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Holguin *Dreaming Of Hope Street*

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Dreaming Of Hope Street

by Eder Holguin

Introduction

Are you frustrated with your current living situation? Do you feel that life could be better in many ways? Do you feel like your dreams are so far outside your reach that it is pointless to keep trying? I know exactly how you feel. I wrote this book to let you know that your dreams are so important that you should never give up, no matter how impossible they seem. I want you to know that there's always hope. No matter how bad your current life situation is, there's always hope. Never give up on your dreams.

Dreaming of Hope Street is my personal journey, told in the classic Coming-of-Age tradition, and proves that, though life can be ugly and brutal, even the most disadvantaged can overcome the odds and find happiness, their own Hope Street. The narrative steps along and rings with authenticity; it's often sad, shocking, but ultimately uplifting and motivational.

Today, nearing forty, I am a successful New York entrepreneur in the online media industry. However, as a kid in the mid '80s, I fled a frightening home life and wound up living for years on the streets of Medellin, Colombia. It was a dicey existence, in what was described during this era as the 'most dangerous city in the world', where international drug lords like Pablo Escobar ruled, where you could be shot for looking at the wrong guy the wrong way. The incredible journey from living under those circumstances to becoming a successful entrepreneur and how through effort, dedication and hard work I was able to get to where I am today is told in this book. Those life lessons and principles are universal and apply to everyone.

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I hope this book serves as a source of inspiration; that, by reading it, you can realize that you too can achieve your dreams. My intention when writing this book was to provide you my story as a source of inspiration and to help you realize that you are not a victim of your current circumstances, you have the power to create your own life. The choices you make and things you do today will determine your future. No matter how many times you have failed in the past, how many times you tried; just by changing your attitude and making different choices you too can change your life when you make the decision to do so, you too can become successful; achieve your dreams and live a happy life.

To those who are victims of abuse and are currently living in fear, please find the help that you need. Open your eyes and realize nobody deserves to be the victim of physical or verbal abuse. You deserve to be happy value yourself and love who you are. Once you do this and discover your self worth, life will open up new opportunities and will bring new people into your life.

My mother always told me that I had ruined her life by being born. Late at night she'd come home drunk and wake me. I was a little kid and was always afraid of her. She was a violent person and she didn't really care if she hurt me. She would sit by my bed and cry while she told me how terrible her life was, how unfair it was, how she hated my father and how everything had turned out wrong. She was the proverbial victim who only saw the negative influence of everyone around her, ignoring her own faults and blaming everyone and everything for her own misery and unhappiness. One of her main regrets was that she did not have an abortion when she became pregnant with me. "I would've had a future," was a line she always worked herself up to. That's when I knew the rage was coming. In her mind, I was the cause of her misery and sadness. Later, when she did really terrible things and I went to the hospital several times, I suspected my life would soon be over. Even at the age of seven, I sort of knew my mother would eventually kill me, I just didn't know how or when.

I would wake up in the dark and be afraid, afraid of her, afraid of losing everything, from my little toys to anyone who might care what happened to me. *If she kills me*, I would wonder, *what will she do with my body?* I was terrified by the idea of being secretly buried, deep down in the dirt somewhere. Would she tell anyone? Would anyone ever know that I was dead? I clearly remember the time she stabbed me in the arm with a fork. I had repeated something she'd said during one of her drunken fits about a neighbor's gambling habit. The pain barely registered, but I was scared and desperate to get away from her. Running off, I wandered around the city, using my T-shirt to stop the bleeding. When it was dark out, I crept back home and was relieved to find

she had gone drinking with her friends. I believe that was the day that I first began to make my plans—my desperate plans.

This was in the 1970's, and we lived in Medellin, Republic of Colombia, at that time a city about the size of Philadelphia. Medellin is in western Colombia, situated a mile above sea level, like Denver, in the temperate Aburrá Valley of the Cordillera Central. Over the last few decades, the city has grown enormously to become Colombia's second largest, mostly due to its heavy industrialization. As is well known, Medellin was at one time the headquarters for Pablo Escobar's worldwide drug cartel, until he was killed in a shoot-out with army commandos in '93. During the 1980's, as I was growing up, Medellin was known as the most violent city in the world, unrivaled—in terms of bloodshed and body count—until the Mexican drug wars of the early 21st century.

