

Christianity and The Worldview Fiction Genre

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By

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Abstract

In researching this paper, the artist learned a great deal about how fiction and popular genres are tied directly to or at least behind the print. First, the research takes a perfunctory look at how the Christian behaviors and, more or less, common morals create what readers know today as a worldview genre, also known by other names. The worldview seeks to present a protagonist who changes something about their view of the world by the end of the story. The paper goes on to look at the Christian worldview from the perspective of religious leaders. While it may seem that the Christian Worldview would be a subject easily agreed upon but there is some disagreement among scholars as to some specifics. When it comes to Christian worldview books as compared to secular worldview, the distribution means and plentitude of one was far more than the other. Another aspect discussed is the need for a Christian author to find a way to get his or her message through while still keeping the secular entertainment aspect of the story if it to be commercially viable. Empathy, regardless of whether from a secularist or a Christian, is a necessity, or least being able to pretend empathy. This last part of the critical research paper goes into greater depth about empathy with the goal of demonstrating how empathy plays a major role in storytelling and how it can be taught if not already known.

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Artist's Statement: Regarding My MFA Journey, My Future in Writing, and the Worldview Genre

Purpose/ Background

This is my master's thesis for the Creative Writing Master of Fine Arts degree. It has been a difficult or challenging process to define my research parameters. My goal is to bring an understanding of how the worldview genre or internal story affects readers keeping my focus on the period from the early 1900s to the early 2000s. I will also look at how the genre has changed in that time and as additional point of interest.

Until later in life, about my early forties, I had never considered the art of fiction writing. It was while studying history at Columbia College of MO I began to grasp that not only did I enjoy reading history, I also found I enjoy writing. Throughout my B.A and MBA, I came to realize just how much I enjoyed writing.

Fast forward several years to a time when I was putting that previous education to use, now the itch to learn more came back. I decided to go back to school. This time it was for my own pleasure. I wanted to learn the mechanics of fiction writing. I began with a B.A. then went on to my current pursuit of an MFA. My goal is now to write fiction, novels to be specific.

While I am working on a worldview or internal story novella for my thesis project,

intend to write in other genres as well. Unfortunately, I can only work on one project at a time, so far. My current work involves the worldview genre. It may also be known as the internal story. The genre focuses on a protagonist who must learn how the world works and that their initial understanding of the world is not accurate. Through trial and error and hard lessons, the protagonist matures and gains understanding and insight.

As I write this, I think about the impact worldview stories have had on my understanding or storytelling. A good example is *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, 1999. Here a student moves to high school from junior high. He has an image in his head of how high school will be only to learn it does not work the way he expected. That novel sells as a young adult novel, but the internal struggles of the teenager are the focus.

As a genre, worldview is universal in its appeal. Not every reader enjoys this genre, but its pervasiveness reaches all aspects of life. Rarely is a story told in this genre that doesn't profoundly affect its audience. My novella focuses on an area known only to a select few but the story is one that will impact any reader as we all can empathize with the lead character.

The worldview genre can encompass a variety of characters of different ages and backgrounds. It can be the story of rites of passage, internal struggles, revelations, and many other areas. The hero's journey and emotional backdrops are common in the worldview genre. It comes down to the protagonist's choices and understanding.

When I think of worldview stories, *Too Much Happiness* by Alice Munro comes to mind. This collection of short stories looks at interpersonal relationships, loss, and the unspoken nuances of marriage. Like *Chandra*, *Munro's* undergo internal struggles and learn powerful life lessons.

Chandra tells the story of a character, who while being a product of my imagination, lives a life seen in real people. Chandra learns a hard lesson about reality, one that will resonate in the hearts and minds of readers. The story sheds light on the human condition in that many of us have a certain outlook on life and later learn the world is not what we expected.

The worldview genre may come in several forms including the internal story, stories of maturation, coming of age, and more. My work here will focus on the internal story. The protagonist will come to realize she cannot change the world. She enters the workforce with the hope of saving every person she encounters only to learn it just is not possible.

Having spent a career in the United States military and having a number of other employment careers, I have come to see the world for what it is, in its multi-faceted splendor. I, too, have learned the world is not a cookie-cutter and not everyone in it sees it the same way just as no two of us live our lives the same way.

It must be said that in the world in which I spend my days, there are good people. There are people who, at their core, are good, strong, intelligent, and caring who have simply made poor choices. In my arena, I have worked with families for over a year to resolve problems and there is such great joy when those families finally come to the light at the end of their proverbial tunnel. It saddens me when I work with parents who never come around to realizing their worth or that of their children.

It is this success and failure which provided the seed for my story. While I am creating characters and lives, those lives are indeed real. These events do happen and the social workers in my story do experience the success and failures I describe.

The fiction I am presenting is strictly the creation of my imagination, but I am basing it on my experiences in my current career as a social worker. I have created characters with no

basis in reality. These characters live lives similar to what one sees in my line of work and therefore are more realistic than if I had created them entirely from thin air.

The story is one of the internal struggles the main character, Chanoa, endures. It might be seen as a coming-of-age story as Chanoa enters her new career with a certain mindset and learns through trial and error she has it all wrong.

As I considered my thesis, I wondered what would make a compelling novella. I considered writing something regarding history, historical fiction. This is a genre I am interested in. Then I thought about the worldview genre as I realized I work in an environment with real heart wrenching stories. I have seen my younger coworkers who have fallen by the wayside and left after a short time because the stress is too much. I have seen moms who have realized they are on the verge of losing their children and the ones who have fought tooth and nail to repair the damage done. It is these scenarios I had in mind when I determined I would write this story.

Writing, to me, is more than simply telling a story. To tell a story best, it is imperative the writer know the topic and the nuances that create the characters, the plot(s), and the environment. Since none of us knows everything about everything, research is necessary. While research is not the pretty part of writing, it helps give the story a foundation of reality and allows the reader to fully immerse himself, to believe in the characters and the story. My story is based on firsthand experiences as my research, and I have had to research a multitude of information to develop the content for my thesis.

Literary Context

My story starts with Chanoa being assigned a new case involving a mother who has overdosed on heroin. She must assess, then take steps to see to the safety of the children involved. Chanoa is simultaneously enduring a relationship which turns south. Stress mounts as

Chanoa is assigned more cases. Chanoa's coworker and friend tried to give her advice, but Chanoa does not really take heed. Her friend tries to relate a story to her to make her point. That story takes time, but she ultimately can get her point made.

Chanoa is not the first and will not be the last young college graduate to enter the workforce with a rose-colored view of the world. Everyday men and women find their way into the working world and find it is not what they expected. We, as people, are raised in such a way that we often do not know what is on the other side. As a child, I was one of those people. My parents, of course, provided everything, all my needs were met. It was not until I was on my own when I truly began to understand the facts of life.

If you ask a twenty-two-year-old social worker who is new to the job why she or he got into this line of work, they will likely say to help people. If you ask them how many they plan to help, they will probably say all of them can be helped. The reality is, they cannot save them all. Chanoa will come to learn this the hard way.

Chanoa puts in all the services she is required to, keeps in touch with the family regularly, and she really cares. The oldest daughter, at 14, appears to be responsible. Her mother is a drug addict. It is not too long before the daughter begins to experiment causing more problems for Chanoa.

Chanoa digs in to save the girl. She is trying desperately to save the mom as well. Mom's problems went far deeper than experimentation. She was a hardcore addict. One thing Chanoa learned in school was that the drug use cycle perpetuates itself into the lives of the children. Chanoa also knew that the mother could also come back from the tragedy that was her life and Chanoa wanted to see to it she did.

In the end, the daughter is helped to get back on track. Chanoa rekindles her relationship with her boyfriend.

Significance of the topic from the viewpoint of a Christian Scholar

1 Kings 17: 1-16 tells the story of a woman who was raising her son alone because her husband was no longer living. The woman struggles as a single parent. Elijah comes to her asking to be fed. The woman, knowing her own struggles, feeds Elijah anyway. God then blesses the woman because of what she did for the stranger, Elijah.

As a Christian, I believe in the ways of Jesus. I believe it is important for us to show mercy and to help others when we have the opportunity. Like any other social welfare worker, my aim is to help families and try to provide for the safety of children. It is not a position I take lightly, and I hope none of my coworkers do either.

When I consider my Christianity, I think it is my responsibility to be an advocate for Christ. I do not believe Christ would condemn the sinners who have fallen and are finding it difficult to get back up. He would likely have reached out a hand to help. In choosing to be a social worker, I have found my earthly way to be helpful. Unfortunately, I am not able to pronounce my beliefs or to proselytize because I work for a state agency. I can, however, demonstrate my Christian worldview by my actions.

I am a sinner, that is not doubted. It is with a heavy heart though, I meet parents who have not provided their children the opportunity to accept Christ or to learn of His glory. I find ways to mention that I am a Christian without trying to convert or to preach.

The worldview genre provides a way for the reader to experience the goodness within people and this goodness can be attributed to the goodness of our Savior. In these stories, the

author can weave in God's message to the reader. It is not farfetched for a writer to create a story of a person coming to know Jesus through the medium of a short story or a novel.

In Christ I can be strong in my writing, to know that God has given me a talent and I am able to use that talent in so many ways. We can look at modern media and see myriad examples of how writers have brought Christian stories to the forefront of public attention. One common theme is sports. Using sports themes, writers have told the worldview stories *Greater* a movie by Brian Reindl and David L. Hunt, *Facing the Giants* a movie by Alex Kendrick, Stephen Kendrick of how Christian faith has helped the protagonist to see the world in a different light or how that protagonist's faith has guided someone else to faith in Christ.

I mentioned earlier the ability to write a story is a God given talent. It is with that gift and with His hand I find my inspiration. I believe God provides every one of us some ability that we are to exploit and to give Him the glory. Writing also provides me solitary time and I can devote some of that time to God in prayer and give Him thanks for the blessings in my life. It is this time when I ask God for the ability to create and to guide me as to the content of my pen.

We all are familiar with the hero's journey, the murder mystery, or the horror story and as commercial endeavors, those genres are generally successful. On the other hand, these types of stories do not often provide any insight into the human side of people. It is through an internal story the writer can present those images and feelings that may motivate the reader to seek God (Consider C.S. Lewis novels.). Even in terms of commercial success, a writer can generate a story that tells of a Christian worldview while still appealing to the secular reader.

Unfortunately, society today has steered far left of where God can be found with those in positions of authority trying daily to tamp down the enthusiasm Christians feel. We see it in our

laws across this nation. The secularists and atheists have done all but jail Christians for simply believing. The cause, though, is not without hope.

By writing a worldview story, one can tell that story in a creative way. My story, while focusing on one woman's attempts to help a family, also projects her Christian faith to influence those around her. By living her life as a Christian, she need not preach to her clients or coworkers. She simply demonstrates her joy in her daily life. She thanks God openly without pushing Him on anyone. I have seen it in my life. When others see your positive attitude, they almost always want to know where it comes from. Why are you always so happy? Why don't you complain? Or I hear all around you how terrible the job is, or how pitiful the clients are. I hope also to be able to weave a Christian theme into other stories as I write more, and other genres. It is with my Christian view that I enter this endeavor, knowing my work will mean something to someone.

When we read a story, seek to be entertained. Whether we admit it or not, we also expect to get something else out of that story. If it is the hero's journey, science fiction, or a western, the reader wants to feel like they are part of the story, able to empathize with the characters. This work will consider the juncture of the worldview genre fiction or internal story and Christian worldview.

To begin with, we examine what defines the worldview genre. The story genre is characterized by an internal struggle experienced by the main character. She may go into a situation with the idea the world works in one given way but by the end of the story, she comes to understand her original vision was not necessarily correct. Christianity bears some similarities. As Christians, we often see the world through rose-colored glasses only to have the shades removed when tragedy strikes, or we find ourselves in a situation we could never expect.

According to Shawn Coyne at Storygrid.com, “The internal genres concern forces inside the individual aligned against the protagonist’s pursuit of a subconscious object of desire.” In this statement we can see how this also applies to Christians in daily life.

Critical Paper

In considering how Christian-like behavior correlates with a worldview or internal genre story, we need to consider a few things. First, how do we define Christian-like behavior. Is it simply enough not to outwardly disobey the Ten Commandments or does it take more effort? One does not need to be an evangelical to be a Christian or to display the same sentiment. One need not be a Christian at all to behave in a Christ-like manner and Christian or not, one can understand the world for what it is and what they imagine it to be. Does one have to go out in the streets and preach on the corners to win souls for Christ? In his book *Reading Evangelicals*, Daniel Silliman looks into what makes an evangelical, or who is an evangelical. He focuses in part, on Christian fiction because fiction allows the reader to enter a make believe world. It is within that world the reader meets that hero or heroine who, through the life of the saga, learns an internal lesson. *Leota's Garden* by Francine Rivers gives some insight as to how a character might struggle or learn from their own internal story as he sees the actions of others and looks at his own actions in comparison.

Interestingly, Silliman points to the fact that in academia as well as among commercial reviewers it is common practice to color any given text with a broad brush, presuming that all readers share the opinion of the reader who judged the text. What is left out is that not all readers necessarily agree with that opinion. This also suggests the idea that any genre of story can be labeled in such a way as to obscure the true intent of the author. With this in mind, a worldview genre story may sell as a young-adult story, but the author may have used the genre to sublimate his or her message. In reading the story accompanying this paper, the reader will get one clear picture of what is being stated but there is also a more subtle message being sent.

Silliman explains it well when he writes that the readers are involved with the institutions which shape the genres. Whether intended or not, the art and the readers are boxed into categories, cookie cutter categories we call genres. When this occurs, it is easy to understand how a Christian worldview can be hidden, missed, simply ignored, or regarded as not commercially viable, sending the work to the bottom shelf where it is likely to suffer a lost fate. It is also possible for a writer to place a novel on bookshelves which caters to a commercially viable genre yet appeals to the Christian reader as in Janet Oke's *"Love Comes Softly"*, a romance novel earmarked by the author's faith. Here, we pause to ask what makes a worldview story and what differentiates it from a Christian story, if anything. One thought may be to look at Aesop, the ancient Greek storyteller. Aesop weaved morals into his stories. Those stories might be seen as having a worldview. When we consider Christian principals of treating others as we would want to be treated or patience in all things, Aesop's fables may also be considered to reflect a Christian worldview. It can also be stated that moral behavior is derived from Christian beliefs. Even if a person does not subscribe to any religion, he follows an internal compass which guides him to do right rather than wrong. In *Naming the Elephant*, James Sire writes "At the base of all our thought-all our ruminations about God, ourselves and the world around us- is a worldview" (Sire, 18).

Mr. Sire defines a worldview as the way we see the world around us with all our own biases, prejudices, education (or lack of), our religious beliefs (if any), and who we as people are. With this broad definition, the worldview can be stated in an infinite number of ways. As a reader, you may experience worldview in strictly Christian terms. Sire goes on to provide a series of questions to help one determine what a worldview is and, less than surprisingly, those questions lead to religiously themed answers and are rather philosophical. Sire provides several

definitions from well-known philosophers such as Abraham Kuyper, Michael Foucault, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Each of these men put their own unique philosophy to the definition of worldview. Nietzsche, famous for his stance that God is (not literally) dead, believed human beings had lost their sight of God and therefore lost their meaning, their goals and reason for life. Without these important elements, humankind would have no true compass. Nietzsche also believed the worldview was cultural. Indeed, this may best describe the worldview as our views are shaped by our culture. In contrast to Nietzsche, Foucault considered worldview something predetermined by the powerful to be taken as law by the rank and file. This demonstrates the expansive difference between understandings of worldview. When applied to genre, this allows for numerous story types to be encompassed.

Christian Worldview

Following his brief discourse on worldview from a secular perspective, Sire introduces the Christian worldview from the perspective of theologians and apologists James Orr (1844-1913), Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), and Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977). Each of these men provide their own take on what makes Christian worldview. Keeping in mind, these definitions were not intended to apply to fiction writing but as a general philosophy of how we see the world, they also offer a glimpse as to how a work of fiction might be viewed by a reader. Orr, going back to what this paper mentioned earlier, states that worldview is built from biblical principles and internal morals. Orr pins the worldview to a way of seeing things from a biblical perspective. Orr, in Sire's estimation, a worldview is rooted in a human being's nature, their heart of hearts.

Distribution

When the idea of readership comes to mind, it cannot be underscored enough, the need for publishing and distribution. In ages past, Christian books were largely published by publishing houses friendly to Christian authors and sold by Christian book stores. The Christian worldview story was not a mainstream staple and needed special handling and attention. As Christian authors began to write more commercially passable stories, they found their way into popular bookstores, albeit in a back corner on the bottom shelf. The whole distribution system has evolved over time to what the world has today. Today, the internet allows authors to use social media to brand themselves and sell their wares directly to consumers. There are only publishers allowing readers to purchase their books in digital format or print on demand. No longer is a Christian worldview story relegated to the farthest reaches of the book store in a dimly lit corner. The author just needs a good marketing plan and the use of multiple social media outlets.

The secular worldview author is in possession of the same tools as the Christian author. The trick for the Christian author is to weave his Christian worldview into a story the masses will find enjoyable. One can look at some movies to see how this can be done. One movie that comes to mind is *Greater* (2016), directed by David L. Hunt, written by Brian Reindl and David L. Hunt. It tells the true story of Brandon Burlsworth who, through hard work and dedication, made his dream of playing football for the Arkansas Razorbacks a reality. Unfortunately, the movie was not a blockbuster but, for a person who has a penchant for true heart-wrenching stories, this movie was wonderful. The story is bolstered by the family's Christian faith. The characters express their faith and their own Christian worldview by their actions and their words. The point here is that in literature or any form of media, the Christian worldview can be expressed, realized and combined with secular categories for commercial success.

Practicality

According to LeAnne Hardy, the modern Christian author needs to straddle the line between secular popularism and the clean veneer of the Christian worldview. Take out all the sexual innuendo, language, and violence and what is left? This is where the Christian author can take liberties to express a Christian worldview without necessarily quoting the Word of God. He or she may create a fictional world that doesn't even mention God, Jesus or even faith but whose characters may demonstrate Christ-like behaviors or who might see the world through a similar view as a Christian might. Hardy indicates that Christians, as a group, have blinded ourselves to the mean, sinful, nasty world around us and by doing so have written ourselves into a corner where no one from the secular world trod.

Another aspect of writing with a Christian worldview is the need to appeal to a wider audience. Even the renowned Christian author C.S. Lewis has been known to include an occasional "damn". The intent is to tell a story that is realistic, blending with the vernacular of the times. A story cleansed of reality becomes unimaginative or humdrum. This story is not likely to sell to a wider audience. Even young Christians today want a story that makes them feel like the characters are accessible. If the Christian author masters the art of writing the story, he will be able to blend in enough "real life" to capture readers. Let the story tell itself. One key statement by Hardy is that Christian authors should show the world as it has been created. This is not to say as God intended because Christians know God intended the world to be perfect, for man to live in the Garden of Eden and commune with Him. The story is well known and now the world is left with the remnants, and they are pervasive.

In his book *Worldview: The History of a Concept*, David K. Naugle cites Scottish Presbyterian theologian James Orr states that Christianity was a Christ centered worldview, an

apologetic angle on faith required by living in a modernistic world. As the world, or society continues to change, so too must the Christian worldview. That is not to say Christians should abandon their faith or their ways. It is merely to suggest in order to see the world for what it is, Christians must accept that we live in a sinful world. Who among us has not sinned? According to Naugle, the world revolves around the human mind. Add to that the idea that the mind is wrapped in a cloth of societal norms, acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and this now helps to establish the worldview, from both a Christian and secular point.

Taken from an agnostic point of view, worldview is secured in a strictly secular box, safe from the harsh judgement of Christianity. This view is basically “human”. If we were to remove Christianity, remove biblical teaching and principles, would we find that society maintains the norms it has established today. Perhaps common moral values are innate. In Vida Scudder’s *The Witness of Denial, The Religion of Humanity*, the worldly view sometimes overcomes the Christian worldview as agnostics swarm the land. The Christian, in order to get along is pressured to go along. Christians may and should still maintain their Christlike view but with the caveat that the world will not conform to a Christian worldview.

In Leland Ryken’s *The Christian Imagination*, Donald Williams writes that “faith was born into a pagan culture and has survived into a secular one which shows signs of returning to paganism. The church has perforce used the languages, the markets, and the forms of the surrounding culture. It has transformed them and been transformed by them.” (Ryken, 16). In a contradiction of themselves, early Christians reviled literature as being of the world while baring testament to some beautiful poetry throughout the Old Testament. It is in those early days, even before Christ, that the Christian worldview or a Christ-like view came into being. Religious sects of all types based their customs and behaviors on the teachings of their priests, elders, and

generational lore. Their worldview was, as ours is today, directly correlates to societal norms and morals. Martin Luther, cited by Ryken, makes note that literature enables theology. This is to say the connection between worldview and Christianity goes deeper than simply variances in tradition. It registers at a more basic level of mutual necessity. They go hand in hand.

Donald Williams, in Ryken's collection, also points out that while Christians participated in New Criticism by reading, protesting, and found themselves impacted by popular literature but they, collectively, their contribution from a Christian worldview vantage were little to none. In other words, Christians in the New Criticism era of the twentieth century assimilated, all but abandoning their core beliefs when it comes to their part in literature. This fact goes back to the idea that the worldview genre is hard to ignore when compared to the Christian worldview. It does not mean, however, that the two cannot be joined. Ryken writes "It is also useful to keep in view that literature performs a threefold function: It presents human experience for contemplation, it offers an interpretation of that experience, and it presents form/technique/beauty for a reader's enjoyment" (Ryken, 37). While literature is the sense this paper is discussing, if fictional, it serves multiple purposes or produces various results. Literature can entertain and allow the reader to venture into a world created by the author. Looking at literature from a Christian point of view provides a tacit approval of the fiction. Making a strong argument, Ryken writes that apologists for literature argue that literature can be a force for good as it can motivate readers to good behavior. Ryken also notes that God, in his unending wisdom, created man in His own image and in doing so He made man creative. Ryken also sets the Bible itself as an example of that creativity and the importance of literature. He reminds us that the

poetry in the Bible is written in verse format and if literature was not important, there would have been no need to write it or write it well.

Literature's blade, from the Christian point of view, is double edged. On one side, literature can be seen as is seen by some as detrimental as it can evoke misbehaviors and impure thoughts. On the other side of the blade is the idea that literature can induce virtuosity. It is up to the Christian reader to judge whether the literature he reads meets his moral standards. This author believes a reader can discern and compartmentalize well enough to set aside misgivings about popular culture and enjoy life without succumbing entirely to the pangs of temptation. There is no argument that literature is a bastion of reality or truthfulness; it is, rather, an escape, a moment of simple entertainment and an opportunity to appreciate the talent God bestowed on an author. This is not to say a Christian worldview is somehow misplaced or wrong, merely that Christians are part of a specific community of people with shared interests and viewpoints. As a community Christians can offer their unique feedback to authors. C. S. Lewis, writing in his essay, *We Demand Windows* (Ryken, 65), suggests readers want to be outside themselves, to enrich our hearts and our minds; we want to live through another's eyes.

The human imagination is foundational to the human mental well-being and the imagination is the window through which human beings, Christian and non-Christians alike, experience the world outside our physical environment. Further examination of the imagination allows us to realize the physical world has direct ties to the imagination as well. To begin with, someone used their imagination to invent everything we see, everything we touch, taste, smell, and hear. Janine Langdon, in *Imagination, Beauty, and Creativity* from *Christian Imagination*, writes "Imagining is an act of hope, a challenge to fate, an effort to take matters in hand and to accept our unique role as human beings, "in the world but not of it." Langdon makes it clear she

believes the imagination, whether Christian or not, is a powerful tool, a necessary tool, and one that should be fed regularly. L'Engle, writing in *Walking on Water*, states the obvious but not glaringly that the a Christian worldview and a secular worldview share one common thread; both are unique to the individual. What floats one man's boat may very well sink that of another. What one reader finds trashy, another may be willing to overlook and not throughout the baby.

Empathy and Fiction as Part of Worldview

In a world where headlines are filled with examples of people who have lost their way, there remain those who care, those who are not afraid to show their softer side. When the term empathy is mentioned, it usually is associated with certain professions, not necessarily with everyday people and likely not in conjunction with fiction or worldview. Christ-like behavior would certainly imply an empathetic soul but what if a person, Christian or not, does not know how to be empathetic? Are there ways to build or teach empathy?

Dora Rowe introduces the idea that empathy can be learned through reading. She reminds the reader of some common phrases regarding reading like "getting lost in a book" and "really getting into the characters". As readers, we probably do not think about these things when we are wrapped in a novel. Possibly, without realizing it, we find ourselves more able to show empathy after reading certain stories. Rowe posits that reading has a real, measurable effect on the human brain. According to her article, some professors have found that reading can improve empathy response. Research suggests that the empathy response can be increased on a permanent or long-term basis, solidifying it as a normal response. Empathy can be an indicator of emotional intelligence. Lack of empathy can indicate some psychological disorders. Empathetic people may be more likely to come to the aid of others.

