyes were resistant like the heavy clouds trying to fight off the urge to rain. Aunt Esther was looking towards the floor. Her face looked very sad and her eyes avoided the devastating scene. I thought for a second that this wasn't Grandma, but the way momma and Aunt Esther reacted was enough confirmation that the little old lady napping on the bed really was Grandma. She laid there with her eyes closed and her chest barely rising above the surface of the pale white blanket that covered her as she gently

breathed. There were tubes stuck up her nose and needles attached to her arms. Her body was like an old and dying tree whose leaves could be broken off by the slightest motion of the wind. Her skin no longer resembled the color of butter scotch ice cream, but more like the dull color of plain vanilla ice cream. She didn't wear the beautiful apron that I remember her in, instead she had on a lifeless gown that reminded me of cloudy days. The only thing that looked the same was the wrinkles on her face, but this time they were like roads that were shut down to all traffic. It was a puzzling and haunting sight; even my crummy drawing on the bus offered a better rendition of Grandma than this.

We didn't stay very long in there. We left before Grandma even had a chance to open her eyes. I was still trying to understand what I had just seen. It started making a little bit of sense why momma was so down and quiet all this time, and why the Nyquil medicine would have been completely useless. But a change took place while I was in that room. I felt like a small wound within me began to form and leak. It was almost like when you get punched in the face—you don't feel that much right then, but the reality of the pain kicks in gradually as you snap out of your numbness. For the first time I didn't feel like smiling. Momma grabbed a hold of my hand. "Are you okay little Ray?" She said with tears still in her eyes. "Yes momma." The truth was that I wasn't okay. I wanted to yell at her for allowing me to see such a thing. I wanted to find out who had done this to Grandma. I wanted to ask how to make her better. Could we buy her a pack of magical cigarettes? What can we do!?

We were on the road again heading towards Aunt Esther's house. The car was silent. I looked out the window and everybody was happy—everybody except us. The road seemed to be extra long and extra bumpy. Aunt Esther turned on the radio. I looked out again, and people were selling things out on the street. I noticed one lady who was selling flowers and balloons. I wanted a balloon.

I found myself in Aunt Esther's kitchen. She was making us lunch, but I wasn't hungry. She heated up some leftover tamales with beans, rice and guacamole. I usually slobbered over Aunt Esther's cooking, but this time I wasn't looking forward to it. The food was placed in front of us. I didn't want it, but I forced myself to eat it for the sake of Aunt Esther. I thought about how these four portions all grew out of trees and plants, and how trees and plants feed off of dirt. So I'm basically now eating dirt in the shape of food, just so I can crap it all out later so that it can become dirt again.

I finished my meal. I told Aunt Esther *gracias*, it was the Spanish word for "thank you." She smiled back and asked me if I wanted ice cream. She knew how much I loved ice cream. But I told her no. It was the first time in my life I said no to ice cream. I could tell she was a bit shocked and she glanced over to momma who shared the same reaction. She led me towards the living room. She turned on the television and gave me full control of the remote. I flipped through the channels and all the stations were in Spanish. Even some of the movies that were originally in English had been translated into Spanish. I finally came across a channel where they were showing people riding in hot air balloons. These things were humungous, but they became so tiny once they were hanging from the gigantic sky. They all exhibited a mosaic of colors and patterns, kind of like a kid's coloring book. The colors added life and bliss to the balloon. Just watching it on T.V. helped cheer me up a bit. It was fascinating to watch it launch off the earth, take its direction from the wind, and be driven by the blazing fire. What was even more

interesting though was how it wasn't even the kids who were playing with these balloons—they were all adults. This world has everything mixed up! Now we got grownups acting like little kids and playing with balloons. I glanced over by the wall, and there was a picture of Grandma. It was the exact same picture as the one in our house, except with a different frame, and it hung against a sky blue painted wall. She was smiling and so I smiled back at her. She hung on the wall like a pleasant balloon flying in the gorgeous sky.

