In *White Bread*, readers accompany Jessica on a journey into her family’s past, into herself, and into the bicultural community she teaches but does not understand. Jessica, a fictional White fifth-grade teacher, is prompted to explore her family history by the unexpected discovery of a hundred-year-old letter. Simultaneously, she begins to grapple with culture and racism, principally through discussions with a Mexican American teacher. *White Bread* pulls readers into a tumultuous six months of Jessica’s life as she confronts many issues that turn out to be interrelated, such as why she knows so little about her family’s past, why she craves community as she feels increasingly isolated, why the Latino teachers want the curriculum to be more Latino, and whether she can become the kind of teacher who sparks student learning.

The storyline alternates between past and present, acquainting readers with German American communities in the Midwest during the late 1800s and early 1900s, portraits based on detailed historic excavation. What happened to these communities gives Jessica the key to unlock answers to questions that plague her.

*White Bread* can be read simply for pleasure. It can also be used in teacher education, ethnic studies, and sociology courses. Beginning teachers may see their own struggles reflected in Jessica’s classroom. People of European descent might see themselves within, rather than outside, multicultural studies. *White Bread* can also be used in conjunction with family history research.

Christine Sleeter, Ph.D., Professor Emerita at California State University Monterey Bay, is internationally known for her work in multicultural education. Her nineteen books include *Power, Teaching and Teacher Education*. In 2009, she received the American Educational Research Association Social Justice in Education Award, and in 2011, her co-edited book *Teaching with Vision* was named Choice Outstanding Academic Title. *White Bread* is her first work of fiction.

www.christinesleeter.org

Cover image by Christine Sleeter
White Bread
Social Fictions Series

Series Editor
Patricia Leavy
USA

The Social Fictions series emerges out of the arts-based research movement. The series includes full-length fiction books that are informed by social research but written in a literary/artistic form (novels, plays, and short story collections). Believing there is much to learn through fiction, the series only includes works written entirely in the literary medium adapted. Each book includes an academic introduction that explains the research and teaching that informs the book as well as how the book can be used in college courses. The books are underscored with social science or other scholarly perspectives and intended to be relevant to the lives of college students—to tap into important issues in the unique ways that artistic or literary forms can.

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White Bread

Weaving Cultural Past into the Present

Christine Sleeter
ADVANCE PRAISE FOR
WHITE BREAD

Using her own experience of exploring her family’s immigration history, renowned educator Christine Sleeter has crafted a captivating story that weaves together interrelated themes: investigating family histories, teaching children of diverse backgrounds, and forging personal relationships across lines of race and culture. After reading this engaging novel, readers may be motivated to delve into their own family histories and, along the way, to reflect on what it means to be an American in our complex, multicultural and multilingual nation. – Sonia Nieto, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, author of What Keeps Teachers Going?

This is a provocative and moving story about how coming to know oneself, including one’s own family history, can lay the foundation for acting in solidarity with others. Addressing the complex topics of teaching, identity and community, White Bread will serve as a valuable resource for pre-service and practicing teachers, as well as for teacher educators. In fact, I can’t wait to use it in my own courses that aim to advance learning about the challenges and joys of teaching in today’s increasingly diverse schools. I highly recommend this book! – Jamy Stillman, University of Southern California

Sleeter imaginatively engages family history as a tool of critical collective reflection, recovering community cultural wealth as a matter of urgency in our classrooms and beyond. – Tara J. Yosso, University of California Santa Barbara, author of Critical Race Counterstories along the Chicana/Chicano Educational Pipeline

With White Bread, Sleeter artfully explores the challenging topics of race, culture, history and identity critical to the success of white teachers in multicultural settings. That she manages to do this in a page-turning, multigenerational novel complete with mystery and romance makes this a must-read not just for teachers, but for everyone. – Bree Picower, Montclair State University, author of Practice What You Teach
Refreshingly innovative, creatively telling, and heart-wrenchingly intelligent, *White Bread* not only captures the everyday minutiae of teaching in culturally diverse U.S. classrooms, it also documents the emotional, psychological, and spiritual transformation one undergoes when self-investing in racial justice. Through the humanistic characterization of Jessica, a white, middle class school teacher, Sleeter provides a concrete answer to how the historical nuances of white privilege influence identity, society, and, in particular, education. A must read for the almost 90% white teaching force in the United States! – **Cheryl Matias, University of Colorado Denver**