Rowe's article provides a wide expanse of the role empathy plays in the lives of people from different walks of life. One outcome of empathy is stronger leadership. Rowe writes that empathy is essential to good leadership. Studies have shown that empathy among younger adults has slowed while empathy among middle aged adults has shown an increase. Some potential reasons for the slowdown in empathetic behaviors are the requirement by colleges to have volunteer hours as a standard for admission and the fact that much contemporary fiction uses individualistic terminology which discourages empathy or caring about others. Rowe cites increases in bullying and mistreatment of individuals who identify with marginalized groups like the LGBT community. In a world where tolerance is a mantra, it seems backward that empathy is waning. Not all is lost however, there are currently programs being worked that aim to increase or possibly teach empathy. Empathy may seem like simply a trait that expands or enriches a personality but there may be much more to its value than allowing people to show they care. Researchers have determined empathy plays a key role in psychological development. They have also been classified as playing a role in two different theories. The Theory of the Mind involves emotional intelligence and Affective Theory of the Mind involves thought. Another concept that may come as foreign is that non-fiction, not requiring the reader to suspend belief, does not evoke a change in the empathy response. Some research has shown that some students experience permanent changes in their empathy due to reading fiction.

This portion of the paper is at the end because it seems a good way to wrap up this work. Karen Swallow Prior wrote *On Reading Well*. In it she suggests that the act of reading is, in itself, a virtuous act, one to be treasured and enjoyed. Adding to that, reading might be seen as a privilege and with that assumption, it is worth doing well. American chef and restaurateur, Thomas Keller, wrote "Any job worth doing is worth doing well. But to be able to do that, you

have to do it over and over again.” With that, it stands to reason the same applies to reading. Mrs. Swallow Rowe tackles some common terms in comparing their previous importance and their current place in society. To begin with, she addresses the word “virtue” as being somewhat a concept of the past, demonstrating how one novel written in 1740 sparked a revolution among novelists and a battle for virtue itself. That novel spoke of virtue and provided the reader with moralistic views while stories following it sparked a change in the moralistic version of stories spearheaded by parodies aimed at the idea of virtues in literature. The change featured a more individualistic worldview, moving away from the revolutionary virtuous worldview. Along with the erasure of virtue in novels came the breakdown of morals in stories. That change, in turn, affected the worldview of readers, allowing readers to begin to see the world through more selfish lenses.

One way the author enables a Christian worldview is by using his narrative as a tool for instructing the reader. By inserting Christian values or prayers, or even allowing characters to refer to God, the author sets the Christian worldview on the table as an open book rather than hiding it between the lines. While virtue is a characteristic on its own, Swallow Prior adds that virtue is more of an umbrella term encompassing numerous other terms such as prudence, temperance, justice and courage. She goes on to differentiate theological virtues such as faith, hope and love. She further separates heavenly virtues, naming chastity, diligence, kindness, patience and humility.

Understanding these terms, a reader can take from a novel the virtues intended by the author, if they are indeed intended. In a secular worldview novel, the implicit meaning or message may not abide within the Christian worldview but the messages may remain the same. The morals of the characters can still equate to a Christian worldview. Whether the author

believes that Christ died for our sins or is an agnostic, good remains good, kind remains kind, and patient remains patient. Looking deeper into the ideas presented by Swallow Prior, it can be seen that each of the virtues she names has a place in the world, not only in the hearts and minds of Christians. Going back to generally accepted morals, these virtues are commonly understood. It may be that a reader does not demonstrate a given characteristic in their own life but they can certainly understand how those virtues play a role in the story and in life. If a reader examines a virtue for what it is, he can set aside any presumptions about its value from a Christian or secular perspective and see it as simply a good quality. Kindness is universal as are patience, justice, and courage.

Summary

As a rule, the worldview fiction genre finds its relation to Christian worldview in the fact that the concepts are similar, the fact of seeing things from a perspective of empathy. Whether those feelings are organic or created, they are common in both worldviews. This paper finds that while the Christian worldview may have stricter regulations than its counterpart, they share some traits which allows for the convergence of the two. Christians are encouraged to read the secular books discerning which may be too offensive to their person and allowing themselves the pleasures of reading what they will. The idea of a secular worldview being somehow different than a Christian worldview can be disputed by the reality that morals are morals and are generally shared across all lines. Right is right and wrong is wrong. Most people know when they are doing something wrong. The Christian worldview, therefore, is not far from the secular worldview in the common interests. The separation comes in that the secular does not necessarily own any relation to Christian values, but the values are the same.

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Chanoa

Rose Colored Glasses

Prologue

The ER staff rushed around, affixing hoses, probes, and tubes to the middle-aged woman as if putting together a piece of machinery. A flurry of activity passed in what seemed like two hours but only took about twenty minutes. The doctor on duty barked out instructions and the remaining staff responded as if it was second nature.

In the waiting room, three children huddled together with a young lady. The children sobbed as the woman tried to calm and reassure them. “Your mom will be fine babies. Let’s go get a snack while we wait, okay?” The young woman said.

The hospital staff worked frantically to save the woman’s life while the children wept, and the caretaker consoled them. The young lady tried to assure the twins their mom was going to be fine, although she had her own concerns. Overdoses often resulted in death. These children, she thought, don’t deserve this.

“Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved.” Helen Keller

Part One- Going to Sleep

She watched the powder dissolve into a liquid as the lighter heated the spoon. Then, Marie took the syringe and filled it with warm liquid. She watched the syringe empty as the plunger made its way down the tube. The liquid burned as it muscled its way into her vein. Euphoria enveloped her. Her cares dissolved as her head fell limp. Her body collapsed in a heap and the lights went out.

Marie's bedroom smelled like heroine and cat urine mixed with stale leftovers and dirty dishes. The bedside lamp and the overhead were broken, the only light coming from the streetlight. Dirty clothes littered a spot on the floor while clean clothes overflowed a laundry basket. The clothes hadn't dried all the way, causing a musky odor to waft among the other combined scents and throughout the house.

Laura listened to music over her headphones, oblivious to the condition her mom was in at the moment. The television blared in the background, but Laura didn't hear it over her music. The twins played on the floor of the bedroom while Laura lay on the bed. Laura wasn't paying much attention to the boys, just a glance now and then. One of the boys tugged on her shoe. She didn't pay attention at first, she just shook her foot and hollered for him to leave her alone.

Her headphones were her escape from reality. She loved to smoke a little marijuana and chill with some tunes. This is what drove her and it allowed her to be herself. She didn't need to go away as long as she had her music. She listened to it loudly to block out any distractions and usually her eyes were closed. She could spend hours and hours lying on her bed, or sitting on a park bench, consumed in her own, melodic world.

Again, the younger boy tugged at her foot. She opened her eyes and saw his lips moving. Pausing her music, she hollered "what do you want now?!"

"Hungry" he yelled and started crying.

"Hungry! Hungry! Hungry!" his brother shrieked.

Laura rolled her eyes, huffed, and threw her headphones on the bed. OMG, Laura thought, what time is it? Her phone showed 11:30 PM. Shouldn't the boys be asleep? She thought.

"Hang on! Dang you two! All you do is eat and poop!" she grumbled, heading toward the other end of the singlewide trailer. Stepping around laundry, she walked into the living room, the stench of cat urine, stale leftovers, and the musk from damp laundry assaulted her nostrils. She always felt like puking when she was in the living room. She stepped over some toys to get to the kitchen. There, she moved a few pans out of the way and swatted a roach before finding some microwaveable mac-n cheese and ignoring a couple other roaches. Then Laura noticed there was no sound from her mom's room. She should have heard the TV or her mom on the phone. Laura called out to Marie "Mom!"

“Mom, what are you doing?”

Not getting an answer, Laura grew concerned and went to the bedroom door. She knocked lightly in case her mom was sleeping. No answer so she knocked again. Still no answer. Laura opened the door slowly. First, the smell of feces and cat urine slammed into her senses. When she entered the room Laura screamed as she saw the scene before her. This had happened again. Laura’s anger only subsided because she was afraid. “Mom, mom, please, mom!” Laura bawled as she fell to her knees on the floor, her frail body shaking uncontrollably next to her mother. Her hands trembled as she grabbed her mom’s cell phone and dialed 9-1-1.

Unable to control the trembling in her voice, Laura managed to let the operator know her mom had overdosed and was unresponsive. The operator tried to calm Laura down and keep her on the phone. “What’s your name sweetie? Your address?”

“It’s Laura” she blubbered.

“I need you to slow down and try not to cry darlin’. Can you do that for me please? Don’t worry sweetie, the police and an ambulance are on the way. Tell me if she is breathing. Is your mom breathing?”

“I can’t tell” Laura sobbed, still in a whisper.

“Say that again babe, I still can hardly understand you. Does she have a pulse?” The operator asked.

“I don’t know how to tell!” Laura whimpered, feeling inadequate.

“Ok Laura,” said the operator. “I will talk you through it. Now, using your index and middle fingers, press them against the inside of your mom’s wrist, just up past the hand where the thumb is. Now, place them firmly right where the wrist turns to the inside. Don’t press too hard though.”

Laura, catching her breath now, stammered “I think I feel it, but I can’t tell.”

“Okay darling, keep your fingers there and be still. Try to calm down Laura, you will not help your mom if you can’t calm down. Stay with me Laura, you got this.”

“Okay, I’m calm now.” Laura said. “I can feel it a little.”

The operator asked “are the police or ambulance there yet? They should be there soon baby.”

“I think I hear them down the road.” Laura cried.

Just then, Laura saw the flash of lights through the window. Seconds later, footsteps rattled the front porch, and a knock startled the front door. Laura hurried to the door and, crying again, she pointed to her mom's room. The police scanned the bedroom and spotted the syringe lying next to the bed.

The ambulance pulled up on the road in front of the trailer. The two paramedics pulled out a stretcher and wheeled it up the steps and through the front door. One of the officers stepped away to call it in while the other spoke to Laura.

“The officer asked, “is there a relative you can stay with tonight? Is there anyone else in the house?”

In her trademark whisper, she answered, “My brothers are in the back bedroom playing. They haven't been out here yet.” Laura's tears had dried, and she was breathing normally.

“Can you go get them please?” he asked.

“Yessir, hang on a minute.” Laura mumbled as she headed down the hall.

A few minutes later, Laura came down the hall with her three-year-old twin brothers in tow. The boys were in diapers and appeared unbathed. One of them had a toy in his hand while the other sucked a thumb.

The officer who had spoken to Laura earlier asked her to sit at the table. He had a small notepad. Laura sat opposite the officer. She clasped her hands on the table in front of her, one eye on her brothers as they sat on the sofa.

The officer took out a pen and asked “Okay, first, what are your names and your mom's name? And how old are you and your brothers?”

“My name is Laura, I'm fourteen. My mom is Marie and those two are my brothers, David, and Danny and they are three.” Laura said. The fear in her voice was palpable. Laura had been through this once before when it was just herself and her mom. Last time she ended up in foster care for six months. She refused to go to foster care again.

“Listen, this is what we are going to do. I am going to take you and your brothers to the hospital. A worker from the Department of Children's Services will meet us there. Why don't you go get some clothes and a toy for your brothers” he told Laura.

The ambulance pulled away, lights flooding the trailer park as it sped away. Neighbors stood on their decks watching the show. The officers got the boys' car seats and followed the ambulance to the county general hospital.

The music on her ringtone startled Chanoa out of a dream or more of a nightmare. She lay listening to the tune, trying to get out of her dream, pushing the cobwebs aside so she could reach for the cell phone. Next to her phone she had a collection of glasses half filled with water, each one from her nightly routine. The problem was, she always forgot to take them to the kitchen until there was no room for another on her nightstand. Aside from her not remembering to take her drinking glasses to the kitchen, Chanoa was somewhat a clean freak, obsessive even.

She picked up the phone and listened to the recorded message. Chanoa was on-call, and this is how the on-call person got notified of a situation. She sat up in her queen-sized bed and swung her feet over the edge as she listened.

Chanoa got dressed quickly and headed to the hospital. She flashed her credentials to the ER staff and asked where she could find Marie and the officers. Unphased by the lack of sleep, Chanoa still looked like a hundred bucks. She was an attractive, twenty-something woman with a million-dollar smile. “Officer, I am Chanoa with the Department of Children’s Services. Hi” as she stuck out her hand.

Chanoa felt this was her calling. She was put here on earth to help families, children, and their parents. She would help, no one was going to fail or fall by the wayside on Chanoa’s watch. She didn’t see why anyone would fail. The state offered free services to help in any situation.

The officer shook her hand and, putting a hand on her shoulder, led her away from the children who remained with his partner.

“She overdosed on heroine. Sad to say, this is not her first rodeo either,” he said.

Chanoa answered, “I am new, but I am familiar with the story, not hers, but in general.”

“Do you already have somewhere to take the kids?”

“I will take them to the office for now. We have rooms set up for short-term holding. Do the kids have clothes, toiletries, stuff they will need for a day or two?”

“Yes, it’s out in the car, come with me and we can move it over to your vehicle.”

Chanoa thanked the officer as they walked toward the parking lot. It was dark out and the autumn air was brisk. Chanoa wished she had worn a sweater, but she left in a hurry. Chanoa had to clean out the back seat and move some stuff around in the trunk before she could transfer the kids’ belongings to her car and went back inside.

The boys were playing with toys in the hall while Laura watched them, her mind a thousand miles away. The officer who brought them to the hospital spoke with one of the staff.

Chanoa's heart melted, broke really, when she saw the kids. This is why she got into this line of work; not that she liked having her heart hurt but she wanted to be helpful to kids and families. She introduced herself to Laura and the twins. "Hi, my name is Chanoa. I work for the Children's Protective Services, and I am going to help find someplace for you to stay while your mom is here."

Putting on a veneer of toughness, Laura said, "I'm not going to another foster home, and I really don't need your help. We will just call my friend. She will come get us." Laura was guarded because she did not want anyone to see her vulnerabilities. She wanted others to think she was older than her fourteen years.

"We are going to start by calling your relatives. Since you have already been in the system, I am sure we can find your family tree to start calling. And yes, I will call your aunt first. Why did you say you don't want to go to a foster home?"

Laura broke down crying and answered sobbing, "I just don't. Is my mom going to be okay?"

Chanoa put her arm around Laura's shoulder. "It's going to be okay Laura." "You and the boys will be fine and when your mom is better you can all be together again." Chanoa felt there was something Laura wasn't telling her but decided that could wait, right now there were more important things to be concerned about. "Ok, let's get you to my office so you can get some sleep. We have some rooms with beds and a kitchen."

"Is it far? I'm tired and the twins are hungry."

"Not at all" Chanoa said as they walked through the chilly night to her government car. "And we will pick up something on the way."

At the office, Chanoa led the kids to the bedrooms and showed them the kitchen. The kitchen was stocked with more goodies than the kids could think to eat and the boys were assigned to bunk beds while Laura had her own room with a twin. The room took Laura to a fantasy world where princesses and unicorns frolicked. The boys found themselves in a world surrounded by clownish fish and mermaids on the walls with two overflowing toy boxes. The twins wasted no time rummaging through the boxes looking for what fun they might find, what toys would be hidden inside.

Part Two: Finding a new Home.

Chanoa sat at her desk putting notes in from last night. She paused to think about what she would write next. In her short tenure, she still tried to be as thorough as possible. Her co-workers often told her to make it concise and to the point, but she believed the kids deserved more. Besides,

the saying went something like “if it isn’t in the notes, it didn’t happen and if it didn’t happen, it doesn’t go in the notes.” Chanoa felt it would benefit everyone if she kept copious notes.

Alayna walked by and, seeing Chanoa in her cheerful cubicle, stopped to say hi. Chanoa had a collection of little figurines along the edge of her desk, a Zen Garden in one corner and a fairy garden on the other corner as if protecting her from the evil world out there. The walls were adorned with family photos, cute plaques with positive quotes, and a college pennant. She was humble enough to keep her diplomas at home.

Alayna had been at this job for nearly a decade, and she was good, dedicated, and always willing to help her coworkers. At five feet four inches and one hundred thirty-five pounds, she was not an imposing figure, but her tenacity, her demeanor, and her straightforward attitude made her formidable. Alayna loved her job, but she did not wear rose-colored glasses. She knew there was a dark side and she knew if you allowed yourself to get lost in the dark, you wouldn’t make it. That is why she was always trying to impart wisdom or help newcomers.

“So, what’s up?” Alayna asked, looking over Chanoa’s shoulder.

“I was on call last night and got a call at about 2:00 am. Mom overdosed while her three kids were in the bedrooms. They are in the sleeping rooms in the back. Bonnie is sitting with them right now.”

“Wow! That’s tough; people just don’t get it.”

Chanoa said, “I am waiting on the clear search so I can start looking for placement.”

“Have fun with that. What a pain, all that paperwork, goodness gracious. Oh, don’t forget to request a hair follicle for the kids. If they are exposed to drugs this could turn ugly.

Chanoa wrinkled her face and hummed as she turned back to her laptop and resumed typing. She had a checklist printed on her left side to make sure she never forgot anything. Of course, with every day being new and different, it had to be a very general checklist.

Chanoa didn’t like the negativity around the office. She knew she could, and would, make a difference. She could hear them from her cubicle, always gossiping, complaining. It seemed everyone around her hated their job. Why do it she wondered. It wasn’t just a game; it wasn’t a plug-n-play system. These were people with feelings, futures, hearts, and lives, people with problems she and her coworkers were there to help. She would do her best to make sure these kids were not set aside and forgotten.

Alayna sat in the chair opposite Chanoa and watched her friend typing, her brain seemingly moving at breakneck speed, for a few minutes before speaking. “Chanoa, let me tell you a story. I knew a guy years ago who felt he had to give something to society. Every day he would—”

“Hold that thought Alayna, I need to run. Can we pick it up later? I’m sure there is a point to it, and I want to hear it. You always have such good stories to tell me.” Chanoa said as she packed up her laptop and headed out the door.

Marcus and Chanoa had been together for almost three years, though they maintained their own homes, choosing not to live together. He was a few years older but not enough for their relationship to draw unwanted attention or make Chanoa feel like she shouldn’t be with him. Marcus strutted into the diner as if he was the owner coming to check on his employees. He had somewhat of a chip on his shoulder and it presented itself in the way he tended to look down on others. Some might even say he wasn’t cut out for social work. For Marcus, it wasn’t a calling as much as it was a means to an end. His plans for the future had nothing to do with helping families or kids. Marcus had other aspirations, namely he wanted to finish school and work in business like his dad. The only child of his wealthy parents, Marcus had grown up privileged. It was an odd pairing that put him and Chanoa together, but it seemed to work, so far.

Marcus fidgeted while he waited in a corner booth for Chanoa. His clothing was impeccable, as always. He never let a single hair remain out of place for more than a few seconds. He was a looker but a vain one. “Hey babe!” he hollered as Chanoa walked through the door of the diner. Her heels announced her presence seconds before she arrived. This was their favorite place to meet and have lunch. It had a sense of the past with Formica countertops, actual fountain sodas, and the servers wore cute uniforms. The corner sported an old-fashioned juke box, a relic from days gone by. She loved it here.

Chanoa and Marcus had been a couple for two years. Chanoa felt it was moving in the right direction, but she didn’t know Marcus’ true feelings: he kept them locked tightly as if he was hiding a national treasure. Now and then he did allude to the future in vague terms, but he has never come out and admitted his true feelings. For now, she was happy to have him in her life. She knew how she felt, she was in love. They shared the same faith, same values, same sense of calling in life, and they were close in age. They enjoyed a lot of similar activities. To Chanoa it was a love she knew God had blessed and was destined for the long term. She did find herself annoyed at times when he appeared aloof.

Chanoa walked to the booth and showed her bright smile, “Hey you! What’s your day like? I am swamped and I have a new case that is going to be challenging. It isn’t a simple housekeeping case or lack of supervision. It’s a drug overdose and there are three children needing placement. I hope I can keep them together but finding someone to take all three is going to be difficult. One of them is fourteen and that is always hard.”

“Uh, you know, the usual. Home visits, a Child, and Family Team Meeting at five, and a drug test, that’s about it. Then I get to go home to my monsters, joy.”

Marcus did have a couple of small dogs, mutts, which may seem out of place for Marcus considering his background. He did love dogs though and for all his other faults, he was not a breed snob. Their names were Peanut-butter and Jelly. Those two dogs had the biggest personalities and Marcus loved them. Everyday when he got home, he would first toss their toys around the yard for them, then he would sit with them on the sofa and unwind while he pet them. They were like therapy dogs, best friends, the kind who don't disagree.

“Well, I've got you beat. I had to go pick up these kids at 2:00 AM. They are sitting at the office waiting for placement.”

Marcus cautioned Chanoa, “Darling, please know, you cannot fix everything or everyone. Besides, you still have to have your own life. If you aren't careful, you will find yourself working all the time and catching naps when you are too sleepy to stand.”

“You know what? I don't believe you. There, I said it.”

Marcus said, “I just want you to be realistic. I have been at this a while longer than you rookie and I've been there. You know, some people want help and some never will. Some will actively fight you to keep help at arm's length. You can lead a horse—”

“Please don't try to dissuade or discourage me Hun” Chanoa interrupted. “I hate it when everyone is so negative and that includes you!”

Chanoa studied the menu. The selection was simple, and she appreciated that. Nothing else in her life was simple. At least, she thought, I am single with no kids of my own.

“I think I'll have a grilled cheese with a salad and water.”

“I am going for the double burger with cheese. I am starving,” Marcus said.

They ate without much talking as if concentration on their food was the string that held the universe together. The only sound between them was the clinking of forks on plates and chewing. The food was delicious. The mood of the diner was always private but happy. The service left no questions unanswered, and Chanoa appreciated having a server who seemed to read her mind. It was off the beaten path and Chanoa sometimes worried it would go out of business, but they did seem to have a steady flow of lunch regulars. It was fast food, but it wasn't a national chain.

“I've got to run. I need to go see the mother at the hospital and have her sign the releases for services, if she's awake and aware. I will see you later Hun” Chanoa said as she bent to peck Marcus' lips. Since they had started dating, Marcus had been her constant cheerleader. He was the one who encouraged her to get into the line of work.

“Hello Marie. I’m Chanoa with DCS. How are you feeling? We need to speak about setting up a plan and what is going to happen now.”

Marie grunted “I don’t need your help, just go away!”

“You know I can’t just go away, and I want to help. That’s what I do.”

The scent of sanitizer made Chanoa dizzy. The room was sparse with one recliner, a bed, and a television. The only adornment being a vase of flowers, probably from a church group. Chanoa doubted Marie’s drug dealer brought them. The blinds filtered out any sunlight causing a sense of sadness. There was a television mounted on the wall, but it was turned off. It would probably be a helpful distraction for Marie if she turned it on. The silence was shaken by the sound of passing footsteps and Marie’s wheezing.

Marie was a simple and sad sight in her hospital gown with an IV on her wrist and the bag of fluid hanging next to the bed feeding her arm.

“Marie, this is what is going to happen. First, you will get a summons to appear in court. The judge will ask if you need an attorney and if you can afford one. I am not an attorney, and I cannot give legal advice, but I do recommend taking the offer for an attorney.”

“I don’t want an attorney; I didn’t do anything wrong!” Marie snapped. “Where are my babies?”

“They are safe. They will be taken care of until you are ready to get them back. Look, I can’t give you legal advice but if it were me, I’d want an attorney. Besides, it won’t cost you anything.”

Marie cried, “I’m ready now!” Tears flooded Marie’s eyes and moistened her skin as she sobbed, crying “No, No, No”. Her body convulsed as the hurt enveloped her. and Chanoa leaned in and held her. Marie was hurt and angry, she was feeling the physical need for her drugs. Between her emotional and physical roller coasters, she was lucky to keep her sanity. Sitting here in the hospital wasn’t helping.

“I know this isn’t easy Marie, but it has to happen, and it has to happen the way I am telling you.”

“You can’t make me do anything. I’ll get your job girl!” Marie raised her voice. “Now give my kids back!”

Chanoa spoke evenly, “I wish it was that easy. You know the court has the final say in that. I do not have the authority to take anyone’s children. When I do, it is the court and the law that step in to protect them. I am simply the vessel. Listen, I will be back here maybe tomorrow when you have a chance to rest. Maybe you’ll feel better.”

Marie turned her head in silence.

