Mi Vida - Martin Morales

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Left to right front row: Uncle Arthur, Cousin Olga, Cousin Beto, Aunt Chayo
backrow: Sister Carmen, Niece Misty, Mom, Dad and Niece Michelle

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Madonna Village Neighbors

I grew up in Madonna Village on San Antonio's West Side from the late '60s through the early '80s. I call those years my Wonder Land Years because, honestly, they were. Friday nights at Uncle Arthur and Aunt Chayo's backyard are still vivid: steaks sizzling like they were auditioning for a food commercial, Coca-Cola poured with ceremony, and me living my best life one fizzy sip at a time. They lived across the street, so I was there more often than the mailman.

Every visit with their daughter Belinda felt like stepping onto a game show set—games, laughter, chaos, repeat—until Aunt Chayo announced Belinda needed her inhaler and a nap. That was my cue to exit stage left and return the next day for the sequel. There was always something to celebrate, and cousins visiting from across Texas or Ohio made ordinary weekends feel like holidays.

We went to Playland Park where The Rocket convinced me I was braver than I actually was. Back home, my friends and I produced backyard shows that, in my mind, rivaled Hollywood. Barney Avenue had no sidewalks, so the street became our runway. The Gonzalez and De La Vega families next door were our loyal supporting cast. We staged dramatic entrances, attempted questionable stunts, and used enough imagination to power a small city.

Then there was the time I swung into a ring of old metal window frames I'd doused in gasoline and told my friend Sinky to light them once I landed. Yes, gasoline. Yes, fire. Yes, I lived to tell the tale. My friends hyped my wildest ideas, proving that peer encouragement is both a blessing and a hazard.

School brought new characters. Brentwood Middle and Kennedy High introduced me to Military Brats from Billy Mitchell Housing—kids who could pack a punchline, a backpack, and a life lesson all before lunch. Julian, my friend since first grade, brought brains and sunshine and made everything feel just right.

And roller skating—those glorious, wobbly nights—deserve their own chapter. Clemente, Michelle, Dario, Josie, and I glided around the rink like we were starring in our own coming-of-age movie. Under the disco ball we skated, danced, and made memories coated in glitter and dipped in

nostalgia. Those friendships are the kind you can pick up decades later like a favorite sweater—soft, familiar, and still fitting just right.

Picture Mr. Burkharth's class at Kennedy High: my friends and me arranged around his desk like a human layer cake of teenage personalities. Rob, Martin (yes, me), Morales, Jaime, Mike, Jude, Diana, Roy, Sylvia, Lydia, Cynthia, and Velma—each convinced they were the star. A beer poster hung in the background, the sort of thing that would send today's administrators into a faint. Back then it was just part of the charm, part of the chaos, part of the magic.

Las Palmas, next door to Madonna Village, lives in my memory rent-free. After I moved to North Texas in '96, nostalgia hit harder. Dario Gonzales and I would hop the city bus from Kennedy High to Las Palmas Shopping Center, near San Fernando Cemetery where some of my family rests. We haunted the Las Palmas Library and begged librarians to let us shelve books. We turned shelving into a competition—who could conquer the Dewey Decimal System faster. We were book nerds with Olympic spirit.

When the bus arrived we dashed out with a dramatic "See you tomorrow!" Our adventures took us through Joske's, the old H.E.B., and Tom McCann shoe store where Dario's dad held court. My first job was there too—file clerk at the Texas Employment Commission. The office was a cast of characters: a receptionist who could've been Jennifer Coolidge's cousin and a director who channeled Julia Sugarbaker with every syllable. It was the '80s; the stories were wild, and those women taught me more than any textbook.

Those years weren't just my Wonder Land Years—they were my origin story. Laughter, chaos, friendship, and just enough mischief to keep things interesting. Madonna Village taught me how to make a life out of small, loud moments and how to hold on to the people who make those moments possible.

Nacha, The Garden Queen

When I was ten, the chain-link fence at the edge of Nacha's yard felt like a stage curtain. I'd skip over to it every afternoon, ready for whatever story she had that day. Nacha—Ignacia, from Castroville—smoked like a chimney and tended a garden so immaculate it could have been photographed for a magazine spread. Her secret was a simple, stubborn sidewalk that circled the lawn, giving her a full view of every petunia and marigold, a moat for her floral kingdom.

She talked the way some people talk about ice cream—curious, warm, and with a little sparkle. She handed out snacks and stories in equal measure, and though I never saw her at church, she preached better than any sermon I'd heard. Her stories were small miracles: a memory of a friend, a recipe, a lesson about faith wrapped in a joke. She made the ordinary feel important.

Nacha's yard was a theater of details. The sidewalk let her patrol the borders like a captain on deck. The roses were pruned with the precision of a jeweler. The lawn was a green so even it looked deliberate. I watched her move through it all—knees bent, hands sure—and learned that care could be a kind of devotion. She taught me that tending something every day mattered more than grand gestures once in a while.

We lingered at that fence for half an hour at a time. She did most of the talking; I did most of the listening. She told me about friends and faith and the small, stubborn ways people held on to what mattered. She offered advice the way other people offered candy—freely, with a wink. I soaked it up like a sponge with pigtails.

When I finally had my own place, I copied her sidewalk. Nothing says

adulthood like recreating a neighbor's landscaping plan. But it wasn't vanity. It was gratitude. I wanted a little of that order and care in my life, a way to show up for something every day. Nacha had shown me that a garden could be a map of a life well tended.

Those afternoons taught me two things: wisdom often arrives in ordinary moments, and a good neighbor can change the shape of a childhood. Nacha didn't need a pulpit. She had a fence, a cigarette, and a way of making you feel seen. Years later, when I think of Madonna Village, I see her yard first—an ordinary kingdom that taught me how to love small things fiercely.

I grew up in Madonna Village on San Antonio's West Side, from the late '60s through the early '80s—a stretch of time I proudly call my Wonder Land Years, because honestly, they were. When I think back, I can practically smell those Friday nights at Uncle Arthur and Aunt Chayo's backyard: steaks sizzling like they were auditioning for a food commercial, Coca-Cola poured with ceremony, and me living my best life one fizzy sip at a time. They lived right across the street, so naturally I was over there more than the mailman. Every visit with their daughter Belinda felt like stepping onto a game show set—games, laughter, chaos, repeat—until Aunt Chayo would announce Belinda needed her inhaler and a nap. That was my cue to exit stage left and return the next day for the sequel.

There was always something to celebrate, but nothing beat the excitement of cousins visiting from across Texas or even Ohio. We'd head to Playland Park, where The Rocket ride convinced me I was braver than I actually was. Back home, my friends and I produced shows in my backyard that, in my mind, rivaled Hollywood. Barney Avenue had no sidewalks, so the street became our runway, and the Gonzalez and De La Vega families next door were our loyal supporting cast. We transformed my backyard into a full-blown production studio—dramatic entrances, questionable stunts, and enough imagination to power a small city.

And then there was *that* moment. The time I swung into the center of old metal window frames I'd doused in gasoline and told my friend, Sinky, to light them once I landed. Yes, gasoline. Yes, fire. Yes, I lived to tell the tale. My friends always hyped up my wildest ideas, proving that peer encouragement is both a blessing and a hazard.

Then came Brentwood Middle School and Kennedy High, where my closest buddies were Military Brats from Billy Mitchell Housing—kids who could pack a punchline, a backpack, and a life lesson all before lunch. Julian, who I'd known since first grade, brought the brains and the sunshine, making everything feel just right.

And roller skating—oh, those glorious, wobbly nights. My friends Clemente, Michelle, Dario, and Josie and I would glide around the rink like we were starring in our own coming-of-age movie. Under the disco ball, we skated,

danced, and created memories coated in glitter and dipped in nostalgia. Those friendships became the kind you can pick up decades later like a favorite sweater—soft, familiar, and still fitting just right.

So here's to Madonna Village, a place where the highs soared like we were living on our own personal mountaintop, the lows were just plot twists we survived with style, and the friendships didn't need a Hollywood writer to become iconic.

And now—imagine this snapshot in all its retro glory: Mr. Burkharth's class at Kennedy High, my friends and me arranged around his desk like a human layer cake of teenage personalities. Rob, Martin (yes, me), Morales, Jaime, Mike, Jude, Diana, Roy, Sylvia, Lydia, Cynthia, and Velma—our very own ensemble cast, each of us convinced we were the star of the show.

The whole scene is immortalized with the dramatic flair of a beer poster hanging in the background, the kind of thing that would send today's school administrators into a full-blown fainting spell. But back then? It was just part of the charm, part of the chaos, part of the magic that made those days unforgettable.

Las Palmas, just next door to Madonna Village, still lives in my memory rent-free. After I moved to North Texas in '96, nostalgia hit even harder. Back in the day, Dario Gonzales and I would hop the city bus from Kennedy High to Las Palmas Shopping Center, right by San Fernando Cemetery where some of my family rests. We'd haunt the Las Palmas Library, begging the librarians to let us shelve books. And yes, we turned it into a competition—who could conquer the Dewey Decimal System faster? We were book nerds with Olympic spirit.

When the bus finally arrived, we'd dash out with a dramatic "See you tomorrow!" Our adventures took us through Joske's (where Dario's sister Mary worked), the old H.E.B., and Tom McCann shoe store, where his dad held court. My first job was right there too—file clerk at the Texas Employment Commission. Imagine a receptionist who could've been Jennifer Coolidge's long-lost cousin and a director who channeled Julia Sugarbaker with every syllable. It was the '80s, the stories were wild, and those fabulous women taught me more than any textbook ever could.

Those years weren’t just my Wonder Land Years—they were my origin story, complete with laughter, chaos, friendship, and just enough mischief to keep things interesting.

My horror swing story

“So, it was the last day of school, May 1976 (I’m pretty sure)—pure, unfiltered neighborhood mayhem.”

> “Off to the ER we went, where I collected 16 stitches and a six-week sentence to the couch, missing every ounce of summer fun.”

The last day of school—May 1976, I think—felt like the official kickoff to chaos. Michelle De La Vega’s brand-new swingset arrived and we gathered around it like it was the grand opening of the Summer Olympics. Michelle—cool, hilarious, and the girl I secretly wished would be my girlfriend—beamed like she owned Six Flags.

Her mother’s boyfriend, Lee, gave the warning everyone ignored: “No swinging until I cement it.” To a pack of kids with the self-control of caffeinated squirrels, that sounded exactly like permission. The second he disappeared, we went full Tarzan—legs pumping, hair whipping, swinging higher than our expectations for summer vacation.

Then the world tipped. The whole contraption collapsed faster than our childhood bravado. I ran forward to help and a renegade screw from the falling frame found my head. One second I was fine; the next I was starring in my own low-budget horror scene—blood, panic, and a towel wrapped around my skull like a bad bandage prop.

Mom opened the door, saw the mess, and we were off to the ER. Sixteen stitches later, I had a scar and a six-week couch sentence. My friends were out living their best summer lives while I watched dust motes float like they were having more fun than me. I missed roller-rink nights, backyard shows, and every sunlit misadventure I’d been planning.

Now, when that scar itches—usually when I’m nervous or sitting in the front row of an auditorium—I laugh. The itch is a time machine. It zips me back to Michelle’s yard, to the smell of fresh-cut grass and gasoline, to the ridiculous courage of being ten. I survived the swingset, the stitches, and the humiliation. More than that, I learned that some stories stick because they hurt a little and make you braver later.

My horror bicycle story

I was cruising the neighborhood like I owned it—sun on my face, wind in my hair, and Dario perched on the handlebars like he was the star attraction in a traveling circus. It was 1970-something, an era of questionable decisions and even worse bike safety. Life felt simple and infinite until I decided to jam my foot into a spike on the front wheel. Because of course I did.

The bike flipped faster than a tortilla at a church taco fundraiser. One second I was upright, the next I was airborne, and then—boom—I kissed the pavement with the enthusiasm of a cartoon character. My front tooth took off like it had a plane to catch. I was out cold long enough to dream of a world where Dario didn't want to go on bike rides and I kept my feet to myself.

When I came to, my smile looked like it had been cast in a low-budget horror flick. Dario hovered over me with that classic "Oops" expression, which did nothing to restore my dignity or my dental situation. The tooth eventually grew back, slightly forward of its twin, giving me a smile with personality. It was never corrected, so every time I look in the mirror I think, "Thank you, Dario. My teeth and my pride send their regards."

The scar and the crooked tooth became part of the costume I wore through adolescence—proof that I'd been brave, reckless, and stubborn enough to survive. More than the embarrassment, the story stuck because it taught me how quickly a small stunt can become a long memory. It also taught me to laugh at myself, which turns out to be the best kind of survival skill.

Storytelling

Since I can remember, I've loved storytelling, but I was also the reigning monarch of procrastination—crowned, seated, and waving from the throne—until a health scare reminded me that the clock isn't just ticking, it's practically tap-dancing. My grandkids are my biggest reason to finally get these stories out of my head and onto paper. My second reason is… well, me. I've wanted to write since I was eleven, but it wasn't until college in '92 that I finally decided to stop daydreaming and start doing.

My "Strategies and Policies" professor drilled two truths into my skull: write what you know, and stop putting things off. Naturally, I learned both lessons the hard way. I had a journalism assignment to interview photojournalist Tommy Holtgrin and convince him to speak to our class. I thought, "He'll never come," so I procrastinated like it was an Olympic sport. I slapped together a half-hearted speech and slouched in my seat on presentation day, ready to blend into the wallpaper.

Then the door opened… and in walked Tommy Holtgrin himself. Turns out he was my teacher's friend. I wanted to melt into the floor, evaporate, and drift away on the air-conditioning. Tommy, sensing my mortification—because he knew I was supposed to contact him—later told me, "Never hesitate to ask for help." Lesson learned: ask, don't procrastinate, and for heaven's sake, stop taking yourself so seriously.

Some moments shape you forever.

Like that night in January 1977 when my parents, craving family time and good snacks, took us to my cousins Dolores and Jimmy Urdiales' house to watch the debut of Alex Haley's Roots. Dolores, queen of delicious food and even better hospitality, made sure we were fed like royalty. I was sprawled on the living room floor, belly full, eyes wide, watching Kunta Kinte's story unfold with the intensity of a kid who knew something important was happening—even if I was also battling a snack-induced coma.

There I was, a future storyteller in the making, watching a man fight to reclaim his roots while I tried not to fall asleep on mine. And somehow, between the food, the family, and the fire of that story, something in me

woke up. That night lit the fuse on my love for storytelling—though let's be honest, trying to make movies with no budget back then was about as practical as trying to teach a cat to do calculus. So I pivoted. I picked up a camera and started telling stories through photos instead. I signed up for photography at Brentwood Middle School with Mr. Pfeifer, who probably wondered why this kid was so determined to freeze every moment like it was a rare butterfly.

Later on, I discovered the video room at San Antonio College and snuck in like I was breaking into Fort Knox. That's where I learned that making videos was even harder than convincing Dolores to hand over one of her secret recipes. But I kept going, stubborn and starry-eyed, because something in me knew this was it—this was how I wanted to tell stories.

And it all traces back to one night in January 1977.

My parents, craving family time and good snacks, took us to my cousins Dolores and Jimmy Urdiales' house to watch the debut of Alex Haley's Roots. Dolores—queen of good eats, warm hugs, and the kind of hospitality that could heal a broken spirit—made sure we were fed like royalty. I was sprawled across the living room floor, belly full, eyes wide, watching Kunta Kinte's journey unfold with the intensity of a kid who knew he was witnessing something important… even if I was also fighting off a snack-induced coma.

There I was, a future storyteller in the making, watching a man fight to reclaim his roots while I tried not to fall asleep on mine.

That night planted a seed. A spark. A calling.

And here I am—still making videos, still telling stories, still chasing that feeling I first felt on Dolores and Jimmy's living room floor. Forever grateful to them for the food, the company, and the moment that quietly set my future in motion.

My mother lived life with intention and joy

It's a miracle I didn't grow up to be a five-star chef, considering how many hours I spent watching my mom command the kitchen like a culinary superhero. Those salmon croquettes? Pure bliss. The carne guisada? A flavor symphony where the sauce, the tender beef tips, and that perfect little kick of heat came together like they were performing just for me.

And then there was my all-time favorite: her Mole. The legendary Aztec sauce made from chiles, seeds, spices, and ancient magic. Traditionally it's served over turkey, but my mom—made hers with chicken and swapped the nuts for peanut butter. Peanut butter! Somehow she turned Mole Poblano into her own masterpiece, and I swear it tasted like a hug from history itself.

Don't even get me started on her rice and beans. Who knew something so simple could be elevated into edible art? My mom did. She always did.

But her brilliance didn't stop at the stove. She was a craftswoman, an artist, a creative force wrapped in an apron. The piñata we made together was unlike anything the world had ever seen—crepe paper, homemade glue, and colors that practically danced. And that nativity set? She spent an entire year crafting it, piece by piece, until it felt like stepping into a tiny, glowing universe she built with her own hands.

Still, it was the small things that carved themselves into my heart. The way she made my bed with every sheet tucked just right, like she was smoothing out life for me. The smile and kiss on the cheek she gave me no matter the hour. The quiet moments on the sofa, her fingers running through my hair (back when I had plenty of it), making everything feel safe and steady.

Her love wasn't loud or showy. It lived in the everyday gestures, the gentle routines, the warmth she wove into every corner of our home. Looking back, I realize how much she taught me—not just about cooking or crafting or how to make a bed fit for royalty, but about living with intention, joy, and a heart wide open.

Everything she did was done with love and a smile. So here's to my mom, the ultimate role model. If I manage to be even half as wonderful as she was,

I'll consider that a life well lived.

My father was like a human Swiss Army knife

My father moved on in 1998—twenty-six years ago—and somehow it still feels like he just stepped into the next room. He wasn't just a man; he was a full-service human Swiss Army knife. Quick thinker, quick talker, and so smooth with words he could've convinced a cactus to buy moisturizer. Talking to him felt like flipping through a glossy magazine: colorful, unpredictable, and polished enough to make you wonder if he had a secret team of editors following him around.

He handled people the way a magician handles scarves—effortlessly, endlessly, and with a grin that made you spill your secrets before you even realized you had any. If charm were a sport, he'd have been the undefeated world champion.

He was devout, too. Church wasn't just a place he went; it was practically his second address. First to arrive, last to leave, and always armed with a one-liner that could make a bishop laugh. If he could pop back in for a moment, he'd probably shout something like, "I feel like a brand new second-hand person," a line he earned after surviving a quadruple bypass at fifty-eight. And though he never said it outright, he lived by the motto I always heard in his actions: get involved in your church or community. He delivered that message like a motivational speaker who actually believed what he was saying.

He loved anything active—bowling, camping, swimming, baseball, you name it. He approached fun the way toddlers approach candy stores: full speed, no hesitation, and with the kind of enthusiasm that made bystanders wonder if they should join in or call for backup. His philosophy was simple: why just participate when you can excel, blend in, and maybe throw in a surprise cartwheel for dramatic effect.

Talking to strangers was his cardio. If you were his friend, congratulations—you basically had a personal phone therapist on standby. He could lift your spirits, talk you through a crisis, and still crack a joke that made you forget why you were upset in the first place.

His gift of persuasion was legendary. He could sell you a pen that wrote in

invisible ink and make you feel like you'd just invested in the future of communication. Walk into a room full of chaos, and he'd explain it, defend it, and justify it with the confidence of a game show host trying to charm a skeptical contestant.

He served in the Army and later worked at Kline's Clothing Store, where he met my mother. Their love story could've been a screenplay—two charismatic souls teaming up to become direct-sales royalty. They launched distributorships like trendy pop-up boutiques, working side-by-side with the kind of energy usually reserved for competitive coffee drinkers.

He was a volunteer extraordinaire. With the San Antonio Insight Program, he brought joy to the blind. Imagine him organizing beep-baseball games like it was the social event of the season. "We'll bowl, we'll play baseball! But first, everyone take off those shoes—we're living dangerously today!"

Traveling was his jam—not arriving, just traveling. He was like a travel blogger who never checked into the hotel but somehow found every hidden gem along the way. And at sixty, he took up reflexology. Suddenly he was the family foot-massage guru, making new friends one sole at a time.

In his later years, he doubled down on church volunteering. If there were a support group for people who loved volunteering too much, he'd be the president, the keynote speaker, and the after-party entertainment. He attended St. Martin De Porres (the patron saint of hairdressers and animals—who I was named after), then Faith Outreach, then New Life Ministries. Being around him felt like standing next to a motivational poster that had come to life and started giving pep talks.

