

AMERICAN
ROAD
TRIP

Patrick Flores-Scott

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THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 2008

Moving light creeps into the game cave.

I turn to Caleb. “We played all night, man. We played all night.”

Caleb Ta’amu does not respond. His wide body is sucked into the sofa, long hair frizzing wild, eyes bugging on a flat screen, zombied out on too much Halo.

I toss my headset. Dig through fast-food wrappers on the coffee table. Grab my phone and shove it in Caleb’s face.

He slaps my hand, pissed I’m messing with his gamer trance. “What the hell, T?”

“Check the time!”

Caleb checks it. He whips off his headset. “Do not tell me it’s tomorrow.”

“It’s tomorrow, Caleb.”

He drops his controller. Hops to his feet. “You gotta get outta here.”

We sneak upstairs. Caleb opens the door. He rubs his eyes in the gray morning light. “Second day, junior year. We’re off to a stellar start.”

“Yeah,” I say. “We’re killing it.”

“You gonna try and make first period?”

“I guess. You?”

“I guess. If my dad doesn’t strangle me first. You better go, T.”

I hike the sidewalk-less, residential streets of SeaTac, Washington. Drizzle spraying my face. Water sloshing through my shoes. A mile of dark, evergreen-tree-lined streets. Shabby houses, beige apartments, barred windows, rusted cars on blocks . . .

I arrive at my destination.

But I can’t go inside.

I stand, stuck in this spot on this potholed road, soaking up rain to the rumble soundtrack of Sea-Tac Airport jumbo jets.

They come. They go. Move in and out.

I cannot move.

And I can’t stop staring at the dented-up front door of a tiny, falling-down rental house—*our* tiny, falling-down rental house.

And I can’t stop thinking how we got here.

How two summers ago, we rode the happy housing bubble right into a bright blue, boxy, four-bathroom house down in Des Moines. My mom and dad’s marriage needed a spark. My dad hoped a big new house would do the trick.

One year later the housing bubble popped.

The whole economy popped.

Orders for Boeing planes slowed way down and Fauntleroy Fabrication in Seattle—where my dad machined airplane parts and my mom was a warehouse clerk—went belly-up.

Papi’s fat union check was gone.

Mami traded her living-wage job for part-time work at Walmart.

And we went from being a family that didn't worry much about money, to one that did.

I'll never forget the night last spring. My dad drove me and my sister, Xochitl, ten minutes from Des Moines to SeaTac. And he parked right here in front of this rental. Right where I'm standing. He told us he'd done the math and decided it would be better to hang on to some savings and walk away from the new house now, than be stuck owing way more than it's worth. He'd rather tank his credit for years than put us in a deeper financial hole. He said we'd swallow our pride and move on.

Then he pointed at the dented-up metal door. And said we'd be living here for a while.

The drizzle turns to showers. I take a step toward that door.

But I can't do it.

I can't open up.

Cuz I can't stop thinking about my big brother, Manny.

And I can't stop thinking about us back when we were still living in our old house—the solid little house we all grew up in—the one where we still lived when Manny left us for Iraq. For years, every time I saw our front door, I'd have this hope he'd be inside when I opened up. My brother would be sitting there, smiling at me like he never went to war. He'd be ready to toss a baseball. Take me for a ride in his Mustang. Fishing at the Des Moines pier. Slurpies. Double-scoop cones. French fries and homework help.

I'd see that old door, and I'd feel that stupid hope.

But Manny's tours of duty kept getting extended.

So I gave up hoping for Manny.

And I settled for hoping I'd walk in and catch my parents dancing or cooking together again, teasing each other like they

used to. Something would click and they'd remember how good they were before my brother shocked us with his big announcement.

Spring of his senior year, Manny sits us down and tells us he's off to basic training right after graduation. He says he's been planning this ever since those towers fell a year and a half before.

My mom flips. She tells him he can't go because he's headed to college. She tells him he can't kill people for this lie of a war. That's what Mami tells him.

My dad?

He gives Manny a back-pounding hug. Tells him he's proud and gives him his blessing.

And that's the start of my parents fighting their quiet war at home.

The front doors have changed since then.

But Mami and Papi haven't changed.

Screw it. I'm soaked to the bone and freezing cold. I walk up. Turn the knob. And push in that messed-up door.