As I was growing up, there was no real middle class in Medellin. One was either rich or poor. The rich lived in the beautiful sections of the city, dating back to the well-heeled 17th-century Spanish settlers, or in the luxurious barrios, urban enclaves like Envigado, el Poblado and Laureles. The poor were relegated to the tenements and makeshift homes of the sprawling inner city slums along the Medellin River, where swimming was hazardous to one's health. Some of the poor had it a little better than others, living in an actual house or apartment building, no matter how run-down.

Our family fell into the latter group, the upper-middle of the lower classes. But on this scale, we were all in the same boat, the same day-to-day struggle for survival. After working overtime at mind-numbing jobs that paid less than a subsistence wage, most people returned

home to little food and less happiness. Flies and crying babies, garbage and smelly sewers, curses and broken families were familiar scenes in the hills of the oriental *comunas*. One was simply ground down day after day.

For those at the bottom, Medellin offered little more than a life marked by toil, want and an early death. For others living in the pitiful *comunas* in the hills surrounding Medellin, life was one hell after another. With no public transportation, they had to trudge for hours every morning to find menial work and then stumble back home in the evening, dead on their feet, a little change in their pocket for the day's effort.

My parents met in high school. My father, John Holguin, was almost eighteen and my mother, Cecilia Zapata, was sixteen. She liked his handsome features and cocky attitude, while he thought she was a pretty and pliant girl, popular, well dressed and presentable. They were married at the beautiful chapel of Villa Hermosa and moved in with my dad's mother, Emma. He got a job at Coltejer, one of the largest textile mills in Medellin, while my mother stayed home. I was born a year later, in September of 1972. That's when the trouble began.

Since I've grown up and have heard many stories from various sources, I know pretty accurately what actually happened with my parents when I was very little. As I got older, I could see for myself.

There was really no way that my inexperienced schoolgirl mom could live up to the standards set by Grandma Emma. My dad was used to being looked after by her, waited on hand and foot, having his "special" meals prepared, his clothes laundered and ironed daily and all on a tight budget. The fact is, my father was spoiled rotten and my Grandma Emma treated him like the proverbial king-of-the-castle, the Favored Son syndrome and a typical thing with Colombian mothers, or rather, with some Colombian mothers. By contrast, my mom was unskilled at being a

wife and mother; she was hardly more than a kid herself, with her own ego-driven desires and teenage interests. She wouldn't bow down and cater to her husband's whims or provide the attention he demanded. He became ever more critical of her as a wife, especially when he'd been drinking. He would constantly scold her for not being a good mother to baby Eder. I saw a snapshot once of her holding me when I was about five months old; she did not look happy at all, and neither did I.

Mom was helpless in the kitchen, and that was another annoyance to my father. Being as young as she was, attractive and lively, Cecilia was naturally more interested in clothes and hanging out with her friends, the latest pop tunes, going to parties, having fun. My father didn't approve, he was always jealous of her easy way with people and there were fights about her flirting. As my mother always said when I got older, "Your father treated me like garbage." Punctuated with traditional Colombian slang, "He's nothing but a *Sumbambico!*" she'd say, using one of her favorite terms, meaning something like "a complete idiot."

As well as being spoiled brat, my dad was also hotheaded. Soon, his anger towards my mom went from hollering to serious tirades. The verbal attacks quickly escalated into physical abuse. He'd lose his temper over almost anything and start slapping Mom. But that wasn't enough punishment for her shortcomings as a wife and mother. After one of these beatings, he'd lock her in the dark, damp basement for hours at a time. "This was the nightmare your father put me through," she complained to me many times. "I should have killed the son of a bitch in his sleep! No, I should have killed the *sumbambico* before I got pregnant with you! That's what I should have done!"

It is hardly surprising that the only way my young mother could deal with this monster of a husband was with alcohol, as happens with so many of the powerless in this world and even

those who have lots of power. I've learned that it's literally the only way some people can cope with life. After a while, Mom began drinking heavily and staying out late, which gave Dad even more reason to erupt into his violent attacks and basement shut-ins, this was the vicious circle that perpetuated within their relationship.

One night, after my mother came home late, Dad grabbed her keys and threw her out of the house. "Go live with your friends, you *perra!*" he yelled obscenely, loud enough for the entire neighborhood to hear.

It was a while before anyone knew whether my mother was dead or alive.