Chanoa strolled down the long hall toward the elevator, pondering her life choices and those of Marie. She wondered what made someone do those things. What could possibly cause anyone to decide to put a needle in their arm or smoke stuff that can possibly kill them and to do it knowing the risks. Of course, she knew she took risks daily by simply driving but it wasn't the same. At least in a car you have control most of the time, especially if you pay attention to the other drivers. As she drove off, those thoughts consumed her.

It was difficult to see with no porch light on as Chanoa knocked on the door to the trailer. With each rap on the door, Chanoa felt like it would fall from its hinges. "Third time's the charm." Chanoa thought. As she was about to register another loud announcement on the door Marie peeped out from behind the curtain.

How often had she seen this happen? Once she had walked to a door and she heard the television and a man talking loudly. She knocked and suddenly there was no sound. She had knocked louder and even called out his name and announced who she was, but he didn't answer. He probably thought by ignoring her the issue would just go away. All she wanted to do was help. They all thought she was there just to take away their kids and that couldn't be farther from the truth. Now, Marie was doing it too and her kids were already gone for now. She just wanted to get Marie some help so she can bring the kids home.

Chanoa said, "I know you are in there Marie and hiding from me will not make it go away."

Marie remained silent, holding her breath, standing motionless.

"Come on Marie, I want to help. Come open the door."

Her breath held to try to be as quiet as possible, Marie exhaled and, catching her breath, opened the door. The stench wafted out the front door at once making Chanoa nauseous. "Hi, I'm sorry about that. I just don't want to talk to anyone." Marie was in her underwear and a T-shirt. Chanoa told her to put some clothes on. Five minutes later, Marie returned with a robe wrapped around herself.

"It's okay, I understand," Chanoa said. "Can we sit? Maybe out here on the porch?"

"Yeah, whatever" Marie retorted, a little offended that Chanoa didn't want to come into her house. "Why can't you just get my kids back home?"

"Well, we go to court tomorrow. I expect the judge put a No Contact Order in and tell you to work services. I will set up a series of services for you. The state will pay unless you have insurance—"

“I don’t have insurance. How do you think I can afford insurance? You know I don’t work a lot. That’s why that girl needs to turn sixteen already.”

Chanoa pressed on, “Okay Marie, I am going to need to go over some paperwork with you” pulling a folder out of her bag. “We will need some information like social security numbers for you and the kids, a few other things. Ready? Also, go to the Department of Human Services and they can get you set up with the state’s insurance for lower income families.”

“You get paid extra for more kids, don’t you?”

“Of course not, Marie. Why would you think that?”

Packing her things in her messenger bag, Chanoa went back over the permanency plan with Marie one last time. “So, remember, Marie, expect calls from numbers you don’t know and answer them.”

“Yeah, okay, whatever.”

“First, we need to make a family tree of sorts. I will need the names, addresses and phone numbers of any relatives, close friends, neighbors you trust to take care of your kids if anything happens to you.”

Marie grunted, “I don’t have a lot of family. Only my sister is across town. We don’t talk. She thinks she is better than me.”

“Well, do you know her address and number?”

“I know her phone number,” Marie said.

Chanoa felt a migraine coming on as the fluorescent lights in the office flickered. The twins were still asleep, and Laura watched TV.

“Do you want some breakfast?”

“I want to go home!” Laura snapped.

“Laura, I am working on that whole thing. You are going to have to be patient.”

Chanoa sighed as she walked to her desk. She opened her laptop and found the family’s file. Starting at the top, she began calling. There were not many names, even after she did a search. She had to find someone, or the kids would end up in foster care. Of course, any place would likely

be better than their current home and certainly better than the office. The Joshua House is nice, but they are kind of full.

“Hello, my name is Chanoa. I am with the Department of Children’s Services. Do you have a minute? I have Laura Harkins and her two brothers here. There has been an incident with their mother, and we need to find a temporary home for them.

“Who is this again?” The voice asked.

“My name is Chanoa Thompson with the Department of Children’s Services.” Chanoa said, “I am looking for a temporary home for Laura Harkins and her twin brothers. You are the first family member on my list of potential homes.”

The man on the phone said “Well, I don’t have space and I don’t want anything to do with them or their mother.”

The phone clicked before Chanoa could respond and she began working her way down the list. Chanoa dialed seven numbers and got seven rejections or disconnected numbers. She looked at her list, only two more names. She crossed her fingers on one hand and dialed the next number.

On her eighth call, Chanoa finally found someone willing to take the kids. She was overjoyed. It usually took much longer. The kids often stayed in the office for weeks before a foster home was found.

Her migraine was not being helped by all the rejection. She took a couple of Imitrex and hoped. This was not good, she thought.

Chanoa explained what she could to Maire’s cousin Tammy and arranged to bring them out later in the day. Chanoa was excited, she was making a difference. She printed the necessary forms and went to tell the kids.

“I don’t know her,” said Laura, “I don’t want to go there, I want to go home.”

“You know we can’t take you home right now. Your mom is going to have to do some inpatient rehab. This will only be temporary. We will leave about two o’clock.”

“Whatever” Laura whined.

The gravel road spoke of simplicity and country living with the dust trail following behind Chanoa’s car. Cows watched her drive toward the ranch style home. On her right were chickens in a large fenced in area with a coop as big as her apartment. In the distance she could see a pond. She wondered if it was a lagoon for sewer or a pond for fish or ducks.

On the front porch, a couple rocked in the shade. The older man and woman didn't get up as the car disturbed their driveway. They just sat watching. Chanoa began to feel uneasy, like a feeling of dread was gripping her. It passed as she stopped the car and the woman stood and waved. She was probably in her late fifties, he must be close in age, maybe late fifties, or early sixties. They both appeared healthy and strong. They dressed conservatively. The rocking chairs were a nice touch. There were no toys in the yard. Obviously, their kids were grown and gone by now.

The twins piled out the second Chanoa unbuckled them and ran around the yard. They headed over to the chickens with interest. Laura didn't move at first. Chanoa went to her side of the car and spoke to her. The twins ran around the yard exploring, chasing chickens. Across the yard, in a large pasture, were several cows a few goats, and a couple lamas. The boys would have fun here. Laura was already complaining about the smell and not wanting to step in something.

"I know it isn't easy Laura. This is the best situation for you right now. Besides, look at how much space there is. You will have fun here. I bet at nighttime the stars are beautiful. And watch where you step."

"I don't care. I don't want to be here. Why can't I go home? Let the twins stay."

Chanoa said, "Come on, let's get your stuff inside."

"Hello, Mrs. Graft?"

"Hi, hey kids. I am Tammy. I am your mom's cousin. We are so happy to see you. Laura, I haven't seen you since you were about four years old. And these must be David and Daniel. Which one is which?"

The sun was starting to set, and Chanoa sat on the porch with Mr. and Mrs. Graft going over the paperwork. She explained their rights and how the process works. She told them they will get a stipend from the state of roughly \$25 per day per child. They will have the right to disrupt, or end, the temporary custody but are required to give two weeks' notice. This would allow the state time to find new placement. You will have a court order which will open doors at medical facilities and government agencies. So, if you have to take them to school, the doctor, or if you need to sign up for any state benefits afford the children. If you visit the Department of Human Services, they can tell you all the children are qualified for.

Laura went inside and turned on the television. She plopped on the sofa and pouted while she began texting her friends and scrolling her social media. The boys played in the yard, never having had so much fun. Mrs. Graft told the boys to stay where she could see them. She told Laura to make herself comfortable and she might enjoy sitting out on the porch. Laura didn't respond.

"Okay folks, do you have any questions for me?" Chanoa asked.

“I don’t think so. You have explained everything well, I think. We have your number if we have any concerns we can call.” Tammy answered.

“I will be out to check on them now and then anyway.”

"Hey babe" Chanoa said into her phone. "I'm exhausted."

“Are you going to meet me for dinner?” Marcus asked.

“Not tonight. I am going to go home and rest. I need some me time.” Chanoa said in a resigned tone.

“Okay, if that’s how you want it but know that you are putting the job between us, and yes, it is just a job.”

Chanoa barked, “I don’t need this, Marcus. Please stop!”

“Whatever, I will talk to you later.” Marcus replied as he clicked off the call.

Chanoa pulled into the driveway of her apartment and sat in her car enjoying the silence. She thought for a long time before going inside and falling back down on the sofa. She contemplated getting a glass of wine or maybe she needed something stronger. After several minutes she found the energy to get up.

Chanoa poured a glass of white wine. She turned on the television and flipped through the channels before stopping on something she had seen before. While Chanoa wasn’t a videophile or one to stay glued to her television, there were certain kinds of shows she liked. She really enjoyed courtroom drama movies and those inspirational true stories about athletes or sports teams. The one she always went back to was *We Are Marshall*. She loved that movie. She must have been fourteen when it came out and it made such a deep impression on her. She kicked off her shoes and laid her head back. This is what she needed.

She opened her journal and began thinking about what to write. She had kept a journal since she was a little girl. She shared her thoughts, the things that happened to her or around her, her feelings. She was a prolific journalist. She guessed it was one way of dealing with her stressors and she could always go back and reflect if she wanted to remember how she felt at a certain time in her life. She often would browse the pages of her myriad books and smile at the memories. She finished jotting today’s events and laid her head back down and fell asleep.

Chanoa’s phone rang, jolting her from her to reality. She had reached that dream state and was on the ocean on a raft, alone, basking in the sun. What time was it, she wondered. She answered the phone. “Hello, this is Chanoa.”

“Hey Chanoa” her supervisor, Jason said, “what is the status of the Harkins kids?”

“Oh, hey Jason. They are with their cousin, Tammy, about an hour from here. It’s a nice home, with plenty of room and about three acres of property.”

Jason asked, “Did you get the Request for Services completed to get mom in treatment?”

“Not yet. I am going tackle that first thing in the morning.”

“Don’t forget you have training in the morning at eleven.” Jason reminded her.

“Dang Jason, I totally forgot about that. I will just have to get in and get this done early and fast. Don’t worry.” Chanoa assured Jason.

Chanoa went to bed hoping her phone didn’t ring again. So many of the veterans have scolded her, growled at her, pleaded with her to turn off her phone when she is not working. They said, “it will consume you.” No, she’d argued, I will be fine, and I want to be accessible to my clients. “It will consume you” they’d said. “I won’t let it,” she had said back to them. She still was not convinced.

As soon as she got to the office, Chanoa got a text. Another case had been assigned to her. Chanoa put on her cape and went to work. Two hours later, she got an email, another case assigned from the court. The workload was stacking up, but Chanoa was determined to get all the families on her work tree through whatever they were dealing with. It kept her busy and every day provided something new and different. She loved this job. The autonomy was nice and not having to actually punch a clock was good. She had to put in her own time but that wasn’t a big deal. It was good, she could come in late or work from home, she enjoyed that.

“I know it’s been three weeks” Chanoa said into the phone. “I don’t know what I can say Laura. It takes as long as it takes. The program is set for three months but that will depend on your mom.”

“I hate it here. The animals stink! There’s nothing to do and the cell phone signal sucks.”

“I understand how you feel Laura, but you are going to have to bear it out. Okay? Look, you can go help with the animals, maybe you could learn something new. You might even find your passion.”

“My passion is music, and they don’t like the same music.”

Laura's dislike for the house ran deeper than her music. She didn't like older people and the fact they listened to different music, if any music at all just sealed the deal. It was as if music was the string that held her soul together.

In the middle of Laura's lunch her phone rang. It was Tammy, she let it go to voicemail. She would call back after she ate. It had only been a few weeks since she dropped the kids off with Tammy. It rang again and again, she ignored it, turning the sound off. Laura continued with her lunch, her phone ringing again and again. She tried to let it go, she needed self-care, but she knew it must be important. She finished her lunch; the world was not going to come to a complete stop while she ate lunch.

Chanoa looked at the phone, seven calls from Tammy. Now she could be concerned, worried even. What happened, she wondered. Hopefully none of the kids got hurt or Laura didn't do something stupid. It was probably Laura, she figured. She knew Laura was going to be a problem.

"Hey Tammy, what's going on?" Chanoa said, "I assume it must be important."

"I know I said we are happy to help but we have a problem."

"Uh-Oh" Chanoa said. "What's up?"

Tammy was frantic and clearly angry. "It's Laura. She is being impossible. She won't do anything I ask; she leaves trash everywhere. I am not so sure we can keep her here. She argues and complains all the time."

"Let me come out and talk to her. I can be there in about three or four hours if that's okay."

"That's fine, we should be done with dinner by then and the boys should be in bed." Tammy answered.

The headlights of Chanoa's car were the only light as the car crawled along the rutted gravel trail, slowly as if trying not to wake the crickets. The cows were silent, chickens were perched on top of the coop and even the stars seemed quieter out here.

Getting out of the car, Chanoa looked up and gazed at the thousands of stars she doesn't get to see at home in the larger town among all the city's homes and the glare of streetlights.

The porch made a comforting creaking sound as she ascended the steps. It felt like home, but it also reminded her of a horror flick, expecting the monster to jump out from behind a tree or from the barn and come to eat her. For Chanoa, this could be home or a nightmare, either one worked. She could understand why Laura isn't comfortable here, it's out of her element. The boys

are too young to know the difference, they took to this place as if it was a playground. Running around with the chickens, chasing butterflies, it all seemed to come naturally to them. At fourteen, Laura must have felt isolated, her friends were. They were back in town with the mall and boys and iced mochas. She had cows and a barn. Poor girl, she thought. She hoped this wasn't a mistake. She got out of her head as Tammy answered the door.

“Hey Chanoa, come on in,” Tammy’s voice drawling like syrup, stepping aside for Chanoa to get through the door. Laura loved this house. The front door was solid, heavy. The log walls made her feel like she was at a cabin in the woods. The aroma made Chanoa wish she didn’t have to live in the city, but she knew she couldn’t afford a place like this, but she could dream. “Laura is in her bedroom sulking. She either sulks or complains, not a whole lot more. I’ve tried to get her to help me with the animals, told her it would do her good but, nope.”

“Hi Tammy, so tell me about what’s been going on.”

Tammy told Chanoa about Laura’s behavior, about her disrespect for anything and everyone. She talked about how Laura was being mean to her brothers. She was seen trying to kick at the chickens and throwing things at the cows and goats. A few times, she hit her brothers for no reason. She didn’t bruise them, she just slapped them on the hand or punched one on the arm and laughed about it. Tammy told Chanoa that all Laura wanted to do was play on her phone and listen to her music. She just didn’t know how to reach her. She had hoped Laura would help with the animals, maybe she would enjoy that, maybe she could teach her something. Instead, Laura remained in her room or on the sofa plugged into her music. Tammy was tempted to take it away, but she feared what that might lead to. She could bond with her but no, Laura was not going to be that kid.

“She even tried to hurt one of the chickens.”

“Okay, so if I talk to her and hopefully get her back on track, can we try to keep the arrangement going? The kids need stability right now.” Chanoa pleaded.

“I guess we can try again.”

“Great and thank you. Let me go in there and talk to her for a few minutes.” Chanoa said, standing.

“Hey girl.” Chanoa said as she tapped on the door and pushed it open. “Can I come in for a minute?”

No response as Laura just lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling, pretending Chanoa wasn’t there.

“Listen, you need to make this work. Finding a place for three siblings is very difficult. I need you to be a bigger person. Your brothers need you to be strong for them. Your mom needs that too. Besides, have you ever been to the country? If you open your mind, you really might like it.”

“I don’t want to make it work. I don’t want to like it. I told you; I don’t want to be here!”
 Laura yelled.

“Please keep it down Laura, your brothers are asleep. Let’s try to have some respect for others. Please turn this around, make it a positive experience for the boys. Before you know it, your mom will be home and you can be together again. Your mom will need you to be strong and she will also need your positive attitude. If I have to place you elsewhere, well, we never know what could come of that or where it will be.”

“I will just be here, nothing more.”

Part Three- Chanoa and Marcus- Its Complicated

The Formica tables, a ringing bell and a man’s voice announcing “order up” reminded Chanoa of her childhood. The aroma of bacon and eggs rested on her lips and sent her to another world. She loved the smell of bacon and eggs, any time of the day. Her thoughts were interrupted when Marcus arrived and kissed her forehead.

“Hey babe. How’s your morning?” reviewing the menu which he knew like the back of his hand. He felt like breakfast food.

“Oh Honey, I am so worried about these new kids. On top of that, I just got three new cases.” Chanoa whimpered, tears filling her eyes. She was beginning to worry it would be too much to handle. She would never quit but she had to find a way to juggle all her cases. She still had to go see each of her kids for the month.

“Darling, I am telling you, do not get too close, do not get your heart wrapped up in every case or any case” Marcus scolded.

The fragrant black coffee again made Chanoa think of other times and again her mind wandered through lanes of memories. She could see her dad standing at the counter sipping his coffee and her mom at the table reading the paper, bacon and eggs with toast on her plate.

“Marcus, stop telling me that!” she snapped. “I pour my heart into it just as I do anything else, that is who I am, and you know that. Besides, I know I can help these kids and their mom. She will get better in rehab, and they will be back together. I am confident of it.”

“I keep telling you, you cannot fix everyone. There will be moms that go to jail or continue to use. There will be children lost in the system. There will be kids who rebel.”

“I know you’ve told me, but guess what? I don’t accept that. I don’t accept the status quo.”
 will make a difference!”

“Chanoa, you can make a difference of course, but you will not be able to make the difference you want in every case. The numbers just don’t add up.”

“That’s the problem with you and everybody else in the business! You all see these kids as numbers, as statistics. I don’t appreciate that. I never will!” Chanoa barked.

“No, they aren’t just numbers, but they cannot be the center of our lives. When you went through your training, they talked about self-care. Part of that self-care is not allowing your caseload to be all you think about, all you do.”

“Marcus, please don’t tell me how to do my job, at least not how to care. You know I am always open to your constructive criticism and any guidance you care to offer but when it comes to how I feel, that is off limits. Not even you can tell me how to care.”

“Okay babe, whatever you say,” he sighed. “You win. I am done trying to convince you. Actually, I am not done yet. I am tired of taking the back seat to your whims because you want to stop and see a kid on the way to a movie or call a mom as soon as we walk out of church. This has to stop.”

“Well, that is who I am, and you learned that about me early on Marcus. You have had ample time to change direction. If that is what you want, do it now so it will hurt less. What I need from you is encouragement, and a hug now and then.”

The server brought their food, and they ate in silence, the forks on the plates the only sounds between them. Discomfort enveloped the couple as they ate. One of them should break the ice but neither knew what to say so they just ate. Marcus stopped, took a breath then continued his attack on his breakfast food.

Part Four: Laura’s Nightmare- It is Only Just Starting

“Leave me alone!” Laura yelled as she slammed the bedroom door.

“Laura, you cannot talk to us like that! Come back here now!” Tammy shouted. Tammy was frustrated. It had been at least fifteen years since she raised a teenager and her own hadn’t been this troubled. They were both successful in their careers now with children of her own.

“Screw you!” came the heated reply from behind Laura’s closed door. “Leave me alone! You aren’t my mother! I hate it here!”

Tammy answered, “I know I am not your mother, but I am the adult responsible for you right now and we need to talk about your behavior. We do not use drugs in this house and as long as you live here, it will not be tolerated!”

“It was only grass, give me a break! Everybody smokes it.” Laura said through the closed door. “I am going to smoke it all I want, and you can’t stop me.”

Tammy went back to the living room. The only light coming from a corner lamp produced shadows across the walls. Tammy’s husband Tom sat in a recliner on one side of the lamp reading. The aroma of orange spice potpourri permeated the room, and the sunset brought a cooling to the outside air. The night was still, and the only sounds remained an occasional owl or a coyote howling in the distance.

Suddenly the sound of loud music blared from the room at the end of the hall. Tom looked at Tammy who lifted her eyes from her own book. Tammy had no consideration for others, and it was really beginning to bother Tom and Tammy. Their own children were not raised that way and they were having a hard time dealing with it in Laura.

“What is she up to now?” asked Tom.

“Hmmm, I will go tell her to turn it down.” Tammy said.

Tammy knocked on the bedroom door. “Laura, Laura!” she hollered. “Laura!” louder as she banged harder on the door.

Laura yanked the door open and hollered “What!?” to be heard over the music.

“You have to turn down the music” Tammy said. “There are other people in this house.”

“Whatever” Laura huffed as she slammed the door again. Laura turned the music down and plopped on the bed. The room was nicer than her room at home, but it wasn’t her home. The walls were covered in posters of rock bands from ten years earlier. Some girl’s clothes were still hung in the closet. Laura hated it here. This was not her home and those were not her clothes. She knew her home wasn’t nice, and it smelled bad but she also knew it as home and that’s where she lived. Her mom was there.

Marie reeked of cigarettes and body odor, but Chanoa figured it was a small price to pay as long as she was able to get Marie some help. The miles of highway passed as dashed white lines. Each one seemingly a passage of time. The other cars on the road seemed as if they were not in the same world. Each of them held their own secrets but how many had a drug addict as a passenger headed to a rehabilitation facility. The silence between the two women was thick like butter and Chanoa wanted it to melt, to be able to talk to her like another person. She wanted Marie to open up, to tell her about her children, to tell her about her own childhood but Marie was determined not to speak at all.

Chanoa asked Marie “what kind of music do you like Marie?”

“I like country, older country. What do you care? Why does that matter? When will I see my kids again?”

“First, your kids are with your cousin Tammy. She is happy to take care of them until you are finished with rehab.” Chanoa said.

“I don’t need rehab, I told you that. I just want to go home and get my kids back with me, where they belong. I’m not going. Let me off at the next corner, I will find a ride from there.”

Finally, after however many miles passed, the two women chatted about everything and nothing. Six hours later, they pulled into the driveway at the rehab facility. Chanoa got out of the car and stretched. Marie got out and lit a cigarette. The modest building looked much like a house, a large house, but a house still. There were only a few cars out front. The front door was fire engine red. The welcome sign next to the door had a bible passage on it “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” Philippians 4:13.

“I already don’t like this place” Marie said as the car slowed to a stop at the front door. “Why do I have to do this? I don’t have a drug problem. I don’t want to be converted to a Jesus freak.”

Marie’s fingers tapped rapidly. She needed another cigarette, a bump, something to calm her nerves. She had to find a way out as soon as she got checked in and as soon as Chanoa was gone.

“Marie, you overdosed on heroin. You have a drug problem. You must own that and start trying to heal. You are not the first person with a problem, and you will not be the last but trust me when I say you can do it.”

Chanoa knocked on the door and a young woman answered. “Hi, come on in.” The twenty something said. “We are just sitting down to dinner. Please, come have a seat and eat some dinner, you must be starving. I understand you have had a long drive.”

“I’m Chanoa with DCS and this is Marie. We are so excited for the opportunity to be here.” “I am not hungry, but I bet Marie here is. How about it, Marie?”

“I could eat” Marie answered as she set her duffel bag down and looked around the room. The other women, each in a different stage of recovery, registered in her mind. She knew one of these ladies would be able to hook her up, even here. The skinny blonde sitting alone is probably her mark, she thought. She has no friends so she must be newer. The smell of roast made Marie’s mouth water. She hadn’t had a good meal in a long time, not since before the twins were born, when Laura was a baby. If she ate, it was usually something like canned soup or cold hotdogs.

“Okay. My name is April, and I am one of the counselors and I also help with the cooking. We take turns, staff and residents alike. Do you enjoy cooking Marie?”

“Not really or I don’t really know how. When I was with my daughter’s dad, he did all the cooking and my mom never cooked. You know you won’t be able to help me, right? I don’t have a problem. All I want is to be done and go home.”

The others at the table listened as the two of them talked. Chanoa reached out her hand to shake April’s and gave Marie a hug. “Good luck Marie” she said.

Marie didn’t respond, opting to sit and eat. She felt all the eyes on her and felt like running away. Later, in her room, Marie lay on the bed staring at the ceiling, thinking, getting angry about being there and planning her escape. These and thoughts of getting another hit were all she could think about.

“Tom, Tom, have you seen Laura? I’ve looked all over the house, and I can’t find her.” Tammy said.

Tom looked up from his book and groaned. “Darling, I am sure she is just outside hiding or maybe she fell asleep. Maybe we got lucky, and she ran away.” Tom answered. “She has been nothing but trouble for the last two weeks. I honestly would rather she go away, find someplace else to stay than to give us more headaches.” Tom knew he didn’t really hope Laura had run away but sometimes it would be a blessing, he thought. He knew though, if she did, there was no telling what might happen to her, and he couldn’t have that on his conscience.

“Tom! That is not funny. I can’t believe you said that. Do you really feel that way?” Tammy asked.

“Tammy baby, I know she is your cousin’s daughter, but she is a druggie and a pain” Tom said, adding, “You can’t fix that girl.” “The twins are great and so cute, but she needs to go. I would not be upset if she ran away.”

A noise in the backyard startled Tammy. “Tom, what was that? Maybe it’s her.”