Jessica’s questions, her history, and the situations she finds herself in enable the reader to reflect on the challenges many of us find in the classroom and in our lives on a daily basis. Thoughtful, engaging, compassionate and reflective, *White Bread* is one of those books that’s easy to read, and go back to, again and again. – **William G. Tierney, University of Southern California, author of Academic Affairs: A Love Story**

In *White Bread*, Christine Sleeter has woven together a wonderful narrative of life in America, one that includes multiple layers of identity, ever-shifting and forever shaping the deeply entrenched experiences of everyone. The book seamlessly floats back and forth between a time more than a century ago that was not fully documented, and aimed to assimilate a white German past, and a contemporary time in which Mexican-Americans are facing similar concerns. The narrative and characters are delightful, real and compelling. This very thoughtful book presents an engaging vision of social justice. I very much enjoyed reading it. – **Paul R. Carr, Université du Québec en Outaouais, author of Revisiting the Great White North?**

*White Bread* tells a wonderful story of how a young, white, novice teacher comes to critical consciousness around issues of race as she studies her own family history and learns to connect with her Mexican American students. *White Bread* should be read by everybody, but especially teachers and teacher educators as they work to transform their practices to reach our increasingly diverse student populations. In particular I think *White Bread* has the power
to help white teachers explore their own identities and better understand how legacies of racism and oppression impact communities of color. – Wayne Au, University of Washington Bothell, author of *Pencils Down!*
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Cory, an Asset Protection Specialist at Best Buy, filled me in about the process of job promotion, correcting some inaccuracies and misconceptions on my part.

I appreciate the support of my colleagues in Central Coast Writers of California, who have helped me think through the process of writing, publishing, and marketing fiction. The Number One Ladies’ (and Gentlemen’s) Book Group was wonderfully supportive of me through this writing process, adding White Bread to its reading list when the book was completed.

Finally, to my most valued writing critic, supporter, and life partner, Joe Larkin, even if you show up in only three sentences in this book, I never would have had the confidence to write it without your steadfast encouragement and love.
**PREFACE**

*White Bread.* How many times have I heard White teachers describe themselves that way in response to my attempts to show them the importance of culture and ethnicity in their classrooms? I used to regard statements like “I’m just white bread” or “I’m just an American” as attempts to shrug off implications that racial and ethnic identity might matter. But I gradually realized something deeper going on: In the rapidly shifting demographics that make up our schools, our neighborhoods, and our public spaces, many of us – especially those of us who are White and unsure that there even is such a thing as collective identity for white people – aren’t sure where (or if) we fit. Unable to place ourselves within a nuanced collective memory, we retreat into denying its value.

What I didn’t reveal for a long time was that I, too, was not able to place myself and my family into a larger historical memory, except in the most general of terms. Of course I had studied U.S. history in school, but in abstract, impersonal terms. I knew my father was of German descent and my mother was of mixed European descent. But beyond my grandparents lay a huge lacuna. One day I jumped into the website Ancestry.com, and became quickly obsessed with tracing my family roots. As I discovered a goldmine of online resources, I created family trees and stories about ancestors, shared them with family members, then began to play with situating my family within larger narratives of U.S. history and culture.

Out of this work came Critical Family History (http://christinesleeter.org/critical-family-history/), a process for placing any family’s story within a wider socio-cultural and historic panorama. Eager to find out whether this process made sense to anyone else, in the summer of 2014, I tried it out on thirty-eight racially and ethnically diverse classroom teachers in Colorado for two weeks. The depth of their learning and enthusiasm exceeded my ambitious expectations.

Writing *White Bread* turned out to be the best venue I could use to portray struggles and questions around issues of culture and identity in schooling. Jessica, a White fifth-grade teacher who endeavors with only mixed success to teach her culturally diverse
students, is prompted to explore her family’s past by an unexpected discovery. Simultaneously, she begins to grapple with culture and racism through suggestions offered by others around her, principally a handsome Mexican American teacher who helps her understand her students.