Now that it was just my dad, Grandma Emma and me, the house was much more peaceful. I was in kindergarten and beginning to understand the world around me, mostly by the things I saw on television, which brought far away places into our humble living room. TV was an education in itself. One of my early recollections is of the curious New York City blackout of 1977. It was fascinating to me that people in such a big city had to deal with some of the same challenges that were just daily occurrences for us. Even more fascinating was that this was world wide news; after all, we lived this way on a weekly basis. I remember seeing news clips about a man named Elvis Presley who had died and people were making a big deal out of it.

Little things come back to me, goofy things. I remember Grandma had pet names for me, her favorite being *papasito*, meaning cute little fellow. Later, the kids in the neighborhood gave me another nickname. When I became fascinated with *Superman* and Christopher Reeve, they started calling me Ederman. I think I saw the original movie about 10 times; I was so obsessed

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with it, I started wearing a red cloth around my neck. In the beginning, I did it at home, but eventually I started doing it at school. “Is it Superman? No, it’s Ederman!” And that’s what most everyone began calling me, Ederman. The wisecracks all thought that was hilarious, playing off my movie hero like that. The joke wore thin but the name stayed. From then on, I was Ederman. I still sometimes sign messages like that.

My father remained working at the Coltejer textile company and Grandma Emma took care of me, while doing all the chores and keeping our small home spotless and tidy, even if the outside wasn’t much. We would walk to the noisy neighborhood market, where she would carefully pick out fresh items for the table. She would also take me to *El Centro*; we would go to *Junín*—downtown Medellín’s most popular place. It was full of movie theaters, street vendors and a park with beautiful fountains. We would often take time to stop for *empanadas* and hot chocolate and sometimes I’d get ice cream or candy. I distinctly remember treats being a very serious concern of mine and selections were not made hastily.

No matter how little money she had to spend, Emma always came up with delicious meals: *Sancochos*, *Bandeja paisas* and other traditional Colombian dishes, heavy on the pork and chicken. She was a sweet natured, salt-of-the-earth lady, very loving and giving. Grandma Emma was the first person to truly care about me.

At some point, when I was in first or second grade, my mother came back into the picture. She was living nearby and wanted to see her little boy. I’m told there were scenes and arguments, but eventually my father agreed to let her take me for a few days (my mother had threatened to go to court and sue for custody). As it turned out, Mom didn’t give a damn about seeing me. She was just using me as a way to get back at my father. She had a lot of warped ideas like that.

In the time my mother had been away, she had become a full-blown alcoholic and daily drug user. Instead of taking me to the amusement park like she'd promised, she took me to these horrible, dirty dives in Lovaina and the bad parts of Guayaquil. Sometimes we had to stay there overnight and I would see these men and women taking drugs and pairing off. My mother's main concern was finding money for drugs and booze; I can only guess what she did to scare up the cash. (I'm told her drug of choice was '*basuco*', a low-grade cocaine mixed with coca paste and cannabis.) She was drowning her pain and sorrow and I wasn't a consideration. As I said, my mother had to be high to deal with life.

Of course, I didn't understand all of that then. It would be years before I understood all the pain she was dealing with and for me to develop the level of compassion to forgive her, for now, I just knew my mother was someone I didn't want to be around, with her awful drinking, the slurred speech and those disgusting people. She was like this evil witch who would swoop in on me for a few days, take me to these creepy places, put me through a terrible time and then vanish for a couple of months. The only thing I liked about my mother was those cheery absences.

Finally, fearing another "visit" was about to happen, I asked Grandma if I had to go with my mom. When I told her about some of the places my mother was taking me, and the people she hung around with (I think I threw in some tears, too), Grandma Emma said I didn't have to go with her anymore. "Don't say anything to your father," she instructed. "I'll talk to Cecilia myself."

After that, my mother stopped coming around to fetch me and I began to feel a lot safer. Grandma Emma was watching out for me. I will always remember that, always.

And I will always remember the day it all fell apart and I was thrust back into the terror of my mother's clutches.

That day, I came home from school to find my father sitting at the kitchen table, weeping. This was unheard-of; I knew something terrible had happened. "Grandma's in the hospital," he managed between sobs.

The next day I didn't go to school and my father skipped work so we could visit Grandma. When I saw her lying in the hospital bed, looking pale and weak as she reached out to touch me, I tried to fight the tears but couldn't. They took me out so my father could be alone with her. That was the last time I saw Grandma Emma. It was that night, or the next, that she had a stroke and passed away in her sleep. I remember walking up that morning and hearing my dad cry all morning. I didn't have to ask the reason why; I knew what had happened, I could see it in his eyes.