“Yeah, maybe” Tom groaned. He did not want it to be her. He would rather it be a prowler. “I’ll go check it out. Stay here.”

Flashlight in hand, Tom went out the back door. He started at one side of the yard and walked the entire fence line. “There you are” he said as his light found Laura crouching down behind the shed.

The odor of marijuana hit Tom’s nose, nearly knocking him over. It was familiar but he hadn’t smelled it in at least twenty years. It was unmistakable. Tom didn’t like it and he was not going to tolerate it in his home. “You will not bring that garbage into my home, period!” Tom yelled at Laura.

She stared at him with daggers. Her eyes pierced his as she remarked, “yeah whatever,” her favorite word. Laura stood and walked to the house, grumbling about how nothing is fair. Tom followed a few feet behind her, watching her every move. Tom didn’t trust Laura not to bring more drugs into the home or do them in the home. His children would never have done this, they would never have thought to disrespect him or his home like that. No children should. He wondered what had happened to the world. Sure, when he was young, he did some stupid stuff, but he would never have done this. He would never have brought this kind of thing into his home. Tom stomped the dirt off his shoes on the front porch and grabbing the screen door, he pulled it open and walked through it.

“She was out there smoking dope. This is a problem. We need to think about calling that DCS girl. I’m not sure how much more of her behavior I can take. She is rude and inconsiderate.

“I know Tom. I will call her in the morning,” Tammy said, staring into the window.

“I know it’s been three weeks Tammy and yes, I understand Laura can be a handful but, please, please hang in there.” Chanoa answered an irate and frustrated Tammy on the phone.

“No, I can’t do it anymore. We are happy to keep the twins, but we can’t keep Laura. I will have her things packed and ready when she gets home from school.”

“Tammy, wait!” Chanoa said but Tammy had hung up the phone.

Chanoa felt the tears begin to fill the edge of her eyes. She would have to find someplace else for Laura now and it was never easy to place a teenager. She would bring her to live with her if the department would allow it. She struggled with this. The idea of separating the kids was gut wrenching. It was Laura, she was making this whole thing more complicated than it needed to be. Chanoa leaned back in her chair and sighed, rubbing her temples.

Chanoa spent the next hour on the phone until she found another, distant relative willing to take Laura in. She went to the house and did the requisite home inspection and paperwork. Back at the office, she did the background checks and sent it all up for approval.

Two hours later, she got the email authorizing the placement and called Tammy. “Tammy, its Chanoa. I will be there to pick up Laura in a couple hours, okay?”

“Yeah, that’s great, thank you.”

Chanoa asked, “How are the boys?”

“They are great, perfect little angels. But Laura doesn’t want to help me with them. Makes it a little difficult but we are fine.”

Chanoa heard the boys laughing in the background. She heard the television, a cartoon. The boys sounded like they didn't have a care in the world. Those boys were precious, she thought. "Sounds like it".

"Yeah, "Tammy said, "they love this cartoon. Do they have insurance? I noticed one had a cough the other day."

"You didn't get the insurance cards in the mail already?" Chanoa asked? "I submitted the paperwork the morning I got the case. You should have had it by now."

"No ma'am. It hasn't come yet." Tammy replied.

"Okay, give me until the end of the day. I'll see what I can find out." Chanoa said.

Chanoa sat in her usual chair to the judge's right, between the DCS attorney and the guardian ad litem. The bailiff announced the Judge's entry, and everyone sat quietly. The courtroom was simple, the only adornments being the state flag and the United States flag. The usual cast of characters were present and only them and the defendant.

The judge began by reading the report sent in by Chanoa. It only took a minute or so, it was concise. Chanoa learned early that this judge does not like long, wordy reports.

"Now, Ms. Thompson, In your own words, what is going on?"

"Your Honor, we had her in the care of her mother's aunt and uncle, but it isn't working out. I have found another relative willing and able to take her. We would like the court to order services for the minor because she is reportedly smoking marijuana" Chanoa said.

"You're confident this new relative will be able to handle her behaviors?" The judge asked Chanoa.

"Yes, Your Honor, I am and thank you."

"I'll allow it. If there are any further problems, we will consider residential placement because it sounds like foster care won't work any better than relative placement. You will also get her into A&D Treatment as soon as possible." Judge Truman stated.

"Yes, Your Honor, I have already requested the assessment."

"I don't think the assessment is necessary at this point, do you?"

"Yes, your honor, I do because it will help to determine what level of treatment she needs."

The judge replied, "Very well and thank you." Then to the guardian ad litem, "Will you please write up the order Mr. Franklin?"

The guardian ad litem answered, "Yes of course your honor."

Part Five: The Coffee Shop

The coffee burned Chanoa's lips as she looked over her notes. Across the table sat Marcus, his signature coiffure demanding the attention of anyone within a few yards. He was a good-looking man and Chanoa knew it, so did he. She was lucky she had met him. It's been a few years now and she felt like he should be ready to ask the question soon. Today though, he seemed distant, upset, something was off. Even his sense of humor appeared to be absent this morning. He was always flirting and making jokes. He looked serious, and not at all attentive.

Between sips of coffee, Chanoa read over case notes. She was happy with what she had written and was ready to submit. Her mentor had taught her well. She couldn't have asked for a better trainer.

Chanoa asked, "Where are you Marc, what's eating you?"

"Nothing babe, I'm good. Just waiting for you to get done."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. Don't worry about it. Just keep reviewing your notes." He responded.

The tone in his voice made it clear to Chanoa, he did not want her to continue with her notes. She pressed him. "Come on hon, tell me what is bothering you, please."

"I told you I'm good." He snapped.

Marcus never snapped at her; he was usually dripping with sweetness. It was bugging her; he was someplace else, and the suspense was killing her. Her coffee was getting cold. She waved at the server.

"Marcus, we have been dating for a long time. Do you see where I'm going? I know you, and I know when something is bothering you."

Marcus stared into nothing. His hands embraced the cup of coffee as if he was freezing. The heat didn't even seem to bother him, as if in a vegetative state.

"Marcus, Marcus, I am talking to you." Chanoa said, bring Marcus back to earth.

“Chanoa, I think we need to take a break.”

It came out of nowhere and floored her. Chanoa couldn't speak. When she expected a proposal soon, what she got was off the charts and made no sense. She needed to understand. She fought back the tears for the moment, allowing anger to slowly replace the heart ache.

“Wait! What? What do you mean we need a break!?! If you are unhappy, please talk to me so we can work it out. You can't just quit. That isn't fair. Please babe, let's talk about it.” The hurt crept back into her voice.

“Didn't you say not too long ago if I am going to leave to go ahead and do it now?” Marcus said, “Let's talk about it. Here it is in a nutshell, the elevator version. You are married to your job. I had thought we might find ourselves married one day but you are already committed.”

Marcus sat staring a thousand yards away, busying his hands with the coffee cup. He was too ashamed to look her in the eye. Chanoa's eyes penetrated his soul, searching for answers. All their memories flashed before her eyes.

“No, no Marcus.” Tears puddled onto the table and Chanoa reached for some napkins. “Please don't do this. I can change. I promise, I will spend less time working.”

“Chanoa, we have talked about this before. Your answer is always the same, “they need me. Well guess what. I need you too. You can't see there is no way you can save every person, every family, regardless how many hours a day you work.”

“I can save the ones I work with. I do not accept the idea that some will simply fall through the cracks.” Chanoa retorted, angry again.

“You have said it before, you want to save them all. While that is honorable, it's just not sufficient. You can't save everybody Chanoa, plain and simple. The sooner you understand that reality, the sooner you will be able to get your life back, and maybe me.”

Chanoa's heart sank. The small café seemed even smaller now, like the walls were closing in. Her clothes felt tight like they were a few sizes too small, or she just ate too much food. She stood, walked across the room then sat back at the table. She couldn't look at him again, not his face, his eyes. She watched his hands as if they were unattached, had their own embodiment.

“Please” Chanoa sobbed, “Please don't do this. I love you; I need you.”

Marcus stood and walked to the cashier. Through blurry eyes, Chanoa watched him go. Once he was out the door, she sobbed openly. Stifling her tears as best as she could, Chanoa stood to leave but was interrupted by a woman sitting nearby. The woman sat across from Chanoa and took her hand. A stranger in what was now, a strange place, she had a calming effect.

“Darling,” the stranger said. “Your man is right. You can’t save the world. You can influence it by your actions, and you can save only a select few. The sooner you learn this and come to peace with it, the better off, the happier you can and will be.”

With that, the stranger left. Chanoa had stopped crying and began to focus her mind on her cases. She determined if she can’t have a love-life, she will just pour her heart and soul into her work. Then, her phone rang.

You can’t tell me what to do! You aren’t my mother!” Laura yelled.

“Laura, you cannot smoke marijuana in our house. Those rules apply to anyone who comes to this house” Betty said as she slammed her hand on the counter.

“I am going to run away. I’ll go get my brothers and get out of here.”

“Where will you go? How will you support yourself and your brothers?” “Have you thought about that?”

“I’ll get a job, duh.”

Betty spoke calmly, “So you’ve got it all figured out huh? What kind of job will you get? What do you know how to do?”

“I can get a job at a fast-food joint. Or I could become an influencer.”

“Sweetie, I don’t want to discourage you, but the reality is, fast food doesn’t pay the bills and becoming an influencer takes a lot of time, years in most cases. Besides, you are going to need a place to live, the internet and whatever other equipment to do that.”

Laura was not getting any closer to calming down than when she and her Aunt Betty started this conversation. She was upset, she didn’t like being told what to do, especially by her aunt.

“I’ll get a boyfriend” She blurted.

“Oh, you think they just grow on trees. You think you can just go out and get a boyfriend and that will make everything work out?”

Aunt Betty started to speak again then rolled her eyes. “Okay, Laura, I am not going to argue this point any more. Those are the rules. No marijuana in my house and not while you live under my roof.” Betty walked out of the room.

Two weeks later Laura had been good, at least she hadn’t been smoking in the house. Betty wasn’t so sure she had stopped altogether, but not in the home. She called the DCS case worker. “Can you please come do a drug test on Laura?”

“Yes ma’am, why? Is she smoking again?” Chanoa said. “I’ll come a little later today. Will she be home?”

“She should be home around three-thirty.”

“Okay, I will see you then.” Chanoa said as she pushed the call end button on her cell phone.

The phone rang again. It was Chanoa’s supervisor. “Hey boss” Chanoa smiled into the phone.

“Hey Chanoa, I hate to do it, but I’m going to assign two more cases to you. I know you already have a huge workload but it’s in your area and we just don’t have anyone else to take them,” said Thomas Silver.

“Sir, you know I love my job and I am part of the team. Whatever you need from me I will do it, I will obey orders blindly.”

Sitting in her home office, Chanoa stared at her decorated walls and found herself transported to a different time, if only for a moment. Arriving back to the present, she thought about her cases. One more is nothing she thought. Soothing music filled her ears, the sound of her fingers tapping noted into the computer was muffled by her engulfment.

She looked over the names, thinking about how she had been able to help each of the families. Who says she can’t save the world? No one on her caseload was in a worse situation than when they started. She knew all she had to do was listen and help. It was easy.

She only had thirty cases and it wasn’t as overwhelming as all the veterans had warned. She didn’t feel the stress everyone promised. She didn’t mind working on a Saturday now and then, it usually gave her time to catch up on notes or school work. She was just starting her Master’s program and she learned right away that taking more than one class at a time is too much. Next term she would only take one class, regardless of the fact it would take longer to finish.

Chanoa’s thoughts were set aside as her dog barked, filling the void between her office and her living room. “Wait puppy, I’m coming” She called down the hall. Chanoa opened the back door and let her little Shih Tzu run out the back door. The warmth of the sun immediately sent Chanoa to another place. Living near the beach landed Chanoa in a different world. It was like being on vacation every day. She felt sand between her toes and smelled the salt water in the air. She felt Marc’s eyes on her, her insides cooled by the iced drink she sipped. Marcus treated her like a princess. He never spared an expense and was always such a gentleman. They had had good times together, she missed him.

She remembered when they first met. It was her first day in the new job and he immediately caught her eye. He was wearing slacks, a polo shirt, and some of the brightest socks she'd ever seen. She loved that he always wore colorful socks. His cologne was subtle, arriving when he did, not before. And he probably wrote the book on chivalry.

“Groucho, you are so silly boy. Go get your toy Groucho. Go get it. Good boy.”

Chanoa tossed the toy a few times with Groucho panting as he sprinted across the backyard after his toy. Chanoa's laughter was contagious. Groucho fed off it and jumped up and down when she held his toy in the air. Twenty minutes later, Chanoa closed the sliding glass door and made her way back to her office room.

The files on her computer stared back at her, inviting, begging her to start typing away. Chanoa sipped her lukewarm coffee as she delved into her case notes. She set aside her notes after another thirty minutes and opened the state's training site. She loved to get any training she could fit into her schedule. She loved learning. Music filled her little room and Chanoa slipped into a world where no one else existed but her and her studies.

Ever since Chanoa was a little girl, she absorbed anything she could get her hands on. She loved any subject. She read everything, articles, books, labels. She devoured information like water. Her parents had tried to dissuade her, to get her not to read as much and to lead a social life but she had been determined to learn everything she could.

The phone rang, it was Marcus. Chanoa had been hoping he would call but now she hesitated, butterflies fighting to escape her stomach. She could feel them punching the walls of her abdomen. It rang four times then went to her voicemail. What was she doing, she wondered, why didn't she answer the phone. She went back to work, then he called again, and again, the butterflies rumbled, twisting her insides like a jigsaw puzzle. Sweat dampened her armpits and her mouth dried up as if she'd eaten a ball of cotton. She answered it, hopefully.

“Hello,” She hesitated.

“Listen Chanoa, I don't want this to be weird. I just need to get my things. You could just bring them to the office, I'll get them from there,” Marcus said.

“Are you sure you can't just swing by and get them? I won't make it awkward. I promise,”

“Nah, maybe it's just better if you bring them to the office. I think that works best. Please. Listen, Chanoa, I know it isn't easy, it isn't lost on me. I have feelings too,”

Chanoa answered, fighting back the tears, “Are you sure you won't come over and pick up your stuff? I will not bother you. I will let you come get your things and leave. I can be a grown-up.”

“Maybe just bring it to the office Chanoa. I think that’s best. I will see you Monday.”

Chanoa opened her email and found the one she was waiting for, the approval for Laura’s services. Now she just needed to let Betty and Laura know to expect a call to set it up.

Laura sat in the bleachers with a couple of friends. They smoked weed, watching over their shoulders to make sure no one was watching. The three of them giggled as they talked about their teachers. They watched the team practicing on the field, gossiping about certain players and teasing about which ones they liked. Amidst their laughter, one of the coaches came around the corner. He stood there not saying a word, watching.

“Got any chips?” one of Laura’s friends said with a laugh.

“Not me,” Laura answered. “Hey put it out, quick!”

“Hey, what are you girls doing? You can’t do that on school property, I am going to report you to the principal. The football coach turned and walked away as he called the principal on the radio.

“Hey coach, you got any chips?” one of the girls tweeted before they were herded away and back to class.

Sitting in class, Laura stared blankly at her book. She wanted to leave but she knew better. She wasn’t hearing the teacher; her mind was somewhere else. She wanted to be with her friends getting stoned, anywhere but here and now. She reflected on her life before all this stuff happened. Was it that bad? How was her mom? Was she allowed to see her? Call her? Was she getting clean? Would it take? Laura was startled back to the present when she heard the announcement.

“Laura, you are needed at the principal’s office.” Laura’s teacher announced. “Take your things with you Laura.”

Sitting in the hall, waiting to be called in, Laura let her mind drift again. She wasn’t worried, she didn’t care. The principal leaned out of his door and called her to his office. She stood and the worry that wasn’t there before now rushed to her head. She looked at the diplomas, trophies, and plaques on the walls. How pretentious was the only thought that she could muster. He is really stuck on himself, wanting to show the world his importance. No one cared, she thought, especially not her. One thing’s for sure, she mused, she was not going to college. She may not even finish high school. On one wall, all by itself, he had a small picture of him, and some man surrounded by other men who looked like they were looking around. All of those men wore black sunglasses and the same suit. There was a plane in the background. She wondered for a second who it was but then she didn’t really care.

“Laura, I have known you since you were much younger and I have to say I am shocked by your behavior,” said Mr. Loving. “Do you have anything to say?”

“Not really. I don’t know what I did that was so bad. We just had a little weed.”

“Not that bad? First of all, it is against school policy. Secondly, it is illegal, and finally, you are a minor. This behavior cannot and will not be tolerated. You are suspended for three days, and I am going to enroll you in the school’s counseling program to deal with drug use. You will start the day you return. I will be calling your mother.”

“Good luck with that, she is in rehab, and I haven’t talked to her in a few weeks. Can I leave now? And do I finish the day or go now?”

“You can finish the day, so you have a full three days.”

“Fine, whatever, what about my friends? Am I the only one being suspended?”

“Don’t worry about them Laura, worry about yourself.”

As she walked out a smile took shape on her face. She fled like she had stolen a car. She didn’t need to be told twice. As soon as she got home, she planned on smoking more. Laura walked out of the front entrance of the school and skipped to the sidewalk. Donning her earbuds, Laura escaped that old world of torture and stepped into her own special universe. Here, she could be alone, think her own thoughts, and smoke as much weed as she wants to smoke.

Opening the front door, Betty said, “Your principal called. Suspended? That’s great! Laura, I told you I am not going to put up with this. I am calling your case worker.”

“Please don’t call her. She’ll put me in a group home. She hates me, she hates kids. I don’t want to go there. I’ll stop. I promise.”

“She doesn’t hate you or kids. On the contrary, she loves kids, that is why she does what she does. Besides, you told me that before and look where we are now. You got suspended from school. I probably should call her anyway, just to tell her that.”

“I will be better. I will clean the house, come straight home from school, I won’t have any friends over except on Saturdays and only after I ask. I will get my homework done as soon as I get home from school,” Laura promised.

“How long will that last? Go to your room while I figure out what to do. And do not do anything stupid while you wait. I will let you know what I decide.”

Chanoa got a call from the police detective about Marie. It appears Marie had walked out of rehab and got some more drugs and found herself in the emergency room, again. “If she doesn’t do anything else right, Marie knows how to overdose,” Chanoa thought out loud.

Heels clicking on the tile floor, Chanoa made her way down the hall toward Marie’s room. She knocked on the door. She heard the television muffled by the bedding and knocked again.

“Come in,” came a woman’s voice.

Chanoa opened the door and peeked past the bathroom wall to see Marie in bed with an IV feeding her fluids. “Marie, it’s been three months since you first got put in the hospital and your kids were placed with relatives. I want to help you get them back, but you can’t keep doing dope and using the hospital like it’s a vacation spot.”

Marie whispered, “I know, I know. Where are my kids?”

“Well, your sons are with your aunt and uncle. Laura had to be placed with her Aunt Betty.”

“Why? Why did you have to split them up? I hate Betty. She is their father’s sister and she never liked me. She looks down on me, thinks she is better than me. I also don’t trust her, not with my kids. She has always struck me as having some sort of secret side.”

“She would not behave, and your cousin’s husband, Tom, put his foot down. He said he is more than happy to take care of the boys as long as it takes but he is not going to deal with Laura’s mouth or the stuff she does,”

“Why didn’t you just move all three of them to Betty’s? Wait, don’t tell me, Betty didn’t want them. She always favored Laura and didn’t like the boys. She just doesn’t like their daddy and she takes it out on them. Some wonderful aunt she is. What did Laura do, aside from having a mouth on her. She gets that from her mother.”

Chanoa said, “She’s been smoking marijuana and vaping. Okay, let’s focus on you getting where you need to be then we can worry about the kids. Remember, the goal is to have them back home with you. It’s a doable goal Marie.”

Marie tuned Chanoa out and lost herself in the nothingness of the window. She was thinking about the day she gets out of the hospital and would she be able to get another bump. She would get the kids back but first she needed just one more trip, she needed it. It made her feel alive and pushed her through this dimension to another existence. It was always the same for Marie, just one more trip, it was always the last one until she came down and needed another.

Chanoa smelled the air in the room. It reminded her of when her grandmother passed. Chanoa had sat at the bedside and listened to the rasp coming from her grandmother’s body as her lungs were forced to breathe and her organs slowly shut down until her lights were turned off.

Chanoa wiped the tears from her cheeks. There was something about the odor of a hospital room. Marcus had said something similar about the dirt in Iraq. The smell, he'd said, stays with him. She felt the same about hospital rooms.

"Marie I am going to find an inpatient facility to help you. It will be a six-week program. It will require you to be there with no visitors, limited calls, ongoing and continual treatment, and regular drug tests to determine your levels. It will tell if you have used recently," Chanoa told Marie.

Marie did not hear her. She was somewhere out in left field. She was aching for another bump of that sweet "H". Chanoa repeated what she'd said, and Marie just grunted. "Marie!" Chanoa barked. "I am trying to help you and it is very serious. You need to come around if you ever want to have your kids at home again. You are going to end up dead or in jail. Where will your kids be then?"

"I wish you'd just leave me alone. I don't need your help."

Chanoa produced a document and said, "Marie, this is the court order which states you do need my help you and you have to comply. You were in court when the judge made the order, so I know you know what he said."

"Forget that judge. I don't need inpatient rehab. I can stop anytime."

"Marie, you have already shown you can't stop anytime. If you could, why haven't you already? Secondly, the court order requires you to go to an inpatient rehab facility for not less than six weeks. After that you will have continued outpatient care" Chanoa admonished.

"You wait, I am not going to rehab. I will do therapy but not inpatient. I don't really have a problem."

"Marie, I have already sent in the request. As soon as you are ready to leave the hospital you will be headed there. It's a few hours away but we can talk about calls with the kids later. I am going to go now; I will be in touch."

"Tell my babies to call me," Marie said as the door closed behind Chanoa.

The cup burnt Chanoa's hands as she tried to sip her coffee. Other patrons glanced as Chanoa's fingers tapped. Chanoa glanced at the clock. "Come on Alayna," she whispered.

In her usual unenthusiastic fashion, Alayna was running late. She never seemed to care much, and she certainly did not seem to be under any stress. It didn't add up to Chanoa, but Alayna did seem to be successful in her job. She would have to start asking Alayna how she did it, how she planned her days. The diner was filling up and Chanoa was growing agitated. She was wearing out her watch face checking the time. Just then, she saw Alayna at the door.

Heels clotted on the tile floor drawing the attention of most of the diners. Alayna's perfume announced her presence as much as her heels. Her ponytails oozed sexuality belied by her smart work-casual skirt. One thing Chanoa could say about Alayna is she always walked the line between professional and cute.

As Alayna sat, a hot cup of coffee was placed in front of her with a menu. The server knew her too well. Alayna glanced at the menu then set it aside and blew on her coffee. Her breasts were barely contained in her buttoned-up blouse. Alayna was a sexy woman and she didn't seem to know it, not like some women who know it and flaunt it. It was her attitude. Alayna was humble even though she dressed like a sex symbol.

"So, finish your story."

"Wait, tell me what's happening with that overdose case," Alayna demanded.

Chanoa hesitated, "I got the kids placed and mom is going to inpatient rehab, whether she wants to or not. Now, I really am interested in your story."

Alayna watched Chanoa sip her coffee with a napkin in her hands, "Where was I? Oh yeah, so the guy wants to give back, but he is not sure how. He didn't have any money and he worked full-time. He felt obligated though, because when he was a little boy, his mom lost her job, and his dad was not around, and they ended up living in a shelter for over a year."

The buzzing of her phone jolted Chanoa. She looked at the screen. "Marcus" it read. She let it buzz a little longer until it went to voicemail. The buzzing started again and again went to voicemail. When it began buzzing for a third round, Chanoa answered it. She held a finger up to Alayna and stepped away from the table.

In her best hushed tone, Chanoa barked at Marcus, "No, I don't think we have anything to talk about right now. Please, just don't," tapping the end button.

She got back to the table and saw Alayna had left a note and a \$5 on the table. Her note said she had to go and would finish her story later. Chanoa's smile lit up the dim dining room on her way out the door. The sun was bright today and when she stepped into the warmth, she had to shield her eyes until she got adjusted.

Chanoa looked around at the trash strewn around the yard; the stench, like a physical force, nearly knocked her off her feet. The odor of trash and dead animals brutalized her senses.

Each step leading up to the porch felt a little like it was about to break. The rain made those same steps even worse. She made a mental note that she needed some better shoes and to recommend they fix the stairs before someone gets hurt. At the top of the stairs Chanoa found more trash and she jumped back when she thought she saw a rat scurry along the edge of the porch. All she could think of was her pity for people who lived this way. She had seen it before, even as

a child she had known people who lived like this. It was the way they were raised, and those traits are hard to shake. It was kind of like the dog and new tricks axiom. Most didn't even know there was anything wrong.