He faced more challenges than most people see in a lifetime—losing his mother young, navigating life with one eye, surviving a near-death experience that could've been a Hollywood thriller. He lost his wife, his only daughter, his granddaughter, nearly all his siblings, and still managed to dance through life, praising the Lord with every breath.

He taught me our family history—how we came from the Canary Islands over two centuries ago, one of the thirteen Spaniard families that formed San Antonio de Béxar. We visited the family cemetery in Elmendorf, Texas, where he told me stories of the two Spanish brothers we descended from.

I remember his father, Grandpa Louis, living with us. My dad adored him. Those years taught me to treasure every moment with our parents, like each

day was an episode of This Is Your Life. In his quieter years, surrounded by grandchildren (and there were many), he made every moment feel like an adventure worth framing.

We all miss him—family, neighbors, friends. Though he may have checked out of this world, his laughter lingers like the scent of freshly baked cookies: warm, inviting, and impossible to forget.

And of course, my father's siblings—my aunts and uncles—were part of the tapestry of who we were: Navor Alvarez Ramos and his wife Feliz Garza Morales, my mom and dad, Louis and his wife Nate Morales, Florinda, and Felix and his wife Soila Ramos. A family stitched together with love, humor, and enough stories to fill a library.

My Sweet Sister Carmen

I loved my sister Carmen the way a summer breeze loves a long, lazy afternoon—effortlessly, naturally, and with a warmth that settles into your bones. She was woven into the softest parts of my life, and when she left us, it felt like someone closed a beloved book mid-sentence. She was thirteen years older, a perfect blend of second mom and best friend, but without the strictness or lectures. Carmen's style was pure open-arms, pure laughter, pure sisterly magic.

Watching her glide across the graduation stage at Kennedy High felt like witnessing a comet streak across the sky—brilliant, unforgettable, and absolutely hers. Then she stepped into the medical field, turning all those late-night study sessions into a career that glowed with purpose. And when she became a mother to Michelle and Misty—two beautiful girls who lit up her world—she handled single motherhood with grace, grit, and a kind of love that could've powered a small city.

Our memories together sparkle like sequins on a disco jumpsuit: dance lessons at Cuellar Park, spinning and laughing until our sides hurt; kiddie rides at Brackenridge Park, where we were all kids no matter our age. Life with her was one big carousel of joy, and I was lucky enough to hold on to the same painted horse.

Then came the plot twist: she married the Santa Claus from downtown Joske's winter wonderland. Yes, the Santa Claus. A military man who didn't exactly match the jolly image, but hey—love stories come in all flavors.

When they moved away, my heart packed its bags too. Devastation doesn't even begin to cover it. But like a holiday movie with perfect timing, they eventually returned to San Antonio, and I could breathe again. Time, however, is a slippery thing. Before I knew it, Michelle and Misty were grown and off to North Texas, leaving a little tear in our family quilt. Carmen always nudged me to follow them, but I stayed put, partly because my brother's antics kept my mother on her toes.

Life moved forward. I married my first spouse, had three daughters—my own miracles—and Carmen adored and spoiled them with the enthusiasm of a fairy godmother on overtime. When she passed, our world spun into a terrible pirouette, the kind that knocks the wind out of you.

Eventually, I made my way to North Texas, where I watched her grandchildren—five bright, beautiful souls—grow, graduate, and begin their own adventures. Every time we gathered, the air filled with laughter that danced through the years, echoing those disco lessons we once shared. I thank my lucky stars for those moments, and for Carmen, who taught me how to live with love, kindness, and a little sparkle.

After all, isn't that what sisters are for?

Picture me in my late twenties, suddenly the captain of a ship with no map after Carmen passed. Enter Michelle and Misty—two teenage whirlwinds of sass, sparkle, and unstoppable energy. I thought, if we stick together, maybe we can weather this storm. Carmen had left me a treasure chest of wisdom, confidence, and courage, whispering that maybe—just maybe—I could be the kind of grown-up she was. I never tried to be their father figure; I was more like the coolest older brother with a goofy grin and a bucket of popcorn.

Popcorn, yes. My teenage rebellion prepared me well for their teenage adventures. Back in high school, I ran a popcorn fundraiser for choir—real popcorn, not the microwave stuff. My entrepreneurial brain thought, Why stop at a dollar? Let's charge two and use the extra to charter a bus to Astroworld! This was the early '80s, long before SeaWorld or Fiesta Texas. All I could think about was spinning in the Teacup ride and screaming my lungs out on the Texas Cyclone.

By August 1981, my bedroom looked like the world's largest popcorn warehouse—boxes stacked to the ceiling. Naturally, I enlisted my nieces to help, which Carmen probably would've raised an eyebrow at. We spent our days dodging the neighbor's ferocious dog, leaping onto parked cars like Olympic gymnasts, popcorn flying everywhere, laughing until we couldn't breathe.

And then the big day arrived. Our chartered bus rolled down the street like a

royal procession. We piled in with our bags, hearts racing, ready for a day of thrills and joy. And we did it. We actually did it. A legendary expedition born from popcorn and teenage determination.

And oh, those disco days. Monday nights at Cuellar Park Recreation Center, twirling under a disco ball with Dario and my nieces, feeling like we were starring in our own dance show. Saturday mornings at the Aquarium Discotheque, where the floors gleamed and the lights pulsed like a kaleidoscope. We sipped Shirley Temples, plotted new routines, and danced like the world was ours.

San Antonio gave us so many adventures—Fiesta parades, river floats, and one unforgettable day when I crowned myself King of Cool at the Texas Folklife Festival. I was fifteen, armed with two nieces, cotton candy pinker than a flamingo, and a hill perfect for sliding down like giggling champions. We were the three musketeers of sunshine and sticky fingers.

Those memories shimmer in my heart like treasures tucked into a golden chest. Days when life was simple, laughter was loud, and love was everywhere.

Ah, how sweet it was to dance through life—with Carmen's magic lighting the way.

My brother Trino

Let's talk about my brother Trino—because to talk about my life without him would be like trying to tell a story with the main character missing. I always knew he loved me, but living with him was a bit like trying to sleep on a rollercoaster: thrilling, unpredictable, and absolutely not OSHA-approved.

In his twenties, he received a diagnosis no family ever wants to hear—paranoid schizophrenia. At first, I didn't see the signs. Then he came home from the Marines in 1974, twenty-three years old, built like a tank, and carrying a storm inside him none of us knew how to weather.

Growing up, we did all the classic brother things: tinkering with his car, blasting music loud enough to scare the pigeons, marathon westerns on TV, and the occasional wrestling match. I hated the wrestling—he was twelve years older, strong as a bear, and I was… well, not. But he was my protector, always promising that if anyone messed with me, he'd take care of it. I never tested that promise. I valued the safety of the general public.

Trino was loud, opinionated, and about as subtle as a marching band. But he also had this surprising tenderness that showed up when you least expected it.

Like the day I told him I was heading to my friend's house four doors down. "Go," he said, waving me off. I barely stepped inside the yard when Toro—the Rottweiler with the personality of a wrecking ball—launched himself over the fence and straight for my head. It was a full-blown disaster-movie moment. My friend's family froze like they were watching the world's worst live performance.

Then, out of nowhere, my brother appeared—vaulting over the fence like a Marine superhero. He tore Toro off me with a strength fueled by pure brotherly fury. After a doctor visit and the announcement that I needed a shot, I tried to escape through the restroom window. Trino caught me mid-plot and pulled me back with a grip that said, "Nice try, kid." That was him—chaotic, protective, and absolutely impossible not to love.

He'd pick me up from school sometimes, which was never a peaceful affair. He'd roll up in his orange Datsun like a NASCAR hopeful, tires screeching, engine roaring, and me praying silently in the passenger seat. And when he

upgraded to a motorcycle? Let's just say every ride felt like a near-death experience wrapped in leather and exhaust fumes.

My brother also had a… let's call it enthusiastic approach to marriage. Three weddings. Three attempts at happily-ever-after. Janie came first—a candy striper in Waco, sweet as pie. Then Judy, whose wedding in San Fernando Cathedral looked like a fairy tale but ended faster than the bouquet toss. Then Pam, my sister's roommate, a nurse who made sure he took his meds and brought a little calm into his storm.

They had a beautiful baby girl, Trina, born with a serious heart condition. We loved her fiercely. Two years later, I still remember the day about my sister rushed to pick me up to go to the hospital. When the elevator doors opened, I saw my brother standing there, grief wrapped around him like a heavy coat. It was one of those moments that carves itself into your memory forever.

He stood beside me as the best man at my wedding to Josie—a rare moment of clarity and connection. But after our mother passed, the ground shifted beneath him again. But before that, no matter how many doctors he saw or how many healing churches my parents visited with him, he remained a puzzle with too many missing pieces.

Then one day, after a year of estrangement, I found a letter from him—sent from the Audie Murphy VA Hospital. I went to see him. When I walked in, his doctor stood beside him. My brother looked up, surprised, and the doctor said, "You look just like your brother." I always cringed when I heard that–I heard it often–and it was true.

The doctor told me Trino was lucky to be alive—he'd survived a terrible motorcycle accident near Dallas and had been hospitalized for months. I went home that day and he stayed in the hospital until he recovered.

My brother's life was a mix of Marine toughness, unpredictable storms, fierce loyalty, and a heart that loved deeply even when his mind made it hard to show. He was complicated, frustrating, hilarious, and unforgettable.

And through every twist and turn—every wild ride, every rescue, every heartbreak—he was my brother. And I loved him.

Mi Vida

My brother, Trino—oh, Trino

Trino—he still drifts into my mind more often than I admit, like a song that plays on loop, but one you never skip because it carries something warm and familiar. We didn't always move in harmony—he was a wild bull in a china shop, and I was usually the nearest breakable object—but underneath all the noise, all the chaos, all the Marine-tough bravado, I always knew he loved me. And I loved him right back.

We had moments that stuck to the ribs of my memory. In July '83, Josie and I watched him marry Pam, and four years later, he stood beside me as my best man, Pam glowing in the wedding party. For a little while, life felt steady—sure, the tracks were crooked, but the train was still chugging forward.

And then came my parents' 34th anniversary in '86—a night that still makes me sweat like I'm back in that booth. A new restaurant had opened on the River Walk called Dick's Last Resort. No reviews, no warnings, just my overconfident gut saying, "This is perfect!" I told my sister, "Mom and Dad will love it. Trino, Pam, little Trina—they'll have a blast!"

Oh, bless my naïve little heart.

We walked in, and the staff immediately started hurling insults like they were competing in the Sarcasm Olympics. My poor mother looked like she'd been dropped into a comedy roast she never auditioned for. I shot my sister a look that said, "We need to flee," while silently praying Trino wouldn't decide to rearrange the furniture—or the staff. Honestly, I don't even remember if he and Pam were there. I was too busy sweating through my shirt and trying not to faint from stress.

Sometimes the universe throws you a curveball so wild it knocks the wind out of your lungs and your common sense.

But here's the truth: my love for Trino, Pam, and little Trina ran deep. I wanted to fix everything, heal every wound, glue every broken piece back together. But with Trino, one wrong word could topple the whole house of

cards. So I held onto love with both hands—messy, imperfect, hopeful love.

Then came October 1986. Trina passed away. A bright, beautiful light gone far too soon. She would've been 41 on our parents' 73rd anniversary in 2025. Losing her was the moment the mountain shifted beneath my brother's feet.

From '84 to '86, he'd been holding on—Marine tough, stubborn, fighting the weeds in his mind that paranoid schizophrenia kept planting. But after she was gone, he began to slide. Slowly at first, then faster, like a house of cards collapsing in slow motion.

Pam divorced him in '88. My mother died that December. And that was it—the landslide began. His grief was too heavy, too tangled, too relentless. The world kept tossing stones into his pond, and the ripples turned into waves he couldn't outrun.

In February 1996, he sent me a letter—scribbles, doodles, fragments of the brother I knew. His mind was slipping, like a clock losing its rhythm. That was probably the last time I saw him before we moved to Lewisville and life pulled us apart.

It's strange how one tiny pebble can trigger an avalanche. I often wonder what it felt like inside his mind—carrying all that loss, all that pain, all that noise. No matter how much we loved him, no matter how hard we tried, some mountains are simply too steep to climb without slipping.

I wish I had a magic wand, or a fairy godmother, or even a Willie Nelson ballad strong enough to stitch his heart back together. But mental health is slippery—like trying to hold water in your hands. You think you've got it, and then it escapes through your fingers.

I loved my brother fiercely. I still do. And I hope—deep in the quiet corners of the universe—that he's finally found peace. That the mountain he struggled up for so long has softened into a gentle slope.

May my brother Trino rest easy now, free from the storms that chased him. And may we remember him with love, with laughter, and with the hope that someday, somehow, the mysteries of his troubled mind will make sense in

the light of grace.

Mi Vida

Josie and Me

Ah, Josie.
My high-school sweetheart, my co-pilot through youth, the girl who skated into my life on a Sunday afternoon in February 1982 at Rollercade—sequins sparkling, wheels humming, and a smile bright enough to power the whole rink. The place smelled like popcorn and teenage dreams, and fate—clever, mischievous fate—decided to introduce us through my best friend Clemente and his girl Shelly.

She was thirteen, I was sixteen, but she carried herself with a confidence that made her seem twenty. Meanwhile, I was just trying not to trip over my own skates. She was dating Alex at the time—a tall, muscular guy who looked like he could bench-press a Buick—but somehow, through the maze of San Antonio, Josie and I kept finding our way back to each other.

One of my earliest attempts at romance was inviting her to a Kennedy High football game and dance. Picture it: a Friday night buzzing with possibility, the kind of night where anything could happen. Me, Josie, and my two best friends, Clemente and Jaime, rolled into that dance like we were starring in our own teenage rom-com. The lights flashed, the music thumped, and Josie and I danced like the universe had choreographed it just for us.

Then reality came knocking.

Jaime, in a moment of brilliance—or insanity—suggested we stop by the haunted train tracks on the South Side. Because nothing says romance like ghosts, right? By the time we escaped the supernatural and headed toward Josie's house, it was midnight. Jaime's car overheated like a diva, leaving us stranded at a gas station. While he tinkered under the hood, Josie and I slipped into a Denny's to use the payphone.

I ducked into the restroom, and when I came out, Josie claimed she'd talked to her mom and everything was fine. But that sparkle in her eyes? Oh, she was absolutely lying. And I absolutely believed her.

We limped back onto the road in that overheated Cutlass Supreme, only for

it to overheat again near downtown. By the time we reached her apartment, it was 4 a.m. I walked her to the door, feeling like a knight returning his princess home… until her mother Gloria appeared, unleashing a scream that could've cracked the Alamo. She tore into me like I was the CEO of Bad Decisions.

Just when I thought I was done for, her stepdad Ramos swooped in like a superhero and saved me from total annihilation. I trudged back to Jaime's car thinking, "Well, that's it. I'll never see her again."
But deep down, I knew better.

Because some stories don't end—they just change scenes.

On Christmas Day 1982, Gloria herself drove across town to deliver a gift from Josie. That present wasn't just a present—it was the beginning of something extraordinary. From that day on, we were officially "going together." My heart felt like fireworks exploding in my chest.

But I had a truth to share. I like both genders, and I needed her to know before we built anything together. I told her before Easter, stumbling through the words like a nervous kid. She listened, thought, processed—and chose love. Chose me.

Josie took a chance on me. A big one. She gave me a life I didn't deserve, and she made it feel like Christmas—warm, bright, full of wonder.

We married young, full of hope and courage, and became parents to three incredible daughters: Elizabeth, Virginia, and Samantha. They were our joy, our purpose, our proof that love can build miracles.

Twenty-one years later, life took us down different paths. But here's the magic: even after the divorce, our love didn't vanish. It transformed. It softened. It matured. It became friendship—the kind that doesn't fade.

In a twist only the universe could write, Josie officiated my wedding to Brandon. Imagine that: the girl who once roller-skated into my heart standing there, blessing the next chapter of my life.

And now, forty-two Christmases later, we still gather at her home—Josie, her husband Rudy, our daughters, our families—laughing, remembering,

celebrating. Watching her thrive as her own person fills me with a joy I can't quite put into words.

We didn't end the way we once imagined, but we ended beautifully.
We ended with respect. With gratitude. With love that still shines.

This is a story about love in all its forms—the kind that skates beside you through adolescence, the kind that builds a family, the kind that survives heartbreak, and the kind that remains even when the music changes.

And trust me—love like that? It's worth every twist, every turn, every wild, hilarious, unforgettable moment.

Kerville Concert and the Double Rainbow

It's both a lifetime ago and yesterday, the kind of story that feels like a Texas Hill Country rom-com—less Hollywood glamour, more thunderstorms, more mud, and a whole lot more heart.

I only have fifteen photos from our entire 5.5-year courtship. One of them—summer 1986—captures us in Kerrville, Texas, at a Carman concert in the heart of the Hill Country.

Josie is wearing a yellow blouse from Wieners, glowing like she belonged in that golden Texas light. I, on the other hand, look like Borat's cousin in teal pants, thick glasses, and a mustache that probably frightened small children. The photo was snapped right before the skies unleashed a full-blown rain apocalypse.

The concert stopped. People screamed. The Hill Country turned into a slip-and-slide. And there we were—two drenched teenagers standing in the mud, laughing because running to the car was pointless. We looked like we'd been put through a car wash set to "extra rinse."

Then, as if the Texas sky wanted to apologize, a double rainbow arched across the horizon—bright, bold, magical. The kind of rainbow that makes you believe that flooding wouldn't happen there, in second chances, in big love, and in the quiet miracles that show up when you least expect them.

That day, soaked and muddy, we grew a little closer. Something about the rain, the music, the Hill Country air—it stitched us together in a way that still glimmers all these years later.

Josie and I - Wedding Day

Our wedding day—July 25, 1987—was supposed to begin at 3 PM sharp, the kind of Texas summer afternoon where the air hums with heat and hope. Instead, by 4 PM, I was pacing Pastor Odell Allen's office like a groom in a sitcom, praying Josie hadn't run off with a pizza delivery guy. No cell phones back then, so I was flying blind, sweating through my shirt, and imagining every possible disaster except the one that was actually happening.

I'd arrived early, trying to be responsible for once in my young life. I picked up corsages, checked on the cake, and somehow—miracle of miracles—the cake was perfect. Mr. Bermudez, Josie's dad, had paid for it even though he wasn't coming, and it looked like something out of a magazine. Meanwhile, I looked down and realized I was wearing tennis shoes. Tennis shoes. To my own wedding. I turned to my cousin Abe, who was wearing nice dress shoes, and said, "Take off your shoes and give them to me." He stared at me like I'd asked for a kidney, but he handed them over. Neither of us was happy about it.

My brother—my best man—was storming around the church like a Marine on a mission, while guests and Pastor Odell watched me with the same expression people reserve for breaking news alerts. Something was clearly wrong.

And it was.

Josie had told me to leave her mother's corsage at my house. I did. On top of scaffolding. In the middle of my parents' half-finished remodel. And I forgot to tell Josie. Gloria, her mother, refused to attend without her corsage. Meanwhile, her catering sisters—bless their creative chaos—said, "Let's do the reception first!" And because nothing else made sense, we did. Everyone ate while I sat there thinking, "Is this how grooms get ulcers?"

Pastor Odell eventually pulled me aside and asked, "Do you want to wait or call it off?" Call it off? I was confused. She had to be coming. She had to.

Twenty minutes later, Josie and Gloria finally arrived. I gathered the wedding party like a general rallying the troops, and we marched into the sanctuary.

The videographer captured a mostly empty church because everyone was still at the reception hall eating brisket and potato salad. But there we were—standing together, laughing through the chaos, saying our vows in a church that echoed with trust, hope, and the kind of love that survives even the wildest beginnings.

And somehow, in the middle of all that madness, we got married. We ate cake. We danced. We built a life.

Josie took a big chance on me that day—a chance bigger than I understood at the time. She gave me a life I didn't deserve, a family that became my whole world, and a love that made every day feel a little like Christmas. Through all the years, through the laughter and the storms, through the marriage and even through the divorce, our love never vanished. It simply changed shape. Softened. Matured. Became something timeless.

Even now, our story still shines—messy, hilarious, heartfelt, and stitched together with trust, grace, and the kind of laughter that refuses to fade.

One Texas wedding. One unforgettable beginning. And a love that, in its own way, never really ended.