My big sister is sitting at the table. Xochitl is postshow buzzed. Scribbling in her journal. Badass in her purple-striped hair and tattooed arms. Smelling like cigarettes and beer.

She shakes her head at me back and forth, dramatic, fake-parental, wagging her finger, then pointing at the spot on her wrist where a watch would go.

I shrug my shoulders. Make a pleading face, playing like I'm in big trouble.

She chokes back a laugh.

I can't help but laugh out loud.

She shushes me, leaves the room, and returns with a towel.
Throws it at me.

I sit at the table. She sits across.

It's been so long since the two of us hung out.

And so long since we played Radio Xochitl. I raise my pointer
finger in the air.

My sister smirks and shakes her head no.

I bob my head. *Oh, yes.*

She looks to our parents' room. Mouths the words, *It's too late.*

I know she can't resist showing off. So I press the invisible
power button and Xochitl starts singing.

She's Aretha Franklin. Powerful, even with the volume on low.

They say that it's a man's world.

She keeps her eyes on me.

But you can't prove that by me—

I mime spinning the dial. Xochitl babbles gibberish as stations
fly by.

I stop and she belts out norteño—Los Tigres del Norte.

Somos más americanos que toditos los—

I turn the dial. Xochitl busts it.

My method on the microphone is bangin'

Wu-Tang slang'll leave your headpiece hang—

I spin again and again and she doesn't miss a beat. Dixie
Chicks, Café Tacuba, Jill Scott—then serious and intense with
some Ani DiFranco . . .

What kind of paradise am I looking for?

I've got everything I want and still I want more

Even in a whisper, Xochitl can kill you with a song.

I poke that power button in the air.

Radio Xochitl fades to silence. She's smiling, loving this.

I'm smiling. Loving my crazy sister.

The doors have changed.

Thank God Xochitl hasn't.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 2008

Xochitl wasn't quiet enough. My mom woke up and freaked about my all-nighter with Caleb. So today I head straight back to the rental after school.

Xochitl's here, too. She's never home for dinner. I'm guessing she either got fired from selling zit cream at the mall or she quit another band.

Mami doesn't ask questions. We're all home, so she gets to work whipping up her one comfort food specialty: green chile cheeseburgers.

Mami's uncle, our Tío Ed, got married to a New Mexican and moved down there a long time ago. He started farming New Mexican green chile, and for years, he's sent us a box every fall. Mami tried out the recipes they make down there, like green chile enchiladas and green chile stew. Those were tasty as hell. But the Avila family go-to became the green chile cheeseburger.

These peppers are not jalapeños. Not poblanos. I got nothing against 'em. But New Mexican green chile was created by the Almighty Gods of Flavor for the purpose of combining heat with

cream or cheese and creating ecstasy in your mouth. So Mami only pulls them out of the freezer for special occasions.

I don't think this qualifies as a special occasion. But I'm not gonna argue.

It's a quiet dinner. Nothing but the sounds of faces being stuffed till Xochitl slaps a drum roll on the table. She splashes an imaginary cymbal and says, "I bring you this announcement from Fallujah, Iraq: Manny's coming home! They promised. He's home for good in February."

"How do you know?" Mami says.

"We e-mail. It's all set up. He'll call you with the details."

Mami looks at Xochitl like she feels sorry for her for being hopeful.

We've been burned so many times. I can't stand Xochitl even talking about it.

My dad says, "Vamos a ver, mija. We'll see."

Xochitl scoots her chair back. "We can't wait, Papi." She hops to her feet. "We have to get our act together now. *For Manny.*"

Barely twenty years old, and she's taking charge. "We have to make this house feel like a home," she says. "We'll paint. Put up prints. Get our old furniture in here."

"Xochitl, stop," I say.

"I'm not stopping. And I'm reinstituting game night. Everyone plays." She points at our parents. "And you two are going out on mandatory dates."

"*Xochitl,*" Mami says.

"And counseling?"

"Deja, mija," Papi says.

"At least talk to Father Michael?"

What is Xochitl talking about? We haven't been to mass in forever.

Then she points at me. "What's Manny gonna think when he sees you, you big lazy clown? There's a world out there, T. Find a passion. Set a goal. And go for it, bro!"

I make a beeline for my room, pissed at my sister for turning on me. Pissed at her for jacking up the volume on our quiet dysfunction.

Before I can slam my door, she says, "He's coming home, guys. Let's see some energy. Let's see some smiles. Oh, and I quit the Art Institute."