*White Bread* pulls readers into a tumultuous six months of Jessica’s life as she confronts many issues that turn out to be interrelated. Why does she (and many other people, she comes to realize) know so little about her family’s past? Where did the stories go? Why does her husband seem to want something different from life than she does, why do her wishes threaten him, and why has she simply been going along with his wishes? Why does she crave community as she feels increasingly isolated, and does she have any power to change the isolation modern life seems to hand White people today? (From her vantage point, people of color seem to experience communal bonds she lacks.) Why would Latino teachers want to make their classroom curriculum more Latino, when it seems like their students would be better off becoming American? Can she actually become a good teacher who sparks learning in her students, different from her as they are?

Ultimately, Jessica learns why her family’s past was buried, how to retrieve much of it, and how to use it as a lens to work through these issues. The story line of *White Bread* alternates between past and present, introducing readers to German American communities in the Midwest during the late 1800s and early 1900s. While the stories set in the present are products of my imagination, grounded in my decades of work with teachers in multicultural contexts and my ongoing work with ethnic studies, the stories set in the past rest on very detailed archival research of my father’s side of my family, described at the end of this book.

*White Bread* can be used to prompt discussion and reflection in teacher education, ethnic studies, and sociology courses. A short resource guide for instructors using this book in class can be found on my website (http://christinesleeter.org). Beginning teachers who see many of their own struggles reflected in Jessica’s classroom and her conversations over lunch with fellow teacher Cath will likely gain ideas they might try. *White Bread* provides an entre into
considering where White people might fit within ethnic studies. In
addition, *White Bread* can be used, in conjunction with my Critical
Family History blog, to engage students across the disciplines in
researching their own family histories, and learning to situate their
families within a larger context. Indeed, embedded in Jessica’s
ongoing exploration is a step-by-step process for family history
research. Or, *White Bread* can simply be read for pleasure.

*Christine Sleeter*
Jessica’s stomach sank as she anticipated a second year teaching fifth-graders who seemed to come from Pluto while she hailed from Mercury. She scanned thirty-three new faces, about half Mexican, the rest white, most poor. Would she reach them any better this year?

“What did Michelle enjoy most about camping with her family?” she asked about the story they just read. Only the third day, she was still attaching names to faces. She glanced at a card taped in front of a bronze-skinned boy whose short black hair reminded her of a shoe brush. “Jerome?”

Jerome whirled around and whispered, “Don’t do that!” to the boy behind him, who stifled a giggle. Then to Jessica, “Getting chased by ghosts?”

“Ooooh, ghosts of Sherwood!” Álvaro, sitting behind Jerome, pantomimed drawing back a bow.

“They told ghost stories at night, they weren’t chased by ghosts. Diana, what did Michelle enjoy most about camping?” Jessica repeated, mentally marking the two boys to keep an eye on.

“That isn’t how you say her name, Mrs. Westerfield,” offered Mark, blond hair falling across his eyes.

Puzzled, Jessica looked at the name card again. “Sweetheart, how do say your name?”

“At home it’s Dee-AH-nah, but my teachers always say Diana.” She studied the page, apparently searching for the answer. “Here it is. ‘The thing Michelle enjoyed most was the river’s big swimming hole.’”

“Thank you, Diana.” Jessica made a point to use Spanish pronunciation. “How many of you have been to a swimming hole?”

Three hands shot up. “Matt?”

Before Matt could open his mouth, Álvaro blurted out, “We go swimming at Lake San Antonio, teacher.”

Jessica’s mental image of the story suddenly evaporated. Gone were the snow-capped peaks, pine forests, and waterfalls from
her camping trip with Tim the weekend before. In their place, picnic tables rose from gravel alongside a large California reservoir rimmed by dusty, brown hills and trees too sparse to offer shade.

“I asked Matt.” But she barely heard Matt’s reply as she affixed a stern look to her face just as a book crashing to the floor snatched away students’ scant attention to the camping story.

* * * * *

Who were those kids and who was she to them? Jessica wondered as she drove home. Teaching turned out to be so much harder than she had imagined a year ago, certainly harder than her own teachers made it seem. She couldn’t picture what might be going through most of her students’ heads. She wasn’t even sure how to place them in her world, or herself in theirs. Her fifth-grade colleague Esteban had pointed out that much just two days ago.