Wedding Day Dance Floor and PeeWee Tux

In 1987, life wasn't just a wild, beautiful mess—it was a full-blown Texas two-step of chaos and charm, like a sunset dipped in salsa, sprinkled with stardust, and chased with a shot of tequila that made your eyebrows dance. I was hustling between two jobs: one at QuiKWok on Walzem Road, where I did everything except maybe perform open-heart surgery, and the other working for my sister's boyfriend Mitch. Now Mitch wasn't just any guy—he was a former Iranian refugee turned engineer with a company called 4M Engineering, named after his four brothers whose names all started with M. It was like alphabet soup, but with people.

Mitch was a hero in steel-toed boots, the kind of engineer who carried mysterious sci-fi gadgets that beeped and blinked while he measured land like he was plotting out a secret moon base. And the best part of the job? Driving his Jeep all over town like I was on a top-secret mission. I'd march into courthouses, dig through dusty deeds, and discover records so racist they practically hissed. But that's a whole other adventure.

The real story is about love—big, goofy, heart-thumping Texas love—the kind that turns a rainstorm into a rom-com with better snacks.

Fast forward to the big day: Josie and I tying the knot at New Covenant Fellowship Church on Huebner near Floyd Curl. Mitch, being the sweetheart he was, tossed me the keys to his Jeep so we could ride off into our forever. Only problem? The top was at his house, and the sky decided to throw a tantrum. A raincloud rolled in like it had RSVP'd to the wedding and wanted the first dance.

So there we were, newly married, zooming through downtown toward the Alamo, trying to dodge raindrops like we were in some kind of slapstick chase scene. The Alamo looked majestic, the rain was flirting with us, and Josie's dress was blowing around like it had its own personality. I felt like Pee-wee Herman in a tux, trying to keep everything together while the universe giggled.

When the rain really let loose, I whipped into the Rivercenter Mall parking lot because, well, no top on the Jeep and no desire to arrive at our reception looking like soggy tortillas. Once the storm calmed down, we headed to Gloria's house on Amberwood Drive, past Lackland AFB. Now Gloria—my soon-to-be mother-in-law—had turned her backyard into a twinkle-lit wonderland. She built a wooden dance floor with her own two hands, under the Texas stars, and not a single bird dared to poop on it. That's love. That's craftsmanship. That's divine intervention.

Before the wedding, Gloria and I had adopted two cats—Cheech and Chang—named after some Quick Wok competition I can't quite remember. Cheech was a nod to my favorite comedian, and Chang was just too cute to resist. They became part of the story, like furry little sidekicks in our Texas love saga.

As we danced under that enormous Texas sky, I felt like the star of my own Pee-wee adventure—gray tux, Jeep joyride around the Alamo, dodging rain, holding onto the woman I loved while her dress fluttered like a runaway kite. It was hilarious, heartfelt, and absolutely perfect.

So here's to loving in the rain, to families who build dance floors under the stars, and to the kind

of love that makes you holler “Yeehaw!” and maybe reach for a tequila chaser.

Pee-wee, your suit was sharp, your laugh was contagious, and your spirit made the world a little sillier. Thanks for the joy.

Our Daughters Liz, G and Sam

I was 24 when my first daughter, Liz, arrived like a confetti cannon wrapped in a baby blanket, and my heart didn’t just grow three sizes—it practically did cartwheels. She was my tiny miracle, my pride, my joy, my “look at me, I’m nailing this parenting thing!”… right up until daughter number two, G, made her grand entrance and spun my world around like a piñata at full swing.

Suddenly, my peaceful family drama turned into a full-blown sitcom, complete with chaos, comedic timing, and a laugh track made entirely of my own bewildered chuckles. Josie loved to say Liz and G were “unplanned surprises,” while Sam—our third daughter—was the only one she actually planned, like picking out a purse she’d been eyeing for months. I wasn’t convinced we could afford a third kid, but life doesn’t wait for your wallet to catch up. So there we were, riding the bus or piling into our family car that felt like a clown car stuffed with sass, snacks, and sibling rivalry.

Most days, I felt like the referee of an Olympic-level verbal gymnastics competition. Liz and G would chatter nonstop, flipping opinions and somersaulting stories, while I sat quietly sipping my coffee, pondering the mysteries of the universe—or at least the mystery of why I thought three kids was a brilliant idea. But even in the chaos, I felt grateful. Deeply grateful. Their laughter filled the house like music, their hugs could fix any bad day, and their wild energy made life feel big and bright.

San Antonio became our playground, our kingdom, our family theme park. With Josie’s sister Bebe wielding her parenting wisdom like a mighty sword, the girls and I became the greatest trio since Scooby and the gang. Instead of solving mysteries, we conquered Six Flags Fiesta Texas, the zoo, Sea World, the Alamo, the River Center Mall, and of course, church—because

even superheroes need spiritual backup.

Now, let me take you to the day I made the bold, foolish, heroic decision to take on the Alamo solo. Josie stayed home, leaving me as the captain of the ship—steady, confident, blissfully unaware of the storm brewing. With my double stroller loaded like Noah's Ark—two kids inside, one walking beside me, all giggles and chaos—we marched into the mall.

Then nature called. Loudly. Urgently. More urgently than any child ever had.

As I pushed that stroller toward the restroom, I realized I had never attempted the three-girl bathroom mission alone. But I was a parent, a warrior, a survivor. I squared my shoulders, rolled up to the door, and declared, "Alright, ladies! Eyes on the floor until we reach the stall! And I'm going in the next one!"

Did they listen? Of course not.

One asked if I was "done yet." Another wanted to know what the men were doing at the urinal. And there I was, trapped in a tiny stall, praying for the sweet mercy of invisibility. Mortification settled over me like an unwanted houseguest who brought luggage and snacks.

I finished faster than a kid chasing the ice cream truck, grabbed the stroller, and fled the scene with whatever scraps of dignity I had left. And even then—even in the embarrassment, the chaos, the "why me" moments—I felt grateful. Because this was our chaos. Our story. Our beautifully ridiculous, unforgettable life.

And now? We have four incredible grandchildren who bring even more laughter, more love, and more joyful madness into the family. They're like bonus rounds of happiness, each one adding a new layer of wonder to our world.

Ah, family. The greatest adventure, the loudest comedy, the deepest blessing. Every bit of it worth it. Every single time.

Twas' the week before Thanksgiving 2024

Today, I found myself wandering through a landscape of memories, the kind that feel soft around the edges yet bright enough to stop you in your tracks. The last time I walked through this place in my heart was 38 years ago, hand-in-hand with my mother. It was October 1988 when she bravely went in for surgery to place a shunt—one last attempt to help her kidneys find their rhythm again through dialysis. But her body, stubborn and tired, slipped into a coma instead. For a moment, the world felt unbearably still.

And then love did what love does best. It nudged her back.

By November, she opened her eyes—bright, hungry, ready for Thanksgiving dinner like she'd simply taken a long nap. In a moment of pure, joyful rebellion, I dragged the Christmas tree out early that year. She always decorated on December 12, the Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe—a day that wrapped our home in warmth, tradition, and the kind of comfort only family can create. So we decorated early, laughing as we hung ornaments, the lights twinkling like they were cheering us on. That moment became a treasure, a soft landing before she left us just one day before the feast.

Yesterday, I found myself in a strangely familiar place again—hopeful, nervous, waiting for my kidney doctor to decide my fate. And just like that day decades ago, I got a small miracle. He told me I could go home for Thanksgiving. The stakes are high—my kidneys need to show improvement, or dialysis may be waiting for me down the road. But for now, I get to go home. And that is a blessing I hold close.

Tonight, our home will glow with the warmth only family can create. I am overflowing with gratitude for everyone who stepped in to turn our house into a haven—James, Michelle, Alyssa McCullough, and my daughter Sam, whose hands and hearts have done more than they know. They've built a Thanksgiving out of love, determination, and the kind of joyful chaos that makes life worth living.

And oh, the chaos. The laughter. The stories that will be retold for years.

The moments that make you shake your head and smile at the same time.

Family brings all of it—the noise, the comfort, the mess, the miracles. They bring the kind of love that fills a room, the kind that steadies you when life wobbles, the kind that makes even the hardest days feel survivable.

So here's to Thanksgiving. To memories that stay warm no matter how much time passes. To hope that keeps showing up. To family who holds us together with casseroles, hugs, and a whole lot of heart. To the beautiful, unpredictable, hilarious chaos that makes life feel full.

Tonight, we gather.
Tonight, we give thanks.
Tonight, we love—deeply, loudly, gratefully.

Tucker was not just a dog

Tucker wasn't just a dog—he was a full-blown legend, the kind of canine who could turn a simple nap into a spiritual experience. If dogs had résumés, his would've read: "Expert in leisure, professional sun-soaker, part-time philosopher, full-time charmer." And then there was Buddy—his loyal sidekick, a furry extrovert with a heart of gold and an appetite for treats that could put a competitive eater to shame.

They weren't even *our* dogs, technically. But for six glorious, chaotic, pee-scented months, Tucker and Buddy made themselves right at home—on my furniture, in my heart, and occasionally on my clean laundry. They had a sixth sense for finding the one thing I didn't want them to pee on, and then peeing on it with the confidence of artists signing their work. Honestly, I thought I could hide my favorite things better, but these two had detective-level noses and zero shame.

Life with them was a comedy wrapped in fur. Picture this: me, trying to enjoy a peaceful cup of coffee, while Buddy curled himself into a pretzel in the sun like he was auditioning for a yoga calendar. And Tucker—sweet, majestic Tucker—lounging on my red Adirondack chairs like a king surveying his kingdom. He'd stretch out on a plush pillow, eyes half-closed, soaking up the sun as if he were starring in a dog-themed cologne commercial.

Never mind that Caroline had a strict "no dogs on the red chairs" rule. Tucker heard that rule, considered it carefully, and then proceeded to ignore it with the confidence of a dog who knew he was adorable enough to get away with anything.

So today, as we say goodbye to Tucker, we celebrate a life lived with gusto—full of sunshine, naps, mischief, and the kind of love only a dog can give. He brought laughter, chaos, warmth, and yes, the occasional puddle in all the wrong places. But that's the magic of dogs—they make life messier, louder, funnier, and infinitely more loving.

Tucker, my friend, may you rest on the sunniest patio in the sky, surrounded by endless treats, soft pillows, and chairs you're absolutely allowed to climb on. Your spirit lives on in every laugh, every memory, and every slightly suspicious damp spot we find around the house.

Love you, Buddy and Tucker.

Work Friends

Isn't it wild how the people we once awkwardly nodded at by the coffee machine—while pretending to understand how the new filter worked—somehow become the unofficial superheroes of our work lives? At first, they're just names in an email chain, mysterious figures who materialize during meetings and vanish just as quickly. And then, without warning, they become the ones who rescue you from a crafting-machine catastrophe with perfectly

personalized aprons because, of course, they're secretly experts.

They're the ones who share that perfectly timed eye-roll when the latest corporate "initiative" drops like a lead balloon. The ones who slide into your life like a cozy sweater you didn't know you needed, warming up the coldest Monday morning with a joke, a snack, or a whispered "Don't worry, I didn't read the memo either."

Before you know it, their laughter becomes the soundtrack of your workday. Suddenly, spreadsheets feel less like punishment and more like a group project with people you actually like. They turn deadlines into adventures, meetings into comedy specials, and the daily grind into something that feels—dare I say—almost fun.

And then retirement arrives, like it did for me in 2024. You step back, take a breath, and realize something spectacular: those "colleagues" became your people. Your lifelines. Your sanity savers. The ones who made the chaos bearable and the victories sweeter. The ones you leaned on, laughed with, and somehow can't imagine life without.

Work may have just been work—but the friendships?
Those were the real career highlights.

Sierra and Siri

Sierra didn't just enter my life—she *launched* into it like a chocolate-covered cannonball with paws. One minute I was minding my business, the next I was raising a Labrador puppy who brought me more joy than a double scoop of chocolate fudge ice cream on a Texas summer day. She grew from a tiny munchkin into an 85-pound lady who still believed, with full confidence, that she could fit under my coffee table. If I had a nickel for every time I tripped over her, I could've funded her chew-toy empire.

One of my most unforgettable (and mildly traumatic) memories happened on Black Friday 2006. We'd been out shopping like Olympic athletes, ready to come home and devour Thanksgiving leftovers. Instead, we walked into what looked like a corn-themed crime scene. Corn. Everywhere. Kitchen, dining room, living room—Sierra had turned the house into a cornfield of chaos. Apparently, she decided the counter was her personal buffet and inhaled the corn on the cob like a toddler let loose in a candy store.

And her culinary adventures didn't stop there. Oh no, Sierra had a refined palate. She once ate a chunk of my bed. She polished off an entire block of

Irish butter (goodbye, spaghetti night). And then there was the infamous two pounds of thawing ground beef. Instead of becoming dinner, it became her personal art project. She dragged that bloody masterpiece up to my bedroom, leaving the place looking like a low-budget horror film or the dog-friendly remake of that Godfather horse scene. I walked in thinking, “Is this a mob hit or just a very ambitious dog chef?”

Then there was the park incident. One sunny day, Sierra frolicked like a gazelle for two hours straight. But when it was time to leave, she transformed into a dramatic soap-opera starlet, flopping to the ground like she’d fainted from heartbreak. I panicked and called my husband, Brandon, convinced she had heatstroke. But the moment he arrived—her human—she popped up like she’d just won the lottery. That should’ve been my clue: every time we left the park, she wasn’t dying. She was protesting.

And then came Siri, my other four-legged diva—a pit bull with more sass than a Broadway star. Brandon rescued her from neglect when she was two, and the moment she met me, she decided I was her ride-or-die. Suddenly, I had a shadow with muscles. Sierra and Siri loved visiting Grandma Minnie in Birmingham, cruising through that 11-hour drive like they were on a luxury road trip. When Grandma moved in with us, they became her personal cheer squad, barking and wagging like furry confetti cannons.

Sierra lived to the wise age of 15, charming her way into every corner of our hearts. Letting her go felt like trying to rip off a Band-Aid you know is going to hurt no matter what. Five years later, we still feel her spirit—like a friendly ghost who doesn’t rattle chains but definitely leaves behind memories (and maybe a phantom pee spot or two).

Now it’s just Siri and me, continuing our tradition of long park walks. 2024 threw more hospital visits at me than I could count, and our adventures had to pause. But we’re finally close to reclaiming our weekends on “her” favorite park bench. I can already feel the sunshine, hear the birds, and picture Siri giving me that “finally” look.

Here’s to the next chapter—filled with walks, laughter, chaos, and the kind of love only dogs can bring, even when they pee on your clothes, your floor, and every place you wish they wouldn’t.

My Hobby, My Passion

Middle age really knows how to sneak up on you. One minute you're cruising through a 30-mile Sunday bike ride feeling like the poster child for good health, and the next you're lying in a hospital bed trying to negotiate your release like you're bargaining for early parole. I kept thinking, "What's the point of inheriting a decent gene pool if it's going to turn around and file a complaint against me?"

I'd always been one of those annoyingly healthy people—the kind who works out four or five times a week, eats spinach voluntarily, and treats weekends like a personal fitness festival. I figured I had decades before I needed to worry about memoirs, mortality, or fixing my old card games. After all, my parents had their share of health issues, but I was convinced I'd dodged every bullet. Then November 1, 2023, to November 30, 2024, arrived like a cosmic prank. Healthwise, it was a perfect storm with no umbrella in sight.

But here's the funny thing about chaos: sometimes it hands you a gift wrapped in confusion and duct tape.

You see, I've always had this quirky little hobby—making card games. It started in 2002 with Wineguy.org, my attempt to help people learn about wine because, let's be honest, wine solves at least half of life's problems. Then came Grapevine, my wine trivia card game. Poker-style cards, 52 wine questions, a brilliant idea if I do say so myself. I even flew to Manhattan to pitch it to the Wine Spectator folks. We played it together, and… well, let's just say they were confused. "Are we playing poker or wine trivia?" they asked. Fair question. Brutal, but fair.

Did that stop me? Absolutely not. I was hooked.
In 2006, I created the Shuffle Word Game—52 alphabet cards, 13 dealt to each player, two minutes to form a word or phrase. Simple in theory. In practice? A hot mess. I couldn't figure out how to fix it.

Fast forward 18 years. There I was in a hospital bed, trying to convince my

doctor to let me go home for Thanksgiving. I promised to rest, behave, and not do anything heroic. And then something magical happened. My family came over to help clean, and they stumbled upon the old Shuffle Word Game box. Suddenly—like a lightning bolt straight from the creativity gods—the solution hit me. I revised the game, simplified it, and rebranded it as Shuffle-It: A Word Game for Enthusiasts. Yes, it's a mouthful, but it's my mouthful.

I worked on it slowly, savoring the process like a good glass of cabernet. And then the prototype arrived. Holding it felt like Christmas morning, birthday morning, and "your Amazon package arrived early" morning all rolled into one. I didn't die with the fix still inside me. I got to see it finished. That's no small thing.

And through all of this—hospital stays, health scares, game-making epiphanies—my family kept showing up. Even when everyone was stressed, exhausted, juggling their own storms, they still gathered for game nights. They still laughed. They still brought the kind of love that fills a room and makes the hard days softer. Family game night became our little island of joy in the middle of the madness, a place where chaos turned into connection and laughter became medicine.

So here's to middle age and all its indignities.
Here's to the hobbies that keep us sane.
Here's to the families who show up even when life is messy.
And here's to a good glass of wine while we play the games that bring us together.

Cheers to the next round.

My Brandon Lee: He had me at "Hello"

Brandon and I met online—because who needs Cupid when you've got Wi-Fi and questionable dating-app algorithms—and somehow, on that very same day, we met up in real life on July 28, 2011. A digital match made in heaven, confirmed by an in-person "oh wow, you're actually real." Our first date? Poker night and pizza at my place. I risked my heart and my poker chips in one evening. Spoiler: I lost the chips, won the man, and he's been here ever since.

He's 15 years younger, but somehow older in sensitivity with no patience and his uncanny ability to hog the remote like it's a family heirloom. He swears I was interested first; I swear he was. Honestly, he probably just wanted leftover pizza. He's a 6'4" Alabama boy who can see over crowds but still gets lost in the grocery store. I said "I love you" first because someone had to be brave—and because waiting for him to say it was like waiting for a sloth to finish a marathon.

His proposal? Iconic. He tossed our rings at me and declared, "You're gonna propose to me tonight." So there I was, dropping to one knee like a tiny, confused gentleman because love makes you do ridiculous things. He's impatient, sensitive, loud, competitive, and absolutely unhinged when playing Monopoly. I'm the better cook—he disagrees, but he's wrong. He wakes up at 4 a.m. like a drill sergeant, barking orders while Siri and I cling to our last moments of sleep.

Three months in, I wanted to watch the Spurs. He said, "Nope, it's me or the game." I thought he was joking. He was not. So I grabbed the remote and chased him like a gremlin. Now? I watch the Spurs whenever I want, and he's free to binge RuPaul's Drag Race. That's love. That's compromise. That's victory.

He drives like a racecar driver if racecars took naps and watched obscure 80s movies. I drive because he drives so slow I could pick flowers on the side of the road. But when I'm behind the wheel, he puts his feet on the dashboard like he's posing for a magazine, and it drives me absolutely wild.

We both think we're the more social one, but let's be honest—I am. Ask literally anyone. He'd rather be at the casino or gaming.

Our date nights? Braum's, Gloria's, or Chili's—because we're classy like that. He's the spender, the remote hog, the "I don't know" king when I ask where he wants to eat. We both wear the pants—and sometimes the heels—because love is a partnership, and occasionally, it's about strutting together.

We've traveled to Birmingham, San Antonio, the Hill Country, and Vegas (which he swears he'll never fly to again). We're not gold-star gays—we both married women once upon a time. No tattoos, but enough stories to fill a library. I claim I sing better; he actually does, thanks to that Alabama drawl. We were both raised in church—him Southern Baptist, me Catholic turned non-denominational. When we came out, our families wrapped us in love. His mom and sister adored him. My daughters, my ex-wife, and my chosen family embraced us both. When we met, we fell in love with each other's families too.

And in the most poetic twist of fate, my first spouse officiated our wedding. We all cried happy tears—proof that love really does conquer all, even the moments that could've been awkward enough to make a sitcom writer sweat.

During my year-long health battles, Brandon never left my side. He slept in chairs, held my hand, and helped me heal. We're not mushy. We don't always agree. We don't always speak the same emotional language. But for 14 years, our love has stood firm—magical, unpredictable, a little unsteady, hopeful, and healing in all the ways that matter.

