The Barrera-García Family

The Story of Manuel López Barrera and Otalia García Barrera

Working Draft: Prologue and Chapters 1-18

Manuel "Meme" Barrera

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The Barrera-García Family

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Prologue

Every family has a beginning, but very few families preserve the lives of the people who created it.

Birth certificates tell us when they entered the world.

Marriage licenses tell us whom they married.

Military records tell us where they served.

Death certificates tell us when they left us.

None of those records tell us who they were.

This book was born from a simple fear-that one day my parents would become only names on a family tree.

I knew the dates.

I knew the places.

I knew the documents.

But I wanted my children, my grandchildren, and those who come after them to know the people.

My father, Manuel López Barrera, was a quiet man. He survived the Great Depression, served in the Pacific during the Second World War, returned home, worked hard, raised his family, and rarely spoke about himself. Only years later did he sit down with my brother Joel and tell the story of his life in his own words.

My mother, Otalia García Barrera, possessed a quiet strength that held our family together. She did not seek recognition. She simply did what needed to be done. She raised eight children, fed everyone who came through her door, and carried life's burdens without asking for sympathy.

They were married in 1948 in the church at Roma, Texas.

Together they built a life that lasted more than half a century.

Near the end of that life, we knew my mother had very little time left.

Someone recorded a few quiet moments.

Her last recorded words were not spoken to one of her children.

They were spoken to the man she had loved for more than fifty years.

She simply said,

> *"Meme, te quiero."*

That was what she called my father.

He called me Memito.

There is no better way to begin their story than with those words.

This book is not about famous people.

It is about two ordinary people who lived extraordinary lives without ever believing they had done anything extraordinary.

I have written these pages for my brothers, my sisters, my children, my grandchildren, and for those who will someday wonder where they came from.

If, after reading this book, they feel that they have spent time with Manuel and Otalia Barrera rather than merely learned about them, then I will have succeeded.

- Manuel "Meme" Barrera

Chapter One

Fronton

Every story begins somewhere.

Mine begins on the banks of the Rio Grande in the small Starr County community of Fronton, Texas.

To people driving through South Texas today, Fronton is little more than a dot on the map. It sits quietly along the river that has connected and divided nations for centuries. Long before highways crossed Texas and before fences marked the border, the Rio Grande was simply part of everyday life. Families crossed it to visit relatives, trade goods, attend church, or simply because life on both sides of the river was deeply connected.

That was the world into which my parents were born.

Fronton was not a wealthy place.

It was a community built on hard work.

The land determined much of life. Families planted crops, raised livestock when they could, and depended upon one another during difficult times. Neighbors knew one another. Children grew up together. The church, the school, and the river became the landmarks around which life revolved.

The people who lived there measured success differently than many people do today.

A good name mattered.

Keeping your word mattered.

Providing for your family mattered.

Those values were never written on paper, but they were passed from one generation to the next.

My father, Manuel López Barrera, and my mother, Otalia García Barrera, were both children of that world.

Neither of them imagined that one day a world war would separate them by thousands of miles, or that together they would raise eight children whose lives would spread far beyond the little community where they had grown up.

To understand Manuel and Otalia, one must first understand Fronton.

Before there was war...

Before there was marriage...

Before there was family...

There was a small community beside the Rio Grande that quietly shaped the people they would become.

Chapter Two

The Families That Shaped Them

Every person inherits more than a name.

Long before Manuel López Barrera and Otalia García met, they inherited something far more valuable from the generations that came before them.

They inherited character.

The Barreras and the Garcías had lived along the lower Rio Grande for generations. Their roots reached deep into the history of South Texas and northeastern Mexico, where families survived by depending upon one another through droughts, floods, wars, changing governments, and hard times.

They were not wealthy.

Most lived from the work of their hands.

Their wealth was measured differently.

A good reputation.

An honest day's work.

Faith in God.

Loyalty to family.

Those were the possessions they hoped to leave their children.

My father's family understood hardship all too well.

Before Manuel was born, his father, Felipe Barrera, had already lost his first wife during childbirth.

Years later he married Genoveva López.

Genoveva also entered the marriage carrying sorrow. Her first husband, a man named Reséndez, had died, leaving her with a young son. Felipe accepted the boy into his family and raised him as one of his own.

Together they began building a new life.

Manuel was born in 1917.

Armando followed in 1920.

Then tragedy struck again.

In 1922, Genoveva died.

Her death certificate records childbirth as the cause of death. Whether the child survived remains one of the unanswered questions in our family history. Despite years of research, I have never found a record that answers that question with certainty.

Her death changed the lives of everyone in the family.

The years that followed would shape Manuel in ways that only those who knew hardship as children could fully understand.

Otalia García's childhood followed a different path.

She grew up in Fronton, surrounded by family, faith, and the routines of ranch life. From an early age she learned that every member of the household had responsibilities. Children were expected to help, not because anyone ordered them to, but because that was simply how families survived.

The women around her taught by example.

They taught her to cook, to care for younger children, to work without complaint, and to place the needs of the family before her own.

Those lessons would remain with her for the rest of her life.

Although my parents grew up in different circumstances, they inherited many of the same values.

Neither expected life to be easy.

Neither feared hard work.

Neither measured success by wealth.

Both believed that a family's greatest responsibility was to care for one another.

Long before they ever met, their parents and grandparents had already begun preparing them for the lives they would one day build together.

The story of Manuel and Otalia did not begin with their marriage.

It began with the families that shaped them.

Chapter Three

Santos

Manuel López Barrera was still a young boy when his mother died.

Genoveva López died in 1922. Her death certificate states that she died in childbirth, though the fate of that child remains unknown. What is known is that Manuel was only a small child when his mother was taken from him.

At that age, a child does not understand death the way adults do.

He only understands absence.

A voice is gone.

A face is gone.

The person who should have been there each morning is no longer there.

For the rest of his life, my father carried a story that began with that absence.

After Genoveva's death, the family could not remain together in the way it had been before. This was not unusual for poor families in South Texas during those years. When tragedy came, relatives stepped forward. Children were taken in by aunts, uncles, grandparents, or other family members. Families did what they had to do, not because life was easy, but because children still needed to be raised.

My father's brother Armando was raised by Inocente.

My father was raised by Santos.

Santos was my father's aunt. Her name may sound unusual to some readers because Santos can be either a man's name or a woman's name, but in our family she was Tía Santos.

She became one of the most important people in my father's life.