"No, Xochitl, no." Mami drops forehead onto palm and shakes her head. "You can't do that."

"I already did."

Xochitl tells them it's great she's quitting because it's too expensive. Plus she can work full-time during the day and help with rent and bills till Papi finds union work again.

"This way I'll be home afternoons before rehearsals to help out," she says.

"We're okay," Papi says. "No te preocupes tanto, mija."

Xochitl looks at the bare walls of the rental. Looks at our parents. Shakes her head. "We have to get right. And we need to do it before Manny comes home."

I wanna tell Xochitl that's impossible. Cuz Manny being here—being with us—is the only thing that can get us right.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2008

Breaks squeal. Rubber doors slap open. I hop a bus headed for Seattle. I do not care where.

It's been a whole week of my sister telling us stuff we already know about how bad we suck. A whole week of her taking charge in a way our parents should be taking charge.

Plus, she bought Risk. And tonight she will open that box. My mom will grumble as Xochitl explains the rules. Papi will ask a ton of questions. Xochitl will try *very* hard to explain. Mami will roll eyes at both of them. Then Xochitl will bawl them out like she's the parent.

If I'm there, I'll get pissed and walk out and my sister will throw down another lecture about my lame life. And the whole night will be a confirmation that Manny's still gone, my parents are a lost cause, and Xochitl has flipped and she's no longer my sister.

I flash the driver my pass. He nods. The breaks exhale. The engine rumbles and jerks us into traffic.

I would be over at Caleb's, but his dad got on his case after

our all-nighter. Kennedy Ta'amu told Caleb it was time to get a life. *Play a sport. Volunteer at church. Get a job.* So now he's working a couple nights as a dishwasher at Vince's Pizza.

The bus winds its way north. Up Pac Highway. Past Sea-Tac Airport. Onto 405, then I-5. Into Seattle. The U District. The University of Washington campus.

I hop off at the the Husky Union Building—*the HUB*—a brick, ivy-covered, dry place to kill some time.

I pull open the old wooden doors, walk past a bike shop, past a little branch of University Book Store, into a big open corridor. College kids lounge at tables and couches. They flirt. Surf the web. Read important novels. Argue about important things.

I head over to a newsstand to grab a Coke. I pay the lady and turn to go. No big deal.

But I almost bump into the girl behind me cuz she's on one knee tying her laces. She's got this shiny, dark brown hair hanging down so I can't see her face, but I got a feeling she might be cute and I want to find out.

So I fake sneeze.

The girl springs to her feet. "Do everyone a favor and cover that stuff up."

All I've got are *uhs* and *ums* because she is, in fact, kind of cute. Cute cheeks. Cute scowl as she stands there with cute brown eyes staring at me through long lashes and black dork glasses.

"Sorry about that," I say as I walk away fast.

"You wait, mister." She grabs me by the arm and examines my face.

And I'm like, "What?"

And she's like, "Your momma taught you better than that."

“Excuse me? My *momma*?”

“Yeah. She taught you better.”

“Leave my *momma* outta this cuz you don’t know my *momma*.”

Then she slips a bit of a wicked smile. “I think maybe I know your *mamá*.”

I can’t help but slip some of my smile and say, “How you think you know my *mamá*?”

And she says—her smile growing bigger—“Summers in Florence, Oregon. My great-uncle Frank’s place.”

I’m frozen stupid as time and space mess with my head.

This is *Wendy Martinez*, Frank O’Brien’s niece.

But the *Wendy Martinez* from way-back summers was not cute. She was a bossy little busybody who chased me around and drove me nuts and—I’ll admit it—I was a tiny bit scared of the little *Wendy*.

“You had better manners back then,” she says. She busts out a full-on smile. “*Teodoro Avila!* Dude! Hug it out!”

We go in for the hug. Wrap arms like people do and . . .

Oh. My God.

This hug. It’s like firm? But soft and warm.

I turn to jelly in *Wendy*’s arms as she squeezes tighter and my mind—everything fades and this is all there is. Me wrapped around *Wendy*. *Wendy* wrapped around me.

Then both of us—at *the same exact time*—inhale deep and fast and look big eyes right into each other.

Holy.

Crap.

That breath, those eyes—it’s all way too much. So we let go and step back.

“My mom’s at the bookstore,” she says. “You have a second to talk?”