As the school year began, he had given an informal presentation to the rest of the Milford Elementary School teachers -- all white -- about cultural identity and the fact that half their students could scarcely find anyone like themselves in the curriculum. Holding up a reading book, a science book, and a social studies book, he recited in less than a minute their references to Mexican Americans, then suggested what teachers could include.

When he finished, one teacher remarked, “These kids are all Americans, or at least that’s what their families want them to become. Wouldn’t we do them a disservice by teaching them to be Mexican rather than American?” Jessica wondered the same thing.

“Mexican American is American,” Esteban said. “My family, for example, was born here. We’re Americans. But we aren’t white Americans, we aren’t Black Americans, we’re Mexican Americans.”

At that point Jessica, sitting in a corner, looked up from her cell phone where she was surreptitiously playing solitaire. As far as she was concerned, his classroom radiated too much of Mexico – the kids sang songs in Spanish, a big United Farm Workers flag graced the front of the room (although he had pointed out that it represents an American labor union).

So she raised her hand. “Esteban, you might be teaching what you’re familiar with, but don’t expect us to teach things we don’t
know. I’m just plain white bread American, that’s what I know and that’s what I teach.”

He studied her, then asked, “White bread American? What’s that? Who are you, Jessica?”

The room fell silent. Then grandmotherly Marge, all graying hair and tortoise-shell glasses, stood. “Well, I guess I’m white bread, too. You can teach the way you want, Esteban, but I’m not you and don’t see why I should try to be.” The meeting concluding, she left.

As the rest filed out, Esteban offered to loan Jessica a few books she could try out in her classroom, “just to see how the kids respond,” he said. Did he know how much she struggled to excite them about learning? Then again, occupying the classroom next door, how could he not know?

A half hour ago, he had appeared at her door as she was straightening the general chaos her students left behind as though their efforts to put things away had launched a small tornado. As she pushed in chairs and picked up bits of paper like a human vacuum, she heard a light tap on the doorframe. Looking up, she saw Esteban. “Hey, I thought you might want to borrow these.” He entered and set a few books on her desk.

“Thanks.” She saw four children’s novels and a hefty history text, all by Spanish-surnamed authors.

Following the direction of her eyes, he explained, “This one is to give you some background. The others are for the kids.”

“Thanks,” she repeated. “I’ll take a look at them.” As a flush began to warm her neck, she turned back to her classroom to finish straightening up.

“Well, see you tomorrow,” Esteban turned and left.

As his footsteps faded down the hall, Jessica realized her hands were shaking. Was it intimidation? Anxiety? Or something else?

The thing was, Jessica couldn’t say no to him. Her eyes locked onto his brilliant white teeth set off by a café au lait complexion, his body like an Olympic sprinter. More importantly, he exuded a sense of self Jessica craved.

And that was the crux of it. In this California school where half the children claimed European ancestry and the other half
Mexican, in this hodgepodge of a community that had no obvious majority, Esteban knew who he was. Jessica (and her husband Tim, for that matter) knew themselves through facts describing their existence rather than connections weaving belonging and identity.

Was Wonder Bread the best image of herself she could conjure?

* * * * *

Jessica opened the refrigerator to investigate a possible dinner menu, then slammed it shut, fuming. Tim refused to help, insisting her cooking was fabulous. “I can’t even boil water without burning it,” he would joke. Well, as far as she was concerned, praising her domestic ability was his way of placing her in a role that didn’t threaten him. Then she paused. He had started to vacuum and help with laundry. She had to give him credit there.

She had met him during her sophomore year of college. One day as she walked across campus, she noticed a blue-eyed stranger gazing at her. Blushing, she stared at the ground so as not to appear to notice him back. Two days later, she found him waiting outside her English class when she emerged. Haltingly, he asked her to coffee. His stuttering invitation gave her permission to awkwardly accept. They spent the next hour laughing over high school stories, coffee forgotten.

He loved the copper pennies that sunlight sprinkled through her dark hair. She drowned in the blue of his eyes, she devoured the sandy color of his hair. Tim. A name that sounded definite. Short and to the point. They bonded over enjoyment of camping. Discovering they loved the same music (especially Jonas Brothers and Adele) and movies (they kissed their way through *Stranger than Fiction* and *Casino Royale*) felt like a message from the universe that they belonged together.