By the time she cared for him, Santos had already known loss herself. Her husband had passed away, yet she continued to care for Manuel. She did not turn away from the responsibility. She kept him, fed him, guided him, and gave him the closest thing to a mother's care that life allowed him to have.

That kind of love does not always appear in official records.

A census may list a child as a nephew.

A document may show names in the same household.

But no document can explain what it means for a woman already carrying her own burdens to continue raising a boy who needed her.

Santos gave Manuel a home.

That simple sentence carries more weight than it first appears.

A home is more than a roof.

A home is where a child learns whether the world is safe.

It is where he learns whether someone will feed him, correct him, protect him, and expect something of him.

It is where he learns whether he belongs.

My father did not grow up with the softness that many children today might expect. Life along the lower Rio Grande did not allow much softness. Children were expected to work. They were expected to listen. They were expected to help. Poverty did not wait for anyone to feel ready.

But there is a difference between hardship and abandonment.

Santos made sure he was not abandoned.

She could not give him an easy life.

No one could.

But she gave him care.

That care helped shape the man he became.

When I think of my father as an old man, I often remember his quietness. He was not a man who explained himself much. He did what had to be done. He got up. He worked. He came home. He worked some more. He sat with his family. He did not complain.

I believe some of that began in childhood.

A boy who loses his mother early learns that life can change without warning.

A boy raised by relatives learns that family is not only the people who bring you into the world.

Family is also the person who stays.

Santos stayed.

That is why she belongs in this book.

Without Santos, the story of Manuel Barrera cannot be told correctly.

She was not famous.

She did not serve in a war.

She did not leave behind speeches or medals.

But she raised a boy who would one day cross the Pacific, survive the war, return home, marry Otalia García, and help build the family to whom this book is dedicated.

In family history, some people appear only briefly in the records, yet their influence lasts for generations.

Santos was one of those people.

My father may not have spoken often about emotions, but his life showed what he had learned.

Responsibility.

Endurance.

Work.

Loyalty.

Family.

Those lessons did not begin in the Army.

They began long before then, in the years when a young boy without his mother was taken in and raised by a woman who chose not to let him stand alone.

That was Santos's gift to him.

And through him, it became part of what she gave to all of us.

Chapter Four

Work Before Childhood Was Over

Manuel López Barrera was born in 1917, in a place where childhood ended early.

In Fronton, children learned quickly that every pair of hands mattered. Families did not have the luxury of letting children grow up slowly. There was always work to be done, and a child old enough to help was expected to help.

That was the world my father inherited.

He did not grow up with many choices.

He grew up with responsibilities.

The lower Rio Grande was beautiful, but it was not easy country. The river gave life to the land, but the land demanded labor in return. Families worked in fields, tended animals, repaired what broke, and depended upon one another because there was often no one else to depend upon.

My father learned those lessons as a boy.

He learned that work came before comfort.

He learned that complaining did not change the work.

He learned that a man's value was often measured by whether he could be counted on.

Those lessons stayed with him for the rest of his life.

He was naturally left-handed, but even that was not left alone.

In school, teachers forced him to write with his right hand. In those days, being left-handed was treated as something to correct, not something to accept. No one asked whether it made sense. No one asked whether it was fair.

He adjusted.

Years later, the Army would do the same thing. When he tried to shoulder a rifle on the left, they made him shoot right-handed. Still, he always believed he was a good rifleman.

That was one of the patterns of his life.

Something difficult was put in front of him.

He adjusted.

Then he kept going.

As he grew older, the demands on him increased. The death of his mother had already changed the family. Poverty and circumstance did the rest. Like many boys of his generation, he entered the world of adult responsibility before he had finished being a child.

There came a time when he had to leave and look for work.

He was still very young.

Years later, he told stories about those days in the plain way he told most things. One story stayed with me. He once slept in an irrigation ditch because he had nowhere better to sleep. During the night, water was released into the ditch, and he woke up soaked.

He could tell that story with humor.

But the truth behind it was not funny.

A boy was sleeping in an irrigation ditch because survival required it.

That was the kind of childhood my father knew.

Not a childhood of toys, vacations, and school memories preserved in photographs.

A childhood of work.

Movement.

Hunger.

Responsibility.

Finding a place to sleep.

Taking whatever job could be found.

Learning to endure.

I do not remember my father speaking about those years with bitterness. He did not present himself as a victim. He did not use hardship as an excuse. He seemed to accept that life had been hard because, for many people of his generation, life simply was hard.

But hardship leaves marks.

Some people become angry.

Some become broken.

My father became steady.

The man I knew later in life carried those early lessons into everything he did. He got up every morning and went to work. He came home and worked in the yard. He sat down to supper with his family. He did not miss work. He did not make excuses.

Only later did I understand that those habits had roots.

They began long before he became a soldier.

Before the uniform.

Before the Pacific.

Before Saipan and Okinawa.

Life had already begun training him.

The Army would teach him many things, but it did not teach him endurance.

Fronton had already done that.

Chapter Five

New Mexico

Before the Army carried Manuel López Barrera across the Pacific, the Great Depression carried him away from Fronton.

He was still a young man when he left home to work with the Civilian Conservation Corps. The CCC was a government program created during the hard years of the Depression. For many young men, it offered what families could not always provide: work, food, clothing, a place to sleep, and a small paycheck.

For my father, it offered something else.

Distance.

Until then, much of his world had been shaped by Fronton, the Rio Grande, family, work, and survival. The CCC took him to New Mexico, away from the land where he had been born and away from the people who had raised him.

There is a photograph of him from those years.

In that photograph, he is not yet the man his children would know.

He is not yet the soldier who would serve in the Pacific.

He is not yet the husband of Otalia García.

He is still young.

Still quiet.

Still becoming.

The CCC did not give young men an easy life. It gave them routine. They rose early, worked with their hands, lived in camps, followed orders, and learned to do their part as members of a larger group.

For my father, some of that must have felt familiar.

Work was not new to him.

Hardship was not new to him.

Discipline was not new to him.

What was new was leaving home and living under rules made by an organization instead of family, ranch life, or necessity.

That mattered.

The CCC became a doorway between the boy from Fronton and the soldier he would later become.

Long before he wore an Army uniform, he had already learned how to live away from home. He had learned how to sleep where he was told to sleep, work where he was told to work, and follow the rhythm of camp life.

The Army would later demand those same things from him.

But the Army did not meet an untested boy.

Life had already tested him.

Fronton had taught him endurance.

Work had taught him responsibility.

The CCC taught him distance.