“I have lots of seconds,” I say. But I’m thinking, *I got the rest of my life, Wendy Martinez.*

We find a bright spot in the atrium. We sit across a table from each other. Smile some nervous smiles. Then Wendy asks me about the family.

I tell her to go first.

Wendy says she and her mom still live a couple hours away in Vancouver, across the river from Portland. She’s here at the University of Washington looking into a scholarship for women in science. She says this is the place to study health care. She’s thinking about med school already. Wendy’s got all the data and all her stuff one hundred percent together.

Before I know it, she asks me what I’m doing here.

I start telling Wendy about staying away from game night, but that feels way too complicated. So I sneeze again—I cover up this time—and I tell her that I am also here checking out the University of Washington, only I call it U-Dub so she knows I know people call it that.

And I say it with a straight face. As if I believed they would let me into the University of Washington. For actual college.

That’s the first of my lies as I try to convince beautiful and brilliant Wendy Martinez that my parents are doing great. Xochitl’s got a great music career going and she’s doing awesome in art school. And I’m carefully considering my many college options before making my decision.

The thing about Wendy—besides her smile, her hair, her not-skinny curves and those smart-girl glasses—is she is so full of

caring. Like when the subject of Manny comes up and I tell her how bad I miss him. How scared I am he might never come back. Wendy looks me in the eyes as I talk. Touches my hand to make a point. Asks me if I'm okay—like *really okay*.

And when a stupid tear slips when I say I miss him, she acts like it's nothing. She just reaches over and wipes it away with a finger midsentence and says she can't imagine how stressful the waiting must be. How difficult it must be on all of us that Manny keeps getting redeployed. How much she hopes he makes it back.

When people try to make us feel better about Manny, they say, *Everything's going to be okay. God has a plan. Everything happens for a reason.*

Wendy doesn't say any of that BS. She gets that it's way more complicated. And that makes me like her even more.

In a minute, Wendy's mom walks our way. Rebecca O'Brien acts thrilled to see me. She asks how the family is and I keep my lies straight as Wendy takes off running. We watch her go and I'm about to ask, but Rebecca sighs and says, "You never know with that girl."

Rebecca tells me Uncle Frank misses us terribly. She says it'd be great if we all spent a week in Florence, like old times. I tell her I'll let Mami and Papi know.

Pretty soon, Wendy's standing there again, one hand hidden behind her back.

Rebecca edges away and it's clear they have to go.

I don't want this moment to end, so I say, "Wendy, being here, soaking this place in, I think this old U-Dub might be tops on my list."

“That’s awesome,” she says. “It’d be great if we both went here.”

Then I totally lose it and I tell Wendy if she comes here, I’m coming here.

She smiles her wicked smile and says, “That sounds like a pact, Teodoro Avila.”

“Wendy Martinez,” I say, “it *sounds* like a pact because it *is* a pact.” Then I fake spit on my hand and hold it out for a shake.

She pulls her hand from behind her back and she’s holding a cupcake on a napkin.

“For me?” I say.

“Uh-huh,” she says, smiling bigger—even though it’s clear she’s trying not to because of her mom.

Then she comes at me for one more hug.

One more *just us in the world* hug.

Holy.

One more same-time breath.

Crap.

“Check the napkin,” she whispers. Then she looks at me like she’s trying to memorize my eyes.

“*Wendy.*” Rebecca points at her watch. “Good to see you, Teodoro.”

Wendy smiles at me and pulls away. She walks into the crowd streaming out the HUB doors and just before I lose track of her, she turns and jumps in the air, making a wacky face, waving both arms up high.

I hop and wave, hop and wave till she’s gone.

Then I look down at the cupcake in my hand. White frosting. Still warm. I peel the wrapper and take a bite. *Red velvet.*

I devour the whole thing right there. And stuff the wrapper—red crumbs and all—and the napkin with Wendy’s digits, into my front pocket.

I pull out my phone. Check the date. Grab a pen off a table. I say the numbers out loud as I write them on the palm of my hand. . . . *9/10/08.*

Then I close my eyes and make a promise. *This is the day everything changes.*

It’s just past nine when I finally make it to Caleb’s place. He’s got his headset on, butt planted in sofa, hair poofing, smelling like garlic and dishwasher soap. He’s got soda and Vince’s Pizza sitting on the game cave coffee table and he’s twitching his controller. Caleb Ta’amu is Halo ready. “I got two hours, man. My dad’s cool with it. Let’s do this.”