That's our love story: how I got lucky enough to find someone who is both my partner and my favorite pain-in-the-neck, the chaos I choose, the laughter I need, and the love that keeps teaching me how to stay soft in a hard world.

My faith

Faith is funny. Not funny like a joke—funny like a magic trick you don't fully understand but somehow still believe in. It's unpredictable, a little wobbly, sometimes loud, sometimes quiet, but always—always—capable of healing places inside you that you didn't even know were bruised.

For me, faith has never been a straight line. It's been more like a roller coaster designed by someone who definitely skipped the safety meeting. Losing my religion wasn't hard. It happened the moment my sister died, when the world cracked open and everything I'd been taught suddenly felt too small to hold my grief. I'd never quite felt included in church anyway. They preached against homosexuality, and I sat there wondering, "So… what about me?"

From the age of five, I knew I was attracted to both genders. I was fluid before anyone had a word for it. Every sermon felt like a countdown to eternal doom. That's why, at nine or ten, I told my best friend the truth. And why, when Josie and I started dating, I had to be honest. You couldn't know me and think I was straight—not back then, when everyone insisted bisexuality was a phase, a myth, or a punchline.

Once, as teenagers, our youth pastor Brother Archie pulled me aside. He asked if I was gay, worried Josie might get hurt. I took a breath and told him the truth: what mattered was faithfulness. He nodded, and that was that. A rare moment of grace.

After my sister died, I asked Josie if I could get my ears pierced. She hesitated, so I got one. When I walked into church with that earring, the church ladies made it clear I wasn't welcome. Josie defended me fiercely—one day I'll write down exactly what she said—but the damage was done. We both felt the sting of exclusion.

Later, in North Texas, we attended Fellowship Church in Grapevine. I took my daughters every Sunday. One morning, while checking them into Sunday school, I accidentally stepped on someone's foot. I turned around—and it was Troy Aikman. I apologized and moved away before I could embarrass myself further. Another Sunday, during a big football game, the church was

calling out people who left early. My daughters and I sat frozen in the pews, praying the camera wouldn't catch us because we knew their mom was waiting in the van, reading a book or the Fuddrucker's menu until we finished.

But then came the losses—my mom, my niece, grandparents, aunts, uncles. One by one, the people I loved slipped away. My faith slipped with them. And I realized something: the red-letter words of Jesus never once mention homosexuality. The verses people used against me were inconsistent, cherry-picked, and often ignored when it came to things like bacon. Somehow, bacon got a free pass.

It wasn't until I met someone special that I found my way back to faith—not religion, but faith. We prayed, traveled, cycled, loved. But even then, after six years, something inside me still felt unsettled. I was searching for a home I couldn't quite name.

So I broke free. I left with a dog, memories, love, and a faith that had been battered but not broken. And in that quiet space, I learned something beautiful:

Love is about being seen.
Being loved is about seeing someone else—truly, deeply, without fear.

Faith, at its best, is the same.
It gives you room to breathe.
Room to grow.
Room to be exactly who you are.

It's magical.
It's messy.
It's healing.

And it's mine again—rebuilt, reclaimed, and rooted in freedom.

Diane, Olympic Swimmer (not not really)

David, The Skater Boi

David was a guy I met in 2009—briefly dated, then he ghosted me, then reappeared on New Year's D 2011, revealing his real name wasn't David, but for privacy's sake, we'll keep calling him David. Turns out he was moving out of town in two years, and we agreed that it was just a friend + thing with no real commitment. We turned his bucket-list of local adventures into weekend errands—until one Friday, h said, "We haven't done. skateboarding." I smugly claimed, "Lucky for you, I know how to skateboard," despite the fact I hadn't since I was a teenager. It's like riding a bicycle—you don't forget, right? Nope We buy skateboards at Target because apparently, grown-ups don't own those unless they are Tony Hawk. At the park, I pop one foot on the board, push of, and immediately I flew into the air and land on my eyesocket. I kissed the pavement—and I didn't like it. Helmet still in my hand and blood everywhere. "Are you okay?" he asks. "You fell!" he says, as if I hadn't figured that out. He told me "yo need to go to the emergency room" I said take me home, I'll just "wash it of". I kept saying I think my skull was fractured. We got to my place and washed it off and it was clear I had to go to the emergency room. I didn't call 9•1•1, but i was trying to get my iPhone to the emergency room in Irving but my phone wouldn't get it right so kept yelling EMERGENCY at the ANSWERING machine not a person. I mean we made it to the ER before the phone could figure out what I needed! Blood and a trip to the ER, 14 stitch and $1400 later, I'm sporting the black eye from hell. Back at work later that next week, our VP spots my shiner, stops the department meeting (it was packed)—he was introducing our new Sr.

VP, and asks what happened? I explained I was skateboarding—he gave me that look, "Are you too o for that?" and I just nod. Yep, I still thought I could skateboard. Spoiler: I cannot.

Mi Vida

Jody, The Alabama Queen

Jody, when you made that bold move from Alabama to Texas for Michaels Corporate—and brought that adorable troublemaker Brandon Lee along— you didn't just change your life; you changed mine. Honestly, I was pretty sure I'd be single forever, curled up with a pint of ice cream and a bad attitude. We spent most of those first years watching RuPaul's drag race, going to drag shows, shopping at Joann's and Michaels and you did your best to show me how to sew a pirate costume together. I had fun doing that and it looked so fabulous when we were done, that I wore that costume so many times over the years and everyone loved it. Remember when, Brandon, our favorite driver plowed the truck into the sand, and we spent hours arguing whether to call a tow or just dig it out? Pure comedy. And that rainbow crayon masterpiece you made for Brandon and me when we moved in together? It's the star of our Dia de Los Muertos altar—proof that even chaos can be colorful. You always said the only good thing that came from Texas was Brandon Lee and me getting together. Well, Hun, July 2025 marks four years I've been married to our favorite partner in crime. This past year's been a rollercoaster, and I honestly don't know what I'd do without him. So, thank you. Truly. Can you believe it's been seven years since you moved on to that big, peaceful place in the sky? Sashay, I wish you would've stayed here with us here on earth. We miss you more than words can say, but I hope you're watching and laughing. The other day, I was exiting the elevator. Our best bud Brandon hiding just at the doors open he jumped in front of me to scare the bejesus out of me. You would've laughed so much! We love you, Jody. Rest easy, my friend.

Mi Vida

Matt, The PK-Preacher's Kid

It was six months post-divorce. Here I was, on my futon, eating ice cream like a sad panda, singing keys to depressing songs. Then, I meet Matt—PK preacher's kid, not really his name—and looks like Bill Crystal in a suit. We share stories, listen like pros, and he's already got life mapped out—traveling for work, always in control. But when we're together, it's wine, laughs, no fights. We hit NYC's Essex Hotel with a spectacular view over Central Park, enjoyed a couple of plays and romantic dinners, played go Idaho more romantic dinners, crashed a Montreal wine convention, visited Canada's Notre Dam and yes more romantic dinners. Yet, he kept his love life more secretive than the Crown Jewels. On my birthday in June 2004, he bought Earth, Wind & Fire and The Doobie Brothers tickets. I joked, "Aren't you worried someone'll see us?" He said, "Nope." Fifteen minutes later, a lady behind me whispers, "Y make a great couple." Shocked? Nah. Flattered?
Absolutely. Come July, he's wooing me with Atlantis Bahamas tickets (in my hand)—until I learn it's a family reunion. Turns out, he's still married. I was thinking how do you wanna go to this family reunion when you're not divorced yet. He said his parents would not mind but I wasn't convinced and I certainly didn't want to crash the family reunion. I told him they will not be happy about this. I mean, I'm all about Family but that's not the way you do it. I voiced my concerns and he agreed to talk to his parents. He did and they're not thrilled. I realize I really misunderstood this whole situation —he's still living with his wife. Classic. Fast forward, I meet T. Almo a year in with Matt, I hope his divorce is done; it's not. I finally say, "You're not divorcing her?
We're do

" No family meet-and-greet effort with your family? It's not like you made any effort to meet any of my family and stressed me out over trying to meet your family. Nope. Bitter? Maybe. But I should've seen the writing on the wall.

Six years later, Matt's finally divorced—lawyers got her big money alimony (Texas, baby). We travelled to San Francisco and celebrated our

reunion. But he's always on the phone. Turns out, not work. He's seeing someone else— another woman. I can't believe it—again. Then, a week after our SF treat, I met Brandon. First proper date we're at a restaurant just down the canal where we were married.

He's a breath of fresh air. During a selfie, Matt texts me. Brandon snatches my phone, fires off a hilarious, scathing reply, and stands up for me. My heart melted—and Matt? Never heard from him again.

T, the cycling guy who caught my heart

Let's call him T for privacy reasons, the Cycling Guy: A Love Story (Sort Of) September 2004: I met this cyclist—T—So, we hash out me coming out as bi, him being 40, never married, and hiding his secret. We accept the love we think we deserve—and, bam, suddenly I'm dating him. Because, really, who saw that coming? We start cycling every weekend—first mountain biking, then trading in dirt for asphalt around White Rock Lake and Campion Trail.

We even took epic trips to Downieville, Lake Tahoe, and also smaller trails like Tyler State Park, Cedar Mountain Nature Preserve —basically, the entire DFW trail system. It was love… with pedals. He was the perfect partner—great with my family, patient with my teenage daughters, and calm as a monk. Me? I was still bitter, toxic, a walking hurricane of resentment. But somehow, we managed to stick together for six years—bonded by faith and bicycles, even if I never quite felt at home with him. I'd spend most nights backpacking at his place, because he didn't want me there when friends or family dropped by. My boss, knowing our story, would ask, "Backpacking it again?" and I'd just laugh—because it was true. He bought me a beautiful Chocolate Lab—#SierraMama, the dog who became our family. One weekend, while returning my daughter Sam to Josie, T spots Labs for sale in Lewisville. Naturally, he must evaluate all options, so we detour to Petland (back then, I didn't know about puppy mills). An hour and a prayer later, we find her still there waiting for us —one of eight, with the loveliest brown coat. T finally says, "Are you sure you want her?" I say yes, he pays cash, and our lives are forever changed. Years pass. I keep backpacking, never truly making a home, until in July 2010 I finally have to set him free. Mostly my fault—I knew what I was getting into, but who's counting? We have stayed friends. I left with a dog, and more importantly, I regained faith in God because of him. Fast forward to 2019, before Sierra passed, we gathered at Brandon and my house.

There's a knock at the door. Inside, our daughters. Outside, T. When our daughter opens the door, we burst into tears. My daughters tell me I never gave them closure with him—and suddenly, I see what he meant to us all.

What we all meant to each other. And that, my friends, is the story of T—the cyclist, the dog buyer, the guy who somehow held a piece of all our hearts.

Tour of Italy

They say France's for food, Italy's for sex — but for me, Italy was for food, wine, and people who knew how to enjoy both. Here's my scenic, slightly chaotic Italy story. So, I was working 9-to-11-hour days as a senior accountant—bank reconciliations, 401(k)s, government contracts, payroll, accounts payable and inventory —while taking marketing and accounting classes at night.

Company's broke, my pay's cut 20%, and I'm burning out. I tell Andy, my boss, I need a second job. I begin waiting tables at Ifratelli's restaurant in Irving— helping make ends meet. It's December 1999 and Josie, my wife at the time , says (thinking of our daughters) I can't get of New Year's Eve, fearing Y2K. I ask of from Mike, the owner—he says everyone works or you're fired. I skip; he fires me. Oops. My marketing teacher, a former steak-and-ale bartender, says go big chain. So I do, bartending at Olive Garden. Turns out, I love it. One day, during orientation, a tornado hits Ft. Worth. My trainer Jose, from Ft. Worth, sends us home. I watch the news—Michelle, my niece, works downtown. Her car's wrecked by the storm, but she's safe. We hug tighter after that. Back at Olive Garden, I discover wine. Two years later, they hold a contest. It's June 16, 2002 and I was going to help my buddy Jason make a wine video, but he's a no show. My manager Dane says do it for yourself and I'll submit it. I go home, create Wineguy.org, and then three months go by and I'm not thinking about when I get a phone call from Valerie the VP of Olive Garden.

She says I'm on the shortlist and suddenly I'm in Italy. They picked me for the October 2002 Wine Ambassador trip—only seven spots open. I'm stunned. We took the grand tour of Italy starting in Rome. Visiting the Colosseum, Caesar palace, Siena's walls, and tasting gelato (for the first time). On the bus, Jason, Eileen, Pam, and I share our stories, play cards, and bond. I sightsee with a local guide

—actually my bus partner, Jason, who knew everything about Italy from his previous planning-like a pro. We continued the grand tour of Italy with Tuscany Florence Modena . Verona Dolomites Bolzano Trentino-Alto Adige

(The Italian Alps) Lake Garda Milan We take photos, eat pasta, sip wine, and laugh till our stomachs hurt. It’s a trip of a lifetime.

Back home, I promised Valerie I'd share Italy's magic. I do. Through Wineguy.org I partnered with Olive Garden, Su Vino Winery, Delaney Vineyards to do Vino Ventures with guests, family and colleagues. I met new colleagues and friends Lori, Ryan, Mero, Shelly, and Canitra. After my divorce they became my support squad, especially during my 2003 high school reunion—when Ryan and Mero refused to let me go alone. Not lovers, just friends who had my back. In Italy— we enjoyed food and wine, but learned more about life and made new friends, and a whole lot of stories I'll carry forever. P.S. Three months after Italy, I'm at OG's wine hosting—finally assembling my 200-photos-in-a-photo-album masterpiece. Nothing fancy, just a proud little project. I leave it on the counter for guests to browse while they wait. It's Friday night, the lobby's packed. I hear the hostess say, "Would you like some wine while you wait?" "Marty is wine hosting, and he'll gladly pour you some wine. She's talking to Mike from Ifratelli's—yes, that Mike, with his whole management crew. I pour wine, flip through my Italy photos, and then, since the table's taking a while, I offer to serve them in our cafe. I bring breadsticks, salad, and more wine ("pu vino" which in Italian roughly means "here comes the wine"). Mike turns to his team and says, "I taught him everything he knows." We all laugh—because, clearly, I've learned nothing.

Don't bother looking up the ifratelli's restaurant, they only serve pizza now.

Divorce, the first pancake, and Kevin

Divorce, the first pancake (first guy after the divorce), and then Kevin. The term "first pancake" is a metaphor that originates from the idea that the first pancake you make often turns out imperfect — it's a trial run, a learning experience It was April 1, 2003 — just another day that felt suspiciously like all the others, except I had a dentist appointment. You know, the kind where you sit in that chair, teeth numbed to the point where I'm questioning my life choices. I got home, looked at Josie — who was already eyeing me like she knew I was about to drop a bomb — and blurted out, "I want a divorce." This time, she said, "Okay." No drama, no tears, no "Are you sure?" Just a calm, "Okay." Which was surprising because, the first time I asked in June 1995, she responded with, "You're going back to being gay, right?" I said nothing, mostly because she was right. She always knew what was going on before I even knew it myself. She had a psychic gift for calling me out, like a psychic with a sense of humor and a penchant for calling out my lies. We agreed to stay together for the girls — because, frankly, who wanted to be the couple that broke up and then immediately started a reality show? Our secrets were about as well-kept as a Kardashian diet. I'm sure at least one of our daughters knew what was happening, and anyone who met us knew, too. It was the kind of unspoken, messy, beautiful chaos that only a small-town soap opera could rival. We sat our girls down, and one of them, wise beyond her years, said, "I can handle you guys getting a divorce, but. is there something else you want to tell us?" We said, no. Josie, ever the straight shooter, pulled me aside and said, "I can't handle you coming out. If you do, I'm moving back to San Antonio." A month later — May 1st, to be precise — I came out. I put together the divorce papers, we marched down to the courthouse, signed our lives away, and celebrated like we'd just won the lottery. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't all sunshine and rainbows.

Feelings were hurt, words were exchanged, and I learned that "closure" is just a fancy word for "awkward silence.

” June rolled around, and Josie kept her word. She moved back to San Antonio, leaving me and our girls for the summer in Lewisville.

Meanwhile, my daytime job ended — just in time for me to discover that unemployment isn’t as glamorous as it sounds.

So, I picked up extra shifts: waiting tables by day, bartending by night.

I'd drive from Dallas to Lewisville, tips in hand, and spend my hard-earned cash on Sonic runs, arcade visits, and movie nights with the girls — because nothing says "single parenting" like a supersized cher limeade and a round of skee-ball. Summer flew by faster than a kid with a sugar rush. Before I knew i July 25th arrived, our first unanniversary and the day I drove the girls to San Antonio, following Josie and her sister in a U-Haul. My high school reunion was that night, a two-night extravaganza, and my support squad, Mero and Ryan, followed us to cheer me on. I'll never forget their loyalty or their questionable dance moves. By September, the divorce was final. The girls and Josie, 300 miles away, were officially out of my immediate life — and I was, well, alone in the brand-new apartment my boss Lisa found for me. I spent my days working, lifting weights, eating fast food, and repeating the cycle Dates? Oh, I went on some. The first was a marketing guy — a real piece of work — living in the gayborhood with a Beamer that probably cost more than my rent. We went out a few times, though I'm pretty sure "dates" is generous. One memorable outing was at the local Home Depot, because apparently, nothing says romance like picking out a new showerhead together. His best friend worked there, and I guess the plan was to get his stamp of approval, which, frankly, felt more like a performance review than a first date. Anyway, we had a few laughs, some awkward silences, and the on our last date, he drops this little gem: "This isn't going to work. This is your first guy after your divorce, and I don't want to be the one to train you.

" I mean, really? Who knew that dating someone in the gayborhood came with a side of amateur coaching? It was like being told, "Sorry, sweetheart, I'm not here to help you find your way — I'm just here to break you in and then walk away." Classy.

Truly, a masterclass in how to turn a potentially charming encounter into a full-blown comedy of erro

There was the plastic surgeon who sized me up to see what was wrong with me and needed to be fixe the city councilman who insisted nobody knew he was gay — because, apparently, pink trucks and pin cowboy hats are coded signals now — and the gorgeous guy at the club on ecstasy who told me everything was probably okay- I said no it's not ok.Then, there was Kevin (not his real name), a man at a fast-food place, 6'5", more muscles than a gym membership, and a redhead who asked for my number. After a few days, he called. He came over. I asked, "Exactly how old are you?" He said, "How old are you?" I said, "38." He said, "I'm 19." I asked for his ID. He looked surprised but handed it over — proof that sometimes, desperation is just a piece of plastic. We hung out every night when we weren't working. I called Josie weekly — begging her to come back, to save me from myself — but the answer was always no. Until early October, when she finally said, "We're moving back." Her, her new guy, and the girls, all packed up and headed home. I was elated. They arrived before Halloween, and I was so happy I considered throwing a parade — or at least a small, awkward dance in the kitchen. They asked if I was seeing someone. I said, "Yes, his name is Kevin." They wanted to meet him. I said, "No, not yet. The week before Thanksgiving, I got a new job at Zales. My boss, Rosita, asked if I wanted to start before or after the holiday. I chose after
— because, frankly, I wanted to spend Thanksgiving with my daughters, not explaining that Kevin was on his way over for a "quiet" visit. Kevin kept saying he wanted to come over when the girls were asleep. But I said no the first four times and then on his fifth try, I say yes, but only if he was quiet and left before they woke up. He agreed.

The next morning, at breakfast, one of the girls said, "I think Kevin's in my class at school." I died a little, I replied, "No, honey, he's a fast-food manager. He's not in your class.

" They teased me mercilessly.

Then, in early December, my youngest said, "I heard Kevin on the radio the other night.

” I asked, “What?” She said, “He was on some late-night local radio show, confessing he’s in love with a man and doesn’t know what to do because he has a girlfriend.” I don’t know if it was him — the universe is cruel like that — but he disappeared after that, and we never looked back.

And that, dear reader, is the story of how I went from “just another regular day” to a whirlwind of love, loss, and, somehow, a whole lot of humor.Because if you don’t laugh at it, you might cry — and I prefer my tears with a twist of sarcasm.

