

# Prison Letters: Walking to Honor

## Chapter One - The Red House

A Memoir by Vera Sanchez

Playing hide-n-seek is always one of my favorite games, even if it requires running around in public places or other people's property. Nana and Tata live in a modest red house, with air tasting of homemade tortillas and cigar boxes. The older grandkids built a swing out of an old junkyard tire that firmly meshes around a peppertree, and the rope tangled in the hair of those girls who didn't comb their ponytail. I am the prime candidate for this sticky situation. The first time I got my hair in a mess, my dad wobbled over with the rusty clippers in his hands, yanked my braid in the opposite direction of the swing, and chopped at my naps. The front steps of the red house lead to the dim lighting of a quiet living room, with a single, narrow hallway that connects to a kitchen, a couple of bedrooms, and a bathroom with a small window that's just big enough for me to jump on my dad's shoulders and squeeze through every time he misplaces his keys. As the hallway reaches the back of the house, the sounds became more apparent.

My dad holds a Miller Lite can and laughs rowdily as he explains how he's been around the block more than the ice cream truck. He catches me observing him from the back door and waves me over. I sigh and drag my feet to stall because he'll spend countless minutes introducing me to relatives I don't know yet when I would rather be playing with my cousins. I swindle through a crowd of adults who sing along to the live music of my uncles' band. Tio Rick heavily plucks the upright bass and spins it around, not missing a beat for the upcoming tune, while Uncle Chunky, in a husky voice, sings in two different languages. When he forgets the words in Spanish, he'll replace it with an English one, the impractical usage of bilingualism.

"Is this your daughter? She is so big now. I remember her when she was just a baby," Cousin Imelda reminisces. "She's a pretty little girl," she adds, her voice raspy and cold, like the winter nights. She bends down to caress the top of my head while holding a lit cigarette and a beer can in the same hand. The tags from her yellow spaghetti tank top stick out from the back, and her nalgas sag from underneath her gray cotton miniskirt as she bends over to kiss me, leaving a bright pink lip print on my cheek.

"I may not be pretty, but I'm good," my dad loudly spits before he chugs the last of his beer and manages to drench his yellow polyester football shirt, and the helmet with a lightning bolt largely imprinted on the front side reeks of a good time. His can becomes lighter and hollow, so he gestures to the ice chest that sits next to the thirsty band. This is my chance to escape, I think to myself. I race to open up the top, dip my hand into frosty cubes, searching for the last beer at the bottom of the ice

chest. Wiping the moisture from my arm on my jeans, I crack open the lid, so it is ready to be put to worthy use. Before making my way back, Tio Rick stops me while still playing his instrument.

“You see that lady over there?” He nods in her direction. “Her nickname is Fatter Than Me.” “Why?” I dare to ask.

“Because she’s fatter than me. I gave her that name in high school.” He chuckles as his stomach bounces from side to side. “Didn’t you see her cow tits and a Jell-O ass? She looks like a fucken rhinoceros walking upright,” he adds as if ‘Fatter Than Me’ wasn’t obvious enough to decipher. Tio Rick continues, “And that one, her name is Thunder Buns. Want to know why?”

“Because she has a tight ass,” I answer the rhetorical question, shrugging my shoulders. Tio Rick snorts before turning into the microphone to continue his background singing.

“Not bad manners, just good beer,” my dad belches out a booming burp, the drift knocking me back a few steps. We exchange containers so that he may continue his drinking marathon, and I am released to go play with my primos.

I sprint to the side of the red house, to a bundle of cousins that stand beside a trampoline crafted of canvas, whose springs are aged and others are missing. Cousin Cat pulls out a pack of crumpled line paper from the pocket of her Dickies overalls. “These are all numbered 1 through 10. Whoever draws the lowest number is it. Since I am the oldest, I get to pick my number first. And then Monchi and then Gabby, Esmi, and you get the idea.” Nando kicks the dirt with his Pro Wing shoes that were previously owned by his two older brothers, the soles undone at the front and his battered socks with holes loosely bend at his ankles. His legs are skeleton-like, with scabs that he picked so much the wounds have now become permanent on his skin. Everyone snatches a paper, and Nando is handed the last scrap. “Okay, Okay, open to see your number,” Cat reminds us. I scramble to see mine, five. “Who’s gonna be it?”

“Not me.”

“I’m safe.”

Cousin Ricky inhales and blows a puff of clear air. His round stomach matches his tubby knees. His charcoal skin is a similar shade to his father’s. He staggers to the side of the trampoline, leans over it, and covers his eyes with his arm. The count begins, and we fling apart in various directions. Cat rushes

to the junkyard area that contains inoperative clunkers withering annually, while Gabby dashes and ducks behind the peppertree with a junkyard tire, but I have a secret spot where I always hide. The front porch has a small opening on the side of the steps, so it's easy to bypass the gap, especially since it is covered with lofty, dehydrated grass. I cram through the tiny hole. As I creep through and make my way underneath the stairs, I glance to see Nando in the open area. His eyes remain wandering and lost. "Spizz," I buzz gently enough so he hears. He rotates, and I whisper again so that our eyes can meet. "Down here," I repeat. He smiles, his nose flattens, exposing the large gap between his two snaggleteeth. I reach through the waterless lawn, and he grips my hand as I tug him inside. We giggle silently and cover our mouths when footsteps approach. We recognize Ricky's pudgy leg stop as we become rigid.