I do not know everything my father felt during those New Mexico years. Like many men of his generation, he did not leave long explanations of what was in his heart. He left photographs, documents, and stories told in pieces.

Sometimes family history is built from fragments.

A photograph.

A place.

A name on a record.

A memory saved by someone who knew enough to keep it.

But fragments can still tell the truth.

The photograph from New Mexico tells us that Manuel López Barrera did not wait for life to become easy. He went where work could be found. He accepted hardship because hardship had already been part of his life.

And perhaps, without knowing it, he was being prepared for something much larger.

Soon the world would change.

Pearl Harbor would come.

The Army would call.

The Pacific would become part of his life forever.

But before all of that, there was New Mexico.

There was the CCC.

And there was a young man from Fronton learning that life could carry him far from the banks of the Rio Grande.

Chapter Six

Scraps of Cloth

Before Otalia García Barrera became my mother, she was a girl who learned to make something useful from whatever life placed in her hands.

That was one of her gifts.

She could take scraps of fabric that others might have thrown away and turn them into something needed, something warm, something beautiful.

When I think of my mother, I often think of her sewing.

Not as a hobby.

Not as something she did because there was extra time.

Sewing was part of survival.

It was part of love.

It was part of how poor families made do without ever thinking of themselves as poor in spirit.

My mother saved pieces of cloth. Small pieces. Leftover pieces. Scraps that still had life in them. She and my Aunt Tina would set up sticks, or some kind of frame, sit down together, and sew quilts from those saved pieces of fabric.

Those quilts were not decorations.

We used them.

In the winter, they kept us warm.

Our house had one wall heater. At night, that heater was turned off for safety. When the cold settled into the house, those quilts mattered.

They were warmth made by hand.

They were proof that my mother could take almost nothing and turn it into enough.

That was Otalia.

She did not waste.

She did not complain.

She used what she had.

There is another story that tells the same truth.

When she was young, a street photographer came through, and my mother paid a quarter to have her picture taken. A quarter was not nothing in those days. For a poor girl, it meant the photograph mattered.

Her younger sister wanted a photograph too, but she did not have a dress.

My mother found fabric. It may have been cloth she had saved, or perhaps a flour sack, the kind of material families used when nothing was wasted. Whatever it was, she sewed a dress so her sister could stand before the photographer and have her picture taken.

That story has stayed with me.

It was not only about a dress.

It was about dignity.

A little girl wanted to be photographed, and Otalia made sure she could be.

That was already my mother before she became the mother I knew.

She was already thinking of someone else.

She was already using her hands to help.

She was already making beauty out of necessity.

Her family knew hard work. They were migrant workers and followed the crops north, even as far as Michigan to pick cherries. That kind of life did not leave much room for softness. Families moved where work could be found. Children learned that food, clothing, and shelter came from labor.

My mother learned those lessons young.

But what I remember most is not only the hardship.

It is what she did with it.

Some people are made hard by hard lives.

My mother became strong.

There is a difference.

Hardness closes the heart.

Strength carries the weight and keeps loving.

Otalia carried the weight.

She carried it as a daughter.

She carried it as a sister.

She would one day carry it as a wife and mother.

The same hands that sewed scraps into quilts would later make tortillas, dresses, school clothes, costumes, and meals for a large family. The same mind that learned to save every useful piece of fabric would later find ways to stretch food, money, time, and energy for eight children.

My sisters remember her creativity.

They remember the dresses she sewed.

They remember the costumes she made.

They remember that other people noticed.

But that creativity did not begin after she married.

It began earlier, in a life where nothing useful could be wasted and where love often appeared as something made by hand.

I am still trying to learn the names of everything she made. There was something she sewed that I remember as "yo-yos," or something like that - small pieces of fabric joined together, perhaps another way of turning scraps into something beautiful. One of my sisters may still have one. If we find it, it will belong with this story.

Because objects like that are not only objects.

A quilt is not only a quilt.

A dress is not only a dress.

A photograph is not only a photograph.

They are evidence.

They show us who a person was when no one thought history was watching.

My mother did not need much to create something lasting.

A needle.

Thread.

Saved scraps of cloth.

A need in front of her.

That was enough.

And in those early years, before marriage, before children, before the long life she would build with Manuel López Barrera, Otalia García was already becoming the woman her children would one day remember.

Resourceful.

Creative.

Unselfish.

Strong.

A woman who could take scraps of cloth and make warmth.

A woman who could take hardship and make home.

Chapter Seven

The Home Place

Before Otalia García Barrera followed the crops, before she married Manuel López Barrera, before she became the mother of eight children, she belonged to a home place.

It was not a large house.

It was not a comfortable house in the way people might think of comfort today.

But it was home.

The house had concrete floors. The kitchen was in a separate room, with a wood-burning stove. In winter, heat came from a large butane tank. When we visited, we slept on the floor.

That was the kind of place it was.

Plain.

Practical.

Built more for use than appearance.

Years later, after my grandmother passed away and the remaining daughter married, the house was abandoned. A photograph of it still shows the world my mother came from: a modest house behind a fence, dry grass, trees, and the quiet look of a place that once held a family.

A house like that does not look like much to strangers.

But to a family, it can hold everything.

Behind the house, they grew corn and other vegetables. They kept hogs and goats. Food came from work, not convenience. The land, the animals, the kitchen, and the hands of the women all worked together.

They ate tortillas, beans, rice, vegetables, and chicken when they could get it.

It was good food.

It was not expensive food.

It was the food of people who knew how to make enough out of what they had.

At home, they had goat's milk. When a goat was slaughtered, it was hung so the blood could drip down, and even the blood was used in cooking. That may sound strange to those who grew up differently, but in that world nothing useful was wasted.

That was one of the lessons my mother learned early.

Waste was not a small thing.

Cloth was saved.

Food was stretched.

Animals were used carefully.

The garden mattered.

The stove mattered.

Water mattered.

Every useful thing had value.

I believe that world shaped my mother as much as any school could have shaped her.

She learned how to work because work was everywhere.

She learned how to cook because people had to eat.

She learned how to save because there was no room for waste.

She learned how to care for others because family survival depended on it.

Later, when she had children of her own, those lessons returned in everything she did.

They returned in the tortillas she made.

They returned in the meals she cooked.

They returned in the dresses, costumes, quilts, and other things she sewed.

They returned in the way she could stretch money, food, time, and energy farther than seemed possible.

My mother did not become resourceful after she married.

She had been learning resourcefulness all her life.

The home place taught her.