The show was over and I turned off the T.V. What good is it to watch something you want when you can't even have it? I took one last look at Grandma's portrait. She looked so elegant and charming, unlike the way she looked in the hospital. I wondered if she was ever going to get better. I wanted to see her again. I wanted the same good 'ol Grandma that smoked like a choo choo train, that wore the same old beautiful aprons, and like the one that hung on the wall. I heard the faint conversation between momma and Aunt Esther. They were speaking in Spanish, so I didn't even try to make out what they were saying. I slouched down on the couch. My head began to nod off and my eyes fought to stay open.

I woke up to a loud phone ring. I looked around forgetting where I was for a second. Aunt Esther answered the phone. I looked for momma. She had been sitting at the table, but got up to see what the phone call was all about; they must have been talking for hours. Aunt Esther listened to the other person on the line. She didn't say much, just listened and responded with brief answers. She hung up. Momma stared at her. Aunt Esther nodded. I didn't know what this meant. They began to discuss things. I heard them talking about me; something about me not being able to go with them to see Grandma. Aunt Esther told momma that I couldn't stay here alone. They said all this as if I couldn't understand a thing they were saying, which was kind of true, but I was able to pick up certain things they said. They finally came to some kind of agreement. "Little Ray, we have to go." "Go where momma?" She told me we had to go back and see Grandma again, but she wouldn't give me any more details. We had just gotten back a few hours ago from seeing Grandma, and now we were in a rush to see her again. Why can't we just wait till she gets better? Maybe she needs some rest, so why bother her right now?

We arrived at the hospital with the big red cross on it. It was Grandma's house for now. We stepped out of the car and I felt the cold air hit me unexpectedly. The sun decided to hide, but it wasn't evening yet. Momma and Aunt Esther were in a rush. We hurried inside the entrance. I asked no questions because it seemed that momma didn't have time to answer questions. The inside still looked like a battlefield with wounded soldiers. We hiked up the long stairs again. When we arrived at the floor where Grandma was, we did not go straight to the room. Instead we went to a waiting room and met more family members. I recognized some of them, but I didn't feel as comfortable with them as I did with Grandma and Aunt Esther. Momma told me that I would have to stay in here while she went to go see Grandma. I didn't want to stay here with these strangers; I wanted to go with momma. I pleaded with momma, "please-please can I go with you?" I gave her the puppy eyes, but they didn't seem to work their magic this time. Momma was a little more adamant, "No little Ray, you can't come right now. I'll come back for you in a little while." I wanted to throw a fit and make a scene, but instead I sat in one of the chairs with my arms crossed. I watched momma disappear through the hall. Some of the family members tried to talk to me in Spanish. I understood some of the things they were saying, but I acted like I understood nothing. I wasn't in the mood for talking or being

cheered up. I looked around but there was nothing in the room that caught my attention. There was no T.V., no toys, no momma, no Grandma! There weren't even any pictures up on the walls. The white pale walls were old, cracked and beat-up. The only thing that was semi-appealing to the eye was this clock on the wall. It had three hands that rotated around in circular motion; one moved rapidly while the other two moved at the speed of a turtle. The thing that frustrated me about this stupid clock was that I couldn't tell time. The only thing I knew was that the clock was supposed to keep track of every second, minute, and hour that passes by.

I don't know how many times that little hand had gone around the entire circle, but it had seemed that it had gone around at least a gazillion times. Momma hadn't gotten back yet, not even to let me know that everything was okay. Maybe that's why she hadn't returned, maybe because everything wasn't okay. I thought about going to look for her. I think I remembered where Grandma's room was. I turned to look at the clock, but to my surprise the clock had completely stopped working. Not even the little hand was moving anymore. Did time stop?