"I see you," he wheezes tiredly between each word. His footprints kick up dirt, stumbling around the corner, where he notices his sister behind the peppertree. Nando crawls out the crack, and he drags me out, lifting me as much as his petite frame allows. Our hands together as one, we peek over the side of the red house to speculate. In the distance, the other cousins are already flying on the trampoline, having reached safety. Cat's hair soars loosely in the sky, and Monchi blows on his cotton candy flavored bubble gum. I twist around to spot Ricky, who pierces oxygen through his nostrils, tiptoeing our way. I surge for the straightaway, and Nando's hands depart immediately from mine, before he climbs the stairs that lead inside the red house, each stride skipping a step, while Ricky follows the same pattern of footsteps. I make it to the trampoline untouched, even though my shoelaces came untied in the battle to protection. I gulp and bend over, putting my hands on my knees before I squat to fasten my LA Gears tighter. Quickly, I lift myself up and jog to the back door, waiting for Nando so that I can guide him to safety.

The adults are noisier and drunker than before, and I wander into the middle of the action. My grandpa sits on a cement block, blows on a puro, and turns to Tio Rick to give fatherly advice, "Mijo, no te juntas con estas pinchis bolas de putas," referring to the whores with funny nicknames. Cousin Imelda and my dad dance the "Bump." Imelda, with a different cigarette in her mouth, lifts her skirt and flashes her relatives. My dad, not to be outdone by the indecent exposure, rips off his shirt and rapidly twirls the torn cloth in the air, like a helicopter's propellers. He spins in a circle and awkwardly lands the half splits, one leg stretching to the front and the other tucks under his boney ass.

Coming from the back door, Nando staggers sluggishly, and Ricky walks closely beside him, holding his cousin's balance. Blood drains from Nando's head, and the gushing fluid spreads to his shirt. "He's bleeding!" a voice from the party circle yells. Nando, who was calm at the time, touches the deep cut and feels the dampness, and he closes his eyes before letting out a silent, then hysterical cry. The mob of grownups, with mouths reeking of tequila and Mexican beans, hurdle towards him.

"Get Chunky!" Cousin Imelda demands, her voice scratching against her throat. Part of her miniskirt folds inside her ass crack.

“He left. Got up in the middle of the party. Something about his old lady being pissed about the partying, drinking, his shit talking brothers, the fun women, and the good time.”

“Please,” my dad sarcastically replies. “What does she want us to do? Play Patti Cakes and sing Kumbaya all day? We’re no fuddy duddies. We are the best of the sorry bunch,” my dad brags.

Tio Rick, who just finished packing the instruments, snatches Nando, lifting him off the ground, as Katie, Tio Rick’s girlfriend, rushes inside the house. Tio Rick staggers to his truck and tosses Nando on the seat. Katie runs out the door, with a damp cloth in her hand, and makes her way to the vehicle. When she jumps in, Katie places the cloth on the open wound. The light blue Chevy truck, gyrates its wheels, and speeds off to the ER.

“How the hell did this happen?” Aunt Virgie, who was preoccupied cooking and eating the food during the party, demands to know while stuffing a tortilla chip in her mouth, her shirt stained with salsa and guacamole. My dad stands behind his sister and inflates his cheek with air, crossing his eyes, while Ricky tries to explain the situation without laughing.

“We were playing hide-in-seek. I chased Nando into the house, but he tripped over his shoe, and he fell. He hit his head on the edge of the doorway.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake! That’s why you don’t run in the fucken house,” Aunt Virgie scolds, jabbing a thick finger in her nephew’s face. “This is why I don’t have any damn kids!”

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Many hours go by before Tio Rick calls from Mercy Hospital, and when he does, Aunt Virgie picks up the phone eagerly. I sit on the couch eavesdropping on the conversation between the two siblings. My dad snores on the carpet, his arm used as a pillow.

“His lopsided head could fit sixteen stiches?”

“You had to lie? About what?”

“And those fools at the hospital fell for it? I’m sure he could pass for your son, even though your skin is so dark— it’s almost a nasty purple.”

“You know, tough shit. This is as nice as I can get right now, considering the way the party ended, and I’ve been watching everyone else’s turkey turd kids.”

“I took them home.”

“Yes, all five of them fit in my car. They only live a few miles away.”

“They just walked in. The door was unlocked.”

“I don’t know. I didn’t get off.”

“I don’t know if she was there nor do I give a rat’s ass where she is.”

“How the hell should I know? I’ve been calling since you left for the hospital. Their house phone keeps ringing.”

“Everyone went home after that, except Ralph. He’s passed out on the floor.”

“He’s your brother, too, you know.”

“No, he’s fine where he is. Let him take the trolley home in the morning.”

“Because I’m the oldest of you, idiots, and I can make that decision.”

“She’s here, too. She’s just looking at me.”

“Your kids are asleep in the room.”

“Well, hurry the hell up. Bill left when all this mess happened, and he’s been waiting at home for me with our dog. I’m tired, I’m cranky, I’m hungry, and I want to leave.”

Aunt Virgie slams the phone on the receiver. My dad tosses in his sleep and lets out a vulgar scream from within his dream. “Ralph, shut up!” Aunt Virgie takes off her chancla, doesn’t aim, but hits her brother perfectly on his egg-shaped head. He doesn’t waken, just rolls over on his back and breathes through his mouth. My dad, who drinks like a Mexican, wins a dance contest with his cousin, annoys his sister, and sprains his ankle while demonstrating his gymnastic moves, dozes on the ground. My dad, who is resting at my feet, but I never have to question how come he’s not around.