At the time, I was in the second grade. I tried my best to deal with losing Grandma Emma (the only real mom I'd ever had), but it was a lonely and sad period. I hoped my father and I could pick up the pieces, build a new life together and maybe even be happy some day. I would take care of myself and go to school while he worked at the textile company. But this was just another futile, childish dream.

In fact, Dad took his mother's death very hard. He began to deteriorate, drinking heavily and staying out all night. I'd lie awake and wonder where he was and what would become of us. In the morning, I'd eat whatever I could find, a cold *arepa* with *quesito* and some hot chocolate, if there was any, and get myself off to school. But I was unable to concentrate on my studies, or anything else.

It wasn't long before my severely depressed father was skipping work and spending most of his time in the *barras* around the neighborhood, drinking *aguardiente* and hanging out with his friends. Sometimes they would throw parties that would go on for several days. He missed work often. He didn't care about anything, not himself, certainly not me. When the axe fell at his job, his behavior went into overdrive. He became increasingly erratic and unpredictable. He sold Grandma Emma's house and spent the money (which I was told he was supposed to share with his two brothers) on drinking and partying, anything that would help him forget his sorrows. Days would go by before he turned up.

As hard as my father tried to keep the household together, the death of Grandma Emma was simply too heavy a burden to bear—at least for the time being. It wasn't long before his grieving, his drinking, his incredible sense of loss all collided in his poor heart and soul and Dad had to be hospitalized. My recollections of this period are dim and hazy, but I do recall the image of my father morphing into a strange caricature of the reliable and generally sturdy workaday soul he typically was; his strong figure was ultimately replaced—for a time, that is, the time of his greatest pain and heartbreak—by a slurring, erratic soul whose emotions were apt to spill out anywhere and at anytime. My father spent the vast bulk of this time away from the household, as mentioned . . . no doubt partly from a sense of shame, due to the state he had descended into, but also, I'm sure, somewhere deep down inside, from a desire to spare his grieving son the additional spectacle of the complete breakdown of his father.

His continual dousing of his heart and body with mind-numbing, system-wrecking alcohol finally reached a point of terminal excess and he began to suffer the effects of acute alcohol poisoning. His body and mind, used as they were to a healthy routine of rich foods, exercise and sleep, could only suffer for so long the total replacement of all these essentials with alcohol, alcohol and only more alcohol.

After an incredible ten day binge, wandering about muttering and swaggering to and fro in an ever-deepening (and ever more dangerous) stupor, the family finally intervened. My father's seeming superhuman capacity to absorb outrageous amounts of alcohol had finally, it seemed, hit the wall.

It was the ever-reliable Uncle Fabio (who had been carefully watching over me during this tenuous period) who sprung into action to finally steer my father away from this disastrous behavior, which was pushing him directly towards the cemetery. Fabio bundled this muttering heap that once was my father, cleaned him, put him in fresh clothes and got him to the hospital quickly. He could sense that his poor brother's system was at last breaking down, finally and completely, under the strain of that constant torrent of booze.

All I knew was that my father went to the hospital for something. I don't recall the reason that was given, or if one was even given. After all, I was but a small child, just barely seven years old—the unedited, heavy facts of life going on out of my sight among the adults in my household were not often communicated. It was only much later in life that the sad details of this painful interlude in my father's life were related to me . . .

"It's a good thing you brought this man to us, here today, Señor Fabio," the doctor informed my uncle. "There is no question that, left to his own devices, this man would have approached a terminal state of poisoning very quickly. You probably saved his life. One more tiny binge added to his present, heavily deteriorated, state would have no doubt led to acute poisoning, mania and finally coma and death."

"Is he going to be alright?"

"He should be fine—that is physically," the doctor said. "But psychologically the same factors remain in place. We are purging his entire system clean. After he is completely detoxified he will need a period of rest and recuperation. He is going to be weak . . . very weak. I suggest very strongly that somebody stay with him and look after him. And," the doctor looked significantly at my uncle, "please get all alcoholic beverages out of his reach, if only for the time

being. Otherwise I'll be seeing you here again, perhaps under much more tragic and painful circumstances.

“I understand perfectly, doctor.”