Chanoa feared if she knocked too hard, she might break something. The wood felt mushy under her feet. Uneasiness oozed through her veins and hardened her bones as she waited at the front door. The loud television prevented her from hearing movement, and she knocked harder. The television was muted, and Chanoa heard a man coughing then feet shuffling across the floor. His panting was palpable. Surely, he was not in such bad physical condition he can't go from the sofa to the door without being completely spent.

A shirtless man opened the door. His body odor slammed into her stronger than the stench of garbage in the front yard, almost tangible. If an odor could be in three dimensions, this was as close as it could get. His bulging beer gut made him look pregnant and his three-day beard repulsed her. He stood with a shotgun in one hand and a beer and cigarette in the other.

"Who are you and what do you want?" he asked, spitting next to her on the porch. She just realized he was also chewing a wad of tobacco. Chanoa felt nauseous. All she could think was "hold it together Chanoa, you got this."

"Sir, I am with the Department of Children's Services, and we have a report of potentially unsafe conditions for your kids. You have a three-year-old boy and a five-year-old girl here, right?"

"Look here" the stranger with the beer-gut barked, "I don't need the government coming here trying to tell me how to raise my kids. Now, get off my property before I institute Castle Doctrine," referring to the law protecting homeowners who defend themselves when they believe someone is out to harm them on their property. He probably wouldn't do that, would he? If he did, surely he would be convicted, right? Chanoa's mind raced as she stammered for more words.

"Sir, I will be back with law enforcement."

"You do that young lady because that's what it will take to keep you from being ended," that pregnant man said, watching Chanoa descend the stairs of his front porch.

Gravel and dirt pelted the toys scattered around the driveway as Chanoa peeled out onto the blacktop. She pulled into a convenience store and called the police for assistance.

Chanoa pulled up behind the police car and repeated her ascent to the front door. Again, the pregnant man answered the door in jeans, a shotgun, beer, and a cigarette. Chanoa asked the man to allow her into the home to which he hesitated but moved out of her way when the officer cleared his throat.

Still protesting, the man said, "I don't see what the problem is. My kids are fine."

Chanoa spot on the card table and pulled open a folding chair. “Sir, I have to go over some paperwork with you then we will walk through your home to ensure there are no safety concerns.”

“Okay, whatever,” he snapped as he plopped down on a chair next to hers. His odor was sickening. Cigarette smoke filled the stale air and stained the walls. Ashes were scattered all over the table.

The shirtless man led the way through the house, not saying anything, not making excuses and not owning any responsibility. Dishes were stacked teetering on the counter. Trash spilled over the edge of the can and littered the floor within a foot around. The hallway light wasn’t working. In the bedroom, the children played with their toys with the occasional yell. Neither was wearing more than a diaper. Food crumbs and dirty dishes sat here and there around the bedroom. The beds had only a blanket and a fitted sheet which were grey from lack of washing. There were dirty diapers scattered throughout the home, mostly wrapped up like a ball, but scattered, nonetheless.

In the bathroom, Charlotte found the toilet was blackish grey. The counter wasn’t visible for the various opened tubes of toothpaste, bars of soap, medicine, aftershave and smeared make-up. The tub had the usual bottles of shampoo and soap on the edge, and it too needed cleaning.

The master bedroom had a full-sized bed with sheets that matched the ones in the kids’ room and hadn’t been made. There were boxes of ammunition and a weapon cleaning kit on the bed. There were two piles of apparently dirty clothes on the floor.

In the laundry room Chanoa found more dirty clothes and a few empty detergent bottles. “The wife left us a few weeks ago,” the man said, “I just haven’t had a chance to clean up.” In one room in the back of the trailer there seemed what looked like squirrel pelts, or some sort of vermin. Was it a tanning room, she wondered? The smell competed with the rest of the house, coming in at a close second. The inhabitants seemed not to notice the odors, as if their olfactory senses were not working. The paneled walls smeared with blood where someone had wiped off excess because there wasn’t a clean towel in the house or a clean pair of jeans.

Back in the living room, Chanoa sat at the table and laid out a plan for the family to get where they needed to be. Chanoa told him she will submit a request for home-maker services and explained that they do not clean the house but assist in learning to organize. She also was stern in telling him he had to keep the home clean and the next time she visited it better be cleaner or they would have a different conversation. Chanoa could be a no-nonsense kind of person when she had to be although she preferred the empathetic, kind persona.

He was what most might refer to as a “redneck”, but Chanoa preferred to refer to him as less informed. Surely his parents raised him this way and it is all he knows. He can’t help it really. It’s like a genetic mutation that continues from generation to generation until someone breaks the pattern. That someone was usually an outsider like someone who marries into the family. And that is not without stiff resistance. The only reason Chanoa wasn’t going to file a petition to take the

children into custody immediately was that she did not see any safety related issues. There was food, albeit minimal, running water, and the fans were sufficient for the time being. She saw a window air conditioner and there were registers in the floor for heat but neither would likely be on right now.

Chanoa also made recommendations about some safety issues like the ammunition on the bed. She pointed out the knives in the kitchen and told him those needed to be out of reach. "And those meds need to be locked up also," Chanoa said. "Do you understand Mr. Jones? Look, I am not here to take your kids and I don't want to tell you how to raise them. I am, however, here to help and to ensure you can keep your kids safe since they cannot do it by themselves. I will provide you all the tools we have available."

"Yeah, yeah, just tell them people to call me before they come out," responded Mr. Jones, slamming the door behind Chanoa and the officer.

A week later, Chanoa was back in the home.

"Okay, I need to go over a family tree with you first. So, tell me who your relatives are."

"Why do you need my relatives?" he asked.

"This is how we look for placement in the event we have to remove children or if something happens to the parents."

"You are not taking my kids!"

"Sir, I told you a week ago about the changes that have to be made around here and you have done nothing. I don't pull any punches and I am telling you, until you get this lace cleaned up, get rid of the roaches, lock up your firearms and ammunition separately, I have to place your kids with someone else." Chanoa told him.

"I don't have any relatives around here. They are all in other states or the other side of this one. My kids are fine, I told you that before." The man insisted.

"Either you cooperate and help me to keep them with family or I can get a court order placing them into state's custody and they will go into foster homes for now with no promise they will be together." Chanoa replied.

"You go ahead and get a court order lady. I told you, you are not taking my kids." He hammered back at her.

"Fine sir. I will file an emergency petition today and by tomorrow I will be back with law enforcement. Do me a favor and have their clothes and a few toys packed." Chanoa said.

“Wait, just wait a minute. Let me think, okay?”

“Okay, I do have a cousin across town. We don’t talk much though. He is one of those high faultin’ types. Thinks he is better than me, but he has a nice place. His name is Rodney.” The man offered in defeat.

“Thank you. Write down his name, address and number.” Chanoa said, sliding her notebook over to him.

The following day, Chanoa dropped the kids off at Rodney’s house having told the pregnant man she will be back in a week to check on the house.

Music blasted into Chanoa’s ears as the sun rested on the horizon and sweat dripped from her chin. Her feet pounded the pavement allowing her to clear her mind, the day’s clutter drifted away. Running always felt good in the evenings. It was a perfect segway into the night.

When she got back to her apartment she stood in the warm shower for a small eternity. The water cascaded over her, rinsing the troubles of the day down the drain.

She poured a glass of wine and stared into nothing.

The dark outside felt good as the quiet held her close as Chanoa sat on her soft leather sofa in her pajamas under a blanket. It was late but she didn’t want to look at the time, she just wanted to sit there and fall asleep. She did.

Her alarm went off as usual and Chanoa sat up on the sofa. First, through blurry eyes, she checked her emails. Nothing new yet and she went to shower.

Her morning yoga session left her feeling refreshed but exhausted as the hot water rolled down her body. As the water began to cool, Chanoa finished her shower and got ready for work. On the way, she called the landlord to tell them her water heater wasn’t working. She hadn’t finished washing her hair and it was a mess. Going to work like this put a damper on her day.

She eased into a parking space and lugged her things inside. No sooner had she set her things up than she got a call. The inpatient facility had a bed open if Marie is ready. Chanoa bolted out the door and sped to the hospital. Screeching to a halt, Chanoa watched a turtle cross the road. She’d always had a soft spot for little, defenseless animals. She grinned.

She reached the entrance and went to the admitting desk.

“Yes ma’am,” the nurse said, “She can probably leave by tomorrow afternoon. Let me ask her doctor and call you in a while. Okay?”

“Thank you,” Chanoa said as she rushed toward Marie’s room.

The television in the small room was on but the sound was turned off. The rain pattered against the glass pane in a melodic lilt. She didn't react when Chanoa knocked or when she entered the room. Chanoa's nose was attacked by the disinfectant odor of the hospital room. The odor repulsed her but she needed to speak to Marie.

"Marie, they have a bed for you at a facility a few hours away," Chanoa reported to Marie.

Marie remained quiet, motionless.

"Did you hear me, Marie? Marie?"

Several minutes passed before Marie uttered a response. "I heard you and you already know I don't need that. I am not going to rehab."

"Marie, please make this easy on yourself. You know the court ordered it. You are required to go."

"I don't have a court order so as far as I'm concerned there is no court order," Marie growled.

"When the judge stated it verbally in court, from the bench, it became the order. It doesn't need to be in writing, but I will get you a copy of the written order if that makes you happy,"

The only sound was the ticking of a wall clock, the silence thick with uneasiness. In her mind, as she waited for Marie to speak. Chanoa said a silent prayer. She needed God to intervene. If nothing else worked in life, her faith always had.

"Heavenly father, I want to praise you and give you all the glory. We are but meek and weak. We are fallible man and without your mercy we are all damned to hell. Lord, I want to ask you for help. Lord, please put your hand on Marie's heart and lift her. Give her the strength and wisdom to do what she needs to do for her kids. In Jesus name lord, I pray, Amen," Chanoa whispered.

"I'm not doing it. I don't have a problem and you can't make me. Just get my kids back to me when I go home."

"Marie, the court has ordered you to complete an inpatient rehab program. The kids are safe, and they will remain safe until you get home. I will find out if they can come see you."

A quiet knock disturbed them. A nurse came in to check Marie's vitals and ask if she needed anything.

Marie snapped at her, "I need to get out of here! I need to see my kids!"

“Your kids are fine Marie. Right now, you need to focus on getting better. You have a long road ahead of you” Chanoa said.

The nurse went about her business having long ago learned not to take that bait from patients. Chanoa chimed in, “Marie, I will get it set up so you can go straight from here to the facility. I believe it’s about four hours from here. I hear it’s up in the mountains, beautiful.”

“I don’t care where it is. I am not going.”

Chanoa chose not to argue, she too having learned not to argue a point that cannot be won. Instead, Chanoa put her notebook in her bag and shook Marie’s hand before walking out the door.

“You can do this Marie. You must do this for your kids. Besides, if you don’t the judge will put you in jail for contempt.” Chanoa said.

Marie grumbled.

Chanoa rolled into the parking lot at work about 8:00 AM, gathered all her work things, and scanned open the door. “Good morning,” she cheered to anyone within earshot as she bounced into the office. Always the optimist, Chanoa gave credit to Jesus for her positive outlook. She plugged in her laptop and opened her email. Right up to a new case was assigned. She opened the state’s software program and read the intake referral on the case.

“Environmental Neglect, youth- 8. Drug Exposed Child, youth- 8. Physical abuse, youth- 8” it read. “Poor kids,” Chanoa mumbled. She put together a file with an Immediate Protection Agreement to place the child with a relative if needed then she called the referent.

“Hello? My name is Chanoa, I am with the Department of Children’s Services. What can you tell me about John and Samantha with the eight-year-old boy?”

“Oh hi, I am so glad you called. That jerk is my ex-husband and I know he is up to no good,” said the woman on the phone. “My name is June Smithton.”

Chanoa said, “Ok June, tell me more about these allegations. How do you know this to be factual?”

“I know him and that witch he married,” said June.

“Oh, yeah of course, but have you seen him using illegal substances?”

“We don’t hang out you know. I know them; I know what kind of people they are.” June answered.

“Well thank you for talking to me June. I will check it out today.”

“Will you tell me the outcome? Will the police be involved?” June asked.

“No ma’am. I cannot share that information. It violates our policy and federal privacy laws. You will have to speak to them yourself.”

Chanoa grabbed her files and notebook and headed back out the door. Outside Chanoa felt blessed when the warmth of the sun touched her skin. Chanoa was in a good mood, and no one could change that.

When Chanoa arrived at the address on the referral, she was taken aback at how nice the home was. The neighborhood seemed nice. The homes all had trimmed yards and hedges. These were not typical of her clients, but she knew not to judge a book by its cover. She locked her door and walked up the path to the front door. She felt like she was entering a home on the street she lived on as a child, middle income, suburbia. She felt safe.

Chanoa knocked on the door. It was solid to the touch, had the sound of solid oak. Chanoa heard a boy running around in the house, screeching. Then she heard a woman’s voice, “I’ll be right there,” yelled the voice.

A minute later a young woman came to the door. She wore jeans and a t-shirt and an apron. Her hair was flung high on her head, haphazardly tied up. Her jeans had handprints of flour. She wiped off her right hand and offered it to Chanoa.

“Hi, I’m Samantha Daws. How can I help you.” Her smile was infectious and if Chanoa had not already been smiling, she would be now. “Please come in.”

Chanoa shook the woman’s hand and introduced herself, “I am Chanoa Wellington with the Department of Children’s Services, and I am embarrassed that either I have the wrong address or a bad referral.”

Samantha turned down her music and invited Chanoa to sit on the sofa. The smell of cookies baking made Chanoa long for her mom’s home cooking. Snickerdoodles, she knew that aroma anywhere. “Snickerdoodles? It reminds me of home.” Chanoa said.

“Yeah, those are Brian’s favorite and I promised if he picked up his room, I would make them. So, what about a referral?” Samantha asked.

Chanoa felt inadequate suddenly. She could almost not bring herself to tell this put together young woman why she was there.

“Well, like I said I am Chanoa with Department of Children’s Services, and we have a referral. It is classified as Drug Exposed Child, Environmental Neglect and Physical Abuse. It alleges that the two adult members of the household use illegal substances around the child. It goes

on to say the home is always messy with pet feces and roaches. Lastly, the referral says you have been known to beat him with the buckle of a belt.”

A loud, raucous laugh escaped Samantha’s mouth. She couldn’t stop laughing for a full minute. “Oh, my goodness” Samantha finally managed. “So, let’s assume you got the right home, I promise none of that is true. We don’t even have pets.”

Chanoa tried to stifle her own laughter. “Samantha, I don’t doubt the referral is bogus, but we have to investigate them all as serious concerns. May I speak with your son alone for a few minutes please?”

“Of course, hang on a sec. Jimmie, come here for a minute please.” She called down the hall.

“Okay mom, I’ll be right there.” Jimmy called back.

Jimmy ran down the hall. “Did you see how fast I can run? They’re my special shoes. They make me fast.”

“Wow! So fast. I saw that cloud of dust trailing behind you. My name is Chanoa.” Jimmy shook her hand. “Can you show me your room?”

Jimmy leaped with joy at the prospect of showing off his toys. He took off down the hall and stopped in front of his bedroom door looking back, waiting for Chanoa. Chanoa was impressed with the fixtures on the walls, family pictures, and pieces of art. These people had class, she thought.

Jimmy stepped into his room as Chanoa got closer.

“Hurry up,” he called out. When she got into his room, she was impressed again, still. Jimmy showed off his collection of army toys and pointed to his racecar bed.

“Jimmy, how do you feel about your parents?”

Jimmy answered, “I love them. My dad is great, he built this bed for me. Mom always makes me cookies.”

Chanoa asked a few more questions then told Jimmy she was going back to talk to his mom some more. “Samantha, I need one more thing from you to set this whole thing to rest. Will you please take a drug screen for me?”

Samantha, blushing, said, “Yeah, sure. Here? Now?”

Chanoa said, “Yeah, I always carry one with me.”

A few minutes later they were done. Chanoa thanked Samantha for her time and told her she was very likely going to close the case. Then she backed out of the driveway. She rolled down her window and almost called out to her mom. Memories of home flooded into her mind.

Now and then, Chanoa got homesick or maybe it was a sense of melancholia. She didn't tend to live in the past, but she loved her mom. Some things just triggered memories like when she wrote in her journal.

Chanoa sat at her usual table in the crowded diner waiting for Alayna who was late as usual. Alayna seemed to be entirely on her own schedule, in her own world. Chanoa didn't get it. How could anyone be so nonchalant about life? She wondered if Alayna was ever on time for anything. It was only lunch, but Chanoa had other appointments too.

Ten minutes later Alayna strolled through the door, dropped her purse on the bench and plopped down across from Chanoa.

“Finish your story, Alayna. I have been waiting to hear the rest of it.”

“Okay, so the guy was wanting to give back because of what he went through as a kid. He didn't have a lot of money, but he had some. He didn't really like giving to charities because he never knew where the money was going. Occasionally he would offer a dollar to someone on the street corner if he had cash,” Alayna continued the story.

Chanoa said, “I can understand how he felt about charities. I have read about some that use most of their donations for high salaries and very little goes to the stated purpose of the charity.”

“Hey” Alayna blurted. “I hear there was a referral on one of your three kids, the one with the mom who overdosed.”

“Really? I hadn't heard. What now?” Chanoa asked. “I guess I'll going to head back to the office and see what is happening. My laptop doesn't get a great signal out in this part of town. With that, Chanoa gulped down the last few bites of her sandwich, followed it with a long drink of soda and went to the cash register to pay.

Traffic was backed up causing Chanoa anxiety. She didn't really know why but anytime she was stuck in traffic she got anxious. She felt trapped and she detested being late, even if it was just a casual meeting with friends. Honking was useless, she just fumed. She tried turning up her music but that didn't help either. Chanoa rolled her eyes, muttered to herself, and dropped her head in frustration and resignation.

It took twenty minutes to go five miles, but she finally made it to her office. Aggravated, Chanoa rushed inside and opened her laptop. “What now?” Chanoa said out loud. She opened the program and clicked on the link to Marie’s case.

She read the new notes, “Describe in detail what happened to the Alleged Child Victim.”

“Laura was caught smoking marijuana behind the shed again,” it read.

“Great,” Chanoa murmured as she picked up her phone to call Betty.

She dialed the number and listened to the musical tone until Betty answered.

“Hello Betty, this is Chanoa. I am returning your call. Let me come talk to Laura, okay?”

“That’s fine. I mean its only marijuana, I know, but it is still illegal, and my husband and I don’t want it in our home,” Betty said.

“I will be there in about an hour it will take that long.”

“That’s fine. I’ll see you then,” Betty said.

On her way to Betty’s house, Chanoa got a call from the hospital. Marie walked out and they didn’t know where she went. “Just what I need” Chanoa said to herself in exasperation. Rain pelted the windshield causing Chanoa to drive slower but it gave her time to think and to pray.

“Dear, almighty Lord” she began, “Lord, I beg you to help Marie see the light. Let her know that she can make it, that she can have a good life and she is valued, worthy of your love and she is throwing her life away.” Chanoa prayed. Chanoa did love her job, but she was not above getting frustrated or angry at times. She certainly felt pity for some of her clients.

Chanoa pulled into the long gravel driveway and up to the house. Rain continued to batter the car. The ground was soaked. She felt like she was stepping on a sponge underwater. Her feet were getting soaked, and Chanoa hated having wet feet. Her usually bright disposition was turning sour. She could sense she was not smiling as she knocked on the door. Just as the door opened, Chanoa got another text message. She glanced at her phone then put it in her pocket.

“Hi Betty. How are you?”

“I’m good, come on in. Would you like something to drink?” Betty said.

“Uh, sure. Do you have coffee made? If you don’t its fine.”

“I do have coffee made. Do you want cream and sugar? A flavored creamer?”

“I wouldn’t mind a little flavored creamer, sounds good, thanks.” Chanoa said.

The odor of fresh baked biscuits enveloped Chanoa’s senses causing her stomach to growl. She sat at the table looking at the family photos on the wall, each of them with happy smiling kids and either Betty or her husband. The furnishings made her think of money. Clearly, they were well off, but they didn’t come across as haughty. Laura should be thrilled to be here. She is obviously well cared for.

Chanoa heard music coming from upstairs. She assumed it was Laura. The music wasn’t something Chanoa liked but it didn’t matter. More important was how loud it was. Betty came back and sat with Chanoa. Betty’s eyes looked up at the ceiling toward the source of the music and rolled her eyes.

“A little loud huh?” Chanoa asked.

Betty let out an audible sigh, “yeah, a little. I have told her to turn it down, but she refuses to listen. Don’t get me wrong here, Chanoa. I don’t want to disrupt. I am happy to have her here. She is family and it’s what we do.”

“I will talk to her. She can’t keep pushing buttons and have no consequences. We can always look at a facility to house and treat her. She may have Obedience Defiance Disorder and that can be treated with medication.”

“Laura” Betty called out but got no response. “Laura” Betty hollered. “Laura, turn down the music and come down here please.” Betty demanded. The music kept going but got louder.

“Let me go up and talk to her. Maybe she will respond better if I see her alone.” Chanoa said and started up the stairs. St the top she knocked on the bedroom door, but Laura didn’t answer. She knocked harder and called out “Laura, its Chanoa, open up.”

Laura opened the bedroom door and went back to lying on the bed, but she didn’t turn down the music. Chanoa walked to the stereo and turned the music off. Laura sat up in protest, but Chanoa stopped her with a glare.

The room was lit only by the minimal sunlight coming through the window. It had wooden blinds, the expensive kind. The furnishings and fixtures were all well-appointed, solid oak bed and dresser. Wood paneling, very old. The bedroom gave Chanoa a sense of ease, comfort. She wanted a room like this she thought to herself.

Chanoa noticed one thing unsettling; the window had security bars on the outside made of wrought iron. It was a little creepy, but it was ornamental for sure. She let it pass, assuming it was of no concern.

“Listen Laura, we are trying to make this work. You don’t have any more relatives around here to place you with and—”

“I don’t like it here. I’d rather be at a foster home.”

“Why don’t you like it here?” Chanoa asked.

“I just don’t. They aren’t my family as far as I’m concerned.” Laura answered.

The sun shone through the window from the east, announcing the mid-morning. The warmth felt like a blanket enveloping Chanoa. It gave new life to the otherwise dark room.

“Just don’t make me stay here, please.” Laura pleaded.

Chanoa said. “Well, for now this will be where you stay. She is family and it isn’t permanent. As soon as your mom is better you can go home. Just hang in there. Do it for your mom and your brothers.”

Laura agreed to keep trying for her mom but made it clear she has reservations and can’t promise she won’t continue causing problems. “I like smoking weed. It’s that simple and it isn’t hurting anyone.”

“Laura, you cannot continue using. It is illegal and you are living in a home where it is not acceptable. Besides, finding a foster home for a teenager who smokes pot will be almost impossible. This is a chance for you to make a fresh start, like your mom. She will need you to be strong and supportive when she gets home.”

Chanoa told Laura and Betty goodbye as she walked down the steps leading her down from the front porch. She got in her car and read the text message she had gotten earlier. It was from Tammy, she needed to talk about the twins. “This can’t be good” She thought as she backed out of the driveway. Chanoa admired the trees on the lawn with a smile but that smile, that sense of calm, was soon overshadowed by worry about the twins.

Chanoa decided she can call Tammy back in a while. She didn’t want any more bad news right now. She wanted to take a self-care break. She drove to the park and pulled her journal out of her purse. She opened it to the last few pages and read what she had written. It read like a roller coaster of emotions. Her pen took on its own life and it poured words onto the blank space on the page. After a few lines, she placed the journal back in her purse as if it were an egg she dared not crack.

Chanoa liked the park. It gave her solace; this is where Chanoa felt closest to God. She walked to a bench and opened her bible to Isaiah Chapter 43 V. 2 “But those who hope in the Lord

will renew their strength They will soar on wings like eagles: they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint.”

This was one of Chanoa’s favorite passages. She would read it and pray anytime she felt discouraged or stressed. Chanoa gave all the glory in her doings to God. She fully believed that He was there to help with her burdens.

Chanoa bowed her head and raised her hands out to her sides. “Heavenly father, you are the almighty, the most powerful, the giver of life and savior of man. Your blessing abounds in the lives of man, and you give me strength when I am feeling weak. Lord I am not asking for anything now. I know I usually do but this time I just want to praise you, to let you know how I feel. Thank you, Father, for giving me the ability to help others. In Jesus’ name I pray, Amen.”