I tell him we have to talk first.

“You breaking up?” he says. “You can’t do that, T. We’ve built a virtual life together.”

“Shut up, Caleb. And listen.” I plop into the sofa and tell him the whole story. I tell him how amazing Wendy is. How beautiful she is. I tell him how she gets Manny being away like no one else does—besides him, of course. And I tell him about the cupcake.

“Red velvet,” Caleb says. “*Red velvet.*”

“You think it means anything?”

“It means there’s one girl in this world who actually likes you. *You, Teodoro Avila.*” Caleb laughs and slaps me on the back.

I do not laugh. Instead, I tell him about my lies.

And I tell him about *the pact*.

Caleb calls me an idiot and says, “This may come as a mind-blowing surprise to you, T, but women have this thing about a thing called *honesty*. So if you want a shot with Wendy, you got to make it right.”

“I can’t tell her the truth yet,” I say. “But what I *could* do is I could . . . uh . . .”

“Spit it out, T.”

“It’s too stupid.”

“I bet it’s not your stupidest.”

“What I could do is . . . I could go for it, Caleb. You know? Like I could start doing the stuff people do to get into college. And maybe . . .”

I immediately regret it because Caleb is gonna crush me. He knows I got all-but-failing grades and the idea of me doing anything but community college is stupid.

But he doesn’t say anything. He just locks eyes on the flat screen and starts twitching his controller, selecting his player. But just as he’s about to start shooting, he pauses the game. And he stares at the floor.

“Caleb?”

No response.

“What’s going on, Caleb?”

He tosses his controller. Grabs the remote. Hits the power button. He turns to me real serious. “You go for it, T.”

“Yeah?”

“Hell yeah!”

“Are you messing with me, Caleb?”

“No way. You go for it. You go!”

Then Caleb looks around the room. The sofa. The junk food. And he calls himself a loser. He says he's been a waste of space in this world. He tells me I been keeping him down. And he apologizes for keeping me down. Then he whips off his headset and says, "I'm gonna do it, too."

"For real, Caleb?"

He stands, steps over the coffee table, and walks to the Xbox. He bends down and grabs the power cord. Follows it to the wall. He turns and holds up a shaking hand for me to see. "I can't believe I'm doing this."

He reaches for the plug.

"Caleb, you don't have to—"

He yanks it hard.

"Damn, Caleb! I'm not *that* ready."

He unscrews the cable. Wraps the cords. "This box owns us. I don't wanna be owned."

I remind him of our Halo friends all over the world. Splazer3000 in Berlin. Plasma17 in Buenos Aires. DUspartan in Melbourne. "We've been through a lot of battles with those guys. Let's log on and blast some Covenant ass up for old times' sake. And then, maybe—"

Caleb grunts and shakes his head. "Are you really into her, T?" He holds up the box. "Cuz a girl like Wendy wants way more than *this*. And right now this is all you got."

"It's not that easy, Caleb."

"Doesn't mean we can't try."

I look at the box sitting in his hands. Then I look my best friend in the eyes. "Caleb Ta'amu, I'm gonna need your help."

“Teodoro Avila, I’m your brother from another mother. You just say *the word* and this is for real.”

I close my eyes. Picture Wendy. See her brown eyes again. That smile. I fight to feel her hug again. Take in a deep breath. And I say it. “The word.”

Caleb says “The word” right back and we do the ridiculous handshake we made up when we were ten.

I stand facing that dented door, praying I don’t get trapped in the messy aftermath of game night.

I turn the knob. Take a step inside.

“Hey, T,” Xochitl says. She’s sitting at the table. *Smiling.*

With my parents.

Who are also smiling.

And giggling.

At each other. Like, *with* each other.

I walk slowly into the room. Because something is very wrong. And I’m concerned it’s drugs. “Hello, family,” I say. “May I ask what is up?”

My mom giggles more and says, “How’s Caleb?”

“Fine,” I say. “Are you people all right?”

“I’m not all right,” she says. “I could have used your help against these brutes.”

My dad walks around the table and gives her a hug. “Ay, lo siento, Rosi. I’ll make it up to you later.” He plants a fat kiss on her cheek.

Xochitl tells them they’re gross and would they please get a room.

I'm stuck there, wondering who stole my parents and replaced them with these sick, happy clones.

Mami hugs me and wishes me good night.