My uncle described to me the sight that greeted him when he went to visit his typically proud, ever-efficient brother in his hospital room: there my father was, pinned like some dangerous lunatic to his hospital bed with restraining straps; IV's poking into his arms and tubes running down his throat, enduring a complete fluid detoxification of his system. The hospital had, essentially, stuck a series of hoses into my father to flush out every last drop of alcohol that he had absorbed over that titanic binge. The IV's were replacing all that poison with nutrient-rich saline solution.

When he was bundled home after discharge, my dad was extremely weak and running a very high fever. We all did our best to look after him, of course. Little did we realize that my father was not out of the woods yet. At first, he complained of itching and extreme discomfort—the tossing and turning in the bed, the maddening stretching of minutes into hours, that is common to all who are being weaned from drugs or alcohol.

The days wore on and, slowly but surely, he began to grow a little more comfortable in his bed. He found himself able to take little catnaps here and there. He wasn't, however, free and clear—not yet.

Having suffered the worst his body had to offer during his detox, it was now his mind's turn to run haywire on that long, slow road back to normalcy.

My uncle returned home from work, late one afternoon, and went to check on his brother. He found my father sitting up stiffly, strangely, looking disoriented. His eyes seemed far away, his

voice like an echo coming down a long, empty corridor. He sensed immediately that something was not right with him.

“That’s it,” my father explained, when my uncle asked him what was wrong. He gestured about the room with a stiff, mechanical arm. “It’s over.”

“What’s over?”

“Everything,” my father announced in monotone, but with huge significance. His eyes were wooden, bulged. “She came. Over there.” He pointed back to the head of his bed.

Breathlessly, in a hushed whisper, he explained to my poor, longsuffering uncle (who himself, let us not forget, was still dealing with Grandma’s death too!) what it was that had happened, that had scared him so terribly:

“Sleeping . . . I was sleeping, or almost asleep. And then I heard a noise, a noise to make your skin crawl. Then I knew the sound—the sound of a knife sharpening. Slowly, carefully, shhhrrp, shhhrrp,” he mimicked the sound. “Like a threat. Like the most terrible threat you ever heard in your life. I lifted my eyes and the mirror caught my attention.” He pointed limply to the mirror, his eyes bugged. “There she was. Face white as snow. Pale. Huge teeth. Grimacing. In a long cloak. Long and black, with a hood over her long head. What was she doing? Sharpening a scythe, smiling at me with a sick smile. Death Fabio, death.” His face went completely blank. “She came! For me. . . ”

My indefatigable uncle, once again, bundled my father up and rushed him back to the hospital. Clearly he wasn’t out of the woods yet.

Fabio told me my dad was really out of his mind, believing he had been “set up” by the FBI and that they had “stolen” Grandma’s house. “He’s claiming there’s this big international

conspiracy against him.” My uncle kind of spelled it out: dad was a bit crazy and I shouldn’t expect too much from him.

But my father seemed to be trying hard to keep it together. He had found a new job at a department store and wasn’t drinking nearly as much. We had moved to a tiny house in the neighborhood; it wasn’t much, but I was close to my school. Yet, despite this apparent recovery, something was going on in the background, something that was never fully explained to me.

One day, I left school and started walking toward home, only a couple of blocks away. My father had a habit of watching for me from the doorstep and I would wave when I got within sight. Suddenly, my mother appeared from across the street (with that “swooping in” bullshit of hers) and I was jolted to a stop. “Come on, papasito, let’s go get some ice cream,” she said with a friendly arm on my shoulder. “I just talked to your dad. He said it was okay.”

This didn’t exactly sound right and I looked down the street and saw my father. He waved and gave me a nod.

My mom led me across the street to a waiting taxi. As we drove off, I saw my father come down off the steps and hurry into the street, shouting, waving his arms. As we got near, my mother yelled, “Go!” and the driver shot past him. I looked back. He was standing there, throwing his hands up. It was obvious he had not wanted me to get into the cab with her. Alarm bells went off, but there was nothing I could do.

We drove to her mother’s house. “I thought we were getting ice cream,” I said.

“We will. But first Grandma Ines wants to see you.”

My mother’s mom was always nice to me and I was greatly relieved that we wouldn’t be left alone. Grandma Ines gave me some snacks and her son, my Uncle Wilson, taught me how to play video games, which were just then becoming available in Colombia. I was fascinated and

quickly learned how to work the controls. Wilson was fun to be with and we played for hours.

Even my mom was being nice, bringing me milk and cookies.

As the sun began to set, I asked when I was going back home. My mother just shook her head and Grandma Ines stayed in the kitchen. Suddenly, with my little kid perceptions, I knew they were not going to let me go back home. But I wanted to be back with my father. I definitely didn't want to be around my mother.