She sat there, the sun warming her skin like a comfortable sweater, confident she would be able to help Laura and Marie. She had a plan, and that plan would work. All Marie had to do was go to and complete the inpatient rehab program and the kids could come home. She must want her kids home she thought. And Laura, well Laura just had to be patient with her mother. She needed to be understanding and trust that her mom would do the right thing. Laura needed to know God, but Chanoa was a government employee, and she was prohibited from preaching to her clients. If only she could find a way, she thought.

As Chanoa climbed into her car, her cell phone rang that familiar tone. It was Marcus, again. She looked at the phone, feelings rushing through her heart, but her mind wanted to take control. She missed him and it hurt. Her heart ached for him. Was she in love, she wondered as the phone continued its melodious chime. She debated whether to answer. She knew he probably needed something and seeing him, even just to return a book or a pair of jeans, would be difficult.

“Hello”, she said.

Marcus’ voice filled her ear, “Hey Chanoa. Listen, I know I was kind of harsh. I know you are probably still mad, but I was wondering, can we maybe have dinner?”

Chanoa was floored. Her heart bounced with joy and the smile on her face was almost painful. She tamped down her excitement, not wanting to let Marcus know how she felt, not yet.

“Okay, I suppose we can do that. I believe I can let you apologize over dinner.” She spoke.

“How about tonight?”

“Okay” Chanoa answered, “Where? What time?”

“Let’s do 7:00 PM at Charlie’s” Marcus offered.

Chanoa paused, containing her excitement, “Okay Ba—, Marcus” stopping herself from calling him “baby”, at least just yet.

Chanoa felt the cold air rushing from the vents after coming in from the sun’s warmth and turned down the fan. It seemed not too long ago her A/C stopped working and it cost so much to have it repaired. Her thoughts fled the air conditioner and rushed back to her clients. Those poor kids she thought. Laura is blessed to have family who will care for her and the boys. It could be they were placed in foster care, and it was anyone’s guess what they would have had to deal with there. Yeah, they were in a good place.

She began formulating plans in her head. She imagined the four of them back home, Marie working, Laura going to school and coming home to help with the kids. Laura having friends come over, sitting in her bedroom listening to music, giggling, and gossiping like schoolgirls do. Yeah, she thought, they can have a wonderful life, even living in that trailer and barely getting by.

The clouds began dimming the light, cooling the outside air. A storm seemed determined to dampen the day. Chanoa would not allow the shadow of a storm to ruin her day. She knew this was God’s way and she appreciated all He did for her, for mankind. Let it rain, she thought.

Back at the office, rain pelted the ground, soaking Chanoa’s shoes when she stepped out of her car. Running to the door, Chanoa hoped to dodge the liquid bullets but no such luck. She was soaked by the time she got to the door and opened it. As usual, her card didn’t work the first three swipes.

Chanoa read the new referral on her screen. Her mind raced. It was a Priority 3 which gave her a little more time, but she always liked to get ahead of them before the deadline, stuff always popped up to slow her down.

Her new case seemed like a simple one. Environmental Neglect was always easy but always subjective. Usually, she can get the clients to clean up and she can come back in a day or two and the problem is fixed. Unfortunately, when it comes to government housing, roaches seemed to come with the territory. The residents were not allowed to spray or have the apartments sprayed on their own. The government had someone contracted to spray monthly, but the roaches jeered at the sprayers, thumbing their little roach noses at them, marching haughtily right out in the open. If roaches could talk, Chanoa thought.

As promised, Chanoa met Marcus for dinner. The aroma of tortillas and refried beans made Chanoa’s stomach growl. The scene was like out of a movie. Couples sat over candlelit tables. Romantic music purred from a trio of violins and Marcus was dressed to the nines.

As they sat across from each other, Chanoa felt like this was a trap. What was he up to, she thought. He had broken up with her months ago and now he takes her to a romantic dinner.

Marcus started the conversation, “Chanoa, I know I ended things abruptly.”

Chanoa just watched, her eyes filling with tears of anger and hurt. She glanced away, fighting back her tears. The server came and asked if they wanted something to drink. Marcus handed her a note and she disappeared. Moments later, she returned with two glasses and a bottle of wine.

Chanoa started “Marcus, I—”

Marcus stopped her, “Chanoa please, let me try.”

Chanoa asked, “Try what? You dumped me, unceremoniously I might add. You hurt me.”

The server came back. “Would you like an appetizer?”

Chanoa looked at him then up at her. “Not for me, thank you.”

Marcus, in his way, just waved her off then turned his attention back to Chanoa, having never taken his eyes off her. His cologne wafted in her direction, fighting with the aroma of the Mexican food. It smelled nice, as she remembered. Marcus reached for her hand. She paused before allowing him to touch her. She still had feelings for him but now she knew he could hurt her at the drop of a hat. She would take it slow, that was all she could do, no way she could jump back in with both feet. She was not going to allow herself to be swept up in an emotional wave.

Marcus excused himself for a minute and walked toward the restroom. On the way he stopped, and she saw him hand some cash to the trio playing violins then he disappeared behind the men’s room door. The restaurant was warm and sitting alone for that time seemed to make it warmer. She felt uncomfortable and the wait felt like an hour. Marcus finally returned and took his seat. He moved the candle to the side, the dim glimmer now casting shadows against his face. She wondered what he had planned. She had to admit, he looked nice tonight. If he was trying to rekindle their relationship, she thought, this was a good start.

Marcus waved at the musicians who strolled over to their table and began a soft, slow melody. It was romantic and warmed her heart. Marcus then stood and came around to her side of the table. He lowered himself to one knee and pulled a ring from his coat pocket. It was the prettiest ring Chanoa had ever seen, it glistened in the candlelight. Nerves began to rumble under her skin. She couldn’t believe he was about to propose, not after he quit her the way he had. Now she was getting angry, the hurt of the past coming back to the surface with vengeance.

Marcus looked into Chanoa’s eyes, “Chanoa, these last few months have been torture. I know this is unexpected and I still am not sure how you are taking it but I have come to realize I can’t live without you.”

Chanoa looked at the ring in his fingers for a minute before whispering, “Marcus, we can’t get married. We have a long way to go before we get to that point. I have feelings for you too, but you hurt me and for no apparent reason. Besides, you don’t get to just take me to dinner and

suddenly ask. First, you have to rebuild what we had. At some point you are going to have to ask my dad for his blessing.”

Marcus turned red. “Chanoa, we can just pick up where we left off. It was only a few months ago. Like I said. I didn’t realize what I was losing. I love you.”

“No, Marcus. This dinner is just a new start, it is not the end game.”

“Wow! I feel like an idiot. What was I thinking? I, I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright Marcus. I just didn’t expect it. We can talk about it more later. Let’s eat and enjoy the night.”

Marcus tried to enjoy the rest of dinner, but he had lost his appetite. He just wasn’t hungry anymore.

Pulling into the now familiar driveway, Chanoa looked around the yard and at the front porch. It appeared he had cleaned up the yard at least. Now she needed to see the inside. Chanoa climbed out of her car, walked up the three steps to the porch and knocked on the door.

Wearing a white t-shirt, no beer and no shotgun, the pregnant man opened the door and welcomed Chanoa inside. She looked around and found herself amazed. She thought to herself, this couldn’t be the same home she’d visited a week ago. The odor wasn’t entirely gone but it was better. He had started to clean the walls, a work in progress. He had washed and put away the dishes. She walked to the kids’ rooms and found they too had been cleaned up.

“Wow sir! You have done a fantastic job. I am impressed.”

“Thank you. I wasn’t hard. Took a little while but I’m getting there. Look, I am even cleaning the walls. And I’m burning incense to make it smell better.” He said.

“You are free to go pick up your kids. Please make sure to keep your home clean from now on.” Chanoa admonished.

“Thank you, ma’am.” He said as he closed the door behind Chanoa.

Chanoa was smiling as she drove away. “Small victories,” she said out loud to no one. This is the kind of case results that warmed her heart. She did not understand why she would have to put in services for some families to show them how to clean their own home. These were grown men and women. She would never understand it but she would just continue to try and help them. She did know it was a pattern usually, learned from their parents. Sometimes it was rooted in apathy or when they turn to drugs, they lose sight of all that is normal it seemed.

Chanoa got a call from Betty at 5:00 AM. She was on her way to the gym for a workout and a little time in the tanning booth.

“What is it, Betty? How are you?” She asked.

“Laura has run away. We don’t have any idea where she might have gone, and we are worried.” Betty answered.

Chanoa told Betty to call 911 and report it and she will be there shortly. At Betty’s house, Chanoa sat at the kitchen table while the police talked to Betty. The home was clean, as it always was, and the scent of cinnamon cookies floated through the air. Chanoa, half-jokingly said, “I am moving in with you Betty,” after the police had gone. Your home always smells delicious. You must cook all the time.

Betty answered, “No, I used those scent wax melt things. I mean, I do cook some of course but I also use those a lot. I like the way it makes the house smell. It feels like home to me when it smells like food, especially cookies and cake. It reminds me of my childhood. My mom baked constantly. I don’t recall a time when she wasn’t wearing an apron and setting a pan of cookies on the counter to cool.”

Chanoa smiled and sighed. “Okay, tell me what happened. Did she say anything? Did she take her belongings? Did she leave with someone?”

Betty told Chanoa all she knew. “When I went to wake her up to ask what she wanted for breakfast, she wasn’t there. I found a lighter in her room. Her clothes were gone, no note, nothing. She left her other things but took her clothes. I have no idea where she might have gone. We did not know any of her friends, she kept that part of her life quiet. We tried to get her to open up to us, but she never would.”

“Is there anywhere she mentioned she likes to hang out?”

“No, like I said, she was tight lipped about stuff other than her mom and her brothers.”

“I will see if I can find someone at her school who might know where she went.” Chanoa said.

Chanoa dialed Alayna’s number, “Hey girl, you will never believe what just happened.”

Alayna, genuinely interested asked, “What’s up?”

“My fourteen-year-old girl has run away from her aunt’s house.” Chanoa reported.

“Oh, wow! What are you going to do?”

“That’s why I called you. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. I have never had this happen.”

Alayna said. “Okay, first, call your supervisor. Then call law enforcement and give them all the details you can think of. I suggest writing it all down before you call. Then, you can take a ride to try and find her if you have any idea where she may have gone, otherwise, just let the police do that part. It’s their job.”

“Thank you so much Alayna. Oh, finish with your story.”

“Nope, you have things to do. I will finish later, don’t worry. This takes priority.”

Chanoa was beginning to sweat a little. Her nerves were tingling, her stomach turned. She was worrying about Laura. She could get hurt, snatched off the streets, trafficked. She turned on the air conditioning and turned the music down so she could think.

The roads here are so curvy but the scenery is beautiful. She has always loved this part of the country. It calmed her. She drove just under the speed limit on her way to Betty’s house. The sun flickered through tall trees on both sides. It seemed every time she came out this way, she saw a deer or a bear now and then. The lanes seemed to narrow the farther she drove away from town, but she didn’t mind. The drive made her daydream, it was an escape. She could find herself on a ship in the middle of an ocean or strolling along cobblestone streets somewhere in Europe. She could come out and drive all day. As a matter of fact, she thought, she would do that this weekend, just see where the road takes her.

She saw the barn on the left, the one that was close to falling down. That was her clue to get ready to turn. She sometimes stopped to look at the horses. They were beautiful, especially the black one with the white streak up the top of his nose.

She turned into the gravel drive leading to Betty’s house. What teenaged girl wouldn’t want to live out here, she thought as the trees lining the driveway closed off the sun. It reminded Chanoa of southern plantation grounds.

The dog ran up to the car and chased it up the driveway. Chanoa giggled watching him in the mirror. Silly dog she thought. He never got close enough to get hurt, he just chased behind. Dust settled on the car when Chanoa stopped in front of the house. The steps to the front porch were expansive. The porch wrapped all the way around the house. If she didn’t know it had only been built a few years ago, she would have guessed it was from the Antebellum South. It was perfect, right down to peat moss hanging from the trees. She could almost hear the crickets singing their chorus.

Chanoa sat in one of the rockers on the porch next to Betty. Betty seemed distraught, frantic. She had brought out tea and poured a glass for Chanoa but neither of them drank. They wracked their brains to come up with any idea where Laura could have gone. Neither could say

this wasn't like Laura since neither was too familiar with Laura. The only thing they came up with was a girl Betty had heard her talking to on the phone, Brittany.

“Good-bye Betty and thank you so much. We will find her.” Chanoa hollered as she climbed back into her city car. She looked at her phone, read a couple texts, checked her email, and plugged Laura's school address in her phone. As she pulled away, the dust again blew into a tan haze behind her car, layering it with millions of particles. The sound of her tires crunching on the gravel sounded like her grandpa's old truck on that dusty gravel road. Even if she had not lived in that simpler time, it urged nostalgic feelings.

Chanoa watched Betty in the mirror thinking what a nice lady she is. Dust filled the air and dimmed her view, Betty disappearing like an angel into a cloud. The road was empty leaving Chanoa alone with only her thoughts. Her mind raced, so many things to do, to consider. There was Marcus, her other cases, and of course Laura and the twins. At least the twins were doing well. She loved Marcus but she was not going to marry him just because he wanted to give her a ring, a very nice ring. He was going to have to work his way back in, it was that simple.

Now, she thought, where would Laura have gone and why. She drove to the school to ask her teachers; it was Friday and nearing the end of the school day, so she had to hurry. She pressed the gas pedal down a little farther, watching the needle climb. Chanoa wasn't one for speeding but this was somewhat urgent, so she went for it, looking out for other traffic, deer, pedestrians, and of course, police. Ten minutes later, Chanoa was at the school. Her heels clapped along as she rushed to the front door. She could feel sweat beading up on her forehead and her neck. She paused for a minute before pushing the buzzer so she could catch her breath.

“Hello, I am with the Department of Children's Services.” Chanoa said into the little box.

The buzzer announced her acceptance and the door clicked offering Chanoa a feeling of some importance. Of course, she knew she wasn't any more important than anyone of the three or four hundred other people breathing the same oxygen, but she did have a badge of sorts and that distinguished her at least.

Chanoa spoke to the woman behind the desk. “Hi, I am with the Department of Children's Services.” As she flashed her badge. “May I ask if a student is here, please?”

The receptionist looked at her computer, tapped a few keys and said. “No ma'am, she is not here today. I'm sorry.”

“Can I speak to her counselor please?” Chanoa asked.

“Yes of course. Just one minute, let me see if she is available.” The receptionist responded. “Okay, just go down the hall there and it is the second door on the left.”

“Thank you so much.” Chanoa said and walked down the hall.

Being here reminded her of back when she was in school. She was always in the office trying to help. She was a good kid, a good student.

“Hi, I am Chanoa. Laura is one of the children on my case load. I understand she isn’t here today. I’m sure you don’t know where she is but do you have any insight as to why she is absent?”

“My name is Jennifer. It’s nice to meet you, Chanoa. That is a very pretty name. Well, I wasn’t aware she is absent today but no, she hasn’t disclosed anything to me recently that would lead me to believe there is a problem. I wasn’t aware the Department of Children’s Services was involved. I hope everything is okay.”

“I can’t share any information. I’m sorry, it is just the law.”

“I understand.” Said Jennifer. “I suggest speaking to some of her friends, maybe a classmate named Tanya and one named Eileen. Those are the two she hangs around with all the time.”

“Oh, that’s great, thank you, I really appreciate it, Jennifer.” Chanoa said as she stood to leave. Chanoa walked out of the cramped space with an uneasy feeling. Something didn’t sit right with her. Anyway, she thought, I will speak to the girls.

Back at reception, Chanoa asked. “It sounds like Laura had two friends, Eileen, and Tanya. I didn’t get their last names. Is there any chance you know them?”

“Oh yeah, I know them. Hang on let me find them and bring them up here.”

Chanoa and the two girls sat at a round table in an unoccupied office. Books sat collecting dust. Cases of water filled one wall. The smell of dust seemed as thick as mud. Chanoa had to stifle a cough. Boxes were scattered all around the room. The chairs were hard plastic or resin style with metal legs meant for anything but comfort.

The girls both wore school shirts with the mascot on them and their names on the back. Must be cheerleaders or something like that she thought. Both girls were cute with bright, brace filled smiles. They did not seem like the kind of people Laura would hang around and Laura didn’t seem like a girl these two would want to hang around. Some things never changed.

“So, you two are friends with Laura?” Chanoa said, more of a statement than a question.

Giggling, they chimed at the same time. “Oh yeah, we love Laura. She is awesome.” More giggling. “She is good to know, if you know what I mean.” Said one of the twins.

“What do you mean?” Chanoa asked.

“Oh nothing. Just a joke.” Said the other twin as they both stood to go.

Chanoa left feeling dejected. She was no closer to finding Laura than she was when she got here. Chanoa needed some self-care time. She headed to the gym. That always helped. Today was rough.

In the gym, Chanoa got on the treadmill, put her headphones in and turned on her favorite playlist. While her feet pounded out a rhythm her mind hammered out the situation with Laura. She needed to go talk to her friend at the police department. Maybe they have a lead on her.

Traffic was trying her patience. She felt as though time was going to expire and she wouldn't be any close to finding Laura. Her coworkers told her if a child runs away, all she can do is leave it to the police but Chanoa felt attached. She cared.

The police station was cold and uninviting. The walls felt like they were closing in, even in the entry way. She couldn't imagine how it felt to be inside a cell. It must be terrible she thought, a small place, four walls, toilet, sink, and bed in the same room with a roommate. No one looked at her, no one welcomed her. Chanoa felt out of place, like wearing plaid with stripes.

"Excuse me" she said to no one. "Excuse me, can someone please help me?"

"What can I do for you?" asked a uniformed officer, as if aggravated by uttering the words.

"May I see Officer Daniels?"

"Hang on a sec. Let me find out where he is" said the officer as she called into the mic on her shoulder.

"Hey Suzy, what's up?" Came the response through the box on Suzie's hip.

"I have, what's your name?" She paused.

"Chanoa from DCS."

"Chanoa from DCS." Suzie told Officer Daniels.

"I'll be right there. I'm in the locker room."

"Just have a seat right over there." Suzie said, pointing to a bank of hard plastic, bus station style chairs.

Again, feeling like she had landed from another planet, Chanoa took a seat and waited. She watched as the officers went about their business, not noticing her as though she were invisible. The walls were adorned with regulation posters, some for OSHA, some with state laws, one or two were the motivational kind like the one with the team of parachuters.

There was no music, only the sound of fingers tapping on keyboards and anonymous voices on the phone or radio. What a deary place to work, she thought. She would much rather be out in the field, pounding the street, knocking on doors or driving around looking for criminals. Like anyone else, Chanoa had some fantastic ideas of what police work was like.

Officer Daniels finally came through a grey door marked Police Department Personnel Only at the far end of the room. The clip of his boots on the white tile floor announced his arrival. He reached out a hand to Chanoa.

Shaking his hand, Chanoa asked “have you heard anything about my girl Laura?”

He thought for a minute before answering “I am not sure I know which girl you are talking about.”

“Laura, the runaway whose mom overdosed.”

“Oh. I remember now. No, not yet. We have an APB out on her though. I am sure she will turn up. She is probably hiding out at a friend’s house. Most of the time in these situations, the friend’s parents eventually ask them to leave so she will have to come out in public.” Officer Daniels said.

“Okay, thank you.” Chanoa said, desperation in her tone.

Chanoa backed out of her space and drove away. Where should she go, what should she do now, she wondered.

Chanoa opened the door at the diner and went to her usual table where Alayna was waiting. She had already placed the order for her coffee. Chanoa put her purse down and plopped into her seat across from Alayna. Exasperation flew from her mouth as she exhaled as though she’d been holding her breath for a full two minutes.

“I feel, I don’t know how I feel.” Chanoa said. “If that girl isn’t found soon it will be too late. I have a deep sense of dread.” Her butterflies were fighting in her stomach.

” I told you before, leave that to the police. You are not a cop, nor a detective. You are a social worker. You provide services for kids and their families.” Alayna admonished.

“Okay, Alayna, lay it on me. Finish your story. You have been putting it off long enough and I want to hear it.” Chanoa pleaded.

“Oh, where was I?” Alayna asked. “Okay, yeah. So he gives money to people on the corners every now and then but, like I said, he doesn’t like giving to organized charities. He doesn’t trust them.”

“So what’s the point. I mean, what is the moral of the story?”

“Anyway,” Alayna continued, “once, when he was walking into a store to get some groceries” and just then Alayna’s phone rang. She answered it and said, “I’m sorry babe, I have to go take care of something. My kid is sick at school. We will catch up later.” And she fled the diner.

“Dang, I hope it isn’t serious” she called out to the disappearing Alayna.

Chanoa snatched her purse, dropped a bill on the table and left too. She figured she could go back to the school, maybe talk to her teachers and the counselor, Jennifer, again. Traffic was a little better now, one less thing to work her nerves. She slowed down when she met with the school zone speed limit sign.

“Hi Jennifer. Have you seen or heard from Laura?” Chanoa asked, extending her hand.

Jennifer, dressed in a lowcut black top with tight jeans, said, “No, not yet. I will call you as soon as I do. I have your card. I am sure she will show up sooner or later.”

Jennifer looked like a teenager herself. She wore tight jeans and tops that accentuated her upper body. Chanoa couldn’t help but get an uneasy feeling about her.

“Okay, thank you Jennifer. Are there any teachers who were particularly close to her? I know I am grasping at straws, but I am desperate.”

Jennifer thought about the question for a minute and said “maybe try Mr. Hall in Room 39B. He is her Math teacher, and they seem chummy sometimes. I don’t mean to insinuate anything. I just mean, he is a nice guy and the kids like him too.”

“Okay, great, thank you so much” Chanoa blurted in excitement. Anything he could tell her would be helpful. She turned to go when Jennifer stopped her.

“It’s that way” she said, pointing in the direction opposite of where Chanoa was headed.

“Ha-ha, thank you Jennifer.” Chanoa laughed.

Along the hall, Chanoa looked at the artwork and projects the kids displayed. She remembered those days. Seemed like it wasn’t that long ago and of course, it really wasn’t. This was much more inviting than the police department. What a stark contrast, she thought.

Chanoa knocked on the door to Mr. Hall’s classroom. She felt like a kid in school again, waiting outside the door to pass on a message from the office or returning from the bathroom. Funny, she thought. Just then a tall balding man in his early forties opened the door.

With a heavy southern drawl, he asked, “How can I help you?” opening the door and inviting her to come in and have a seat.

“Well, I was hoping you can help me locate a child.”

Before she could finish introducing herself, Mr. Hall chimed in “I think you probably want to talk to the admin office for that.” The sound of his voice dripping like molasses from his vocal chords. He should have been a crooner she thought, like that Harry guy. Whatever his name is. He was from Louisiana, but she couldn’t think of his name. Either way, he had a wonderful voice.

“I am with the Department of Children’s Services. I was told by Jennifer, the counselor, you may have been closer with Laura than some other teachers. I was wondering if you have any idea where she might be.”

“Let me check the schedule. I haven’t seen her in a few days, but she is probably home sick I assume. I can find out for you what class she is in now.”

“Oh no, you apparently don’t know. She ran away. Now we need to find her. I am worried about her safety.”

“Oh wow!” Mr. Hall said. “I wish I could be of some help, but I have no idea where she might be. The only other staff member I know was close to her was Jennifer and since she sent you to me, I am guessing she doesn’t know either.”

“Yeah, I already talked to her, and she doesn’t know either.” Chanoa said.

“It sounds like a police matter, right?” He said.

“My coworkers have told me that, but I can’t help it. I care about what happens to her.”

“I am sorry I can’t be of more help Chanoa. If I do hear anything, I will call you. Do you have a card?” Mr. Hall said.

Chanoa pondered what he’d said about Jennifer being close to Laura. Why hadn’t Jennifer mentioned it? She would have to talk to her again. She stopped by her office on her way out.

“Hey Jennifer, Mr. Hall said you may be somewhat close to Laura too. Do you mind telling me what that relationship looks like?”

“Oh, not at all” Jennifer answered. “I take a special liking to many of our students, those who show promise and the ones who may need additional attention. I help them with school work, listen to whatever is bothering them. You know, normal counselor stuff.”

Chanoa sat on her sofa with the television on but muted. She was just thinking about Laura and wondering where she could be. She recalled the first time she met Jennifer. Even at that first meeting, she had felt something was off about Jennifer.

Chanoa felt moved to pray. She turned off the television and opened her Bible. She held her hands out to her sides and lowered her head. “Dear heavenly father. . .”

Soon, Chanoa found herself sleepy. She crashed on the sofa.

Chanoa woke up early and got ready for work. She went into the bathroom and lit a candle. The room soon filled with the smell of eucalyptus. It soothed her and allowed her to breathe easily. The warm water cascaded over her head taking her to a world far away. Chanoa was ready for the day.