The concrete floors taught her.

The separate kitchen with the wood-burning stove taught her.

The garden behind the house taught her.

The hogs and goats taught her.

The cold nights taught her.

The need to make do taught her.

Some houses are remembered because they were beautiful.

Others are remembered because of what they asked from the people who lived there.

My mother's house was that kind of house.

It asked for work.

It asked for endurance.

It asked for hands that knew what to do.

And Otalia García learned.

She learned so well that years later, her children would remember her not as someone defeated by hardship, but as someone who could turn hardship into a home.

Chapter Eight

Following the Crops

Home was important, but work did not always stay near home.

Otalia García's family were migrant workers. They followed the crops wherever work could be found.

They began in the Rio Grande Valley with melons. From there, they followed the cotton north. At some point, they traveled as far as Michigan to pick cherries. There may have been other crops and other places, but like many families of that time, they went where work was available.

The road became part of life.

They traveled in a truck.

That truck was more than transportation.

It was where they rode.

It was where they carried what they owned.

It was where they slept.

For families like my mother's, movement was not adventure. It was survival. Work appeared in one place, then ended. Another crop was ready somewhere else. Another field needed hands. The family moved again.

There is a photograph of that truck in the fields.

When I look at it, I do not see only a vehicle. I see a moving home. I see a family carrying its life from one field to another. I see the kind of childhood my mother knew before she ever had children of her own.

Migrant life was not easy.

When families stayed in places provided for workers, the housing was often little more than a shed with windows and doors. There was no electricity. Outhouses stood outside. Water came from one shared location, and people had to go get it.

I know something of those places because I saw their echo when I traveled with my grandparents.

I remember the rain.

I remember the worms.

I remember the outhouses.

I remember water being something you went to get, not something that appeared because you turned a handle.

But I also remember that hardship was not the only thing there.

On Sundays, there could be a creek.

We made hooks from pins and went fishing.

Children can find joy even in places adults would only describe as poor.

That is part of the truth too.

My mother's family worked hard, but they were still a family. They ate together. They traveled together. They slept where they could. They followed the work because the work fed them.

The fields taught lessons that stayed with people.

They taught patience.

They taught endurance.

They taught children that food came from labor.

They taught families to move when movement was necessary.

They taught people to carry home inside themselves because the place where they slept might change from season to season.

That lesson would matter in my mother's life.

Later, when she married and raised children, she became the center of the home. She made food. She sewed clothes. She kept the family together. She gave stability to others.

But before she gave stability, she had known movement.

Before she built a home, she had lived on the road.

Before she fed children of her own, she had picked crops with her family so everyone could eat.

That is why the truck matters.

That is why the fields matter.

That is why the worker sheds, the outhouses, the shared water, the rain, the worms, and even the Sunday creek belong in this story.

They show the world that shaped Otalia García.

She did not learn strength from speeches.

She learned it from work.

She learned it from travel.

She learned it from fields.

She learned it from sleeping where the family could sleep and waking up to do what had to be done.

The woman her children later knew did not appear suddenly after marriage.

She had been forming all along.

In the home place.

In the fields.

On the road.

In the back of a truck that carried a family from one crop to the next.

Chapter Nine

When Their Roads Met

By the time Manuel López Barrera returned from the war, he was no longer the young man who had left South Texas.

He had lived through poverty.

He had worked in the CCC.

He had crossed the Pacific.

He had served as a medic and litter bearer in places most people at home could hardly imagine.

He had seen Saipan.

He had seen Okinawa.

He had known what war did to bodies, to fear, and to memory.

When he came home, he brought those things back with him, even if he did not speak of them often.

Otalia García had also been shaped by her own life.

She had grown up in a working family. She knew concrete floors, a wood-burning stove, quilts made from scraps, fields, crops, migrant travel, and the kind of work that allowed little room for complaint.

She had learned to sew, cook, save, stretch, and care for others.

She was not waiting in the story as simply the woman my father would marry.

She had her own history.

Her own strength.

Her own formation.

My father later said he had known Otalia since she was a little girl. They came from the same world, the same river country, the same network of families, work, church, and community.

But knowing someone as a child is not the same as seeing that person as the one with whom you will build a life.

After the war, he saw her differently.

That simple change matters.

Two lives that had been shaped separately began moving toward one another.

Manuel brought with him the quiet endurance of a boy who had lost his mother, the discipline of work, the experience of the CCC, and the memories of war.

Otalia brought the strength of a girl who had followed the crops, helped make warmth from scraps of cloth, learned to care for family, and understood that love often appeared in work done by hand.

Neither came to marriage empty.

Each brought a history.

Each brought wounds.

Each brought habits.

Each brought lessons learned the hard way.

That may be one reason their marriage lasted.

They did not enter life together expecting ease.

They knew better.

My father had learned that life could take a person far from home.

My mother had learned that home could be carried and remade wherever the family had to go.

Together, those lessons would matter.

At some point after the war, Manuel moved to Corpus Christi. He went there in 1947 and worked where work could be found. Construction. Restaurant work. Whatever job was available.

That too was part of him.

He did not wait for the perfect work.

He worked.

It is easy to make love stories sound softer than they really were.

But the story of Manuel and Otalia was not built from softness alone.

It was built from recognition.

He recognized in her the kind of strength he understood.

She recognized in him the kind of steadiness life had taught her to value.

Before they became husband and wife, they were two people formed by the same hard country, the same river world, and the same belief that family was not something spoken about.

It was something carried.

Soon, their lives would meet at the altar.

But before the wedding, there was this quieter truth:

Manuel and Otalia were not beginning from nothing.

They were bringing two histories together.

Chapter Ten

Roma, 1948

In 1948, Manuel López Barrera and Otalia García were married in the church at Roma, Texas.

That church matters in our family history.

It was not only where my parents married.

It was also where my paternal grandparents had married.

For families like ours, places like that become more than buildings. They hold baptisms, marriages, funerals, prayers, promises, and memories that pass from one generation to the next.

A courthouse record can tell us the date.

A church record can tell us the names.

But neither record can fully tell us what it meant for Manuel and Otalia to stand there together.

He was a veteran of the Second World War.

She was a young woman formed by work, family, sewing, migrant labor, and the responsibilities of a hard life.

They came to that church carrying more than themselves.

Behind Manuel stood the story of Felipe Barrera and Genoveva López, the death of his mother, the care of Santos, the work of childhood, the CCC, and the war in the Pacific.