All I really remember of that night was my dad showing up with the police, followed by a lot of yelling and arguing. Dad was accusing my mother of kidnapping me and wanted her arrested. She was accusing him of being an unfit father, incapable of caring for a child. "He should go back to the crazy ward!"

Grandma Ines, I later found out, knew several local politicians and called one of them to the house. Eventually, the cops were persuaded that the matter of custody had to be settled in court. My father didn't get his way and the two officers escorted him out.

My mother was delighted. But I wasn't.

With the death of my grandmother, Emma, and the frightening disintegration of my father, I was in a zone of uncertainty and looming darkness. I was afraid a lot. But I had a safety net in my wise Grandma Ines. My mother was only around off and on, and would do her usual disappearing act for long periods. My grandmother did not approve of how her daughter was carrying on and understood my fear of her. For now, I would be safe.

She owned a large two-storey house in Belen, a much better neighborhood than I had been used to. Located in the southwestern part of Medellin, Belen is filled with parks and places to play and have fun. It is one of the oldest neighborhoods in the city and is crowded with large families. The area is divided by a wide boulevard, La Ochenta, one of the most colorful avenues in Medellin, lined with interesting mom and pop shops, arcades, lots of food stands and restaurants. The whole area is like one huge shopping mall.

Grandma's son, my sturdy Uncle Wilson—who would figure in one of the most important days in my life in my late teens—lived at home and was employed as a messenger at Prebel, a large cosmetics company. He was in his early twenties, good looking, honest and hard working. He treated me like a favorite nephew, whenever he wasn't flirting with some girl.

Now, I had two people around who cared about me and it became a happy period. Like my wonderful Grandma Emma, Grandma Ines was great at taking care of the house, cleaning, doing the laundry and all the rest. She, too, cooked great meals, with lots of fresh, healthy vegetables. Uncle Wilson supported us with wages from his messenger job and I went to the local elementary school. It was sort of a normal family, but instead of a mom and dad, I had a

grandmother and an uncle. This was fine with me. It was like one of those offbeat families in the sitcoms imported from the U.S.

Grandma Ines had worked hard all of her life. Like many girls in Colombia, she married young and had children right away. Early on, when her husband developed diabetes and lost his health, he couldn't work. In addition to being the mother of small children, and her husband's nurse, Ines became the family's breadwinner.

The underclasses of Medellin have little opportunity for formal education, but Grandma Ines had plenty of charm, life experience and know-how to draw on. She was always ready to roll up her sleeves and get to work. She began modestly, baby-sitting for wealthy families and this led to cooking for them (she was a wizard in the kitchen). Her husband died when the kids were little and she had to raise them as a single, working mom. At the time, she had two girls to care for, my mother Cecilia, and Rosa (Wilson came later). Grandma Ines had a positive, success-oriented attitude toward life; if you wanted something bad enough, and were willing to do whatever it took, you'd get there. My own sense of dogged determination I owe to Grandma Ines. Without her influence, I very much doubt I would have survived the troubles that came later.

Eventually, through contacts she'd made working for well-to-do families, my grandmother got a job as a receptionist at the exclusive Hotel Nutibara, one of Medellin's finest. She was good at networking and met a lot of influential VIP types, including city politicians. They liked her pleasing personality, innate intelligence and polite manners. She was often hired to baby-sit for them. When they learned about her culinary skills, she was asked to cook special meals for the various families. She even had their children stay with her at her home when the

parents had to be away from the city. Eventually, several important people who had befriended my grandmother loaned—or just gave her—the money needed to build a lovely new home.

She was still young and attractive and, around this time, met a sterling gentleman of forty. Efren worked as a distribution manager for the local beer brewery and had been there over twenty years. Although they never married or lived together, they had one child, my Uncle Wilson. Efren helped take care of the family and as I grew up I always called him Grandpa. From the accounts I've heard, they had something of a storybook love and they stayed together until he passed away, twenty-eight years later. I always remember Grandpa Efren as being, like his son, Wilson, hard working and dependable.

Living with Grandma and Uncle Wilson, with Grandpa Efren frequently around, I had stable influences and good role models. My Aunt Rosa and her husband came to visit often, bringing along my cousin, Tatiana. We would play together and became like brother and sister. Over the next few years, I did well in school and made friends easily. I learned to enjoy reading, to study diligently, to apply myself, to stay alert and to take pride in whatever I did. I was pretty good at sports, too. I played soccer in the neighborhood sandlot games, becoming a halfway decent midfielder.