Right after their marriage, Tim quit college to start earning money for a house. College bored him; he complained incessantly about classes as though someone had chained him to a seat and compelled him to watch a series of failed auditions for some B-rated show. He took a sales job at Best Buy, which was where he was still working. He had tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade her to join him in
work, to leave school. “You can always go back if you decide you want to,” he would add.

But Jessica liked college. For her, every book opened a new world of ideas. She drank in concepts like epistemology, concordance rates, and Higgs’ boson the way her mother had guzzled fresh vegetable juice during her heyday of health consciousness. Jessica graduated, then continued for a teaching credential.

Tim initially balked when she announced her intention to complete that fifth year. “Come on, Jess,” he would say, “aren’t you smart enough yet?” She gradually stopped telling him about her classes and all the new ideas dancing about in her brain like hyperactive children. Did her education threaten him? She wasn’t sure. When she finally brought home a paycheck from her first month as a teacher, slim as it was, Tim helped her spend it.

But yesterday at breakfast they had a row about Esteban’s presentation. She had been chatting about details of the previous day, the presentation being one such detail.

“That’s another one of those ideas that’s grabbing you, isn’t it?” Tim remarked.

Jessica put down her coffee mug and stared at him. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Look, Jess, you’re always picking up ideas that don’t seem useful to the world we actually live in. Now this guy at your school thinks it’s okay not to teach Mexican kids living here in America how to be American, and you don’t think that’s baloney?”

“I didn’t say I don’t think it’s baloney,” she retorted. “It’s just – when I walk by his classroom sometimes and see all of his students so – so – engaged …”

“So he entertains them better than you do. Is that it?”

“I don’t know. Several of my Mexican kids seem, well, tuned out a lot of the time. They’re behind in reading, so I know it gets hard for them. I thought maybe I could learn something from Esteban.”

“You could learn something by him making you feel bad about being American? We’ve both been just plain American all our lives. Is Esteban making you feel like there’s something wrong with who you are?”
“No, he’s not,” Jessica said, clearing the dishes off the table and dumping them in the sink. “Let’s just drop it, okay, Tim?”

“Fine by me. You’re the one who brought it up.” He stood and marched from the kitchen.

Now Jessica stomped upstairs, where she quickly changed from school clothes into jeans and a sweatshirt. Glancing around the small, cramped bedroom, she winced at Tim’s aspiration to buy a house, when all they could afford was rent on this fixer-upper. That was another thing they sometimes argued about. She didn’t mind the house, while he griped about not just it but the whole neighborhood. “Wouldn’t you rather live in Oakridge?” he would ask, referring to a new subdivision a few miles away. “C’mon, Jess, be honest, you’d prefer that, wouldn’t you?”

As she was leaving the bedroom to go back downstairs, she paused by the door to the spare room. They kept it closed to hide stacks of boxes and second-hand furniture that suggested a thrift shop stock room. Opening the door, Jessica found herself mentally rehearsing how it might feel to pack up all her things and move out. Not that she planned to leave Tim, but she liked to leave open that possibility. As long as it was within reach, she felt she could stay and work things through with him.

Entering, she surveyed the boxes of Christmas paraphernalia and college books, then spied the battered cardboard box containing what she assumed were papers, taken from her mother’s apartment after her death two years ago. Curious, Jessica approached it, seeing the inscription “Precious, Save” in her mother’s flowery handwriting. She had been devastated when an aneurism killed her mom at 54. She and her brother Walt had cleared their mother’s apartment. Jessica had never opened this box.

Now curious, she placed it on an uncluttered corner of a table. The box itself, taped shut, was about twelve inches square and eight inches deep. Jessica looked at her watch: only a little after 4:30, not time to worry about dinner yet, since Tim wouldn’t be home for another two hours.

She fetched scissors and carefully sliced through tape on the top flaps. The first thing she saw was a stack of old Christmas cards.
Opening a few, she found newsletters and pictures of children from various of her mother’s friends. People actually keep these things?

She removed the Christmas cards and saw another stack of cards tied with string. She untied them and opened what appeared to be an old birthday card. The inscription read: “To my darling wife, thank you for the most wonderful 20 years together! May we have many more!” The card was dated 2001, just a year before her father had died in a car accident. Underneath was a Valentine’s Day card, dated the same year, with another inscription in her father’s handwriting: “Kissing you only gets better every year!”