Behind Otalia stood the story of the García family, the home place, the crops, the truck, the quilts, the cooking, the sewing, the garden, the goats, and the lessons of a family that survived by work.

When they married, those histories came together.

Marriage did not rescue them from hardship.

It joined them inside it.

At the time they married, my father was working washing dishes. Their first place together was no better than what they had known in Fronton. It may have been worse.

That is important to remember.

Their life together did not begin with comfort.

It began with work.

It began with rented rooms, poor housing, low wages, and the same need to endure that had shaped both of them before they ever stood together at the altar.

No young couple can see the full road ahead.

They could not know that one day they would raise eight children.

They could not know that their children would remember homemade tortillas, Sunday barbacoa, school clothes, work, discipline, faith, and the quiet certainty that they were loved.

They could not know that years later, my mother would write down the important dates of the family, preserving births, moves, and memories in her own hand.

They could not know that on April 3, 1952, they would move into the house at 4141 Barrera, the house where all of us would be raised.

But all of that began with the promise made in Roma.

In that church.

In 1948.

With two people who had already known hardship and were willing to face the rest of life together.

Chapter Eleven

The First Home

Marriage did not bring Manuel and Otalia Barrera into comfort.

It brought them into life together.

When they married, my father was working washing dishes. It was honest work, but it was not work that promised an easy beginning. They did not start married life with money, property, or security. They started with what they had always known.

Work.

Need.

Endurance.

Their first place together was no better than what they had known in Fronton. It may have been worse.

My mother told me a story from those early days that stayed with me.

The place had cockroaches.

My father, trying to do something about it, put out poison. Somehow the landlord's chickens got into it, and some of them died.

The landlord evicted them.

It is the kind of story that can almost sound funny when told years later, but underneath the humor is the truth of their beginning.

They were poor.

They were renting.

They were living in a place where cockroaches were part of daily life.

And when my father tried to solve one problem, it created another.

That was how their married life began.

Not with romance made soft by memory.

Not with a beautiful first home.

Not with a world waiting to welcome them.

They began in a place so poor that poison for roaches ended with dead chickens and eviction.

But that story also says something about my father.

He was not passive.

If something needed doing, he tried to do it.

There were roaches, so he put out poison.

Maybe it was not the right solution.

Maybe it caused more trouble than it solved.

But he acted.

That was my father.

He did not sit around discussing a problem forever. He did something.

And my mother remembered.

She carried the story with her, the way families carry early hardships after they have survived them. Over time, even painful memories can become part of the family record, not because they were easy, but because they proved that the family endured.

That first home did not last.

They were evicted.

They moved on.

For some families, that kind of beginning might have become a sign of failure.

For Manuel and Otalia, it was simply one more hardship to survive.

Both of them had already known hard lives before they married. My father had known loss, work, the CCC, and war. My mother had known migrant labor, concrete floors, wood smoke, fields, sewing, and making do with little.

They were not strangers to difficulty.

Their marriage began inside difficulty, but it did not end there.

They kept going.

That may be the most important part of the story.

Not the cockroaches.

Not the poison.

Not the chickens.

Not even the eviction.

The important part is that they kept going.

A young couple can lose a rented room and still build a family.

They can begin with almost nothing and still create a home remembered by their children for the rest of their lives.

That is what Manuel and Otalia did.

The first place was temporary.

The hardship was temporary.

But the marriage endured.

And a few years later, my mother would write down a date that marked the beginning of something more lasting.

April 3, 1952.

The day they moved into the house.

Chapter Twelve

4141 Barrera

My mother was a keeper of family history.

She did not call herself that.

She did not sit at a desk writing a book.

But she wrote down the things that mattered.

She recorded the day and time of her children's births. She saved dates. She remembered events. She kept the small facts that later become the bones of family history.

One of those notes still exists.

On a small calendar page, in her own handwriting, my mother wrote:

> *Nos cambiamos pa la casa - Abril 3, 1952.*

We moved to the house - April 3, 1952.

The house was 4141 Barrera.

That date matters.

It was more than a move.

It was a turning point.

After the poor first place, after the cockroaches, after the poison, after the dead chickens, after the eviction, Manuel and Otalia came to the house where their family would be raised.

To someone outside the family, 4141 Barrera may have been only an address.

To us, it became the center of the world.

It was the house where children were born into memory.

It was the house where meals were cooked.

It was the house where school clothes were sewn.

It was the house where homemade tortillas were made.

It was the house where my father came home from work, worked in the yard, sat down to supper, and lived the quiet routine that became part of who he was.

It was the house where my mother turned labor into family life.

That house did not become important because it was grand.

It became important because of what happened inside it.

My father worked at the Naval Air Station in Corpus Christi, where he would remain until retirement. That government job gave the family something steady. After the uncertainty of his early life, after the war, after the first poor places where he and my mother began married life, steady work mattered.

But the stability of 4141 Barrera did not come only from a paycheck.

It came from discipline.

My parents paid cash for the house.

They did not believe in credit.

As the family grew, the house grew with us. Rooms were added when they were needed, but they were added only when they could be paid for. The house was not built all at once. It expanded as the family expanded, one room, one need, one payment at a time.

That was how my parents lived.

They saved quietly.

They paid cash.

They avoided debt.

They put their children first.

My father bought new cars, but he bought them the same way he bought everything else - when he could pay for them. I still remember when he went to buy a 1964 Ford Galaxie 500 station wagon. The salesman looked at him and seemed to humor him, as if a man who came in wearing a T-shirt could not really afford the car he was asking about.

Then my father took out the money and paid for it.

That was my father.

He did not need to look rich.

He only needed to know what he had earned.

Years later, after both of my parents had passed away, we learned how much they had saved. They had accumulated close to four hundred thousand dollars in cash, along with two homes.

We had not known.

They had saved for their children's education. They had saved for security. They had saved because they knew what it meant to begin with little and because they never wanted their children to face life without a foundation.

Yet even with that security, they stayed in the same house.

They did not move to a grander place.

They did not live to impress anyone.

They remained at 4141 Barrera.

That tells us something important.

They did not live modestly because they had failed to build wealth.

They lived modestly because showing wealth never mattered to them.

Family mattered.

Education mattered.

Owning what they had mattered.

Not owing money mattered.

Eight children would be raised from that home.

There would be noise, chores, meals, arguments, laughter, discipline, illness, school, work, and all the ordinary things that become extraordinary only after time has passed.

My mother stood at the center of that house.

She cooked.

She sewed.

She remembered.

She kept the family moving.