The Table

The Morales family tree hails from Elmendorf, Texas—just a quick 15-minute drive southeast of San Antonio—and our family cemetery sits of Hwy 181 on Elmendorf/Lavernia Rd. We’re descendants of the Peres Casanova brothers from the Canary Islands (Spain), one of the original 13 families who helped settle San Antonio—so you know we come with a little island spice. Now, gather ‘round for the story of the giant rock in our backyard on Barney Avenue. My grandpa Louis Casanova Morales used to tell me that our ancestors had a grand hacienda with a long, smooth cement table outside. When their land was taken through eminent domain (for the Highway by Calaveras Lake project-I think), that table was shattered into pieces—this chunk being his part. That rock was so heavy, I swear, when we tried to move it with three men, we might as well have been lifting a small car. I finally gave up and left it behind, realizing some things are too stubborn—like family stories and that rock. Ever since, I’ve adored sprawling tables—like a never- ending bowl of carne guisada—overflowing with family, friends, and enough food to make Abuela cry. There’s magic in a table so big it doubles as a runway for stories, loud laughter, and the occasional tamale debate. It’s where life’s chaos gets served up with a side of Amor y emoción, and every clink of a beer bottle is a toast to good company, brisket, and barbacoa. Honestly, a table this long isn’t just the heart of the home; after a few beers, it’s the heart of comedy, chaos, and a little madness. Because what’s life without a little mess, a lot of love, and a table so delicious even the neighbors want in?

Morales Surname and the Mulberry Tree

Mi Vida

Alright, picture this: The surname Morales is like the family's original Instagram handle—back in Spain, of course—where everything revolved around a particular mulberry tree. Yes, a *moral* (pronounced almost like "more-ahl," because Spanish) isn't just a fancy word for "ethics," but also a leafy, lush grove or a tree so purple it makes you want to Instagram your lunch. Long ago, in the golden days of Spain, families who lived near or owned land dotted with these vibrant, almost regal trees—think of them as the mulberry version of the Royal Family's favorite bonsai—got tagged with "Morales." It was like being called "the ones by the purple tree," a sort of leafy family crest, if you will. These folks weren't just tree-huggers; they were the original landowners with a penchant for purple foliage, and their name stuck faster than grandma's secret recipe. As generations passed, the Morales family became a living, breathing botanical landmark—living proof that your ancestors' front yard was decked out in the kind of scenery that would make a landscape artist cry. Passing down this leafy legacy, they carried a proud tradition of "living by the purple tree," which, in the modern world, sounds like a sitcom spin-of

—"Morales and the Mysteries of the Purple Grove." Today, the name has traveled far beyond Spain, spreading across the Spanish-speaking world and maybe even to that one cousin in Nebraska who insists they're "Spanish, kind of." But no matter where you find 'em, Morales still whispers of land, roots, and a splash of purple—like the family's own version of a family crest, only more leafy and less shiny. In the end, Morales isn't just a surname; it's a botanical badge of honor, rooted in land, history, and a bit of purple flair. It's the kind of name that tells you, "Yes, I live by a beautiful, leafy landmark—and I'm proud of it." "It's the family story you want to tell at every party(or at least I do, lol) —'We're the ones by the

Mi Vida

Bartending Story - A Seven?

Back in the day, I was doing payroll, not bartending at the OG—until one hot summer night when my coworker Janet Riley dragged me to a party. It was the kind of party where the drinks flowed and the sun set slow. Midway, the bartender vanished, and since I was feeling pretty swoll from working out, I ditched my shirt (because, why not?) and jumped behind the bar. As I was pouring, a group of guys nearby started whispering and snickering. I asked, “What are y’all doing?” They looked at me and said, “We’re rating you… and you’re about a seven.” I blinked, then kept serving. One guy boldly said, “I’d go home with you tonight.” I burst out laughing, cut him off, and finally, the real bartender returned. I rejoined my friend, we laughed all the way home, and I still chuckle thinking about that night—because sometimes, a seven’s just a seven, but a story like that? Pure comedy gold.

Playland Park

Once upon a time in San Antonio, there was a little slice of childhood magic called Playland Park. Opened in 1925, it was where kids squealed on the roller coaster, moms clutched their hats on the Ferris wheel, and dads tried—and mostly failed—to win giant stuffed animals at the ring toss, laughing all the way home. Playland was more than rides; it was family, festivals, and summer nights under the Texas stars, where cotton candy was so sweet it could give you cavities just thinking about it. As decades rolled by, Playland's charm faced stiff competition from flashier parks and economic storms. Despite desperate attempts to keep its vintage spirit alive, the park closed in the late '80s, leaving behind a ghost town of laughter and memories. Today, those empty grounds whisper stories of childhood innocence, sweaty palms, and fun with cousins family from Aunt Cora from Ohio, Aunt Olga from Del Rio, and Aunt Maria from Dallas, Aunt Josie I think they are living on Barney Avenue all gathering at my Aunt and Chayo and Uncle Arthur and cousin Belinda's home across the street from us on Barney. Now we reminisce about the good old days. Though Playland's gates are shut, its spirit spins on in our hearts — proof that some fun, like a good story, refuses to fade away, especially in San Antonio's everlasting carousel of memories.

SeaWorld San Antonio and Baby Shamu

Alright, buckle up because this is a Texas-sized tale of SeaWorld, tiny adventures, and hilarious hijinks. Where did Shamu get his name from? Well, from “shumama” and “shupapa”. That sounds like a good name for a giant orca with a big personality! Now, let me tell you about my little Texas-sized adventure at SeaWorld San Antonio. My aunt Bebe who wore kaftans and big hoop earrings,—no, not my sister Bebe, that’s a whole other story—was dating this guy who knew they were hiring and new the right people. I mean this was also when it first opened. The next thing I knew, I got a job. It was full-time job with benefits, full-time hours, the whole shebang. I was hired into the wardrobe department—behind the scenes, but I got to see everything and everybody. I loved watching the skiers tumble into their costumes like a bunch of circus clowns. All the other costume performers and the orca, dolphin, sea lion and penguin trainers with their smelly faux seawater swim suits. We cleaned them and got them ready for the next day. My job? Managing the locker room, which meant all those locks and combinations

—oh Lord, a personal lock was like a secret marriage. People would come to me needing a new lock or trying to break into one they forgot the combo to. I was basically the Lock Whisperer.

When it was slow I’d help wash and care for their wardrobes. Then there was David—a sweet guy with Down syndrome—whose main gig was to clean and keep things tidy. I was his supervisor, and his mom worked just next door in the corporate ofice. I think her name was Helen. Every week, I’d report David’s progress to Helen by the CEO’s ofice—a fancy room with a view, I might add. David? Always perfect.

Until one day, David decided he was done with the routine. He got it in his head that he was going to drive a golf cart. Before I could stop him, he jumped right in and took off like he was auditioning for the Indy 500. I ran after him, screaming, “David! No, sir!” Too late. He hit the building and he flipped over that golf cart faster than you can say “orca splash.” We rushed him to the nurses’ station, and bless his heart, he was fine—just a bruise on his elbow. I walked over to see his mom, who said, “Don’t worry about it.
David never listens to me anyway. You’re doing a great job keeping him focused.” I guess that’s the secret. Just keep him busy, keep him laughing, and keep the locks locked. Now, fast forward to my daily commute— because, I took not one but *two* buses to get to SeaWorld (one way).It was an hour and a half of my life (three hours each day) I’ll never get back, but, you know, that’s Texas dedication. I’d hop on the first bus from Barney, roll into downtown San Antonio by the Alamo (cue Davy Crockett music), and then catch the express to SeaWorld’s main entrance. From there, I’d wait for the bus to continue the route that took me to the back area where I worked
—because, of course, I wasn’t lucky enough to work right at the entrance. One day, I dozed off on the second bus—I mean, who wouldn’t after 60 minutes into a 90-minute commute? And wouldn’t you know it, as the bus rolled down Hwy 90, passing up Barney Avenue where I lived-I wake up just in time to see my brother Trino in his truck, cruising right alongside us, waving like he’s auditioning for “Texas’ Best Wave.” I blinked. Twice. Then I thought, “What in the Sam Hill? How does he know where I work? Is this a Texas-sized coincidence or what?” The bus pulled up at the main gate, I stayed on the bus, and Trino’s truck kept pace, following me as the bus continued its route all the way to the back. I get off at the last stop, and sure enough, there he is—waiting like the sheriff in a western, ready to ask me where I was headed. I was in uniform, so I played it cool—well, as cool as a man with eyebrows that look like two fuzzy caterpillars can be.

I told him I worked here, in the front, but had to pick up some things from the back area.

He chuckled and said, “I just wanted to talk to you,” and I’ll be honest—we didn’t actually talk at length.What I do remember is that he never followed me again to SeaWorld, and I took that as a Texas-sized victory.

Fast forward several months and our beautiful middle daughter Virginia was born in November 1990 - a miracle for sure and we we enjoying our happy family. I couldn't believe it we had two beautiful daughters and they were the joy of our hearts. Fast forward 5 months and the anticipation of Baby Shamu was real especially since I worked about 700ft from the orca bay where ShuMama was getting ready to deliver. You could hear her while we worked and think-oh it's time. But it went on like that for a couple of weeks. Finally, bless their fins! Baby Shamu made a splash in April 1991 at SeaWorld San Antonio—proof that even in Texas, a sea life miracle could happen in captivity. Born to the original Shamu and his lucky mate, this little whale was a big deal.I worked in wardrobe which was in the back next to executive ofice, the printing ofice, the cafeteria and just up the hill was Shamu Stadium and the orca resting and relaxing bays. We walked over to see the new born once they were ready for us. Baby Shamu became the star, stirring up cheers So, about ten years after we'd packed up our lives in San Antonio, we found ourselves in Lewisville, and naturally, the nostalgia hit harder than a Dallas Cowboys game day. We decided to head back to SeaWorld—mainly because our three daughters wanted to see Shamu and the place where their parents used to work. We wanted them to see the giant tanks, the shows, and the fact that we both once proudly wore the SeaWorld uniform. Now, I'd bleached my hair for summer—because nothing says "Texas fun on vacation" like sun-bleached locks—and Josie, being the mischievous one, convinced me to bleach my eyebrows, too.

I thought, "Heck, why not? I'll look like a Hollywood star!" But as soon as we pulled into the parking lot, I caught a glimpse in the mirror and thought, "Damn, you look like a clown's cousin.

With no eyebrows" I couldn't stop laughing at my reflection—my eyebrows now looked like two bleached fuzzy caterpillars had taken up residence on my face.

I begged Josie for mascara, and she handed me hers.

I carefully colored my eyebrows, praying my mascara wouldn't run every

time I got splashed in the splash zones—because, let's be honest, that's a real possibility at SeaWorld.

So, that's my SeaWorld story—full of laughs, a little chaos, and a whole lot of Texas charm. And next time you wonder where Shamu got his name, just remember: it's from "shumama" and "shupapa"—a big, lovable splash of nonsense that's just perfect for a giant orca with a big personality.

And that, my friend, is how you turn a SeaWorld experience into a hilarious, fuzzy eyebrow- raising adventure—Texas style, with a splash of laughter and a whole lot of 'what in tarnation just happened?' I'm now looking for all my elusive SeaWorld photos.

Did you say lick?

When Dad died in '98, my coworkers bought me a cap that said "Did you say lick?"—a hilarious jab at political correctness before it was cool. I've always had a snarky comment, but only around those who can handle it. Their kindness—plus a cheeky sense of humor— made me laugh through tears.
Sometimes, I wear that cap to remind me that humor's my survival kit—because sometimes, you just gotta be a little inappropriate to keep going.

Cheers to the kind souls who knew laughter is the best funeral flower.

Reggie The Artsy Man

Reggie (not his name), the Artsy Man It all started the week after I broke up with T—right after the Fourth of July in 2010. I'd been cycling solo all weekend, pretending I was a heroine in some indie film, exhausted but feeling pretty damn accomplished. Then, like a Hollywood plot twist, I met Reggie—the marketing designer artsy guy. I don't know his fancy title, but he worked for a big cosmetic company in DFW, creating marketing art that made you want to buy lipstick just by looking at it. The man was talented, tall, dark, handsome—basically, a walking Pinterest board or white board. It was instant fireworks—literally, my heart did a little dance. But I wasn't sure how he felt. Still, he kept coming back, so I figured, hey, chemistry's a two-way street, right? I mean we didn't meet each other's friends but I invited him to meet the family for Thanksgiving—because what's life without risking a little? He met them, but I was still a hot mess from T, so maybe I unconsciously pushed him away or just didn't connect. Could be both. Fast forward to New Year's Day 2011—because nothing says "romance" like texting after midnight—and we hung out once or twice after that. Then, in July, I met Brandon Lee. Oh, Brandon had a few choice words for him. The story of Reggie? Oh, I've got photos—a few of them cause he was part of my life — but I'm not sharing. Some things are better kept as art in my mind—like his talent, his smirk, and that tall, dark allure.

So, that's the saga of Reggie—the artsy guy who briefly lit up my life, made me question my sanity, and then disappeared into the background while I moved on to the next chapter.

Classic me—full of love, a little chaos, and a dash of marketing flair.

Mi Vida

Floore's Country Store

Alright, let me tell you about John's Floore's County Store in Helotes—a place that's as Texan as a cold Lone Star on a hot summer day and just as full of stories. Think of it as the Grand Ole Opry's outlaw cousin, with a little hill country charm and more Willie Nelson than you can shake a guitar pick at.

Founded back in 1942 by John T. Floore—who, before opening this legendary joint, managed the Majestic Theater in San Antonio—Floore's started life as a grocery for travelers between San Antonio and Bandera. But John T. had the kind of vision that only a Texan with a dream and a good sense of humor can have. He saw the thriving dance halls in Bandera and Helotes and thought, "Why not add a music venue to the mix?" So, he did, and the rest is outlaw country history. By the 1950s, Floore's had become the place to be—drawing legends like Ray Price, Bob Wills, Johnny Cash, Kitty Wells, Ernest Tubb and even Elvis. But the real star here? Willie Nelson. They say Floore's is Nelson's "musical birthplace," and he's got the tattooed-in-the-lyrics kind of love for the joint.

Willie and John T. struck up a relationship, with Willie returning often and even mentioning Floore's in his song "Shotgun Willie." If that's not a Texan love story, I don't know what is. Now, picture me— probably underage, maybe even a little confused—standing in the middle of the bar, trying to piece together how I got there. I mean I didn't know Josie yet, but I knew I was somewhere I probably shouldn't be. Memories are fuzzy, but I swear I was there because my brother, a Marine with a motorcycle collection, must've taken me. At one time, he lived on Bandera Road, and if you go west from there, you hit Helotes—home of the kind of small-town outlaw spirit that makes Texas special. Helotes (pronounced hə-LOH-tis), by the way, is a tiny slice of heaven in Bexar County, settled by German and Spanish folks in the 1850s.

Today, it has a population of just over 9,000, but don't let the small size

fool you. It’s big on character—full of stories, good food, and that Texas hill country vibe that makes you want to kick back with a cold drink and a good ol’ country song. Floore’s is more than a music venue

—it's a Texas legend, a dance hall with history thicker than a bowl of chili, and a place that’s seen more than its fair share of outlaw country, dance, and maybe a few questionable decisions.It’s where Willie Nelson played, where Johnny Cash might’ve twirled, and where I probably tried to sneak in for a drink of my brother’s beer before I even knew what moderation was.

So, next time you find yourself in Helotes, just remember: you're standing on hallowed ground—where music, mischief, and memories collide, and the spirit of Texas lives loud and proud. And if you're lucky, you might just bump into a ghost of Elvis or Johnny—outlaws of the past, still raising a little hell in the hill country. Cheers to Floore's, y'all—where the past and present dance as wild as the Texas sky.

Russell The Wrestler

Let's call him Wrestle—'cause I once told him he looked like a wrestler. That's my Texas accent, honey. I meant Russell. I tell these stories fast by dictation, but Siri (¡Pinche, Siri!) always messes it up. I'm more storyteller than writer— gotta do it all: write, edit, publish. Then I listen about ten times, fix what's wrong, and listen ten more times. It's my chaos, my love language.

And now, back to the story—because if I don't do it, who will? This trick works for me and I love it, but back to the story. Let's rewind back to 2008 through 2010. That's when I lived with Russell. I changed the name for privacy reasons I mean, let me be clear we were not romantically involved however we did live together. We went together and worked out together every day just about. I respect him and is a very private individual. When we finally parted ways, I told him he was like my older brother I didn't have and he said I was his older sister he didn't have lol He was a lot of fun to live with and very clean, paid his rent on time and kept to himself every now and then he come down stairs among the living very first moved in. I offered him the bigger room downstairs. He said no I just need the upstairs. It's perfect for me. We both have been looking for a place to live because our leases were up at our old place.

Actually mine was just downstairs from where we ended up living so we

just moved to the third floor. I don't know if I was gonna be able to live through moving in July to the third floor, but he is a strong guy and very muscular. He's the one who showed me my current routines at the gym and I still do them today and nowadays when I'm back the old gym again those fun memories keep coming back. I love it. before we moved in together, we would just bump into each other in the hallways at the break room or cafeteria.We bonded over the love of working out, Halloween and work-we didn't love sports like most guys except that I did watch the Spurs game and the Cowboys. After we moved in we mostly kept our live separate, but we did meet each other's families all of them I think and I did hook up with one of his cousins once. He even met my BFs T, Josh (I haven't written that story and don't think I will), and David. We knew each other stories and he would ask. Why are you with these guys who are unavailable? I just shrugged my shoulders. I didn't know, but it was a pattern. sometimes we would hang out for Halloween or New Year's Day or just watch movies together. Speaking of which one New Year's Eve, I think it was 2010. We celebrated with work friends. Yeah, the cava, the grapes and more cava I can't even remember if I made it to midnight, but I was the first to fall asleep and per Russell's rule (I think no one would fess up to it) the first to fall asleep gets pranked.
Everybody was sprawled out in the living room because nobody was driving home.

I woke up on the futon went to the restroom looked in the mirror to

wash my face, and there was a big phallic symbol on my forehead. Everybody laughed and went home sober. One time in February, there was a reduction in force. We all knew the drill for retail in February. That's a telling moment . My boss came up to me and said you can't tell Russell but he's on the list.
Well I couldn't even if I tried because it happened that quick he was called into the conference room or office. I don't know and they let him go. But I worked out with another guy who we will call Jimmy (not his real name) and he said is Russell still looking for work? I said yes Russell is very smart. Several degrees. I couldn't even begin to tell you all the degrees.

He's just really smart, and we made for an odd couple (platonic). I keep repeating that because the rumors at work were not that, but it certainly wasn't true. There are no pictures to share. That's a lie. You know I have pictures, but I won't share them. We don't keep in touch these days, but I do have all these memories and think of him often, especially when I'm back at the old gym on a Sunday afternoon. Ok I will share one photo only cause it's only me and it was the night we went to the gayborhood for Halloween.

My Left Foot

In November 2024 After I was let go from my job of two years, I took out my 401k and bought an Ikea wardrobe and had them assemble it in my office area downstairs. You see, for a whole year I couldn't even go up and down the stairs, so I do my best to shower downstairs. I say shower, but it was really a thorough sponge bath every day. Fast forward to this morning. I showered upstairs, came down and got my socks and underwear and clothes for the day out of the wardrobe and I sat on the sofa, looked down and noticed I had a sock on my left foot- puzzled because I had two socks in my hand. So, I touched it and it's all wet. I can't believe I showered and didn't even take off my left sock! I said oh Lord, it's beginning already, you see my dad suffered from Alzheimer's and I already had a heart attack just like he did at the age of 58 and I'm blind as a bat just like my dad. Thank God for glasses. I'm fearing that I may also be losing my mind so I'm struggling with urgency to get my stories written, edited and published before that happens. When I was working on my game Shuffle It, I was also writing my stories ever since I was released from the hospital in November. I really couldn't do much but sit there and write and work on my game and it's been therapeutic, and I absolutely love it. After what happened this morning, I had to sit down and write about my mom. I have told some of these stories to my daughters and grandchildren, but you know they're living their lives and really don't have time to listen and I'm just an old man talking so I'm making it a point to write my stories down so if they ever have questions about my family they can find it on social media or my e-book. It's been therapeutic and I absolutely love them. It's there for them to read at their

leisure. But I'm not going to lie, that's a funny statement, isn't it? I am scared that even though I'm an American citizen born in America and my Tejano family has been here for over a century, that ICE would pick me up and send me a way to Alligator Alcatraz and my stories would end. I mean things like this have happened over and over in Texas and across America throughout the centuries. Latino stories and their families' stories were erased. That's not going to happen to me if I can help it. At least I hope and pray that my stories won't be forgotten. That's why I post on all platforms in social media and in my eBook. If I'm going to write my stories, it's going to be the good the bad and the ugly.I didn't even want anyone to know the bad and the unholy stories, but all of it is my story and I own it and I don't want it to be forgotten.My mother had a heart that beats for the universe's secret whispers, quietly wondering if we're all just cosmic fideo (a spicy Mexican pasta soup but I loved it more when she added ground beef), tangled in love and ego (I mean she took pride in her fideo and I loved it). As a kid, I was always a frightened little boy. I don't know why, but it was noticeable to everyone. I would scream every time I'd get surprised. So my mom would send me to Ester's house and say Martin it's time for you to go to Ester's. I knew the routine. My mom grew chile pequin and a batch of Yerba buena or hierba buena is the Spanish name for a number of aromatic plants, most of which belong to the mint family. Yerba buena translates as "good herb". i'd break of a few branches and jump the fence walk to Ester's sliding door (but first I would stop at her husband Monico's shed where he was always tinkering on something I love to chat with him and asked what he was working on and it would fascinate me) then I proceeded and knock on her sliding door and say Ester it's me Martin. She'd open the door, I'd lie down on the floor and give her the Yerba buena and she'd brush my body with it to cure me from fright. I jumped back over the fence and my mom would make me some mint tea and I would drink it and that was supposed to help me not be so scared. Maybe that's why I love my tea.