Jessica had been heading right into adolescence when her father was killed. She had been so wracked with her own pain that she hadn’t stopped to consider what her mother had lost. Lifting out the stack of cards, she saw a photo of her parents on a vacation they had taken without the children. Wearing shorts and T-shirts, they stood on a sunny beach in Mexico, holding hands and smiling like kids. Jessica remembered that trip because she and her brother had to stay with their aunt and uncle, where they spent the week bickering with an older cousin who thought it was his duty and right to boss them around.

Underneath were more documents: her parents’ marriage certificate, wedding pictures from the local newspaper, her own birth announcement, and snapshots of her mother holding Walt as a newborn. There was also an old envelope addressed to Annie Hart in Iowa, postmarked August 7, 1928.

Wondering who Annie Hart was, Jessica opened it and took out a hand-written letter. She flattened it and read:

August 5, 1928
Dearest Annie,

It has been three months now since the funeral of my dear Heinrich. I cannot get used to him not being here, even though he was ill for three years before he finally joined Gott Vater. The world has changed so much, so quickly! Is it wrong to say I hope to join him soon?

You, my darling sister, will understand perhaps better than anyone else how painful these past few years have been for us. I think
it broke Heinrich’s heart to see his life’s work completely unravel right before his eyes. It is no accident his health began to fail at the very moment the St. Louis Conference succumbed to pressure on the German churches. Of course the souls he brought to Gott have not retreated from the fold. But the community of Gemütlichkeit he worked to build is gone, and he had to live to see that happen.

We always knew many English Americans felt threatened by us, but I never understood why. Has it made any sense to you? There were always a few who said that if we want to speak German we should go back to Germany. (BACK to Germany?? You and I have never even BEEN to Germany!) Well, maybe the English-speakers should go back to England! Of course I don’t say that. But these days, sometimes I think it. In Iowa, dear Annie, we would be arrested for sharing recipes we grew up with over the telephone! How seditious is that, I ask you? We’d have to call Hasenpfeffer something else! And why on earth did people burn library books by Goethe and Schiller?

Do you remember when the Great War broke out, English Americans were afraid we might be plotting to support Germany? Annie, I hated them referring to us as Huns! Of course we couldn’t condemn our parents’ homeland, but as Americans, we sent our own sons to fight for this country. Our youngest son Albert served, as did our son-in-law. But now, even the English Methodists have turned on us, their German brethren.

Annie, do you think our grandchildren will remember who we were? Do you think they will remember the warmth and community, the Gemütlichkeit we shared, the old songs we so loved, the books we read, the way it felt to say our names as our parents had said them? I look at my own children and wonder. Mamie and Ralston have moved off to Oregon; will their children know who we were? What about Edward’s family, now living in New York? Flora and Ada teach French in the schools here, and may never have an opportunity to teach their beloved German language and literature.

Ah, maybe I’m just an old woman, Annie. I remain your loving sister,

Mary
Jessica was perplexed. Who were Mary and Annie, apparently elderly sisters when Mary wrote this letter? Were they her ancestors? Why had her mother kept these letters but never mentioned them? She vainly scanned the letter again for something familiar. The “Great War” must be what people back then called World War I. Who knew at the time another great war was about to break out? She tried to recall from her two years of high school German what the words Gemütlichkeit, Pfarrer, and Hasenpfefffer might mean.

She returned the letter to its envelope. Her parents’ love was so evident in her father’s inscriptions. Could she and Tim rekindle those feelings? As if she were her mother anticipating her father coming home, Jessica rooted through the refrigerator for ingredients to make Chicken Alfredo, Tim’s favorite. Maybe that, a salad and a bottle of wine, would take the edge off things, at least for the evening.

As she cooked, she wondered what he would think about the letter.
August, 2012

María Paz gazed at the approaching rocky hills, just bumps on the horizon only minutes ago. Then she turned to her husband, Salvador. “¿No estás cansado todavía?” she asked, wondering if he was tired yet. With the exception of a couple of stops, he had been driving since 4:00 a.m., and it was approaching midday.