Traffic was light that morning which eased her stress levels. She listened to the Christian station to lift her spirits, knowing the day would likely be chaotic. She wore a red dress with black pumps, she felt pretty and that felt good. Chanoa was in a good mood today.

At the office her mood changed when she opened her email. From officer Daniels the first email she opened stated “Chanoa, we found Laura. She is back with Betty.”

Well, at least she is safe again, she thought. Now she needed to go see her. She would have to get her into therapy. She submitted the request before she left. Now she had to tackle the traffic she’d escaped earlier. It was almost lunch time, and it was starting to get thick. Her frustration began to fill the air in her tiny car. She could taste it and she did not like the flavor.

She knocked on Betty’s door. She knocked again. The car was out front, they must be home. She waited a minute and knocked again. Betty came to the door. She looked like she had been lifting weights. Her face was as red as a beet and sweat glistened on her forehead.

“Oh. Hi Chanoa. Please, come in.” Betty panted as she struggled to catch her breath.

“Thank you, Betty. So where is Laura? How is she? Was she hurt in any way?” Chanoa pelleted Betty with questions.

Betty called out for Laura to come downstairs. Laura descended the stairs like a cowering animal. Her hair was disheveled. She looked like she’d been in a fight and her face was red from tears.

“What’s the matter baby?” Chanoa asked, putting her arms around her.

“Nothing” she said, fighting back tears. “I’m fine.”

“Betty, can I speak to her privately for a few minutes please?”

“Yes, of course” Betty said, and she slipped away to another room.

“Okay girl, what gives?” Chanoa asked. “Why did you run away? Betty seems like a wonderful person and this home is gorgeous.”

“It’s nothing, really.” Laura said as she began sobbing.

“Talk to me Laura. I can’t help you if I don’t know what happened. First, where did you go when you left?”

“I went to Ms. Logan’s house. She told me if I ever needed a place to sleep, she was happy to have me.”

“Who is Ms. Logan?”

“The school counselor, Jennifer.”

“What? Are you kidding me? She harbored a runaway. That is a problem. Wait, don’t worry about it. All that matters now is you are safe. I am going to get you into some therapy. Can you work with me on that? Please? Chanoa said.

Laura hesitated and said, “I’m not safe.”

“What do you mean you aren’t safe Laura?” Chanoa whispered.

“She hurts me.” Laura whimpered.

“Who hurts you, Laura?” Chanoa said, continuing to whisper. Her leg had begun bouncing a little, so she had to consciously stop it. She was nervous about where this was going. Her armpits had begun to sweat as if someone had turned up the heat.

Laura looked down at her hands in her lap. Then, she whispered “Betty. She hits me in the stomach, sometimes when I haven’t done anything wrong. I will hear her yelling at someone on the phone and a few minutes later she will come to my room and attack me.”

“Does she really? If I ask her about it, will she say it’s true?”

“Please don’t ask her. She will lie and take it out on me after you leave.” Laura pleaded.

“Lift your shirt and show me where she hits you. I am going to take some pictures of your stomach. Is that okay?”

Laura lifted her shirt causing Chanoa to gasp. She had large bruises all over her stomach. Some were older and the discoloring was yellowish. Some were newer and black and blue. Chanoa gently touched her stomach. Laura flinched and winced.

“Ouch! That hurts” Laura said between clenched teeth. “She came in with a paddle a little while ago and hit me like five or six times. Please get me out of here.”

Chanoa stood and told Laura to go to her room and pack her things.

“Do it quietly and quickly. I am going to talk to Betty.’ Chanoa said, trying not to allow her emotions to get the better of her.

“Betty, can we talk for a minute please.” She called out to the vacant room.

Betty came back smiling. She had changed into some workout clothes and her hair was pulled back into a bun. Now she was sweating profusely. Her figure was nice, and she must work out regularly. Her muscles were toned, and she hid her age well.

“Betty, I think we are going to try something different with Laura. I have a place we can take her. We can’t have her running away. Betty, I must ask, have you hit Laura? In the stomach?”

“No, of course not. I would never hit her.” Betty said.

“Where did she get the bruises? She said you hit her often, usually because of being mad at someone else. She also said you hit her in the stomach with a paddle today, right before I got here.” Chanoa stated.

“What bruises Chanoa? Maybe she got hurt wherever she went for the last several days. You know what can happen to a teenaged girl on the street.”

Chanoa knew Betty was lying. “I don’t think she is lying Betty. I think you did it. She has no reason to lie. She has a comfortable place to stay while her mom is in rehab. Why would she run away and lie about this?”

Betty grew defensive. “I did not! I am not lying. You go ahead and take her away. I don’t care. She will wind up like her mother.”

Laura came down the stairs with her bags. They left and didn’t look back. Chanoa called the police on the way to the hospital. At the hospital they took x-rays and examined Laura. The doctor asked her if she had any additional injuries.

“No sir. Just my stomach.”

“Okay Laura, it doesn’t look like you have any broken ribs or internal bleeding. I am going to prescribe some pain killers. I want you to take it easy for a few days.” The doctor said. Then, turning to Chanoa he asked. “Do you know how often this happened?”

“No, I don’t, but once is too often.”

Outside, the stars were visible now and the moon created a lot of light, joined by the parking lot lights. The air was chilly, but it felt good still. The two police cars had their lights flashing and the officers stood waiting for Chanoa and Laura.

“Chanoa” Officer Daniels called out. “Come over here please so we can take a report.”

Chanoa and Laura headed to the car where Officer Daniels sat behind the wheel with a laptop in his lap. He climbed out and placed the laptop on the hood. “Okay, tell me everything that happened starting with when you were hit, to when you ran away, and when you were returned.” He ordered.

“Maybe the day after I got to her house, she got mad at me because I was smoking weed. She came to my room and punched me in the stomach a couple times. Then, every day or every other day, when she got mad at someone else, she came to my room and hit me some more.

“Did she hit you any place else on your body?”

“No” Laura said. “Just my stomach. So, then I ran away and went to stay with the school counselor, Ms. Logan’s house. She doesn’t have kids, but she has an extra bedroom and she told me I could stay there sometimes if I needed to.”

“And today?”

“Today she hit me with a paddle because I had run away. She yelled at me and told me how lucky I was to be at her home rather than foster care and how I am probably going to end up like my mom, probably dead someday.”

Laura went on to tell the officer she tried to fight back but that only made it worse, and Betty turned into an animal when she hit her back.

“Ms. Logan is cool. She smokes weed with me and lets me have a glass of wine if I have had a bad day. I like her a lot.”

“Okay Laura, I appreciate you being honest with me. That’s all I need for now.” Officer Daniels said as he walked to Chanoa, leaving Laura with one of the other officers.

“Where will she be if we need to ask her any more questions? Did she tell you her teacher gave her grass?” Chanoa was floored, her jaw dropped, and she was speechless. “No, oh my

goodness. Really?" Chanoa was incredulous. "Why would she do something like that? What will happen to her?"

"Well, first we will need to get a drug screen on Laura. If it is positive, we will speak to Ms. Logan and go from there. Likely, she will be charged for contributing and harboring a runaway."

Chanoa took Laura first to get something to eat. They sat at an out of the way diner and ate. Laura said she wasn't hungry, but she scarfed down a double cheeseburger in no time before gobbling up her fries three at a time. She ate like she was starving. She didn't look like she was starving though. Maybe she just ate fast. Some people just eat fast, she thought. When the disappeared the burger and fries, Laura went at her ex-large shake with what could only be described as vengeance.

"Wow!" Chanoa choked. "Were you hungry or what? So, we are going to what is called Joshua's House. It was started by a family a few years ago who were inspired by a foster child they had brought in. The tag line is "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you." This is from the Book of Joshua, Joshua 3:5. It isn't a church, but it is sponsored by donations from the church and other civic organizations. It's a nonprofit. All they do is help us with temporary placement of kids who are not able to be home for a bit."

"I don't want to go to church. I don't believe in that stuff."

"Don't worry Laura, no one is going to force you to attend church and they don't preach to you there. It is just a comfortable, safe place to stay. You will always have other DCS workers there with you and sometimes, other kids."

"I guess it will be better than being hit in the stomach. What is going to happen to Ms. Logan? She was just being nice."

"Laura, what she did was illegal. I can't say what will come of it though."

At Joshua's House, Laura settled into one of the girls' rooms. She looked around and saw they had video games, all kinds of food and snacks, and there were a couple of other girls. One was much younger, the other one was about Laura's age.

Chanoa took out her laptop and began the process of placing Laura in state custody. She emailed the department's lawyer, filled out the needed forms and sat with Laura for a while to make sure she was comfortable.

Chanoa explained what was going to happen. "Okay Laura, this is what will happen tomorrow we will start trying to find foster placement. Until we find someplace, you will stay here. Before I leave today, I need you to take a drug test. We have to because there are allegations that you have been smoking weed. As a matter of fact, you admitted it."

“Can I go to bed now?”

“Yeah” Chanoa said as she reached out to hug Laura. “Good night girl. I will be back in a few days to check on you. Hopefully it won’t take long to place you.” Chanoa gathered her things and left Laura in the hands of another worker and a hired sitter.

The night sky had gotten darker, it seemed like Chanoa drove down the unlit street. The curves in the road had a way of sneaking up on a driver without streetlights. She needed to watch for deer. They always seemed to come out of nowhere. Driving at night always gave Chanoa time to think and to pray and tonight she did both. She thought, the Lord has to give Laura a break.

Back at Joshua’s House, Laura was in the bedroom talking to another girl. They exchanged crush stories then Laura showed the other girl some marijuana she had in a bag. Laura said she just didn’t have a way to smoke it. The girl told Laura she didn’t want to do that. Laura called her chicken and left the room but not before threatening the girl.

Laura went outside to the back porch and sat in the dark. She wanted to leave, she wanted to smoke. If she could get a lighter and a coke can, she could go out behind the shed in the back yard. The coke can would be easy but a lighter may be more difficult.

Laura sat for about an hour then went in and told the workers she was going to bed. She went to bed without showering.

Chanoa lay in her tub under a sheet of bubbles. Her eyes rested and she breathed in the eucalyptus as she let her stress of the day float up into the night. She thought about her day. It had been trying but she loved her job. She was helping families and that is why she got into this line of work. Nothing could be better than getting a family the services they need and seeing them get back on their feet. Why didn’t everybody want to have a job like this? She asked herself.

She climbed into bed and said a prayer for Laura and her family. Then, she turned off the light, turned on the television and dozed off. Her alarm sounded and pushed her out of a good dream. She turned it off and got up to get ready to go.

It was Friday and she was ready for the weekend. As much as she loved her job, she knew she needed to refresh after several days. She would probably go for a hike. Maybe Alayna would go with her. Not Marcus though. She wasn’t ready, not after he proposed at dinner.

Today was casual Friday so she slipped into a pair of jeans and put on a comfortable top which showed off her colorful side. She topped it off with a baseball cap. Today would be a good day, she thought, planned. She would need to see what’s happening with placing Laura.

She went straight to Joshua’s House to see how Laura did overnight. Her day suddenly went south because there were two police cars in the driveway when she pulled in. She barely got her car into Park before she had the door opened and was running to the front door.

Officer Daniels met her at the door. “She has run again Chanoa. We already have sent out an alert and have officers over at that counselor’s house as we speak. If she isn’t there, we are back at square one.”

“Great!” exclaimed Chanoa. “And here I thought it was going to be an easy Friday so I could slide right into the weekend. Okay, so will you let me know if you find her, please?”

“Of course. Have a nice day, Chanoa. I will be in touch.” Officer Daniels said.

Chanoa eased back onto the street when traffic cleared and drove away. She didn’t have a clue where to look for Laura this time, no more than she did last time. She probably was not at Jennifer’s house again. She wracked her brain. It wasn’t like she really knew Laura. They weren’t friends before this whole thing started and they weren’t “friends” now. They were friendly but Chanoa was still her case worker.

Chanoa went to her office and got into her emails. She went into the system and put in notes. She didn’t know where to start. This case was putting her through her paces, it just seemed like as soon as the dust settled, something else popped up and she had to rearrange again.. She put in notes for the other kids she’d seen the last few days before tackling Laura.

Chanoa’s supervisor called her on the phone. “Chanoa, they found your girl, Laura. She was brought to the ER. She overdosed on meth.”

Chanoa didn’t know what to say. She managed to utter “How did that happen? I mean why? Who? I don’t know what I mean.”

Her supervisor said. “Okay listen, it is a one-time thing looks like so let’s get her into some outpatient counseling. Get an A&D Assessment done first of course. Assuming it was a one-time thing, they should recommend outpatient. We will go from there. Once we have placement for her, they can take over.

Chanoa sank into her chair. Despair worked its way through her body, causing her muscles to tense. She leaned her head back and sighed. She got started on the required paperwork to place Laura in foster care. Her disappointment showed through on her face like a badge of honor. Her mind raced, thinking about all she had to do now, thinking about Laura and her brothers, thinking about Marie.

Laura sat on the hard bench at the jail waiting for her, well she didn’t know what she was waiting for. She knew she did not want to return to the Joshua House. She didn’t like the rules. She wanted to smoke, and she didn’t want anyone to tell her she couldn’t. She didn’t want to go back to Betty’s for sure. No way she was going to let that woman hurt her again.

While she waited, she heard other girls, women mostly, talking about what they were in for. She heard stories of prostitution, drug sales and use, breaking and entering, attempted murder.

These women were the real deal she thought. She started talking to one of the younger ones. The girl asked Laura why she was there. The older girl said she was in for possession, allegedly. Laura asked her how she got it and how much it cost. She was curious.

The girl said her name was Angela. Angela said she got it from a guy she knows and usually twenty dollars was enough unless she wanted more. He was a nice guy.

“What’s his number?”

“Why? You don’t want to mess with that stuff baby girl. It can really mess you up.” Angela warned. “Besides, you are way too young to mess with that stuff. He won’t sell to you.”

“Why not? I can get the money, somehow.” Laura protested. She sounded like the child she was.

“Okay, I will give you his number but don’t tell anybody where you got it. I don’t want to be charged with contributing to a minor.” Angela said.

Chanoa’s familiar voice carried down the hall and Laura anticipating anger but when Chanoa reached her, she wasn’t mad. She looked as if she’d been crying.

“Are you okay?” Laura asked.

“I’m fine,” Chanoa said. “I am just concerned about you. You scared me, again. I have to place you in foster care now Laura. I didn’t want to but there are no more relatives in this state. I am not concerned about you getting into a bad situation. I just wanted you to remain with family. After we find placement, I won’t be assigned to your case any longer.”

Laura was silent as they walked to Chanoa’s car.

On the way back to Joshua’s House, neither of them made a sound. The silence told a story in itself. When they arrived, Chanoa implored Laura to stay, not to run again.

“I’m getting you some help Laura. That is what you need. It may take a few days, but we will find placement in a good home.” Chanoa told Laura. “Let’s get you inside.”

Laura took her things to the bedroom and plopped down on the bed. She stared at the ceiling, wanting to leave, knowing she would. The sitters checked in on them every hour, she knew this, so between check ins, she would make her way out the window. She would not stay here another day.

On her way back to the office, Chanoa's phone rang. It was an unfamiliar number from out of town. She answered it. "Hello? This is Chanoa with the Department of Children's Services."

At first, no one spoke. After a moment of silence, "Hi, this is Marie. I want to see my kids. Where are they?" Came Marie's voice at the other end. It had been nearly a month since she went to rehab.

"Marie, how are you?" Chanoa beamed. "I really hope the program is helping you. So, the boys are with your cousin Tammy. Laura was there too at first but there was some conflict, so we moved her to Betty's house. That didn't work out either. I hate to have to do it, but we are placing Laura in foster care as soon as we find placement."

"You can't take my kids from me. No way! I'll take you to court."

"Marie, we aren't taking your kids. We are just keeping them safe and cared for while you get yourself in a better place. Once you come home, the kids will come home with you. For now, they are safe and in good hands. How much longer do you have there? Two months?" Chanoa said.

Marie ranted about her children, the bad food, her roommates, the staff. The only thing she didn't complain about was the sun. She even cursed God while also saying he doesn't exist. It was clear Marie had a long way to go. Chanoa had faith she would make it. She had faith in God and in people. The world was not that difficult, she thought. Chanoa offered up a prayer of thanks and pleading.

"Marie, you go get better and let me worry about the kids for now. Okay?" Chanoa said.

"Whatever!" Marie said and the line went dead.

The sun was starting to set when Chanoa eased her car into the driveway at Joshua's House. She listened to the updates from the other worker then went into the bedroom to talk to Laura.

"Hey girl. How are you? Getting some rest?"

"Oh, hey to you too. I'm good. I want to see my mom and my brothers. Why can't you take me to see them?" Laura whined. "I've been good."

"First of all, it isn't about being good or bad. Your mom is in a program that does not allow visitors. She has about two more months before she is done. Your cousin Tammy isn't ready for you to come see the boys just yet. She told me after you get into some therapy or treatment of your own, maybe then we can set up a visit."

"You have to be patient Laura. There is no city on earth that was built overnight. And this situation is not going to resolve itself overnight. We are actively looking for placement. I'm sure

it won't be more than a few days. Besides, what more could you want than what is available here?" Chanoa said.

"Whatever! Just get me out of here. I hate it here." Laura complained.

"Soon, Laura, soon."

Chanoa left the house and headed to the office when she got a call. Her supervisor was on the other end.

"Good news Chanoa! We found a placement for Laura. The bad news is it's on the other end of the state. Can you drive her there tonight? Please? I know it's already the end of the day, but we need someone to transport."

"Hmmm, okay. I will take her. Let me fill up my car and I will go get her. She will be happy about this idea. At least on the other side of the state she doesn't have friends or teachers she can run to."

Marie looked back over her shoulder as she walked away. The moonlight provided just enough light for her to get across the lawn and through the front gate. No one had seen her so she figured she wouldn't be noticed until morning. She would be far gone by then. She had called a friend and told him where to meet her so all she had to do now was hike. It wasn't too far and maybe she could hitch a ride. There was always someone out this late looking for something she could provide, and she knew she wasn't above it.

She found a ride and the guy didn't want anything from her, she even tried to offer but he said no and drove off. It had started to rain, and the wipers beat out a steady rhythm. Marie tapped out the beat to a song in time with the wipers, bobbing her head as if the most carefree woman in the world.

"Here you go," the male driver said.

"Thanks" Maire said, as she climbed down out of the four-wheel drive truck. She slapped the fender as she walked away and headed to the lights of a laundry. She saw her friend waiting in his old car. She heard his music thumping, felt the bass reverberating through her body. All she wanted right now was to get high. She opened the passenger door and without even saying hello, Marie reached into the center console to find his little glass pipe. The car door let out a loud, long creek as she pulled it closed. Marie rolled down the window and asked her friend if he had anything to put in the pipe.

His grin bore the signs of poor dental health with brown caked teeth and a couple missing. Through the filthy grin, he said "yah baby, in that little box", pointing to a small round jewelry box in the center console, the kind that might hold a necklace.

“OOOOHHHH” Marie moaned as she struck the lighter and held the tip of the blue flame to the end of the glass and began sucking in the smoke as if it was water and she was dying of thirst. She inhaled deeply and held her breath for a short eternity. She exhaled in a coughing fit and let her head fall back against the seat. This is what she needed Marie thought. Now she wanted some “H” but she knew that would have to wait and she would have to pay for it but she didn’t care. She just needed it and would do whatever she had to do.

Marie sat on the sofa after she finished the chore of paying for her drugs. She waited patiently for him to bring the rig to her. She tapped on the floor, eyes darting around the room. Wow, she thought, that stuff earlier really kicked my butt. It’s been way too long.

“Hey, what’s the hold up in there? I already paid you, lets have the goods man,” she said.

“I’ll be right there, just hang on a minute. I had to take a call right quick,” said her male partner in crime. Sit back, let me do the honors. I know exactly how much to use,”

She did as told, and her friend proceeded to tie off her upper arm with a leather belt, the buckle pinching her skin. The needle pierced her forearm, and the liquid chilled her vein as the plunger vacated the syringe. Marie watched as he withdrew the needle then she kept watching her arm as if it was an animated object all its own. She watched like she was seeing the blood flow through her veins. Marie then lay back on the sofa and stared at the ceiling and began hallucinating. She saw herself lying on the sofa then flew through the house and out the front door.

Marie soared up to the clouds where she could see the houses, the roads, the people who all looked like ants, and the cars that looked like matchbook cars. Marie flew to her trailer and watched the kids play in the yard. She saw herself sitting on the porch, drinking lemonade, and listening to the radio. She turned and flew to the school where she had been a straight A student before she got pregnant and dropped out. Next year Laura would be there she thought, or is she already there? She could never remember; it was just too much.

When Marie woke up, she glanced around the room. The lights left the place in total darkness. The walls, having been blackened by smoke and mostly black paint, absorbed the little light that struggled to creep in between the shades. She called out for the man, but he didn’t answer. She stumbled through the house, stepping on a beer can and some toys before she finally got to his room. She opened the door to find him in bed with some woman. Marie was shameless. She stood and without batting an eye, asked if there was any more junk. Irritated, the man told her it was all gone. Marie turned to go, and he called out, “close it behind you. And don’t come back.”

Marie slammed the door, shaking the thin walls. A picture fell to the floor, shattering glass in every direction. Like a pouting twelve-year-old, Marie plopped down on the sofa, and hollered in the direction of the bedroom, “hurry dude, we don’t have all day.”

The sunlight blinded Marie when she stepped through the front door. In a huff, Marie didn’t know what she would do now. She knew she needed to find some more “H”. She moseyed along

the sidewalk, watching for someone, anyone to help her. She stopped a kid on a bike and held her hand out. When the boy shook his head and began to ride away, Marie cursed at him and used a finger gesture toward him. She mumbled aloud as she watched the lines in the pavement pass beneath her feet bringing back memories of when she was a kid. It came rushing back to her, “step on a crack, break your mother’s back” she thought, stepping over the next few cracks she crossed.

She crossed the street and turned up the walk to the first house on her right. At the door, Marie paused before knocking. Her timid knock resulted in nothing, so she knocked harder, and once again, nothing. Marie, now desperate, turned the doorknob. The door fell ajar with a soft creaking sound. Marie heard music somewhere from behind the door. The living room could have swallowed Marie as the light was sucked into the utter dark. Marie placed one foot in front of the other as though trying not to wake a baby. She focused on the light from around the edges of a door down the hall. Feeling her way along the hall, Marie went to the door and found it was not locked.

Standing in the doorway, Marie noticed a shape on the mattress that lay on the floor without a frame, no box spring, no headboard, just a mattress on the floor. The room smelled like cat urine, but Marie dismissed it. There was another strong odor that Marie couldn’t figure out but all she cared about was getting another fix. She plopped down on the mattress next to a man dressed in dirty clothes. The body odor turned her stomach, but she didn’t care. She found the syringe and a few small white rocks along with a spoon and a lighter. It was meth, not the heroine she wanted but to her, this was easily as good.

Marie gripped one end of a rubber tube in her mouth as she tightened the tube around her bicep. Then, Marie probed her forearm to find one of the veins she still hadn’t ruined. She pushed the needle into the harsh skin and released the rubber tube. Having done this hundreds of times, Marie knew the steps. The fluid in the syringe flooded into her vein and within minutes, the lights went out.

Marie was startled out of her high by the sound of footsteps and voices. “Clear!” she heard, more footsteps then, the door flew off its hinges as a police officer in a tactical black uniform busted into the room. Next, she heard, “Hands where I can see them. Now! Guns aimed at Marie’s head and torso as the officer gave the order again.

Marie protested but ultimately did as she was told.

“Good news Laura,” Chanoa said, “We found placement for you. It’s a little bit of a drive but it is an approved foster home. So, let’s get your stuff together and we will hit the road.”

“Dang, does it have to be tonight? Can’t we start in the morning?” Laura groaned.

“Unfortunately, it does have to be tonight. It’s only a few hours away. You will be there in time to get comfy and get a good night’s sleep.”

They left Joshua’s House and within thirty minutes, Laura was asleep. Chanoa watched as the opposing traffic lit their way along the highway and trucks passed on her left. She had the Christian station on but turned down low so Laura could sleep. Chanoa said a short prayer of thanks as the car faded into the night.

They arrived late in the night in the hushed tones of the country. A sprawling ranch lay out around them though its reaches were invisible. The only sounds were the mooing of cattle.

The lights inside spoke of warmth and the moon illuminated smoke escaping from a chimney. When Chanoa opened the door, she breathed in the aroma of burning wood. The chilly night enveloped her, and she felt the urge to sit in front of the fire and sip hot chocolate.

“This place is out on the middle of nowhere. I hate it here. I’m not staying.”

Chanoa cleared her throat. “Listen Laura. You are running out of options. It is not easy to find a placement for a teenaged girl, especially one who smokes pot and is defiant. You are staying her and that is that.”