My dad was hardly ever there during this time. Uncle Fabio had kept me informed about him. Losing his mother, his wife and his son, had unhinged my dad. Fabio knew of his meanness toward my mom, but his brother never wanted to talk about her; Fabio thought he was ashamed of how he'd behaved. Dad had become a heavy drinker, a morose drunk, and went from job to job. Once in a while, he'd call and promise to take me places, like the zoo, El parque Norte and the big amusement park outside of the city. I'd get up early on those days and wait for him all

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morning, looking forward to the fun we'd have, but a lot of times he just didn't show up. Sometimes he'd come to the house so crooked Grandma Ines wouldn't let me go with him. Fortunately, he always had a girlfriend and that's probably the only reason he didn't drink himself to death. A few years later, he left Colombia and moved to the States. He was to play a part in my future life, but at this time he was never really there.

Fortunately, my mother only stayed with us once in a while, a few days here, a week or two there. I tried to keep to my room or play outside when she was around. She would sleep late, eat, dress for the evening and depart. She would come back at night and I'd hear her having heated words with Grandma. I tried to tune it all out. Sometimes she'd come into my room and go into a tirade over everything that was wrong in her life, including me. At some point, she'd vanish and we wouldn't hear from her for a time. Same old; same story. Looking back, I see the pattern: she only came home when she needed help or money. Grandma Ines did not approve of her daughter's lifestyle, but she never stopped trying to help. It was not in her nature to say no.

My mother had been drinking for some time and finally her drug use also got out of hand. It was an expensive lifestyle and this led her to become involved in some sort of "companionship service" that catered to upscale professionals. She was living in the fast lane, way out on the edge. And then one day, out of nowhere, my mother had some amazingly good luck, or maybe it was just destiny.

She was still in her twenties, stylishly petite, quite good looking and a great dancer. At an exclusive nightclub she encountered this fellow, Alberto Gomez, an executive at a pharmaceutical firm. Alberto turned out to be an all-round nice person who had lost his wife in an auto accident, leaving him to raise his thirteen-year-old son, Carlos. As I was to learn, Alberto was from a wealthy family, well educated and well traveled, a very cosmopolitan man, with a

penchant for custom suits and vintage wristwatches. He was, no doubt, lonely and fell in love with my mother. After a couple of months of dating, he asked her to move in with him. He wanted to give her, and me, a better life. Grandma told me about it and said I should go with my mother. Alberto owned a gorgeous house in La Floresta, one of the finer neighborhoods in Medellin, and his son would be like a stepbrother. “You’ll have it better there,” Grandma promised. “Your mother’s young. Don’t worry. She’ll settle down. Alberto is just the man to help her.”

It sounded like an exciting adventure and maybe my mom would stop being so full of anger. With Grandma’s blessing, I looked forward to a new life.

I was ten years old when we moved in with Alberto, a few years younger than his boy, Carlos. The place was magnificent, a sprawling, two-storey, five-bedroom *hacienda*, finely decorated and set within a grove of tall, shady trees. There were flowering terraces and a big backyard. It was like Wonderland to me. I had my own room, with colorful kids’ furniture. I got a lot of new toys and nice clothes. Alberto even insisted on enrolling me in the same private school Carlos attended. The Instituto Conrado Gonzales; it was quite a change and I was happy.

I loved my new school, a fine, modern building with small classes and great teachers. Everyone wore cool clothes, white button-down shirts, jeans and black leather shoes. It did a lot for my confidence to have wealthy schoolmates accept me as one of them. Naturally, I’d always felt a little inferior to the upper classes, but at the new school I began to come into my own, feeling like I belonged. I was getting good grades in almost every subject and I never missed a homework assignment. When the jocks asked me to play in their soccer games, I usually came

through with some fancy footwork and dead-on place kicking. For the first time in my life, I was proud of myself.

My mother seemed happy with our rise in social status. I remember hearing her laughing; something I'd not heard her do very often. Alberto was definitely a steadying influence, just as Grandma Ines had said. I think Mom was drinking still, but now it was socially, with Alberto and his friends. We settled into a regular family routine: dinner together at home or a fine restaurant, outings in the park, trips to the movies. Everything went on well for over a year. I loved Alberto and thought of him as my stepfather. I got along fabulously with Carlos, even though he was a teenager and more interested in girls than a little brother.