My father gave the house steadiness.

He worked.

He provided.

He came home.

He did what needed to be done.

Together, they turned an address into a family.

That is why my mother's note matters so much.

She did not write a long explanation.

She did not describe the hardships that came before it.

She did not know that one day her son would look at that little note and understand it as evidence.

She simply wrote down the date.

April 3, 1952.

But sometimes a few words are enough.

In that one sentence, my mother preserved the moment when Manuel and Otalia moved from surviving place to place into the home where their children would know them.

The house at 4141 Barrera became the place from which we measured childhood.

It was where my parents' separate histories became our shared family history.

It was where poverty became discipline.

It was where work became security.

It was where saving became education.

It was where a small house grew with a large family.

And it was where Manuel López Barrera and Otalia García Barrera proved, day after day, that a home is not measured by how grand it looks from the street, but by what is built inside it.

Chapter Thirteen

Eight Children

The house at 4141 Barrera did not stay quiet for long.

In time, it became the home of eight children.

I was the oldest.

After me came my brothers and sisters: Enedelia, whom we called Nena; Jose Alonzo; Mario Alberto; Anna Maria; Jorge Luis; Joel Andres; and Lydia Norma.

Eight children can fill a house in every way possible.

With noise.

With chores.

With arguments.

With schoolbooks.

With meals.

With laughter.

With crying.

With clothes that needed washing.

With shoes that needed replacing.

With questions, illnesses, report cards, and all the ordinary demands that come with raising a large family.

My parents did not raise us with speeches.

They raised us with routine.

My father got up and went to work. He came home. He worked in the yard. He sat down to supper with us. He did not miss work. He did not make excuses. He showed us responsibility by living it every day.

My mother held the house together.

She cooked.

She sewed.

She washed.

She remembered.

She made tortillas.

She made meals stretch.

She made clothes last.

She made sure children were cared for, fed, corrected, and sent into the world with what they needed.

In a family of eight children, nothing happens by accident.

There was only one bathroom in the house. On school days, I learned to get up early because if I waited too long, one of my brothers or sisters might decide to camp there. In a large family, even using the bathroom required planning. A small delay could throw off the whole morning.

That was part of growing up in a crowded house.

You learned to move early.

You learned to wait.

You learned that space was shared.

You learned that a family was not only love and belonging. It was also timing, patience, noise, and learning how to live around one another.

Food had to be planned.

Clothes had to be mended.

School had to be watched.

Money had to be stretched.

Discipline had to be given.

Love had to be shown in ways children might not understand until many years later.

My mother recorded the day and time of our births. That detail says something about her. In the middle of all the work required to raise a family, she still paused long enough to preserve the record.

She knew we mattered.

She knew our beginnings mattered.

She wrote them down.

Those notes became part of the family history because my mother understood, perhaps better than anyone, that a family is made not only from big events, but from small facts saved with care.

The house at 4141 Barrera held all of that.

It held my father's steadiness and my mother's labor.

It held the smell of food cooking.

It held the sound of children moving from room to room.

It held school mornings and tired evenings.

It held Sunday meals.

It held the daily life that children often take for granted because they do not yet understand how much work it takes to make a home feel ordinary.

That may have been one of my parents' greatest achievements.

They made responsibility look ordinary.

They made sacrifice look ordinary.

They made love look like breakfast, clean clothes, a ride when one was needed, a repaired dress, a paid bill, a yard kept, a meal on the table, and a father coming home every day.

Only later does a child understand that none of that was ordinary.

It was built.

Day after day.

By two people who had known hardship long before their children were born.

The eight of us grew up inside that work.

We did not always see it.

Children rarely do.

But we were shaped by it.

We were shaped by a father who gave us steadiness and a mother who gave us home.

And whatever each of us became later in life, all of us began there.

At 4141 Barrera.

In the house where Manuel and Otalia turned survival into family.

Chapter Fourteen

The Promise of Education

My parents believed in education.

They may not have spoken of it in the way schools, universities, or politicians speak of it, but they understood its value.

Education meant possibility.

It meant a child might have choices they had not had.

It meant the hard work of one generation could open a door for the next.

For my mother, education was personal.

She had been denied an education after the sixth grade. Her father told her that was enough education for a girl.

I know it mattered to her because she made sure we heard that story.

She carried that hurt with her, but she did not let it end with her. What had been denied to her became something she was determined her children would have.

From early childhood, she would tell me in Spanish:

> *"Memito, tú tienes que ir al colegio, porque no quiero que ninguno de tus hermanos me diga: 'Memito no fue.'"*

"Memito, you have to go to college, because I don't want any of your brothers or sisters to tell me, 'But Memito didn't go.'"

She understood something before I did.

I was the oldest.

If I did not go, the others might have used me as the excuse not to go either.

To my mother, education was not only about one child. It was about all of us. She wanted the door opened, and she wanted the first child through that door to make it harder for the others to turn back.

That was not a small dream for a woman whose own education had been stopped after sixth grade.

It was not a small dream for a family that had come from poverty, migrant work, war, dishwashing, rented rooms, and a house paid for one hard-earned dollar at a time.

But she believed it.

And my father supported it in the way he supported most things.

Quietly.

Steadily.

By working.

By saving.

By providing.

Neither of my parents believed in waste. They did not believe in debt. They did not believe in buying things to impress other people. They lived modestly because they had a purpose greater than display.

Their children came first.

We did not know everything they were doing at the time.

Children see what is in front of them.

They see the house.

They see the meals.

They see the rules.

They see the chores.

They see what they do not have.

They do not always see the hidden sacrifice behind what they are given.

Years later, after my parents had both passed away, we learned how carefully they had saved. They had accumulated close to four hundred thousand dollars in cash, along with two homes.

That knowledge changed the way I understood their life.

They had not lived simply because they had failed to build security.

They had lived simply because security mattered more than appearance.

Education mattered more than luxury.

Family mattered more than showing off.

They saved for us.

They saved so their children could have a foundation.

They saved so that the next generation would not begin exactly where they had begun.

That was their wealth.

Not money alone.

Not property alone.

Their true wealth was what they made possible for their children.

My father's work at the Naval Air Station in Corpus Christi helped make that possible. A steady government job, held year after year until retirement, gave the family stability. But stability alone does not create a future. It has to be protected. It has to be managed. It has to be used for something.

My parents used it for family.

They used it for education.

They used it to raise eight children in a house that grew as the family grew, always within the limits of what could be paid for.

They were not rich in the way people usually use that word.