I snuck out of the waiting room without anyone noticing. There were many people dressed in white walking across the hallway. I was scared, but determined in my little mission. I walked down the hall and made a couple of turns. I came upon a room where I thought Grandma would be. I peaked in, but realized it was the wrong room. I kept walking down the hall. My heart began to beat faster. A nurse walked out of one room and looked at me with a raised eyebrow, suspicious of what I was doing alone in this place. I increased my pace. I then saw another room and peaked inside. I recognized the familiar faces, except for one man who was wearing all black with a white collar and a necklace with a cross hanging on it. All the attention and focus was on Grandma, but I could not really see her. I noticed all my aunts and uncles standing around—their faces down and sad looking. I saw momma, but she had her back towards me. I entered the room quietly and found a place inside where I could get a glimpse of Grandma. She looked really sick. I never had seen anybody so sick. I felt sick just looking at her in this condition.

The guy dressed in black was holding on to Grandma's hand. I wanted to hold on to Grandma's hand. Grandma could barely keep her eyes open. Maybe she was too tired. Why don't they just leave her alone so she can get some rest? The lights were dim in that room. I could hear Grandma say in a slow and raspy voice to turn off the light because it was too bright. Maybe that's why she struggled to open her eyes. She began to gasp for air. She repeated the word *agua*—the Spanish word for water. I noticed a machine next to her that was constantly beeping, almost at the same pace as the hand on that clock in the waiting room. Aunt Esther grabbed a piece of cotton and dipped it in water. She placed it on Grandma's lips. Grandma swallowed the little bit of water that she was able to squeeze from the cotton piece, and you could tell she had trouble swallowing the few drops. I didn't have a good feeling about all this—something was very wrong.

The man dressed in black held firmly onto Grandma's hand, while holding on to his beaded necklace with the cross on it. He seemed very fatherly and saintly. But I could not understand why he was being selfish in holding on to Grandma's hand when he wasn't even part of the family. Why not let momma or Aunt Esther hold on to her hand? The man in black drew his face closer to the side of Grandma's ear. He began to whisper some words. I began to panic. I looked all over the place for an explanation of what was going on. What was this man saying to

Grandma? Why did everybody look so sad and have teary eyes? Grandma began to pant for air and water. Her chest began to rise and fall more rapidly. I heard some of my aunts and uncles say how much they loved her and others desperately told her to not go. Where would she go? She can't even stand up! The man finished whispering in her ear. I saw Grandma nod in agreement with whatever the man in black said. She looked like she was in great pain and discomfort. I could tell that everyone, including myself, wanted to help, but we all stood there helpless. Then I noticed Grandma's eyes become glazed. They sparkled like the stars that hung under the dark night. Her breathing and chest movement began to decrease gradually. She began to speak softly and calmly. She seemed to be calm and at peace as if she had just taken a smoke. She said she could hear them sing. Them? I didn't know what she was talking about anymore. Who is them? I don't hear anyone singing. Then I heard the beeping sound of the machine beep no more. Grandma's chest no longer moved, it had stopped completely like the clock in the waiting room. It felt like Grandma was a television screen and somebody turned her off. She looked like a baby that was sound asleep. The crescendo of weeping increased from those standing in the room. The man in black gently let go of Grandma's frail little hand. I began to cry. The wound within me began to gush out profusely.

We were back at Aunt Esther's house. The ride back was quiet and depressing. Momma still seemed very sad and I even think she ran out of tears. Aunt Esther was sad, but kept her composure. I was a mess. No, I was devastated. Someone I loved and someone I cherished deeply was now gone—lost somewhere in the sky and never to return. I didn't even get a chance to say farewell. She had gone to a place that's supposed to be a million times better than Disneyworld and she didn't even take me with her! Still, she left. Or maybe she was taken away, I don't know. All I know is that she's gone and I'm miserable. Nothing at this point could cheer me up—no ice cream, no toy cars, and no hot air balloon. For the first time in my life I didn't have my way.