But I often tell her mom it's not working cause I still get scared and boy do I have too many of those stories to tell and that's a whole different chapter.

She tried to help all of us, my brother, my sister, my father and me and her mom and step father and her uncle Ben who she loved and adored and her cousins Vivian, Minnie, Rosario (aka Chayo), Josie, Olga, Cora, and Maria (aka Lucha). My mom was an only child but she loved her cousins.

I called them my aunts we were close though technically they were distant cousins connected through her mother Selma and Selma's favorite cousin Maggie. Yes I've always been surrounded by strong beautiful women. They were always in charge and influenced me so much. She's convinced that the "I" we cling to is just a fancy illusion—like thinking you're the only salsa verde in the jar (I'd help her make). Real awakening? It's realizing we're all part of one big, beautiful, messy dance—no need to stress about the steps.

Living in the present is her mantra, because honey, life's too short to worry about yesterday's heartbreak or tomorrow's bills.

Fast Forward, on a Sunday afternoon my mom would love to go for a drive not that she drove because my dad drove everywhere and she would like to go window shopping. This particular Sunday she wanted to stop at this place fancy place of McCullough and I 35.

She thought it was Ethan now so she told my dad, Trino pull over. I wanna go look inside. so we stop we get out and we walked towards the front door, but as I'm walking, I noticed there's a hearse on the side of the building. I was puzzled but we continued to walk in and my mom said where is the bedrooms and the lady look puzzled she said ma'am, this is a mortuary and she said oh I thought it was Ethan Allen. She laughed and said Trino, let's go so we ran to the car and we couldn't stop laughing all the way home. We're done window shopping but on the way home she was telling us when I die. I want you to bring me back to this place this mortuary this is where I'm gonna be. I don't wanna fancy cofin, but I want to be at this mortuary and my dad honored her wishes when she passed.

Speaking of which, after I had given a eulogy for my mother, everybody was coming up to us, the family and to me and giving their condolences and all the time that I was talking, I noticed the man sitting way in the back. He got up to come talk to me after everybody had left. He gave his condolences. He was an older tall dark and handsome gentleman whom I didn't recognize him from anybody I knew. He said to me as he held both my hands, your mother was very special to me and we're all gonna miss her. I was like oh my God, what? I turned to her cofin and asked (to myself), mama? I didn't get his name and I've never seen him again. It's funny how you find things out after somebody has passed and it makes you question everything. I mean, later I found a letter which I still have today

—it was before my parents got married and my dad wrote it to my mother all in Spanish and he was pissed.

She had called off their wedding and he was trying to win her back but not doing it in a nice way with this letter.I won't post that letter, but I do have it and it makes me wonder about that man and who he was to us and who he was to her. She ended up marrying my dad and had three children, and we all wouldn't have been here (my whole family and me) if that letter he wrote didn't mean something to her. But what did it mean?

It's funny how one place can trigger 1000 memories for you— that place for me is Joske's department store Downtown San Antonio next to the Alamo which is now The River Center Mall. It holds those stories having lunch or dinner with them at the Aztec restaurant inside Joske's first floor on the side of St. Joseph's, but I digress-that's another story. I'll wrap up this story by saying she knew that letting go of attachments—whether it's stuff or ego—is the key to peace, and that enlightenment isn't a finish line but a playful, ongoing gig. With a wink and a laugh, she reminds us: life's a dance, so shake what your mama gave you, and remember, we're all just stardust (not foot dust) in love's big, cosmic fiesta with fideo.

Mi Vida

The Guestbook

As I flip through my mother's guest book, my heart fills with a flood of names
—family, friends, neighbors, coworkers—people who've woven themselves into the fabric of our lives. It's a little overwhelming, honestly, like a family reunion I didn't plan but can't help but cherish. Some names stick out— Alfredo, my boss at SeaWorld, whose kindness I'd forgotten until I saw his note. I couldn't even remember his name at the time I wrote my SeaWorld story,, but he was there, showing support, like so many others. The SeaWorld wardrobe department sent flowers—because, of course, they did. Alfredo came up to me afterward and said, "Your eulogy was great. You're a strong man." I looked at him, exhausted and heartbroken, and thought, "I don't feel strong, Alfredo. I feel drained, tired, and lost." There are names I don't recognize, and I almost go down that rabbit hole

—who are they? Did I meet them once? But I decide I've had enough memories for one

night. Instead, I chuckle at the message that reads, "Hi mom, it's me"—which, of course, was me—because, honestly, if I don't laugh, I might cry. Ok I'm crying. I'm grateful—so grateful—for this community of love and support. It's a reminder that, even in grief, we're never truly alone. Family, friends, neighbors—each one a thread in this beautiful, complicated tapestry. I'll say: I'm grateful for all of it, for the chaos, the love, the humor, and the heartbreak. Because in the end, it's these connections that make life worth living. I mean, I've got more stories about the Cervantes and those fabulous posadas, the Escobars my Madrina and padrino, the Gonzalez, the Duenas, Rios, Ramos, Pelayo, Urdiales, Sanchez, Maranon, Huerta, Huizar, Maldonado , Gomez, Chipatecua and many more families, my aunts and uncles, and even our cats—poor Cheech and Chang—who I'd forgotten until now. I mean, mom passed away a month before Josie and I welcomed our oldest daughter into this wild, beautiful chaos. Back then, our only kids were our cats, Cheech and Chang—little furry versions of our own tiny humans, just with more

hairballs and less attitude.

Then there's Arnoldo Gutierrez—my family's friend, who, by some divine twist of the universe, was also Josie's next-door neighbor. Small world, huh? It's these quirky connections that remind me how lucky I am—how lucky we all are—to have folks who show up, who stick around, who make the mundane magical. So, thank you to everyone— family, friends, neighbors—who've been part of this whirlwind. Your love, your laughter, your presence, even the awkward hugs and questionable casseroles, mean everything.

Life's a crazy ride, full of surprises, and I'm just grateful to have you all riding along with me. And honestly, if I could, I'd write a story about each of you— about the love, the chaos, the laughter, and the small, perfect moments that make it all worthwhile.

Maso Toresella

Now, picture me, a guy who loves Olive Garden (extra breadsticks, please), dreaming of Italy's untouched magic. My heart? It's racing just thinking about Maso Toresella, a historic estate perched on the dreamy shores of Lake Toblino in northern Italy's Trentino. Built way back in the 16th century by the Princes Bishops of Trento—those fancy folks who knew a thing or two about wine and castles—it's about 6.5 hectares of pure heaven, vineyards and all.
This isn't just any estate; it's a star in the world of wine, especially for Cavit wines. Crafted in a tiny, special corner of Italy, these grapes are like the diva of the vineyard—fussy, fabulous, and worth every sip. Maso Toresella isn't just about history; it's about tradition, craftsmanship, and a love for the land that runs as deep as my afection for a good glass of Chianti at Olive Garden (because, let's be honest, the breadsticks are basically Italian love on a stick). Now, let's talk about the scenery—because honey, it's as stunning as a sunset over a vineyard. The estate's location on Lake Toblino is nothing short of a postcard come to life. The lake's tranquil waters mirror the sky, and the mountains in the background seem to whisper, "Stay a while, darling." It's the kind of place where you breathe in history, sip some wine, and feel your soul get a little lighter. And then there's Torcello—oh, sweet Torcello! An island in the

Venetian Lagoon, famous for mosaics that shimmer like your favorite glittery dress and churches that whisper stories of centuries gone by. It's quiet, it's peaceful, and it's a stark contrast to the lively chaos of Venice. Think of it as Italy's little secret, a place where you can hear your own thoughts echoing through time—kind of like that one dinner in Olive Garden where everyone's talking but you somehow still feel connected.

Speaking of magic, let me tell you about the descent from the Italian Alps down to Lake Toblino. Honey, it was a journey straight out of a fairy tale—twisting mountain roads, lush green vineyards, and a view so breathtaking it made me want to sing Willie Nelson's "On the Road Again" at the top of my lungs. Instead, silly me, I opted to seeing the commercial song for Ricola the lemon mint drops made with Swiss Alpine herbs, the wine ambassadors rolled their eyes and laughed at me. We finally made it to this magnificent, almost mystical place, where every conversation echoed like a song, and I swear I could hear someone's laughter two tables over. It's that kind of acoustics—like the universe itself is eavesdropping on your happiest moments. We wandered through the vineyards, each grapevine telling its own story, then gathered by the lake for a moment of pure magic.

And just when I thought I couldn't love Italy more, we did an Olive Garden-inspired toast—

wine in hand, hearts full, and a camera snapping away for that "Wine Ambassador" photo. It was beautiful, it was heartfelt, and honey, it was spectacular—like a perfect melody that stays with you long after the last note. So here's to Italy, to wine, to love, and to the kind of memories that make your soul sing and your heart dance. Because whether you're whispering in a vineyard, admiring mosaics, or just enjoying a plate of pasta (extra garlic, please), life's about those moments—full of laughter, love, and a little spice— reminding us that we're all just trying to find our corner of paradise. And if you're ever lucky enough to visit, remember: it's not just a trip. It's a love story waiting to be written, with plenty of Olive Garden breadsticks and a glass of Cavit to seal the deal. Cheers, y'all. Listen to my story on Dropbox: https://bit.ly/4mJhDlq #MasoToresella #torcello #italy #laketoblino #cavit #olivegarden #Wineambassador #Oct2002

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Payroll Week, Whiskey Cake and Mama Minnie Lee

Alright, hun, sit down, grab a whiskey cake if you got one, and let me tell you a story about payroll—because if there's one thing I've learned from my life, it's that mama Minnie Lee can tell some stories and payroll folks are the heart and soul of any company, and their stories are worth more than a bottle of good tequila. So, it's September 2018, and I'm working as a senior Payroll analyst at Michaels—yes, that Michaels, the craft store that working there is now just a fond memory, much like my waistline after a whiskey cake binge. I worked under Susie, my boss, and her boss Jim—the kind of guy who celebrated Payroll Week like it was the Kentucky Derby and I worked for them for at least 10 to 12 years. Jim was a senior VP, or something fancy, and he loved taking us to Whiskey Cake, just down the street from headquarters, to indulge in their famous whiskey cake and toast to the unsung heroes of HR—the payroll pros. Now, I'll tell you, payroll folks are a special breed. They have this uncanny ability to dig up the past (guess that's why I fit right in cause I got buckets of the past that I love to dig into!)—figures, huh?
Memories, the exact date someone got paid, even that one time Joe's direct deposit went to the Home Depot instead of his bank account. It's like a superpower, and I love it. I may not be a girl (in my book they have all the superpowers), but I sure appreciate a team that can find the truth faster than I can find my mama's secret Mexican Macaroni or my favorite fideo recipe.

Anyway, we're at Whiskey Cake, enjoying our lunch, Jim sitting across from me, Susie to

the right, and the team happily munching away, when my phone rings. It's Brandon Lee— my husband, my partner in crime, the reason I still believe in love and whiskey cake. He's frantic. "Get home," he says, sounding like he just saw a ghost or a really bad soap opera.

“Can’t,” I say, trying to keep my cool, “We’re celebrating Payroll Week, Jim’s bought us whiskey cake, and I’ve got a fork in my hand.” He’s persistent, bless him. “Mama Minnie said somebody threw a brick through the sliding glass door.” Now, if you’ve ever met Mama Minnie, you know she’s as sweet as her smile but as stubborn as a mule (wonder where Brandon gets it from). I ask, “Can’t you handle it? Aren’t you at home?” “No,” he says. “I’m at Winstar in Oklahoma, but YOU gotta get home. Mama called, said somebody threw a brick through the door.” Well, honey, I’m a man who’s been in payroll since 1989— that’s right, before cell phones, before TikTok, and definitely before I ever met whiskey cake—so I know when Mama Minnie’s calling, it’s serious. I excuse myself from the table, leave the team with their bourbon-scented dreams, and rush home. 15 minutes away(but this day I made it in 5), but it feels like five hours. I open the door, and there’s Mama Minnie, sweeping cofee mug shards of the floor, looking as innocent as a kitten in a yarn basket. “Mama, what happened?” I ask. She looks up, puzzled, cofee mug in hand, and says, “I don’t know.” I glance at the sliding doors—both are perfectly intact. No brick. No broken glass. Just Mama Minnie, with her hair a little tousled, probably dreaming of whiskey cake. Turns out, she’d fallen asleep in her chair, sipped her cofee, and the mug fell, shattered, waking her up. She thought a brick had come flying through the glass. I breathe a sigh of relief, check the doors, and find them all good. Mama Minnie’s just fine— maybe a little more tired than usual, but she’s tougher than a Texas tequila shot. Back I go, driving the 10-minute trip that felt like a lifetime, returning to Whiskey Cake to find my team still sitting out in the September heat, probably wondering if I’d lost my mind. I tell them what really happened, and they laugh, because that’s what payroll stories are—full of heart, humor, and a little bit of chaos. Just like Mama Minnie’s whiskey cake recipe (ok it’s really my matron of honor Janith’s bourbon balls recipe-but that’s another story for another time) —simple, sweet, and a little unpredictable. And that, my friends, is my payroll week story—one for the books, full of love, laughter, and the kind of chaos that only a mama and a team that digs up the past can handle.

Because at the end of the day, it’s not just about numbers—it’s about family, resilience, and a good slice of whiskey cake.

And honey, if you ever need a good laugh or a reminder that your payroll team is the real MVP, just remember: they're the ones who keep the lights on, the doors intact, and the whiskey cake coming. Cheers to payroll pros— mama Minnie's heroes, and ours too.Celebrating #payroll pros and recognizing their hard work! Get ready for National #PayrollWeek, September 1–5, 2025.

Theo and Elvis

One day (I think it was a Friday) in October 2010, Theo, the CEO of Zale Corp
—the diamond store, b was walking up the ramp alongside me to go to our respective offices. I don't know how he was with other people, but I do know how he was with me. He was relatable and down-to-earth. I mean, I was in finance and he was an Executive and I didn't win the costume contest but he was chatting with me as we were walking up the ramp and he was going to his office on Mahogany Row (the executive suites on the top floor) and I was going to my desk in a cubicle in the Payroll department on the fourth floor. And that's a kindness and a conversation I'll never forget. I mean I was wearing my Elvis costume, and he asked me where's that music coming from? Do I want to know? I said, well, Theo I'm glad you asked. It comes from the speakers that I strapped to my legs with duct tape, and I control the music from my iPhone. As we were walking, "Burning Love" was playing. He said, now that's the story I haven't heard, and he told me most of my stories I've said repeatedly, or I've said different variations of the same story. I didn't know what he fully meant, but I kind of sort of understood. But now, I fully understand. I mean I tell my stories with photos cause I have so many of them repeatedly and I see the same words and same photos all the time and I stop and change some of the words and enhance the photos or reimagine them just so I don't sound like an old man repeating the same story with the same old photos from his golden days. I got it now. One of the words that pops up all the time is Josie. We were together 21 years so it's evident that she's going to be in a lot of my stories and she never really says anything about them. There was one

time she asked me to take one down and she deserves to have a say-in everything. I mean, she's my lifetime BFF besides Brandon and I respect what she has to say.

Mi Vida

I'm what you'd call a little bit of everything — an optimist, a pessimist, and a realist all rolled into one. I try to tell my stories in this way. It's like I wake up in the morning thinking, 'Today's going to be perfect!' but then I looked down and I realized I just took a shower with my left sock still on and then I remembered I don't have any coffee, so I'm like, 'Well, maybe it's not going to be a good day.' Then I look out the window and see the clouds and think, 'It's going to rain, so better grab that umbrella,' but then I realize I left it inside my car or there's confetti in it (that's a whole different story), so I'm just sitting here, dry but still wishing I had a little more faith in the weather. That's me— part hopeful, part doubtful, and all kinds of confused. It's like being a Texas tornado—chaotic, unpredictable, but with a whole lotta heart." Scientists— those smarty-pants in psychology—say repetition is key. But there's no magic number, no "just listen three times" rule. Instead, it's more like a good playlist: spread out sessions over time helps it stick better, like listening once today, then again tomorrow, then a week from now. That's called "spaced repetition," and it's proven to boost memory, so your brain isn't just humming along clueless. It's also proven to help my writing and I listen to my stories at least 10 times before I get it right the way I want it. Then there's the "Forgetting Curve," which is basically your brain's way of saying, "Hey, if you don't reinforce this, I might forget it faster than your grandma's secret enchilada recipe." Repetition helps cement things before they slip away. But here's the kicker—being actively involved helps more. Asking questions, summarizing, discussing—these make the story yours, and less like background noise. Picture of this- I was in my Elvis costume getting my real hair-cut -before the gayborhood's Halloween block party and also, I wanted to show Ophelia my costume, she was my hairdresser when I had to hair. I walked to the salon from my apartment, you should know that I lived and worked and worked out within 600-700 steps of everything and in this timeframe, I walked everywhere, but that's another story to tell later. another story to tell later.

Texas Talladega

One day (I think it was a Friday) in October 2010, Theo, the CEO of Zale Corp
—the diamond store, b was walking up the ramp along side of me to go to our respective ofices. I don't know how he was with other people, but I do know how he was with me. He was relatable and down-to-earth. I mean, I was in finance and he was an Executive and I didn't win the costume contest but he was chatting with me as we were walking up the ramp and he was going to his ofice on Mahogany Row (the executive suites on the top floor) and I was going to my desk in a cubicle in the Payroll department on the fourth floor. And that's a kindness and a conversation I'll never forget. I mean I was wearing my Elvis costume, and he asked me where's that music coming from? Do I want to know? I said, well, Theo I'm glad you asked. It comes from the speakers that I strapped to my legs with duct tape, and I control the music from my iPhone. As we were walking, "Burning Love" was playing. He said, now that's the story I haven't heard, and he said to me most of my stories I've said repeatedly, or I've said diferent variations of the same story. I didn't know what he fully meant, but I kind of sort of understood. But now, I fully understand. I mean I tell my stories with photos cause I have so many of them repeatedly and I see the same words and same photos all the time and I stop and change some of the words and enhance the photos or reimagine them just so I don't sound like an old man repeating the same story with the same old photos from his golden days. I got it now. One of the words that pops up all the time is Josie. We were together 21 years so it's evident that she's going to be in a lot of my stories and she never really says anything about them. There was one time she asked me to take one down and she deserves to have a say-in everything. I mean, she's my lifetime BFF besides Brandon and I respect what she has to say.

He notices the handcufs wrapped around the gear shift of my convertible. He gets serious, asks what those are for. I take a deep breath, looking at him like I'm in a telenovela. "You don't wanna know," I say. He presses, "Do I wanna know?" I shake my head, "Nope," and he says, "Step out of the car.
You've got an unpaid speeding ticket in Irving, and you're goin' to jail." So there I am, in Coppell jail—actually, a pretty nice place— and I make my one call to work. My boss, Lisa, answers, and I tell her I'm in jail. She says, "I'm coming to get you. Hang tight." Meanwhile, I sit there, feeling like I'm in a country song or a sitcom. Finally, Lisa walks in. "Am I too early? Have they roughed you up?" she asks, joking. I laughed, thanked her, and finish payroll. And that, my friends, is my speeding ticket story—though I've got a few more
—because I'd've loved someone like Judge Caprio to listen, laugh, and maybe even forgive me, Texas-style. Here's to speedin', love, and the kindness of those who see the story behind the ticket. Rest easy, Judge Caprio. You were a true hero.