They did not live like rich people.

They did not dress to impress.

They did not move to a grander house.

They did not build a life around comfort.

They built a life around responsibility.

That is why the education of their children belongs in this story.

It was not separate from the tortillas, the sewing, the yard work, the cash payments, the no-credit rule, or the house at 4141 Barrera.

It was part of the same belief.

Work today so the children have tomorrow.

That was Manuel and Otalia.

They had known a world where survival came first.

My mother had known what it meant to be told that school was no longer for her.

But she wanted more than survival for her children.

She wanted us to stand on ground they had made firmer.

And in that sense, every diploma, every completed year of school, every child who went farther than they had been able to go, became part of their story too.

My parents did not leave us speeches about education.

They left us the evidence of their lives.

They worked.

They saved.

They sacrificed.

My mother told Memito he had to go first.

Behind that command was the memory of what had been denied to her.

And behind that memory was her larger dream: that none of her children would have an excuse to stop short of what she believed they could become.

They believed their children were worth it.

And they were right.

Chapter Fifteen

The School Years

My parents believed in education, but that belief did not stay in words.

It showed itself in the daily life of our house.

My father went to our PTA meetings.

He had not been educated in the schools the way his children would be. His English was the English of a man who had grown up in a part of Texas where Spanish was spoken by almost everyone around him. But that never stopped him.

He went.

He asked questions.

He wanted to know how we were doing.

He did not sit back because he felt out of place. He did not let language or schooling keep him from being a father involved in his children's education.

My mother watched school just as closely.

She went over our report cards carefully. She looked at everything. Grades mattered, but conduct mattered too. If we did not have an E in conduct, she wanted to know why.

She knew if we had missed school.

She knew how many days.

If I told her I was sick, she would put an aspirin in my mouth and say:

> *"Vete a la escuela."*

Go to school.

That was my mother.

Education was not optional in our house.

There were no computers then. Research was done with books, and in our house that meant the World Book Encyclopedia.

Those books were not cheap.

But my parents bought them.

Every year, we would receive the update volume so the information in the house would keep growing. To us as children, they were just books on a shelf. Looking back, I understand what they represented. My parents were placing the world within reach of their children.

We also had children's books filled with stories. Those books may have been where my love of reading began.

My parents may not have had the education they wanted for themselves, but they made sure books lived in our house.

They also kept our yearbooks.

For every year one of us attended junior high or high school, there was a yearbook. Some were lost during a major hurricane that struck near Corpus Christi in the 1970s. All the Molina Junior High yearbooks were lost.

I did not think much about those yearbooks then.

Now I look back at the ones that remain and realize that all the people I considered friends are gone.

That is what time does.

What once seemed ordinary becomes evidence.

A yearbook becomes more than photographs and names.

It becomes proof that we were there.

Proof that we were young.

Proof that a whole world once existed around us.

School was not only personal for our family. It was part of the larger life of the community.

In Molina, Mexican-American and Black families saw an injustice and acted on it. Students were being sent by bus to a school miles from where they lived, even though the vast majority of the students lived closer to home. The school board was all white.

The community organized.

Mexican-Americans and Blacks united and defeated the all-white board.

They desegregated the schools before civil rights enforcement forced the issue in the way people later remember it. After that, most white families left the school district.

That history matters because it shows the world my parents were raising us in.

Education was not only about grades.

It was about dignity.

It was about whether our children mattered.

It was about whether Mexican-American and Black families had the right to shape the schools their children attended.

My parents understood that.

My father did not only work and come home. He showed up at school. He asked questions. He participated in the life of his children.

My mother did not only tell us education mattered. She checked the report cards, counted the absences, bought the books, and sent us to school even when we thought we had found a reason to stay home.

Together, they made education part of the household.

Not as a theory.

As a habit.

As a duty.

As a promise.

And like so many things they gave us, I did not fully understand it until much later.

Chapter Sixteen

The Quiet Man Who Showed Up

My father was a quiet man, but quiet should never be mistaken for absence.

He showed up.

That may be the simplest way to describe one of the strongest things about him.

He showed up for work.

He showed up at home.

He showed up at school.

He showed up for his children.

He was not the kind of man who filled the house with speeches about being a good father. He did not need to explain responsibility. He lived it in ways that were easy for children to overlook because they happened so regularly.

Every day, he went to work.

He worked at the Naval Air Station in Corpus Christi, where he would remain until retirement. That job helped give the family stability, but the job alone does not explain the man.

What mattered was that he came home.

He came home and worked in the yard.

He came home and sat down to supper.

He came home and remained part of the household.

In a house with eight children, that mattered.

There were fathers who disappeared into work, drinking, or distance. My father did not do that. He had his faults, as all men do, but he was present.

He may not have said much, but we knew where he was.

We knew he would come home.

We knew he would go to work again the next day.

That kind of steadiness becomes part of a child's life before the child knows how to name it.

My brother Jose and I played baseball.

I played from Cub Scouts through Little League. Jose played Pony League and later in high school.

My father never failed to show up to a game.

That is a simple sentence, but it carries a lifetime.

He did not have to understand every rule the way a coach might.

He did not have to shout from the stands.

He did not have to make himself the center of attention.

He was there.

For a child, that is enough.

Sometimes it is everything.

The same man who had grown up with little formal schooling went to PTA meetings. The same man whose English came from a Spanish-speaking South Texas world sat before teachers and asked how his children were doing.

He did not let embarrassment stop him.

He did not let language stop him.

He did not let his own lack of schooling become a reason to stay away from ours.

That tells me something about courage.

Not the courage of war, though he had known war.

The quieter kind.

The courage to enter a school where others may have had more education, better English, and more confidence, and still ask the questions a father needed to ask.

That was my father.

He did not need to look important.

He needed to be present.

That presence showed itself in many ways.

A PTA meeting.

A baseball game.

A yard kept.

A car bought with money earned and saved.

A supper table where he sat with his family.

A house he returned to day after day.

When I was young, I did not understand the full meaning of that.

Children often notice what a parent does not say more than what a parent does. They may wish for more words, more softness, more explanation.

Only later do they understand the language some parents spoke.

My father's language was showing up.

He showed up until showing up became the shape of his love.

He was not perfect.

No father is.

But he was there.

At work.

At home.

At school.

At the ballpark.

And in the memory of his children, that presence remains one of the pillars of the family he and my mother built.

Chapter Seventeen

Soy de Molina

When people ask me where I am from, I do not begin with Corpus Christi.