Aunt Esther led me to an empty room in her house where I would spend the night. She gave me a hug and a kiss on the head; it was momentarily soothing. She told me if I needed anything that she would be right next door. I had my pj's on and 3 covers over me. Momma came in and sat next to me on the bed. I didn't look at her. "Are you ok little Ray?" I nodded up and down, but didn't say anything. "Are you sure?" She placed her hand on my head. I repeated the same bodily expression. I said I was ok, but what I really wanted to tell her was that I wish I were dead! I wish I were dead so I can see Grandma. She tucked me in, kissed me on the forehead, and wished me goodnight. She left the room and turned the lights off. Still, the moon's light shone through the window. I looked out but not even on this side of the country could I see the stars. I wondered if Grandma was somewhere out there among the stars, the moon, the planets. I wondered if I yelled loud enough if she'd be able to hear me.

A couple of days had gone by and I found myself going to a place called the cemetery. It was a creepy place. We rode in Aunt Esther's car again. Grandma took a ride from this strange car with a special driver. They kept her in this big fancy box. Momma explained earlier that we were going to take Grandma so that she could be buried because that's what they do to people when they die. It didn't make sense to me. You mean to tell me that we reward people for dying by digging up a hole in the ground and throwing them in there? Grandma deserved better! I wondered if, like a plant or tree, and after Grandma had been buried, if she'd be able to sprout

from the ground like a flower. But it didn't seem like this was possible because all the other people who had been buried in this place stayed in the ground.

They carried Grandma's box from the strange looking car to the place where they were going to bury her. A gentle wind began to pick up. The day was gloomy and grey. Most people wore black. I followed momma everywhere she went and she followed Grandma's box wherever it went. They opened up the box so that people could get one last look at Grandma. A huge line began to form. People did all kinds of strange things. Some people kissed her on the forehead, some people took their hand and drew a cross over their own face, and others left her a gift on or beside her box. Momma and I were towards the end of the line, but I started to worry. What was I going to do when my turn came? I didn't even bring a gift to leave Grandma, and I sure as hell didn't want to kiss a dead body. We kept getting closer and closer. I dug into my pockets to see if there was something I could find to give Grandma. I didn't have anything except a piece of folded and crumbled paper. I opened it up. It was a drawing of a hot air balloon flying through the immense sky. I had forgotten all about it. I drew it at Aunt Esther's house because I was sad and bored out of my mind and the only thing I could think of was Grandma. After Grandma died I thought about all the possible ways to get to her and the closest thing I could think of was a hot air balloon. The only thing though, it was all drawn in black ink—no color, no life. It was permanent. Inerasable.

Finally, our turn was up. Momma began to cry heavily. She spoke to Grandma as if she could hear and understand. I stood next to momma and tried to get a glimpse of Grandma, but I had to stand on my tippy toes to see her. There she was. She didn't look dead; she looked like she was sound asleep—minus the breathing. They had fixed her up really nice, and even put make-up on her. Her cheeks were rosy and they put a touch of butterscotch color on her face to hide the paleness of her skin. She had on a red dress and they had placed her hands together, one on top of the other. She looked so elegant and charming. I almost wanted to smile. I took the drawing out and placed it inside her box. I didn't say a word to her. It was time to go.

The entire line had gone through. They closed the box. A man in a strange robe came to Grandma's box and began to sprinkle it with water. I didn't know what all this was about it. Maybe it was his way of watering Grandma like a gardener attempting to water a dead plant hoping it will spring back to life again. They began to stack Grandma's box with tons of flowers. They were flowers of all types and colors. Grandma's box almost resembled a hot air balloon that was getting ready for takeoff. They began to lower Grandma into the hole. I held onto momma's hand. She was shaking. After her box reached the ground, they began to throw dirt on it. They got her a nice box, beautiful flowers, and fixed her all up just to throw dirt on her. Grandma was gone.

We were once again on the bus to return back home. What I hoped to be a fun and fulfilling trip turned out to be a painful and unpleasant experience. I looked at momma and she was asleep—but still breathing. My entire joy and happiness seemed to be dependent on Grandma, and now she was gone. I looked out the window and noticed a red balloon that someone had let go of. It glided through the enormous sky of nothingness. I knew that somewhere some stupid little kid had lost his balloon and was now crying an endless river. It wasn't my balloon, but I cringed in anger and sadness as if it were my balloon I had just lost. A tear began to run down my face; it wouldn't be the last.