Express yourself, potato head

Take Diane—my “ex-girlfriend,” who I called an Olympic swimmer even though she wasn’t, but she liked to boss me around like she was training for gold. We reconnected in 2010 first on FB then Words with Friends after decades apart, spilling our guts like two long-lost amigas. Nothing beats catching up with someone who knows all your embarrassing stories—and still loves you.

But then, the mundane crept in, and I started replying with one-word replies
—“ha,” “sure,” “thanks”—the digital equivalent of shrugging while binge-watching Netflix. Diane called me out: “Listen up, cupcake,” she said, using her favorite nickname, which was her way of saying, “Girl, get your words together.” She told me to use my words because my responses were as expressive as a potato. That was my wake-up call. From then on, I vowed: full sentences, full attention—whether in emails or on calls or texting. It changed everything. Sometimes, a well-placed word can turn a bad day around.

Vibra — yes, it’s a new word. It’s less than 8 letters so I could add it to my word play in #ShuffeItWordGame or Words with Friends I mean, if i could add it to the dictionary. I would if I could. It’s catchy, and it’s a short word for vibrant. It suggests expressing your true self, feeling the groove, and staying authentic—because if you don’t, well, you’re just spinning your wheels. It’s heartfelt with a dash of humor, Plus, it nods subtly to the Madonna-fun spirit in Express yourself —owning your truth and dancing to your own beat. Why Madonna? I hate to think of this world without this song because it has so much meaning to it for me. How do you like them apples, Diane? Look at me trying to have a conversation with a friend who passed , missing our game time conversations—love you always!

It’s more than fitness-it’s friendship.

Well, folks, today is August 27, 2025 and it’s finally happening—closing day at LA Fitness in Coppell, and this is our last workout together here, Christian and me. I mean, even before cancer decided to crash my party, I was dragging myself to that gym. Fast forward to January, I finally rejoined, thinking, “Can I get back to good?” Honestly, I didn’t feel up to it, but I made myself drive those extra miles. See, the Coppell location was closer to Christian and had better security—no more Las Colinas break-ins, thank God.

Christian and I started working at Michaels HQ—my life’s new sitcom—where we barely had time for anything but work. But somehow, we found time for sweat and laughs. Over the years, our friendship blossomed—lucky me, I needed a friend, though I suspect Christian endured a lot of my endless stories. I tried to get him to talk about himself, but he kept it brief. Now? He’s sharing more stories, which I think is a win.

Today, Christian texts, “I’m on my way,” then “Huge trucks outside, still open,” and I knew it was go-time. I scrambled to the gym, dodging those monstrous trucks and the guys loading them up. Half the gym equipment was missing—welcome to the modern workout. We finally found a diverging pullback machine, and just as we settled in, a mover comes up and says, “Y’all done, gotta move this machine.” Christian, in true diva fashion, shakes his head and says, “Oh hell no, it’s 8 o’clock—we got 40 minutes!” Meanwhile, I’m behind him, probably grinning, thinking, “Yep, that’s my Christian.”

I peeked into the locker room, saw chaos unfolding—lockers being carted out faster than a TikTok dance, and I realized, yep, this place is closing. We finished our last reps, and I asked Christian, “Any last words?” He looked at me and said, “Bye.” Honestly, Christian, I hope you’re not that curt with your dates. For the record, he’s a single man—slight control issues, but a heart of gold. Of course, I had to toss in my parting shot,

but he called me some names I can't repeat—Southern politeness, y'all. I told him, "We're gonna miss this gym. It's been good to us, a real lifesaver." He said, "We'll find a better spot," and I replied, "Better days, more fun, and hopefully fewer gas attacks."

So here's to new locations, better days, and maybe, just maybe, fewer surprises in the gym—and life. Cheers!

Memories of an angel

Trina Diane Morales—born August 30, 1984, gone September 25, 1986—was only two when she left us. My sweet little niece, Trina was a

tiny spark of joy in a world that's often too busy to notice. I remember taking care of her during those precious two years, and one memory stands out like a bright star.

We were driving home from visiting Aunt Minnie downtown, just south of the Alamo, on Hwy 90. Passing Zarzamora Road, I suddenly heard that unmistakable giggle from her car seat. I asked what she was laughing at, and she giggled some more—those little giggles that make your heart do a somersault. In that moment, I felt a love so fierce and pure, like a warm Texas sunset, and I knew she was a special angel.

Trina was born with an inverted heart—like life's little quirks that make us all unique—and she had the same doctor as Mayor Cisneros' son, born around the same time. When I got the call at work—Carmen picking me up on Walzem Road—I knew something wasn't right. Racing to Baptist Medical Center, I could see the heaviness in my sister's eyes and when we get there I saw it my brother and sister-in-law's eyes. The doctor's words hit like a soft but relentless breeze: she had passed. We held her tiny hand, and in that surreal moment, I felt the universe's quiet, divine love.

She's buried at Fort Sam Houston, where the Texas sky seems to whisper her name. After the graveside, a gentle rain fell—like heaven's tears mingling with ours, refreshing and tender. That day, I learned that love, even in loss, is a sacred thing—beautiful and unbreakable.

Trina, my precious girl, your short life was a lesson in love and faith. I love you fiercely, forever. Rest peacefully, sweet baby—your spirit dances in the stars, and your memory is a melody in my heart.

Dog Days

Well, honey, today's a scorcher—88° at 4 p.m. in late August, which is practically California weather in Texas. I swear, I half-expected palm trees to wave back at me. It's perfect for a neighborhood stroll, but don't worry—I'm not stupid. We walk in the shade, under those glorious trees that seem to give the sun a little break. Sirimama, bless her heart, loves the yellow sun.
She says it grants her superpowers—who am I to argue? She's a four-legged superhero, and her love is as unconditional as an Oprah giveaway.

Every day, we make the neighborhood feel like a doggy United Nations. There's Janith with JJ (Siri's boyfriend), Lisa with Kya, Bill and Joe with their Jadzia Dax (yes, Trekkies)—and their Husky shepherd with a pink ponytail, honey, I didn't even know dogs could wear hairdos. Then there's Santino, who looks like the Monopoly dog—well, Monopoly's got style—and Abby with Maverick, Will with Chloe, and Niko with Missy—oh, Missy—zoomies on a tiny red rocket, and Nick with his dogs Rocky and Rambo. And that's just a handful. All make great friends to know. Honestly, these dogs—our four- legged love machines—speak a language beyond words. Their love is loud, pure, and without the need for a syllable. Sometimes, I swear they understand everything we say, and other times, they just pretend they don't, which is a whole other kind of love.

The hardest part is losing them. I don't know any other pain like that. I wish they lived longer. I mean they should but will forever have them in our hearts. I have Sierra Mama's ashes and photo on the mantle so when I walk by, I can boop her nose. And it reminds me all the good times that we share together.

My dad, bless his soul, was blind once—both eyes—then sent to Palo Alto to learn braille. When he regained his sight, he'd take me to Herman's Bowling Lanes in downtown San Antonio on Saturday mornings—me, my dad, and the league for the blind and deaf. Watching them communicate with their hands, no words, just gestures—well, it was mesmerizing. I always thought I needed words to express my feelings, but dogs—oh, dogs—show us love without a single syllable. And isn't that God's whole thing? His spoken word and dogs' silent devotion—two sides of the same divine coin.

Speaking of divine, every time I hear "Somewhere in Time" by John Barry from *You've Got Mail*, I lose it—right there on the spot, tears streaming like Shop Girl Meg Ryan at the 91st Street Garden. That scene, Tom Hanks crossing the bridge with Bailey, his dog—oh, honey, it's pure romance. It captures that nostalgic, tender feeling of love that needs no words, just a look and a wagging tail.

We even leave music on whenever we're not home so they could enjoy the tunes and dance the night away.

Now, let me tell you about Sirimama's rescue. In 2014, Brandon brought her home, and honestly, I thought she was going to eat my other dog, Sierra. I'd never had a pitbull before—didn't know what to expect. But she ran up, jumped onto the sofa, and stayed glued to my side ever since. Presto we have two lovable and fun dogters. The only problem? Calling both Sierra and Sirimama sometimes comes out as "Sierriria," which sounds like a secret code or a new breed of dog. And don't get me started on AI. When I say Siri's name, it triggers the virtual assistant—so now when I'm writing and listening to my stories before I publish them, we call her "Pamfila," after my cousin from Mexico and so we don't

trigger the AI Siri. It’s a running joke in the house, and I laugh every time.

Mi Vida

I've loved dogs my whole life—each one more special than the last. The first was Nicky, a black poodle given to me by my sister's pilot friend who couldn't care for him. I remember crossing a little island bridge in his apartment swimming pool near Evers and 410 in San Antonio, and Nicky just came right to me—I was hooked for life. Then there was Muñeca, a gorgeous Pekingese- Dachshund mix, who gave birth to puppies and broke my heart when she passed. That was my first real loss, and I cried like a baby. That is the problem about dogs. They cross the rainbow bridge too soon! I can t the other members of the fabulous four and that Macie and Lucy oh my goodness they were two lovable chocolate cocker spaniels. Lucy lived about 15 years, but Macie went too soon. But not before leaving a litter of pups so beautiful it would melt your heart.

Later, my daughters wanted a dog, so we rescued a mutt and named him Obadiah—Obi-Wan, for short. Then came Tucker and Max, for my Daughter Sam and my wife Josie's birthdays—August 30 and September 1, respectively. Brandon swears I named them after the comedian Tucker Max, but honey, that was before I even knew him. They just came with the names, I swear. We had to give away Tucker later—long story, but he's still loved and well taken care of by friends. Then, T bought me Sierra, a chocolate lab named after the Buttes in California where we cycled together. Love, just love—no questions asked. then there's so much love when I'm with Skyler my Granddogter and Riggs oh lil ol' rambunctious Riggs my Granddogson And don't forget Pluto and Chester and Snoopy my Dognephews

That's a lot of dogs, but not nearly as many photos that are on my phone probably more than 5,000 photos and 4,000 of them Siri. Sierra, Grindie, Blue and Lucy

And here's a little fun fact: "dog" is "God" spelled backward. Now, I don't think that's a cosmic conspiracy, but it sure feels like divine irony. "Dog" comes from Old English "docga," a term for a powerful breed, while "God" has roots in Proto-Germanic and Indo-European languages. The reversal? Just linguistic happenstance, but isn't it poetic? Dogs, after all, are our divine messengers of loyalty, love, and devotion—words

sometimes fail, but love never does.

My dogs have given me confidence—more than any pep talk from a preacher or a motivational speaker. They've taught me loyalty, devotion, and the purest kind of love—no words needed. Maybe that's why I'm a card- carrying member of the Universal Life Church—just in case I need to perform a wedding someday. Because if two dogs and a heart full of love can make a miracle, honey, I can do anything.

So, today, I celebrate the simple, soulful magic of dogs—those four-legged angels who remind us that love doesn't always need words. Just a wag, a lick, and a whole lot of loyalty. And maybe, just maybe, a little bit of divine coincidence.

Celebrate your best friend with a big hug.

Lynn Turner

Happy birthday to my sister from another mister, Lynn Turner! Living in Hartville, Missouri—yes, that charming little spot often called the "center of the universe" (or at least the center of America)—Lynn's heart is just as big as her hometown. According to the U.S. Census, Hartville is the nation's population center, which is just a fancy way of saying it's a tiny town with a giant soul.

Lynn, a gifted photographer, has a gift for capturing moments that make your heart swell. I'll never forget our visit there with Roger—who's more family than just a friend—when Maxine Cottongin's article declared that "a good time was had by all." But what really stole my heart was Lynn taking a moment alone, quietly snapping photos of my little girls—just because. She handed over those photos and negatives as a gift, and I almost fell off my rocking chair. That act of kindness, so pure and genuine, made me realize that love and connection come in simple, beautiful gestures.

Lynn and I are kindred spirits—both lovers of photos, memories, and making life's moments special. The first 15 photos in this video are the ones she took that day; the rest are snapshots from our years of visits, filled with laughter, love, and a little Texas sunshine. I owe so much to Roger for introducing us to his incredible family—especially since my own family is now a beautiful memory. I met Roger just six months after my sister passed, and he was there through the toughest days—helping me pack up my life and move from San Antonio to Lewisville, Texas. When my dad passed, he was there.
When my brother left this world, Roger was there again. He and Carmen celebrated their wedding, and we cheered on their children, Mitchell and Zoie, as they arrived into this world. And when Roger left us too soon, we were there, holding his family close.

Their kindness, their unwavering love, has shaped me in ways words can't fully express. You don't have to be rich or perfect to make a difference—just caring enough to show up, to be present, to love.

So, Lynn, thank you for always being there—like a true sister. For your kindness, your heart, and those beautiful photos that tell stories words never could. I love you more than words can say.

Happy birthday, Lynn Turner! Thank you for caring. Here's to many more memories, photos, and moments of love.

Mi Vida

Say what you want to say-speak Your Truth

I'm from the south, south Texas that is, I mean San Antonio. Alright, darlin', let's talk about saying what you want to say—seems easy, right? Like telling Granny you don't want her fruitcake—just get it out there. But oh no honey, it's a whole dance. You gotta have some controls, some boundaries—nobody wants hurt feelings or a messier kitchen. You want to tell the truth, help folks out, and keep it cool, like a summer breeze under the shade tree in South Texas.

Because honey, freedom of speech is the sweetest tune there is—truth shall set you free, after all. So say what you want to say, keep it kind, and never forget: simplicity is a form of love.

At 60 I'm finally saying what I want to say. For the most part I finally learned the lesson of keep it simple, keep it real and always keep it cool and from the heart.

I didn’t invent Post-Its Clemente and Marty

I didn’t invent Post-Its, but my book *Mi Vida* feels like a collection of scattered, heartfelt notes—more a mosaic of moments than a traditional autobiography. When I started this journey, I had no clue what I was doing, but I knew I had to do it. I wanted to say what I needed to before I check out. Last year handed me lessons I didn’t see coming—so thank you, universe.

My longest-standing BFF, (Clemente Jung (CJ), and I still argue like it’s high school. She’s the Romy to my Michelle—always quoting that movie like it’s gospel. Now, at over 60, we’re just grateful to be alive and still crack each other up. After losing my job in November 2024, I asked myself, “What’s my purpose?” So I started writing my life story, or at least a list of stories I wanted to tell. I checked them off as I went, tossing them into my book in no particular order
—more like a jukebox of memories. Now, I’ve got an Excel spreadsheet that’s almost a character in itself. Funny, because I thought I’d lose my Excel skills last year, but nope—Brandon Lee, my husband, storytelling and spreadsheets are my superpowers. My friends Tiffany and Aaron might be better at the tech stuff, but I know my way around a formula and a checklist. Payroll taught me that—if you don’t get it right, you’ll hear about it. Every.
Single. Time.

I wish I could show you my spreadsheet, including the words I use repeatedly to tell my stories —though, honestly, it looks like a hot mess. I mean it may look like a mess to you, but to me it keeps me focus and the well used list of my vocabulary words are just to keep the stories flowing. Otherwise I’d be stopping every five minutes trying to figure out what I want to say. But that’s okay. If I had more money, I’d make life simpler for everyone—less chaos, more love. They say it’s sad when people die with their songs still in them.
Well, my book is my song—imperfect, ongoing, and full of the people I cherish. It’s a celebration of resilience, storytelling, family, friends, and that wild, beautiful, me lol

Can you really die from a Broken Heart?

Can you really die from a broken heart? Honey, I believe it's more than just a saying. My maternal grandma, the queen of our family, lost her first love, Manuel Galan, and just four months later, she followed him to the great beyond. Now, this wasn't her first rodeo—she'd been through heartbreak before, but losing Manuel was like losing the sun itself. Heartbroken? Hun, she was practically heartbroken in two pieces.

I pray I go before my husband, Brandon. Not because I don't love him—Lord knows I do—but I'd hate for us to be caught in that cruel, heartbreaking dance. We're both second marriages, and let me tell you, that kind of love comes with a little extra sweetness and a whole lot of vulnerability.

Now, they call it "broken heart syndrome"—a fancy term that sounds like something out of a soap opera but is real. It accounts for about 1-2% of all suspected heart attacks. Basically, your heart throws a fit, and suddenly, you're in a real-life drama, gasping for breath. It's tragic, it's poetic, and it's a reminder that sometimes love can be so powerful it breaks your heart in the most literal way.

So, whether you're a proud Texan with a love for grandparents or a spirited soul with a flair for the dramatic, remember: love is worth every heartbeat—even if it makes your heart skip a beat sometimes. Cherish those you love, hold them close, and pray you don't outlive your heart's true love. Because, honey, that's the kind of heartbreak that stays with you forever.

This is what Brandon and I argue about

So, there I am, in the middle of a lively debate with Brandon Lee—him glued to his game Fortnite, me scribbling my stories—listening to Avril Lavigne's first album on Apple Music. Suddenly, the playlist skips to "Breakaway," a song that, oddly enough, wasn't on her debut album but should've been.
Brandon, hearing it, perks up and says, "That's not my Kelly Clarkson." I chuckle and reply, "No, honey, that's Avril singing. Kelly didn't write this one." Brandon insists, "Kelli sang it first!" Well, he's not wrong—Kelly did make "Breakaway" famous in 2004, but the song was originally crafted for Avril's 2002 debut, "Let Go". Avril felt it didn't fit her style, so she passed, and Kelly snagged it, giving it her own Texas twist—changing "snow" to "rain," because, well, everything's a little wetter and more soulful down here- except when snowmagedon hits Texas once in a blue moon In the

first place, I was listening to Avril first album because it takes me back to that Oct 2002 OG trip to Italy, where I took only Avril's CD on the trip that made it feel like a scene from a movie—music, wine, wild stories, and the kind of moments only a with a heart full of dreams would understand. That album is my soundtrack, my memory, my reminder that life's a little unpredictable, like Brandon's stubborn insistence or a song that's meant for more than one singer. Don't get me wrong, Kelly made it her own!

In the end, it's a love story—music, memories, and the kind of humor only life can serve up. Whether it's Kelly, Avril, or a little bit of both, I know one thing: the best stories are the ones we sing along to, even if they get mixed up along the way.

Church Lady Drama

Looking at my father's guestbook stirs up a flood of memories—like flipping through my grandfather's, and then my mother's, each page whispering stories of love, loss, and resilience. It all started with my mother's guestbook, where I spotted Sister Ebner from New Covenant Church's signature. She was the sweetest lady, the kind you'd want at your kitchen table, sharing stories and sweet tea. But right after my mama passed away—literally the week we buried her—my dad announced he was moving out. I didn't get it. He said he couldn't stay because the house (at 2015 Barney Avenue) had too many memories (where we all lived together, celebrated together and grieved together), and he needed space. Josie and I had looked at an apartment by San Antonio College, where I thought we would move into.
But, no! My dad moved to the far north side, miles away, to Thousand Oaks Dr. and Nacogdoches Road.

We packed up and made that new place our home—though we'd been staying with Gloria. One evening, a knock at the door. Realtors. Showing the house. I was stunned. My dad had listed it for sale. I called him, confused as a long tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. That's when I heard Sister Ebner's voice, whispering what to say. Turns out, she swooped in right after my mama died, charming her way into my dad's

heart and, it seemed, into his decision-making. I was blindsided. I called my Aunt Florinda (his sister), aka Florence, desperate for advice. “Don’t move out,” she said. “Your mama paid for half that house with money from selling her mama, Selma’s, home on (254) Bank Street (The same home he sent that letter). She wouldn’t want you to leave.” I’d never known that story, but Florinda told me with a gentle firmness that stayed with me.

So I reached out to Pastor Odell Allen at New Covenant Fellowship. We weren’t even attending there anymore—we’d switched to new Life Ministries, Pastor Ray’ and Ester Maldonado’s church—but I needed someone to listen some one who knew my family and sister Ebner. I told Odell’s secretary what was happening. The next day, I called my dad again. He had previously refused to meet us. But after I explained everything to Odell, he agreed to meet us at Mexican Manhattan. We sat, shared tacos, and talked. My dad changed his mind about selling the house. He moved into a new apartment off Fredericksburg Road, closer to us, and I realized that sometimes chaos, love and resilience come in the most unexpected forms—sometimes through a church lady with a heart as big as Texas and sometimes from an Aunt who listens.

And that, my friends, is how a sweet, innocent-looking church lady tried to steal my dad. But love, family, and stories always win.