However, my mother could not quit the alcohol and drug cycle; no matter how hard she tried (I learned later she had been in rehab a couple of times). She was good at hiding her addictions, but eventually it was out in the open and there was friction between her and Alberto. Sometimes there were hushed arguments. I began to get an uneasy, though familiar, feeling of dread.

Alberto was away at his office during the day and he sometimes had to travel to Bogota or Cali overnight on business for his pharmaceutical firm. Carlos was frequently off with his high school friends. This left me alone with my mom. Sometimes she would try to be the normal mom and sit with me to do homework, but that never worked out well. She would lose patience and start smacking me if I didn't have the correct answer, or the correct answer fast enough. At least it was only slapping I had to fear. Since moving in with Alberto, her really scary side had subdued. Or, that's what I thought.

Late one afternoon, I was in my room doing homework. My mother barged in and I could tell she was high and mad about something. I'd seen it many times before and I was afraid. I continued to do my homework and pretended she wasn't there.

Whenever she was drunk or stoned my mother always had an excuse for tearing into me. This time, she claimed I had been watching TV instead of doing my homework, which wasn't true.

"I'm almost done!" I cried, poised over a math textbook.

But it was too late. She rushed at me with a silver-buckled leather belt. "You *lazy* little bastard!"

I tried to dodge and squirm away, but in the close confines there was no place to run or hide. A stinging lash caught me on the shoulder, the neck and then across the face. I screamed and went down, the pain flashing through me. From the floor, I threw up my arms, but that only made the blows hurt more.

Frantic, I tried to crawl under the bed. She kicked me solidly in the side and grabbed an ankle. With that extra power smaller women seem to possess, she dragged me away from the bed, going berserk, yelling and cursing as she continued flailing me with the leather strap. At some point, the large silver buckle slammed into my forehead. I saw a burst of light and blood came trickling down into my eyes.

"Get up!" she demanded, jerking me by the arm. "Get up!"

Terrified and trapped, I staggered to my feet. "Please don't kill me," I blurted out.

"Kill you? Kill you! That's what you deserve!"

By now, there was blood spattered on the floor.

“You’ve *ruined* this rug!” She yanked me after her, across the hall to the bathroom and shoved me inside, slamming the door. “There! That’s a good place for you to die!”

Cringing in a corner, I was shaking with fear. When I was sure she’d gone downstairs, I took a towel, wiped the blood from my eyes, and looked in the mirror. There was an inch long gash in my forehead. I was a complete mess, wet with blood from face to chest. Would I bleed to death? I didn’t know what to do. I thought of Grandma Ines and wished I’d never left her house.

For a long time I stayed in the bathroom, holding the towel to my forehead, crying, wondering how long I had left. *Help me*, I prayed, *help me. Don’t let me die.*

And then I heard Alberto come in from work. Soon, he was yelling and running up the stairs. He flung open the bathroom door, saw me, saw all the blood and recoiled in raw horror. “My *God!*” Alberto wrapped a fresh towel around my head, rushed me down to his car and we sped to the local hospital’s emergency room.

It took ten stitches to close the wound in my forehead; I still have the scar. I was cut and bruised all over my face, neck, arms and legs. When these and the head wounds were treated and bandaged up, I came out looking like something Dr. Frankenstein had patched together on an off day. The X-rays showed I had a mild concussion and two cracked ribs, which made it excruciating to breathe.

“This child has been severely brutalized,” an outraged doctor told Alberto. He demanded to know how it happened and said it would have to be reported. My stepdad had to talk fast to stop him from calling in the authorities. I don’t know exactly what he told them; I was on heavy pain medication. Some money probably changed hands. After all, this was Medellin; this is how things were handled back then.

When we got home, Alberto tore into my mother. And it went on for hours and into the next day. Shouting and shrieking, doors banging (“Are you *crazy!*”). Alberto had been stunned by her violence. I knew he cared more about me than did my own mother. The doctor had ordered me to bed, so I couldn’t go to school, not the way I looked and felt. Carlos let me share his room and he stayed home with me, just in case. He had one of those simple video games like I’d played with Uncle Wilson. It was fun but I couldn’t get too excited. With my ribs banged up it was very painful to laugh, not to mention going to the bathroom.

Several days after the beating, Alberto came home from work and found Mom unconscious in her bedroom.