Papi musses my hair—the man is *not* a musser.

I watch them walk to their room. *Together*. “Xoch,” I say. “What did you slip into Mami and Papi’s Diet Cokes?”

“It’s the magic of game night,” she says. “And it wasn’t Coke. It was red wine.”

“So I’m thinking there should be a lot more booze up in here?”

Xochitl smiles big. “It’s Manny,” she says. “He called and told them he has his ticket. And tonight, Mami and Papi were kind of like when we were kids.”

Wow. “Did they play ‘Con los años que me quedan’? Did they do their dance?”

“One small step at a time, T.”

“It didn’t look that small.”

Xochitl stares up at the ceiling. Stares at the beige walls. “Help me paint.”

I tell her I don’t think these walls are worth it.

“We’re worth it. Manny’s worth it. Let’s get some color in here.”

“All right. I’ll help you paint this dump. But you gotta promise, no more lectures.”

“Deal.” She shakes my hand on it. “I’ll get everything ready. It’s gonna look great, T.”

“Worth a shot,” I say.

“Cuz Manny’s coming home.”

“Even if it’s just another false alarm.”

“It’s not. He’s coming home.”

I go to my room. Pull out my phone. And shoot off a text.

WED SEP 10 9:55 P.M.

T: Make it home ok?

Wendy: Hey you!

Wendy: Yeah, thanks. We got home
fine.

T: Great cupcake

Wendy: Oh good! Someday you can try
one of mine.

T: I'd like that

Wendy: What's your favorite
flavor?

There's a bunch more. But that's the start of it.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2008

We wait outside Ms. Bradley's office door before school. When she finally walks our way, my heart is thumping. Caleb looks sick to his stomach.

"Good morning," Ms. Bradley says. She unlocks her counseling office door. Flips the light. Sits and tells us to do the same. She pumps antibacterial lotion and rubs it in good. "What's up, gentlemen?"

I turn to Caleb because he's better at talking. He juts his chin at me. *You do it.*

"Ms. Bradley," I say. "I need, uh—*we* need—to know, um, what we would hafta do"—I swallow the lump in my throat—"to get into the University of Washington."

She tilts her head. "The Seattle campus?" Her fingernails *tap-tap* her desk. "The main, biggest campus?"

"Yes, ma'am. The big one."

Ms. Bradley turns to her computer. She prints our grades and reaches for a binder with the University of Washington admissions

requirements. She studies them for a minute. Then she takes a deep breath to tell us the bad news.

I stand up to leave. “You don’t have to, Ms. Bradley.”

“You sit,” she says.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Your grades are not college material.” She leans in. Studies us long and hard. “But you might be.”

Caleb and I shoot looks at each other. “We might?”

“I don’t know. Admissions folks are all about *What have you done for me lately?* Grades. Test scores. Activities. Overcoming adversity. You boys have spent two years creating a big mountain of adversity. So at least you’ve got that going for you.”

Then she tells us about AVID, this program for underachievers with potential. Kids whose parents didn’t get a degree. She can stick ’em in college track, honors, and AP, along with an AVID support class. They do a tutorial in there where seniors and college kids come in and help students on new concepts.

“Your grades don’t meet the requirements for the program,” Ms. Bradley says. “But I have some discretion. . . . If I believe in a student, I can make it happen.” She looks us in the eyes. “I don’t know, gentlemen. Shoud I believe in you?”

That’s when Caleb starts talking fast. He says his parents are so smart but they never had the opportunity to go to college. He talks about how hard his sisters work in school and he knows he can do better. He swears to Ms. Bradley that he’s gonna work his butt off and make her proud. He’s gonna make his parents, his church, his aunties and uncles and cousins—the entire Polynesian community—all proud. “You got my word, Ms. B.”

Bradley turns to me.

I fake sneeze.

Because I can't make any promises.

She grabs me a Kleenex.

I wipe and blow, thinking it's one thing to realize you have to change yourself. And it's a whole other thing to fight through that overwhelming mountain of adversity to make change happen.

I plant my feet hard on the ground. I lean forward to stand and walk outta that office.

But before I can . . . I feel it in the palm of my hand.

And I sneak a peek.

Yesterday's date in faded ink. I feel the pen pressing sharp into my skin back at the HUB. I see Wendy waving good-bye. I see her eyes. Feel her hand on my hand. Her finger wiping away that tear. Her body hugging my body. And in all my guts, in every part of me, I feel a massive, magnetic tug of *want*.