Together they knocked on the door. Mr. and Mrs. Jones answered the door. They introduced themselves and their three children. The children were all under ten, the parents were probably in their mid-thirties. He wore jeans with boots, a plaid shirt, and a baseball cap. He must have been six foot two at least. A large, husky guy, outdoorsy type. Mrs. Jones was petite. She wore plain clothes, nothing fancy, no makeup but she was pretty. The children were dressed in bed clothes.

“Come on in, please. It’s cold outside. Let’s sit by the fire for a few minutes then I will show you to your room Laura. So, long drive huh?” Mr. Jones said to the pair.

“Thank you, sir. It is nice to meet you. This, of course, is Laura. Yessir, it was quite a haul. I am happy to be done for the night.”

The fire felt cozy as it warmed Chanoa’s bones. She could fall asleep right here and not think twice. The furniture was made of logs with cushions covered in leather. The scent of pine filled the air. They must have air fresheners someplace out of sight she thought. Chanoa could live here. She felt at home. It was too bad she had to leave in a few minutes.

Laura sat on one end of the sofa with a grimace on her face as if someone had fed her castor oil. She had dropped her bags like an entitled movie star, certain someone would pick them up and take them to her room. She refused to answer when asked how she is feeling about this change.

Chanoa apologized. "I'm sorry Mr. Jones. She is a little nervous and shy. She will warm up by morning. I will talk to her before I leave. I have some paperwork to go over with you, Mr. Jones. I'm sure you are familiar with it since you have been fostered for some time.

"Sign here, initial here, and sign here please." Chanoa said.

Mr. Jones signed the appropriate lines and thanked Chanoa for all she did.

"We know it isn't an easy job and you guys are shorthanded. Good luck Chanoa. She is going to like it here." Said Mr. Jones.

"Thank you, sir. We appreciate you. It takes special people to be foster parents."

Chanoa turned around in the driveway and headed to the hotel. Chanoa was tired, she couldn't wait to plop down on the bed and let her world slip away. She decided she would not set her alarm, she would just sleep as long as she needed.

At the hotel, Chanoa's first impression was not good. The desk clerk was rude and acted as if he didn't want to be bothered. Then, he complained because it was a government account, and they take a few more steps to input. What a mean man, Chanoa thought. Anyway, I am not here to socialize with the clerk, I am here to sleep and nothing more. She rode the elevator up to the third floor and dragged her bag behind her to 311.

The room was nice, but it smelled like stale body odor or something weird. The king bed looked huge compared to the queen she slept on at home. The shower was a walk in, and she loved that kind of shower. It had a double sink. There was a view of the parking lot. The carpet looked clean, but carpets always retain odors, hence the body odor. It did have a thermostat on the wall rather than one of those under the window units. Chanoa like that, she always preferred to sleep with the temperature between sixty-five and seventy. She dropped her bag, pulled back the cover and plopped onto the bed. It was firm, she noticed right away. She always liked the way hotel beds felt stable and were lower than what you might find at a furniture store. They were certainly lower and more stable than her own.

Yawning loudly, Chanoa reached for her phone to check the time, nine o'clock. Okay, she thought, time to get up. She felt rested. No TV, no noise, nothing but the darkness last night and she slept like a rock. She felt so rested. She should stay in hotels more often, she thought. She showered and got ready to go. The lobby still had breakfast, so she sat and had an omelet. Her belly full and feeling rested, Chanoa left and got on the road toward home.

On her way home, Chanoa got a call from Mr. Jones. "You are never going to believe this Chanoa. She is gone. We hadn't seen her yet, so Mr. Jones went up to check on her and she wasn't in her room. We have searched the entire house and she isn't here."

Chanoa rolled her eyes and wondered where she could possibly have gone this time. She is nowhere near anyone she knows, she has no money, and she doesn't know the area.

“Okay, Mr. Jones. I will come back there in a few. I am still in town, maybe thirty minutes away.” Chanoa answered as she took the next exit ramp and turned her car around. Okay, she thought, this time I am going to tie her to the house and pray with her.

Chanoa pulled into the driveway and immediately noticed Laura sitting under a tree at the side of the house. Chanoa walked over to her and leaned against the tree next to Laura. “So, what gives Laura? You have the Joneses worried to death.”

Laura didn't respond, she just sat there, almost catatonic, staring straight into the distance. Chanoa looked down at Laura and noticed her hands. They were open and in one she saw a lighter. In the other she saw a pipe. She has been smoking again. Great! She thought. She is high. Well, at least she didn't run away again.

“Laura? Laura! Hey, are you okay? What did you smoke? Grass again?” Chanoa asked but Laura didn't respond. “Laura, talk to me Laura. Look at me.” She said as she knelt next to Laura.

Laura didn't move but she said, “Just a little meth. Only a tiny amount. I promise. I just wanted to try it once.”

Chanoa thought for a minute then asked, “Where did you get the money for drugs?”

“I borrowed it.”

“Borrowed it from whom?”

Laura paused then said, “some woman at Joshua's House. She won't miss it. It was only twenty dollars.”

Chanoa found she was getting angry. “Where did you buy it? When? And how do you know she won't miss it? What if that was the only money she had until payday and was going to use it for baby formula? I am disappointed with you Laura, not to mentioned worried about you.”

The two of them sat there for some time. Chanoa didn't want to alarm the Joneses just yet. She wanted to let Laura come down from her high first. It wasn't necessary to disturb them anymore than they already had been. She prayed aloud for the healing of Laura, for peace for Laura's soul.

“Laura” she said, “Whether you believe or not, God loves you. He loves you so very much that he allowed His only son to die a human death to defeat Satan in the burning depths of Hell. Sorry, I am not trying to preach to you. I just wanted you to know. End of discussion.”

Laura never responded. She just sat with a stare reaching a thousand yards, motionless.

“Laura, are you better now? We are going to the hospital then we are going back home. You are going to be at Joshua’s House until we find an inpatient treatment program and that could be weeks down the road. I am so sorry Laura, but this is what has to be done. It will be a large treatment facility and you will only be there as long as the staff feels you need to be. There will be plenty of girls there who are going through something similar. You could make some good friends there.”

Laura finally spoke. “I do not want to go there, and I am not going to Joshua’s House.”

“I am not going to argue with you Laura. Let’s get your things and hit the road.”

Inside the house, Chanoa shared the abbreviated version of the morning’s events and told them she was taking her home and back to Joshua’s House while she waited at the Joshua House for placement in a facility. Chanoa apologized for Laura’s behavior before the two of them left.

The next four hours dragged slower than winter. No words were said the entire trip, no music, no talk radio, just that awkward silence usually reserved for couples. Billboards, taillights, and headlights slipped by at sixty-five miles per hour until Chanoa had to stop for gas. She kept her eyes on Laura the whole time while she filled the tank. That girl was not going to get away with running tonight, Chanoa thought.

Back home, Chanoa took Laura straight to Joshua’s House. Once again, she briefed the people sitting with her. She also informed them that Laura has an appointment at a behavioral health facility in the morning and she will be by early to get her.

Laura grumbled all the way to her room, the same girls’ room she stayed in the first night there. It was adorned for younger girls with a doll house, dolls, and other little girl toys. Laura felt like she was intruding. There was nothing she found interesting in that room. She wondered why she couldn’t just sleep on the sofa. She went to the window and found they had installed a more secure lock and a beep alarm. The staff stayed awake, so she was not going to escape through the front door. She would figure out a way. She did not want to stay here.

Chanoa woke up early, in a fog. Yesterday was such a long day, as was the day before. She was tired and struggled to not go back to sleep. She reminded herself she had to get Laura to that appointment.

She arrived at Joshua’s House early as promised. Laura wasn’t quite ready, so Chanoa sat and had a bagel and a cup of coffee. Sitting at the table, she chatted with the other worker who was getting ready to leave soon. The other kids had been taken to school, so she was just here waiting for Chanoa.

“Go ahead and get out of here.” Chanoa said and the worker left.

“Laura!” Chanoa boomed. “Hurry up girl. We can’t be late.”

Laura came out of the bedroom. She was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, but her hair looked like two cats had been fighting in it. She had all her stuff packed, expecting not to stay.

“Did you sleep well? And what happened to your hair?”

“I lost my brush. Probably left at that house yesterday.”

“Laura, they have brushes here. You can take one. Come with me down to the basement. Is there anything else you need? Do you have a toothbrush? Do you need any clothes?”

Chanoa went through the basement grabbing some goodie for Laura, including a duffel bag for her things so she didn’t have to carry it around in a trash bag.

“Isn’t that better?”

“Yeah, it’s so big. Thanks Chanoa.”

“You can leave it here Laura. We are coming back after the appointment.” Chanoa told her.

Chanoa’s heart melted a little when Laura thanked her. Maybe she was getting through to her. They left and Chanoa checked the front door to make sure it locked behind them.

In the car, Chanoa turned on the Christian station. Laura found herself tapping her toes and bouncing her head to the beat of the Christian contemporary music. Chanoa did too. Together they started mouthing the lyrics. Chanoa’s grin brightened up the car and Laura noticed. It was contagious. Before she knew it and despite herself, Laura found herself grinning too.

“You know, when I was your age, I found Jesus. Don’t jump to the conclusion that I am trying to convert you because I’m not. I am just stating a fact. He has been my rock through every storm in my life since then. He was probably there all along and I just had blinders on.”

“I don’t really believe in all that stuff.” Laura said.

Chanoa got a call in the middle of her lunch break. She wasn’t expecting anyone in particular and she didn’t recognize the number.

“Hello?” She answered.

“Hello Chanoa” came the female voice on the other end of the line. The signal wasn’t good, but Chanoa could make out it was a female and young.

“Who is this?” Chanoa asked.

“It’s me, Laura.” She responded.

“Wow, hey girl. You sound good. How’s it going? How long have you been gone now?”

“It’s been one month exactly. I get to come home in about two weeks, they told me. Will you be able to come get me?”

“You call me the day before and I will be there with bells on, a train couldn’t keep me away. So, it sounds like you have come a long way.”

“I can’t tell you how much I appreciate the way you dogged me. If it weren’t for you, who knows where I’d be now.” Laura beamed.

Chanoa’s day was made. That call brightened her whole week. She couldn’t wait to go pick her up. She was proud of Laura. She decided she would try to take the twins with her. She drove out to Tammy’s house to see if it would be okay.

“Hey Tammy, how are the boys?”

“Hi Chanoa. They are wonderful. They miss their mom and sister but otherwise they are fantastic. How are Laura and Marie?”

“Laura is doing great. Marie is struggling. She has managed to relapse a time or a few whiles in rehab and had to start over from the beginning.”

“Awe, that’s too bad. I am sorry to hear that. I am thrilled that Laura is doing well. I don’t know if we are ready to have her come here yet, but I am happy for her.”

“I understand, I do. We will keep her at Joshua’s House and maybe you two can visit sometimes. If that works out, maybe we can discuss her coming back to live with you for a while. But we won’t rush it. I do understand your concerns.” Chanoa said.

The day had come. Laura was ready to leave and with her she brought a whole new outlook on life. She had had a birthday, so she felt more mature. She felt better about herself and like nothing could stop her. She wanted to be somebody now. She had dreams and she believed she could achieve them. She couldn’t wait to see Chanoa. She was her only friend and sometimes she thought Chanoa was the only one who cared for her.

Chanoa was so happy to be picking up Laura today. She stopped to buy her a little birthday gift since she was in the facility for her birthday. She found a perfect card and got her a journal with a nice pen. The journal was girly with flowers, and she wrote a note to her on the inside of the front cover.

She wrote. "Laura, I have believed in you from the moment I met you. God believes in you too and he will wait patiently for you. You are a special girl and will grow into a talented, wonderful woman. I have faith in your future."

When she arrived at the gate and security allowed her to enter, Chanoa followed the blacktop drive around to the front door where Laura stood waiting for her. She looked so different Chanoa thought. Laura was beaming, bouncing even and she waved her arms like she was trying to catch the attention of a police car.

When Chanoa got out of the car, Laura ran up to her and wrapped herself around her. She didn't want to let go but she eased up so Chanoa could breathe. Tears heated their cheeks as they put Chanoa's duffel bag into the trunk. Chanoa got into the back seat without an argument. Chanoa drove out of the property and onto the road.

"Well, how do you feel?" Chanoa asked, looking into the mirror.

"I feel wonderful Chanoa. I am so happy. I want to do something useful with my life. I am done with drugs of any sort. The medicine they had me on really helped to even out my moods but now I am hoping to be rid of that soon."

"I am so glad to hear your new attitude, Laura. You look terrific! Do you want to stop for lunch?"

"Yeah, we can do that. I could probably eat something. Thank you."

They stopped at a fast-food place, one of Chanoa's favorites. After they got seated, Chanoa reached into her bag and took out the gift she had wrapped up in pretty paper for Laura.

"Here you go Laura. Happy belated birthday" Chanoa said, handing the package to Laura.

Laura's eyes welled up before the tears cascaded down her cheeks. She gently opened it as if the paper itself was fragile. She saw the little book and opened the cover. It's a diary. Wow, I have never had one, but this is so amazing."

"Read what I wrote inside."

After she read it, Laura opened it to the first page. Chanoa had made the first entry.

"On this day, I completed my inpatient treatment with a new attitude and a new outlook on life, new hope for the future, and the ability to see a future for myself."

"Thank you, Chanoa, I love it. You have inspired me."

"Let's go see your brothers Laura."

At Tammy's house, Laura and Chanoa got out of the car and Laura took a long, deep breath. The air smelled good she thought, better than she remembered. She noticed the flowers in the air, saw the beauty in the trees. It was as if she had been blind her first fourteen years.

Her brothers ran out the front door and both of them hugged Laura like they hadn't seen her in a year. Laura bent down and lifted both of them. She let them down then she went and hugged Tammy.

"Tammy, I am so sorry for how I acted before. That wasn't me and I am truly sorry. You were nothing but good to me and I am thankful you tried."

"Laura, you are family. In time, maybe you can come stay again, if you want that."

"I would love that, Tammy. I really want to be with my brothers."

Chanoa dropped Laura off at Joshua's House and headed to the office. When she got there, she found a note on her desk. Someone from the police department had called and left a message with the front desk. It must not have been Officer Daniels; he has her number. She wondered who it had been.

She called Officer Daniels. "Hello Officer Daniels. First, I wanted to let you know that Laura just got out of treatment, and she is doing fantastic. So, what's up? Someone from the department called me and left a message at the front desk. I figured it wasn't you but maybe you'd know what's up." Chanoa said.

Just then, Marcus called her on her personal phone. "Officer Daniels, can I call you back in a few minutes please?"

"Yes, of course. Go do what you need to, it will wait." He answered and hung up the phone.

"Hey Marcus. What's up?" She asked.

"How about dinner? Just dinner and I promise, no rings."

"When? Tonight? Okay, we can have dinner. Let's take it slow. Is that okay with you? I still need to build back my trust. You really hurt me. I built a wall, and it will take time to tear it down again."

Chanoa looked at her calendar and saw she had some time penciled in for notes right at the time she was supposed to meet Marcus for dinner. She looked at it, then at her phone and picked up her pencil and erased that from her schedule. Notes could wait, Marcus was important. Her life was important. When he told her about being married to her job, she took it to heart. Alayna had made an impact too. Maybe the two of them had teamed up to convince her or teach her.

“Okay, Chanoa. You are at the helm. You control the speed and the direction. I am simply your first mate. Fair enough?”

“Okay, then dinner at eight, and then I go home, alone.”

“Agreed. I will take what I can get.”

Marcus said goodbye and hung up the phone.

Alayna came over to Chanoa’s desk. She glanced at Chanoa’s pictures and smiled. They were all of the children she had helped.

“Okay, are you ready to hear the end of my story? I have been waiting to tell you before I forget.” Alayna asked.

“Yep, let’s have the details. Go!” Chanoa said.

“Okay, the man was headed into the grocery store when a man came up to him and gave him a sob story about how his house had recently burned down, his wife was disabled, he has three kids, lost his job, and just wanted a little cash to buy some food for his family.” Alayna caught Chanoa up on the story.

“So, what happened? What is the moral or the punchline?”

“I wasn’t finished. Anyway, the man told the guy he doesn’t carry cash, but he would be happy to buy the man some groceries. He offered to let the guy come in with him or he could just bring some stuff out to him. The guy stomped off calling the man names. The point was, you can’t be the nice guy and expect the whole world to do the right thing. Chanoa you can’t save everybody. It just doesn’t work that way as much as we wish it did.”

“Alayna, I know what you are saying but I disagree. My batting average so far is pretty darn good, and I expect it to continue that way. I will always have a positive attitude. I appreciate your concern, Alayna. I do.”

Alayna smiled and left, going back to her own cubicle. Chanoa called Officer Daniels back. “Hello again Officer Daniels. So, what was it someone needed? I know it isn’t Laura. I just picked her up from a treatment facility and she is doing great.”

“Chanoa, it’s her mother. She was out on probation, and we found her in a motel room. She had overdosed on heroine, and she had been smoking crystal meth. She didn’t make it Chanoa.” Officer Daniels told her.

Chanoa spirit plummeted. How was she going to tell the kids that their mom is gone? All she could think was how this could happen. She was headed in the right direction. Laura will be devastated, the boys will not be hurt as badly because they are young, but they will still hurt.

Chanoa went to Joshua's house to talk to Laura.

"Laura, I have some bad news and there is no way to tell you but to come out with it. Your mom left the rehab facility and was found in a motel with a needle in her arm. She overdosed again Laura. She passed away because there was no one there to help her.

"Chanoa, will you pray for her?" Laura asked through sobs. "I hate her! Why did she do this? She is so selfish."

Chanoa stood and hugged Laura. "You will be fine Laura. I will be with you every step of the way. I am proud of you and don't let anyone ever tell you that you are less than wonderfully blessed.

The last day of the month Chanoa picked up Laura from Joshua's House. She put her bags in the trunk and opened the passenger door for her. Laura sat down and Chanoa noticed she had the journal in her hand.

"Well? Are you excited?"

"I am excited and a little nervous after the first time but let's do it."

Chanoa drove, turned on her Christian station and they both hummed along to the music. Soon, she was pulling into Tammy's driveway.

Snow draped over the edge of the roof threatening to crash down on anyone daring to walk under it. Chanoa tiptoed as if trying not to wake a baby. Her car door was frozen shut causing her to struggle to open it. This winter seemed especially harsh she thought as she sat in the driver's seat and let the car warm up and the windshield defrost.

Chanoa ventured carefully along the icy road, slowing to a stop behind a school bus picking up kids. She drove again, inching her way to the office when her phone rang. Chanoa turned at the next light and headed to see her former client.

She pulled into the driveway of a two-story brick house. Christmas lights adorned the home and inflatable characters littered the yard. The home gave off a warm vibe and Chanoa liked it. She was happy to have found this foster home.

Chanoa knocked on the thick wooden door. The door was like a fortress gate, keeping away the bad neighbors who would seek to pillage and keeping in the love that sustains the family. The ten-foot-tall door opened just a little and the woman spoke with the softest southern drawl.

“Hey, Chanoa. Please, come on in.” Said Mrs. LeBlanc, opening the door fully in a welcoming gesture.

Chanoa crossed the threshold and draped her coat over her arm.

“So, Laura called me this morning and asked me to come by. Is everything okay?” Chanoa asked.

“As far as I know everything is fine. Let me call her for you. Do you need to be alone?”

“Can we talk for a few first? How is she doing, really?”

Mrs. LeBlanc said. “She is wonderful and so intelligent. She has come so far; she should be proud.”

Chanoa took in the living room. The candles in the window combined with the wood fire warmed the room, making Chanoa feel as if she had just walked into her own home. The hearth was dressed in Christmas ornaments.

Laura floated down the stairs like she was on a cloud. Her hair was dolled up and she wore a pink dress. She looked beautiful, far from the girl she had been just a few months ago. This family suited her well.

“Hey Laura, you look precious.” Chanoa said, as Laura came closer and the two embraced like family who had been apart for years. Tears wet Chanoa’s shoulder as Laura wept.

“Chanoa, thank you for all you’ve done for me, for putting up with me, and for not giving up on me.”

“Laura, you did all the work. I just watched you along the way. I am so happy you have made it this far. I just stopped by to see how you are getting along. Looks like you have landed in a wonderful place. I am proud of you Laura. You keep doing what you are doing, and you will have a fantastic life. Oh, the LeBlanc’s have agreed to bring your brothers here and they are talking adoption. How do you feel about that?”

Laura’s bottom lip quivered, and tears filled the rims of her eyes. She paused for several seconds before she found the words, “Oh thank you Mrs. LeBlanc, Mr. LeBlanc, thank you so much!” as she ran to hug them both.

Chanoa said her goodbyes, wished Laura well, thanked the LeBlanc’s and headed home.

Five years later, Chanoa was drinking coffee at the regular place when a young woman walked through the door. It was Laura. She looked great, well dressed, smiling. Laura went to the counter and ordered an iced coffee. Standing there, waiting for her coffee, Laura looked around the small café and spotted Chanoa. She ran to Chanoa's table. Chanoa stood and the two stood in an embrace like long lost friends.

“So, how are you, Laura? I am so happy to see you.”

“I'm good, wonderful actually. I am starting my second year at State. I am president of my sorority.”

“That's awesome Laura! I knew you had it in you. How are the boys?”

“Oh, they are great. They are doing really well in school. The LeBlanc's adopted us. My last name is now LeBlanc.”

“What's your major?”

“I'm majoring in psychology with an emphasis on addiction. I am also going to minor in early child development. I want to help others who are going through what we went through. No one should have to endure that. My mom doesn't know it but she really helped me get some direction and purpose. You did too Chanoa. Without your persistence and caring, I don't know what might have happened.

“That is a wonderful choice, Laura. I am sure you will do so much good. I believe it is your calling. I believe God has given you the tools, the empathy, and insight to be an outstanding help to anyone you touch.”

“What does it take to work for the department?”

“It just takes a college degree and right now because we are so short-handed, you could have a degree in underwater basket weaving. Seriously, they aren't stringent about what type of degree but with a psych degree you could go far. You have to keep in touch and if you need help don't hesitate to ask.”

“Oh, Chanoa I am so grateful. Of course, I have a few more years.”

“Are you working to help pay for college?”

“Yeah, I work at a motel cleaning rooms. It was the only job I could find that was part-time and had reasonably steady hours.”

“I bet you could get on with us now as an assistant, or even as an overnight sitter. The sitters are contracted through a third-party but they pay well and the schedule seems to be flexible or consistent, whichever you prefer.”

The two women sat sipping their coffee, talking about all that has happened, mostly in Laura’s life when Laura noticed something new.

“You got engaged?”

“I did! The wedding is in a year. I was seeing him when I first got your case, and we went through some stuff, but we pulled it back together.”

“WOW! I am so excited for you! I know you will be so happy.”

“Are you seeing anyone?” Chanoa asked.

“Me? No, I don’t have time, besides, I want to focus on school. I don’t want to be that girl who lets her life go by the roots to chase some man. There is plenty of time for that.”

“So, tell me about him?”

“Well, he works with me, in a different area but still with the department. We actually met on the job. I have been promoted since I last spoke to you. I am a supervisor now.”

“That’s incredible. I am sure you are a wonderful supervisor. You know your stuff and you care. I can see it.” Laura observed.

“It’s rewarding but not without challenges. Sometimes I wish I had just stayed a worker-bee.”

After a short pause in the conversation, Chanoa stood to leave. The two women said their goodbyes. AS they walked out of the diner, Chanoa went one direction toward her car, Laura went the other on foot.

As Chanoa sat in her car, she offered a short prayer of thanks to God then she took out her journal.

The End

Afterword

Every day in the United States thousands of children are placed in foster care due to no fault of their own. The United States spends over \$200,000,000 on Child Welfare Services according to the US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families website, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov>. Also, according to Children's Defense Fund, www.childrensdefense.org, there are over 400,000 children in our system. Those children often suffer from physical abuse, or drug use by adults in the home. According to Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) and Treatment Episode Data Set Admissions (TEDS-A), ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov, roughly 40% of families in the Child Welfare System are alcohol or drug related. In this era, our nation has seen a rise in the level of illegal substance use and overdoses. As someone who works in the social services industry, I have seen any number of children whose parents have set their own wants ahead of those of their children.

The story above, while not based on actual events, does have elements derived from my experience and that of other case managers in my area. We see families daily torn apart by drug use, physical abuse, and domestic violence. Often the parents use the excuse that they are poor, but poverty does not cause a person to make bad choices in life. Poverty does not cause someone to hit their children or leave their homes in complete disarray with food left all over the house.

Society in the United States must make a change. We need to go back to our Christian values, back to teaching our children the value of working hard, back to accountability and responsibility. Without change, our nation is headed down a dark, tumultuous road.