“Vamos a parar en Gómez Palacio,” he replied, indicating a stop near the next town. After a quick lunch there, María Paz knew from experience she would drive much of the afternoon while Salvador slept in preparation for the evening shift. She ran a hand through her short black hair, normally styled but today flat with a misbehaving clump on one side. Glancing into the back seat of their Ford Explorer, she noted with satisfaction that the two younger children, Manuel and Jaime, slept while Marisela, about to enter fifth grade, quietly played on the iPad.

Turning back to the window, María Paz recalled tears glistening in her mother’s dark eyes the previous evening as they said good night, knowing it would be months before they would see each other again. Her mother’s black and silver hair, wound into a knot on the crown of her head, had displayed vivid red and yellow flowers in celebration of her fiftieth birthday. She wasn’t yet what one might call old, but each time María Paz visited, signs of aging in her mother’s handsome face jolted her.

Just about everyone in the village had turned out for Mamá’s birthday. And had they ever eaten! Empanadas, pan de acámbaro, arroz rojo, barbeque, mangos, strawberries – it was as though the best restaurant in the state of Guanajuato threw a grand closing that would ensure its place in local folklore. María Paz thought she would never be hungry again. She treasured the preparation time in the kitchen with her sisters and sister-in-law, laughing and telling stories. Ah, she missed them so much, living now in the U.S.

But the work was better there. When Salvador was offered a job as digital publisher with a California TV station that catered to a
Spanish-speaking audience, at a better salary than he made doing much the same work in Mexico, they agreed readily to go.

_Carretera Federal_ 40 north was now ascending grey, stony hills of the Sierra Madre in the southern part of Durango state. Sandwiched between highway and hills, dry brown grasses punctuated with creosote, yucca and an occasional tree reminded Maria Paz of a woven blanket her mother favored during winter months. A large, startlingly green swath to the right broke the arid landscape. Most likely an irrigated alfalfa field.

Normally they would make the 1600-mile drive from their family home in Guanajuato to California in three days, maybe even more if they took their time. Now, however, with school starting in the U.S., Salvador decided they would do it in two days.

“My turn!” Manuel, age seven, was obviously awake. Maria Paz sighed, knowing competition for the iPad was about to begin. She turned around and gave the children her “No fighting” look. Sometimes they could share without squabbling. If not, each child got it for ten minutes, with Maria Paz keeping time.

“Here. I’m tired of it.” Marisela, reaching across Jaime, shoved the iPad into Manuel’s lap, then pointedly turned to look out the window. Seconds later, the roar of a speeding car coming from the back seat prompted Maria Paz to turn around again and signal him to turn down the volume.

The children increasingly used English with each other. A school effect, no doubt. They had lived in the U.S. for only a year, but the English language program Manuel and Marisela experienced in their elementary school in Mexico seemed to be paying off. With most conversations involving their parents in Spanish, Maria Paz was confident the children would grow up bilingual, a clear asset in her view. Her own schooling in Mexico had been mainly in English, which turned out to be very useful. Maybe they will complete university like their father. Unlike her, though, since a handsome video editor swept her off her feet as she was completing her first year. She glanced at Salvador – still handsome, she thought.

“I’m getting hungry,” Marisela grumbled. Breakfast of leftovers from the fiesta had been consumed hours ago.
“We’ll be stopping in a few minutes,” María Paz said. “I think there’s another mango in here.” She groped around in a plastic bag of napkins, crumpled foil, used coffee cups, and pieces of candy.

“Por fin, la salida a Gómez Palacio y Torreón,” remarked Salvador as he spotted a sign for the exit.

“Are we there?” shouted Jaime, now wide awake. Jaime, age five, was born with two speeds: asleep and high gear, with virtually no transition time between.

“We aren’t there,” Marisela emphasized “there” meaning home. “We won’t be there till tomorrow night. This is just lunch.”

“Tengo que hacer pipí!” Jaime wailed.

“There’ll be a bathroom at the restaurant. See? There it is.” María Paz pointed.

As the car decelerated in the exit, she exhaled, her mind beginning to tick off chores she would need to do the morning after they got home. What would the kids wear to school? She wasn’t sure what was still clean. She might have to do a load of laundry before taking them. Jaime would be starting kindergarten! She’d need to make sure all three were settled in with their new teachers before noon, since she was expected at her job that afternoon. Thankfully Marisela and Manuel liked school. So far, anyway.

“¿Quién tiene hambre?” Salvador asked as he steered toward a truck stop with a large restaurant sign.