I know I can't say, *I'm doing this for Wendy*, so I say stuff about wanting to be the first in my family. Stuff about my mom starting college a couple times, but each time stepping away for family reasons. I tell Ms. Bradley that us kids making it became her big dream.

And because Manny was a big star at Puget High and everyone loved him—I say, “My brother, Manuel, is coming home. I want to show him I can do this.” Even though I say that because I know it'll sound good—when I hear myself talk about my brother, the words hit so deep it hurts and I gotta stop another tear from coming.

Ms. Bradley prints out two AVID student contracts and says

all we have to do is sign on the dotted line. But before she hands over the pen, we need to look her in the eye and promise we will not waste this opportunity. Or make her look like a fool.

Caleb looks her in the eye and says the words.

Ms. Bradley hands him the pen and he signs.

She turns to me. "Mr. Avila?"

"I will not let you down, Ms. Bradley."

I take the pen. And I sign.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 2008

I hop off the Metro bus and into the sunshine after a week of sitting in those classes. One whole week with a sharpened pencil and a sharpened backup pencil and a shiny new notebook with crisp dividers. One week of scholarly freaking posture and eyes on the speaker and trying so hard to make this all look perfectly normal.

Finally, the weekend is here and Ma Nature is giving us one last shot of summer.

For the old T, this would have been time to cut loose.

But instead of heading to Caleb's, I'm marching down the cracked streets of SeaTac sporting a bulbous one-ton backpack. I got the periodic table whirling in my mind and I can't drop the idea that the formula for calcium phosphate is C_3PO , when it's really Ca_3PO -something. And I'm kicking myself for the time I've lost trying to find the compound whose formula is closest to R2-D2.

I have to unlock the mysteries of linear equations for Algebra Two. They're in their second book in AP English. *Dante's Inferno*.

Eight chapters to read by Sunday night. Six chapters from the AP US History textbook, *Out of Many*, and an essay about a colonial rebellion called “Persons of Mean and Vile Condition.”

And I have to be prepared to talk pros and cons of sentencing convicted kids as adults for Socratic Seminar in Ms. Hays’s AVID class. *Everyone talks. That’s the rule.* And I have to keep my three-ring-binder in order. That thing is checked daily by Ms. Hays until I prove I’m a wizard of organization.

Ms. Bradley said it’d be like this. Like you’re trying to hop on a merry-go-round spinning a thousand miles per hour. You have to keep reaching for it, jumping up for it, keep getting smacked down. Eventually the spinning will slow and you can just step up for the ride.

Right now, I’m motion sick with all the spinning, but I’m choosing to trust Ms. Bradley.

I get to the house and onto the porch. But before I open the door, I lift the lid on the mailbox and reach in. There’s a utility bill, some ads, and an envelope from Puget High School.

I sit on the step and open up the parent version of the AVID contract. All this stuff Mami and Papi are supposed to do to support me. All the promises they’re supposed to make.

I turn to the second page. Pull a pen from my pack. Find the dotted lines. I’ve been practicing for this moment. I sign, *Daniel Avila*—long, curvy and clear. Then *Rosario Avila*—big *R* and a big *A*, the rest a fast mess.

I’m not ready for any Avilas to know. College has always been the most important thing for my mom. She had high hopes for Manny. But he chose to join the army. Xochitl is the smartest of us all, but she thinks college will slow her down. My brother and

sister disappointed Mami because they had real potential. I have never really shown any of that, so I don't want to get her hopes up and end up being another disappointment.

But maybe the real reason I'm hiding all this is cuz when I blow it, it'll be easier to quit if no one knows I tried.

I stuff the contract in my pack.

And before I head inside, I shoot off a text. Wendy answers right away.

FRI SEP 19 3:37 P.M.

T: What's ur favorite class?

Wendy: AP Physics. But anything math or science.

Wendy: And I kind of love my history teacher. Your fave?

T: DK . . . year is still young

Wendy: Oh, and band. I play tuba.

T: Lol you crack me up

Wendy: I play the tuba, Teodoro.

T: Wow that's

Wendy: Cool? Awesome?

T: Cool and awesome and kinda

Wendy: ?

T: Cute

Wendy: The tuba?

T: U

T: Playing the tuba

Wendy: Aww. You are sweet. I have to
run.

T: Me too gotta hit those
books