I say:

Soy de Molina.

I am from Molina.

That means something to me.

Molina was not simply a neighborhood. It was the place that shaped how we saw ourselves, how we understood work, how we understood race, how we understood family, and how we understood what people could build when the world tried to keep them out.

Some people have written or spoken about Molina as if it were only a place of gangs, fights, poverty, and Black and Brown conflict.

That is not the Molina I knew.

I do not deny that conflict existed. Every community has its fights, its troubles, and its wounds. But to make that the whole story is to miss the truth of the place.

The Molina I knew was also a place where Black and Brown families stood together.

It was a place where parents saw injustice and did something about it.

It was a place where people did not wait politely for someone else to open a door.

They built their own.

Our parents understood exclusion because they had lived with it.

Their children were not always welcome where other children were welcome. We were not allowed to join other Little Leagues, so our parents built a Little League field for us. Black parents and Mexican-American parents worked together because their children needed a place to play.

That field was more than a baseball field.

It was a statement.

It said our children matter.

It said we will not wait for permission.

It said if you deny our children a place, we will make one.

That was Molina.

The same spirit appeared in the schools.

For years, children were bused miles away from where they lived, even though the vast majority of the students lived in our part of the district. The school board was all white. The arrangement made no sense except as an expression of power.

Mexican-American and Black families saw the injustice.

They organized.

They united.

They defeated the all-white board.

They desegregated the schools before civil rights enforcement forced what should already have been done.

After that, many white families left the district.

That also tells a story.

But it is not only a story about those who left.

It is a story about those who stayed.

It is a story about families who believed their children deserved schools, fields, books, teachers, and a future.

Molina was poor, but it was not empty.

It produced lawyers.

Doctors.

Teachers.

Soldiers.

Workers.

Mothers and fathers.

People who carried themselves farther than the world expected them to go.

Many young men from my generation joined the military. Some made it a career. For others, the military opened doors that had been closed at home. It offered discipline, training, travel, education, and a way into a different life.

That too was part of Molina.

Not escape from who we were, but another road forward.

Our Lady of Pilar stood near the center of Mexican-American life in Molina. The church was more than a building. It was a marker of faith, family, baptisms, weddings, funerals, and community memory.

The schools mattered.

The ballfields mattered.

The church mattered.

The streets mattered.

The neighbors mattered.

Even later, the Selena mural in Molina would stand as another kind of witness - a sign that beauty, music, pride, and memory belonged there too.

Molina should not be remembered only by those who looked at it from the outside and saw poverty.

Poverty was there.

Discrimination was there.

Hardship was there.

But so was dignity.

So was organization.

So was ambition.

So was love.

So was the stubborn belief that our children would not be stopped simply because others tried to stop them.

That is the Molina I knew.

A Black and Brown community.

A working community.

A poor community, but not a defeated one.

A place where parents built fields, changed school boards, sent children to school, attended PTA meetings, showed up at ballgames, and expected their sons and daughters to become more than the world had planned for them.

That is why I say:

Soy de Molina.

Not as an address.

As an inheritance.

Chapter Eighteen

Before Them

At some point, every family story reaches what feels like an ending.

Manuel López Barrera and Otalia García Barrera married, built a home, raised eight children, worked, saved, sacrificed, and left behind more than they ever announced.

They left behind a family.

They left behind memories.

They left behind lessons.

They left behind the evidence of lives lived with purpose.

In one sense, that could be the closing.

A son could stop there and say:

This is who my parents were.

This is what they gave us.

This is why I remember them.

But family history does not stop where one generation ends.

The more I write about my parents, the more I understand that they did not come from nowhere.

Their strength had roots.

Their habits had roots.

Their silences had roots.

Their faith had roots.

Their endurance had roots.

To understand Manuel and Otalia, I have to look behind them.

Behind my father stood Felipe Barrera and Genoveva López.

Behind my mother stood Eduardo García and Paula Barrera García.

And behind them stood still older generations whose lives reached back into Fronton, Roma, Mier, the lower Rio Grande, and the borderlands that existed before the modern border became what it is today.

Those earlier generations lived in a hard country.

For more than a century, families along the Rio Grande were separated from much of the outside world by distance, land, danger, and necessity. They lived among Indigenous peoples who saw them as intruders. Over time, Indigenous blood also entered the families. They were not simply Spanish. They were not yet Mexican in the later national sense. They were not American. They were not Indigenous, though Indigenous ancestry flowed through descendants.

They became something of their own.

A borderlands people.

A people shaped by survival before Mexico and the United States became the nations we know today.

That matters.

Because when I look at my parents, I see more than two people born in the twentieth century.

I see older stories moving through them.

I see the Rio Grande.

I see ranches, river crossings, church records, fields, wars, droughts, migrations, marriages, deaths, and children raised in houses where nothing was wasted.

I see people who had to endure before endurance became a family trait.

My father did not become steady by accident.

My mother did not become strong by accident.

They inherited more than names.

They inherited ways of surviving.

They inherited the belief that family mattered.

They inherited the habit of work.

They inherited caution with money.

They inherited faith.

They inherited the knowledge that the world would not always be fair, but that unfairness was not an excuse to quit.

That is why I cannot close the story yet.

A closing would honor Manuel and Otalia.

But going backward will honor the people who helped make them possible.

Some of those earlier lives are clear in records.

Some are only partly visible.

Some names appear in church books, census records, land records, death certificates, and family stories.

Some connections must be handled carefully, because family history should not pretend certainty where certainty has not been earned.

But even when the records are incomplete, the direction is clear.

My parents were part of a long chain.

They were not the beginning of the story.

They were the ones who carried it forward to us.

In 2004, after both of them had passed, I planted a burr oak in their memory. I chose it because burr oaks are long-lived trees. I wanted something in the ground that could outlast me, something that would keep growing after my own life was finished.

I also planted a ginkgo biloba, but Houston was not kind to it.

Someone once told me that I would die and the burr oak would still only be a few feet tall.

Maybe so.

But that is not the point.

Some things are planted knowing we may never sit under their shade.

My parents did that for us.

They planted what they might not live to see fully grown.

Education.

Family.

Security.

Memory.

A name.

A home.

A way of standing in the world.

This book is one more planting.

Even if I am the only person who ever reads it, the tribute is worth it.

Because when I compare myself to my parents, I do not believe I reach their knees.

But I can remember them.

I can write them down.

I can follow the roots backward.

And perhaps, by doing that, I can give those who come after me something more than names on a family tree.

I can give them the people.