My dad and the Sam Brown Award in ROTC

Well, I don’t have any tales of glory from the war—no heroics, no battlefield ballads. But I do have a story that’s as Texan as a longneck in the sun and just as heartfelt. It’s about my dad, Trinidad Morales Sr., and a little ol’ thing called the Sam Brown Award. Think of it as the Oscar of ROTC, but with a dash more swagger, a splash more pride, and a whole lotta heart.

Back in 1942, at Brackenridge High School in San Antonio—where temperatures are hot and the dreams even hotter—Dad and Pat Maloney were the big shots in ROTC. Pat had that smile that could light up the Alamo, and Dad, well, he had a heart as wide as Texas itself. These two seniors weren't just about homework and football; they were dreaming big, aiming high, and already knowing that honor and service ran in their blood. Pat, who later ran his own legal firm downtown, handed Dad the Sam Brown Award—imagine a shiny trophy with a little extra Texas ROTC spice.

Now, this wasn't just a shiny piece of metal; it was a nod to leadership, charm, and a love for country that ran deep. Dad always told me that getting that award was like a wink from the others higher in rank—saying, "Son, you got what it takes." And that wink led most of the ROTC gang, including Dad, his friend Edward Frazier and even his brother Adolpho, to enlist in the Army when World War II roared to life after Pearl Harbor. December 11, 1941—that's when the U.S. officially joined the party, and our boys were ready to dance.

Dad graduated in '42, right in the thick of it, with his buddies' signatures— Lupe Garza and Edward Frazier—smudged across his yearbook like a badge of honor. His brother, Adolpho Morales, also signed up, enlisting October 5, 1942. I don't know why I ended up with his brother's metal box, but I like to think it's got a little of that old Texas grit in it.

So, that's my story. A tale of a proud dad, a shiny award, a few friends who shared the dream, and a war that changed everything. It's a story about honor, humility, and a love for this great land of ours—told with a touch of humor, a lot of heart, and a pinch of that Tejano soul. Because in the end, history isn't just about dates and battles; it's about the people who wear their courage like a badge of pride, just like my dad did back in 1942. And that's a story worth telling.

Cancer Removal Surgery

Wow, can you believe it's been a year? Sometimes it feels like yesterday—like a flash of my hospital gown and those endless beeping monitors and vampires drawing blood three times a day my veins alone can write their own stories —while other times, doing my follow up visits with my cardiologist, urologist, neurologist and surgeons makes it seem like a lifetime ago. That week before surgery? I was basically saying my goodbyes, just in case this 9-hour cancer removal was my final act. It was a wild ride of setbacks, recoveries, and a team of nurses and doctors who became more like family—my quirky, caring crew who knew all my secrets (and some TMI moments too).

Honestly, I didn't plan to include this chapter in my life's story, but it's part of who I am now—and I love it. I cry sometimes and celebrate just thinking about the love, prayers, and support I received. Those nurses? They told me, "You've got a huge support system." And they weren't wrong. Sitting in that hospital bed, I realized each of you completed my story—from the mundane to the epic. I spent so much time reflecting, I swear I could write a novel—my "hospital soap opera with Dr. Drake Ramoray" if you will.

That's why I do this, I mean, that's why I write my stories every day and include them in my life story Mi Vida. Some folks have more "important" callings, but this? This is mine. I feel it in my bones, and I own it. Thank you, my dear husband, for staying by my side every night on those uncomfy chairs and sofas that turned into beds. To my daughters—who made me feel like I was back with my little girls—your love kept me going. And to my first spouse and her husband, your support meant everything. To my niece Michelle and her family, your presence was a gift, always going the distance.

Thank you all—your listening, sharing, loving, and praying. You mean the world to me. Life's a wild, beautiful ride, and I'm so grateful to have you along for the journey. ¡Con mucho amor!

Mi Vida

Stresa, Lake Maggiore and a Taste of Salt

Let me tell you a little story about my trip to Stresa, Italy—a place so charming it could make even a grumpy bus driver crack a smile. Stresa, a tiny town of 5,000 souls perched 200 meters above Lake Maggiore, is the kind of place where the air smells like fresh basil and vintage Amarone wine. It's nestled Lake Maggiore and is about a two hour drive from the Gulf of Genoa, with beautiful places that look like they were plucked straight from a fairy tale, complete with palaces and gardens that make you want to quit your job and become a full-time gondolier.

We stayed at the Regina Palace, a hotel so beautiful it practically whispered "luxury" with every marble step. Its lakeside promenade is lined with elegant villas and Art Nouveau dreams, perfect for a slow stroll and a little daydreaming about your next romantic rendezvous—or just a good nap. Since the late 1800s, Stresa has been a magnet for the well-heeled and the culturally inclined, and I could see why. The town's got that slow, sophisticated charm that makes you feel like you've stepped into a Bond film
—minus the espionage, plus a lot of pasta, seafood, wine and laughter.

Now, before we headed back over the Atlantic, our bus driver—who, I swear, had the patience of a saint—finally snapped. "Why can't you pack roller luggage like everybody else?" he grumbled, glaring at my duffel. Honestly, I hadn't thought about it until that moment, but yes, roller bags are the way to go—less rolling, more strolling, right? Lesson learned. I was finally out of film to take any pictures so I just had to enjoy the beauty around me.

That afternoon, I decided to do something I love—jogging around the lake, just the sound of my feet, the rustling leaves, and the distant hum of Italy. Suddenly, I heard the most beautiful song drifting through the air. I stopped, turned, and asked a lovely lady, "What's that song? It's gorgeous!" She smiled and said, "Sapore di Sale"—meaning "Taste of Salt." That song, with its haunting melodies and salty memories of

summer days by the sea, felt like a warm hug from Italy itself.

Feeling inspired and a bit sweaty, I headed back to my room, stripped down, and stepped into the shower. And just as I was getting into that perfect, relaxing rinse, the door swung open—yes, in Italy, apparently the maid thinks nothing of walking in on you mid-shampoo. She froze like a deer caught in the headlights, muttered, “I help you?” I said No! Prego! and she scurried out. I stood there, dripping, thinking, “Well, that’s one way to wake up.”

Later, I hurried down to dinner, realizing I was late. The dining room was alive with chatter, clinking glasses, and the intoxicating aroma of aged to perfection Amarone—smooth, velvety, and dangerously easy to drink. I slid into the only open chair—sandwiched between a vegetarian (who looked at me like I’d just ordered a steak) and Drew, the president of Olive Garden, who was busy discussing his latest salad obsession. I explained about my jog and the shower incident, and we all laughed as the wine worked its magic.

We spent the evening tasting the finest Italian wines, and I swear I probably drank two bottles of that Amarone all on my own—no shame. Afterward, we wandered through each other's rooms, marveling at the grandeur of Regina Palace. Jason, my fellow wine ambassador from Friendswood, Texas, had a terrace so big you could host a small wedding. My room on the top floor boasted a breathtaking view of Lake Maggiore—perfect for mornings with a cup of coffee and a good book or, more likely, a quiet moment of gratitude.

That’s my Stresa story—an imperfect, hilarious, heartfelt adventure in a town that feels like a warm embrace, a little salty, a lot beautiful, and forever etched in my memory. Like a good song or a fine glass of Amarone, it’s a reminder that life’s best moments happen when you least expect them, preferably with a view and a little dash of La Dolce Vita.

Buckets of Memories

Let me tell you, I've got a little treasure trove here—stories sewn into the fabric of my family's history, wrapped in the faded paper of old letters, cards, and memories. And honey, it's a lot. Like buckets of postcards, greeting cards, report cards—you name it, I've got it stashed away, waiting for the right moment to come out and tell their stories.

See, I'm not as meticulous as my dad, bless his heart, who kept everything with the precision of a Texas ranger. But I inherited that same sentimental soul—an eye for the meaningful, a heart that saves the moments that matter. The back of a 1951 letter—yes, THAT letter (sent to 254 Bank St), the Mother's Day card my dad wrote in Spanish on May 10, 1953, for my mama— those are the kind of pieces that make you believe in love's persistence across generations. It's funny, isn't it? How a simple note can hold the universe of a lifetime, like a secret handshake with the past.

And then there's the sympathy card from the MTI family when my daddy passed on November 8, 1998. It's a reminder of community, of love that surrounds us even in our darkest hours. I keep these tokens close, not just for nostalgia but because they belong to all of us who've loved, lost, and loved again. They're not just my stories—they're ours.

Now, I've got buckets—buckets of postcards, letters, grade cards, and more— ready to be sorted, shared, and spun into stories that dance with humor, heart, and a touch of that Tejano soul. I say they're mine, but really, they're for everyone. Because in this great community of ours, stories aren't just individual—they're collective, like a family gathering under the warm Texas sun, singing old songs that never get old.

So, it's gonna take some time—patience, like waiting for a good barbecue or a sunset in Big Bend. But I promise, these stories will find their way out, with all the love and laughter they deserve. And maybe, just maybe, they'll remind us that the places we keep in our hearts—family, love, history—are the most precious of all.

Because at the end of the day, hun, it's about love's enduring power— through postcards, through time, through us. And that's a story worth telling, over and over again.

P.S. My mother's name is Virginia, but he called her Ochie, because every time he drove crazy she would cry "oh shit" so that nickname stuck.

Diamond Give Me Luck

Back in the summer of 2008, my daughter—let's call her Marcia—said, "Dad, come get a tan with me. I wanna look good for Aruba." Now, I'd only ever done those upright spray-tan booths, so when we strolled into Palm Beach Tan, I figured, "Why not go all in?" The receptionist grinned and said, "Lucky you! We just got new beds—you can do 10 sessions in 10 minutes." Sold. I was in.

She led me to a lay-down bed, handed me a tiny washcloth, and said, "Just get on the glass and press the button when you're ready." Simple, right? I undressed, laid down, pressed start, and ten minutes later, I was done.
Feeling like a bronze god, I met Marcia in the lobby, bragged, "That was great!" and headed to the gym to shower and lift.

But here's where it gets hilarious—and slightly alarming. As I undressed in the gym locker room, a guy next to me suddenly pointed at my butt and yelled, "Woah!" Startled, I looked in the mirror—yep, I was a lobster, with a white diamond on my backside, courtesy of that little washcloth. I'd thought, "This will be cute," but apparently, not so much. That white diamond stuck around until I met Brandon in 2011, and whenever we went to the casino or he bought a scratch off, he would rub my butt and would say diamond give me luck.

by 2014, it was finally fading.
Brandon, bless

Mi Vida

Alicia, the best part of waking up? NGAF

The best part of waking up? NGAF. I grew up a little boy on Barney Avenue in Madonna Village in San Antonio, where my neighbor Alicia Gonzalez, a force of nature with a mouth sharper than a jalapeño, made sure I knew how to laugh and cuss with the best of ’em. She had a family bigger than Texas, and she wasn’t scared to drop a colorful word or two—more like a rainbow of language that would make a sailor blush.

Alicia, with her fiery spirit and love for life, took one look at me and dubbed me "Tweety Bird"—not because I was sweet, but because I was flitting around, chirping all day long, spreading joy and gossip. That nickname stuck tighter than grandma’s homemade tamales, long before Twitter even thought about being a thing. And just like that, I learned that sometimes, the best way to face the world is to do it with a little sass, a lot of heart, and a big ol’ middle finger to whatever’s bothering you.

Growing up, Alicia showed me that life’s too short to take everything seriously—especially when you’ve got good neighbors, strong coffee, and a colorful vocabulary to keep things spicy. She was my hero, my mentor, and my favorite curse-word enabler, teaching me that sometimes the best way to start your day is by not giving a damn. Porque la vida es corta y hay que vivirla con un poquito de humor, mucho amor, y un más sal sabrosito.
Because life is short and you have to live it with a little bit of humor, a lot of love, and a pinch of tasty salt.

So here’s to Alicia, to Tweety Birds, and to waking up every day with a heart full of love and a middle finger raised high. Because the best part of waking up? It’s knowing that sometimes, not giving a damn is exactly what makes life worth living.

Christian, my Friend and Fitness Buddy

Six years ago? (seems like more), Yvonne Upton nudged me to join the decoration committee you led—an experience I'll never forget, mainly because you were so bossy, I thought you owned the place. Then there was the Halloween party when I showed up in my Amy Housewine costume, and you opened the door, looked me up and down, and said, "Do I know you?" Like I'd wandered into the wrong party. Thanks for being a friend, gym buddy, and the only person who can make "professional" and "bossy" sound like a compliment.

Fast Forward to August 26, 2025… Well, folks, it's finally happening—closing day at LA Fitness in Coppell, and this is our last workout together here, Christian and me. I mean, even before cancer decided to crash my party, I was dragging myself to that gym. Fast forward to January, I finally rejoined, thinking, "Can I get back to good?" Honestly, I didn't feel up to it, but I made myself drive those extra miles. See, the Coppell location was closer to Christian and had better security—no more Las Colinas break-ins, thank God.

Christian and I started working at Michaels HQ—my life's new sitcom—where we barely had time for anything but work. But somehow, we found time for sweat and laughs. Over the years, our friendship blossomed—lucky me, I needed a friend, though I suspect Christian endured a lot of my endless stories. I tried to get him to talk about himself, but he kept it brief. Now? He's sharing more stories, which I think is a win.

Today, Christian texts, "I'm on my way," then "Huge trucks outside, still open," and I knew it was go-time. I scrambled to the gym, dodging those monstrous trucks and the guys loading them up. Half the gym equipment was missing—welcome to the modern workout. We finally found a diverging pullback machine, and just as we settled in, a mover comes up and says, "Y'all done, gotta move this machine." Christian, in true diva fashion, shakes his head and says, "Oh hell no, it's 8 o'clock—we got 40

minutes!” Meanwhile, I’m behind him, probably grinning, thinking, “Yep, that’s my Christian.”

CJ and Me - CJ's Eulogy

A part of me feels like it has died—a big part of me. But honestly, I think CJ would want us to laugh and remember the good times, so here goes—listen up because this is the part that didn't make it to social media because we didn't have it back then.

It all started back in the day when we were just little kids living on Barney. I knew him when he was called Pato—his real name was Clemente Jung. Yeah, C.J. came later. We met in the early '70s because of his older sister, Irma, and my sister Carmen—who were basically best friends and 13 years older than us.

We didn't go to elementary school together because they moved to Jane Ellen—closer to Brentwood Middle School and Kennedy High. CJ was a year older but was in the same grade as me because he was a September baby, and I was a June baby. Basically, he had more time to be cool, and I had to catch up.

In middle school, our friendship really took off. We'd see each other at lunch, and our favorite hangout was the skating rink. Tuesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays—nothing says friendship like falling on your butt together. CJ had his own skates, while I always rented—probably because I was too cheap to buy my own. CJ taught me how to shuffle them skates.

CJ was cool—like, "don't get in our way cause we'll run you over" cool—but he was also the kind of cool with a big heart. He quickly became the older brother I always wanted. I had an older brother back home, but he was a former Marine with paranoid schizophrenia—so hanging out with CJ was way more fun and way less stressful.

His family took care of me like I was one of their own. Mrs. Jung was the coolest. She'd baby sit my nieces Michelle and Misty while Irma and Carmen went out and C.J. and I played. When they got back She'd say,

“You can leave Michelle anytime, but Misty? She’s a different story.” I always felt at home, sitting at their table, watching her cooks something so delicious.

Those early years were awesome. We had more freedom than kids today—back then, we discovered the city on buses, hitting malls, skating, and going to movies. Whenever we could, CJ’s mom would chauffeur us in her white Fairmont—because what’s more fun than cruising around in a car that looked like it belonged to a movie star?

And then, of course, there were the times CJ and I got into trouble. Like when we snuck into Carmen’s liquor at her apartment and got into her Amaretto. We were probably 11 or 12, and I swear we got so drunk we thought we were gonna turn into butterflies or something. Boy, did we get in trouble. C.J. and I in November remembered that time as we drove by those apartments on our way to Costco.

When I was 15, I got a summer job as a file clerk at the Texas Workforce Commission. CJ would wait for me in the lobby—probably bored out of his mind—and talk to the receptionist. She once told me he was a little different—I told her, “Yeah, so am I,” and she laughed. We were quite the pair—me in my boring job, CJ with his big heart and bigger personality.

We loved just doing normal stuff—shopping, eating, talking. Nothing fancy, just us. Then, in 1982, after some skate drama at Skate Center South, we started hitting Rollercade and met new friends, including Shelly (CJ’s Girlfriend) and Josie (Shelly’s best friend). And that’s when things got complicated. My mom was so confused because I would spend hours on the phone with them that she asked me who are you with CJ, Shelly or Josie ? I said we’re all just friends.

Josie was amazing, but her boyfriend was a tall, muscular Italian guy who didn’t like me talking to her. CJ warned me—"Better watch out, he might

get upset." Spoiler: he did. But CJ was always looking out for me.

And then, there was Jaime. CJ and I both liked him—surprise! Turns out, we both liked the same guy, but neither of us knew it at the time.

Our bodies were changing too—mainly from “innocent kids” to “reasonably suspicious adults.” One night, we decided to go skinny-dipping at Elmendorph Lake Park’s pool by Our Lady of. The Lake after midnight, because why not? We were feeling pretty rebellious until someone yelled, “POLICE!” and we scrambled out of there like a bunch of caffeinated squirrels trying to escape a vacuum

We took a Southwest flight to Dallas to visit him, and the trip back was a mess—Jaime’s car breaking down more than a soap opera plot.

That’s when CJ really won Jaime’s heart. CJ confronted me about it, he wasn’t mean—he was CJ: understanding, honest, and just a little bit funny. He knew how he wanted to live his life, and I admired that.

And I’ll never forget the day at the skating rink—When, Josie and Alex broke up- Alex was so pissed at me he was going to beat me up right there in the rink. I put my wheels into his wheels and made him crash. That’s when I ran took off my skates and ran to the bus stop. I was lucky the bus was coming and I quickly made my getaway. I was so fast he didn’t know where to find me. But he found C.J. and took out his anger out on him. The next day at school, C.J. asked where did you go? I explained I had to leave and he said well he came after me! I apologized and he told me if you’re going to be with Josie you have to tell her the truth.

By February 1983, I told Josie my truth, and she took a chance on me. Honestly, if I hadn’t listened to CJ, I wouldn’t have married her and have three beautiful girls and four grandchildren today. So, CJ, thank you for that—and for everything else, especially for being my friend, my brother,

and my partner in crime.

In November, when we went to Costco, we immediately went to the restrooms. CJ and I were walking into the men's restroom and an old man stopped CJ and said ma'am you're going in the wrong restroom. Your's is over there CJ said Ala he wants me to go to the women's restroom. I started laughing and he said you're gonna tell Brandon aren't you?

CJ, you may be gone, but you'll always skate through my heart. And I promise, I'll never forget you.

Rest in peace, my friend. You were one of a kind—and I was lucky to have you. Love you, CJ.

I peeked into the locker room, saw chaos unfolding—lockers being carted out faster than a TikTok dance, and I realized, yep, this place is closing. We finished our last reps, and I asked Christian, “Any last words?” He looked at me and said, “Bye.” Honestly, Christian, I hope you’re not that curt with your dates. For the record, he’s a single man—slight control issues, but a heart of gold.

Of course, I had to toss in my parting shot, but he called me some names I can’t repeat—Southern politeness, y’all. I told him, “We’re gonna miss this gym. It’s been good to us, a real lifesaver.” He said, “We’ll find a better spot,” and I replied, “Better days, more fun, and hopefully fewer gas attacks.”

So here’s to new locations, better days, and maybe, just maybe, fewer surprises in the gym—and life. Cheers!

Mi Vida

Mi Vida bursts open like a confetti cannon of memory, and Martin Morales sweeps you right into the whirlwind with the kind of warmth that makes you feel like you've known him since the days of scraped knees and sticky paleta fingers. He strolls through Madonna Village with the swagger of someone who survived it, adored it, and still laughs at half the trouble he got into.

Every chapter feels like sitting on a front porch with your funniest cousin—the one who tells stories so vivid you swear you can smell the tortillas on the comal and hear the chisme floating through the air. Morales doesn't shy away from the tender stuff either. He folds in the heartbreaks, the losses, the moments that knock the wind out of you, and somehow makes them feel like part of the same beautiful, chaotic dance.

What shines through is his gratitude for every twist, every laugh, every tear, every wild detour that shaped him. He treats storytelling like the magic it is—messy, hilarious, healing, and absolutely essential. Mi Vida becomes a celebration of living loudly, loving fiercely, and remembering it all with a full heart.

It's an invitation to savor your own stories too, even the ones that still make you shake your head and smile.