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Preface

Synopsis

The Desert's Finest Canales is a novel about of a young woman's struggle to redefine her identity and individualism after losing her mother to an apparent suicide.

Catalina Corrales Canales has temporarily dropped out of her University studies in San Francisco and has returned to her native Imperial Valley where her cousin Miggy, sister Isa and grandmother, who she nicknamed La Lupe, still live. With her mother dead and father estranged from her, Catalina no longer has her tuition being taken care of, so she reluctantly moves into her old house where her grandmother resides because a misguided rivalry with a next-door neighbor gypsy led to her burning her own house down.

Catalina begins to work at the local college library for Sandra, a parent whose children Isa teaches and who is also attracted to Catalina's older sister. It is there that she unknowingly meets her mother's former lover, Felipe Franco Williams who intrigues her.

As she and her cousin Miggy try to convince her grandmother to sell her charred home and buy the sisters out so she can get back to her studies, Catalina finds out that Felipe wishes to buy the property. When Isa nudges Catalina to discover on her own that Felipe and her mother had a relationship, she confronts him, and he denies it at first until he can't anymore when her mother's brother, Ray returns and confirms that Felipe was paying her tuition. Ray gets La Lupe to sell the property and becomes a foreman that constructs an office building for Felipe in its place.

Isa moves back in with Catalina, Ray and La Lupe when her husband's drug use and womanizing get out of control not before Felipe steps in and tries to help. Their grandmother finally agrees to buy the sisters out and Catalina begins staying at Miggy's boyfriend, Ernesto's apartment inside another building Felipe owns and where her mother owned a dress shop. Catalina sees Felipe again while out Sandra thinking it's the last time before she returns for school. She meets his affable wife who proceeds to become very sick after mixing alcohol with psychotic medication. Catalina helps Felipe get her home and moved by her loyalty; he takes Catalina to his father's old ranch where he reveals he lost his son. They consummate the relationship and moving forward, begins to assist him with trivial projects as a way for them to spend time together. During one last meeting with his wife, she casually reveals that she knows everything about her mother but also gives

Catalina pause on Felipe's motivations, implying that her uncle has a past with Felipe and that he is selling her grandmother's property for the purposes of drug trafficking. As her grandmother directly questions her motivations and Ray and Ernesto cast more doubt, she uses Miggy to make Felipe jealous so she could better understand his feelings for her causing her cousin to have an accident that leaves him paralyzed. She decides that the only way she can leave La Palma Valley and have a successful life is with Felipe's help. In return, she is willing to forgo love in order to be secure in his possession of her, her hopes that she can fulfill her mother's wishes that she be successful naively thinking she could succeed where her mother failed and self- destructed.

Before she leaves she tells Isa who has begun a relationship with Sandra that she has left her portion of her grandmother's money for her daughter's education asking that she never tell Daniela, hoping she can avoid their mother's fate and most eventually her own.

Fifteen years later Daniela reunites with Catalina while studying abroad in Madrid not knowing what she did for her. Despite her aunt's success as a professor, she feels sorry for her as she lives alone and reveals that she has remained faithful to Felipe and their relationship despite him still being married, having succeeded in his ambition and becoming the governor of Baja California. Daniela vows never to depend on man to be successful.

Setting and Themes

The setting for the Desert's Finest Canales is both in the Imperial and Mexicali Valley where I grew up. This low desert agricultural region has a distinct history, one that is culturally diverse and very much part of America's fabric even if it has mostly been relegated to stories about drug and human trafficking. What has always fascinated me was how both simultaneously experienced the pangs of America's manifest destiny before the establishment of a firm border eclipsed this symbiotic relationship.

In late nineteenth century, the Colorado River was redirected and transformed Southern California's barren desert into a productive agricultural land. The novel, *The Winning of Barbara Worth* by Harold Bell Wright is an account of how respectable hard-working red-blooded white Americans came to this desert and "tamed" it by diverting the river and thus creating more farmland. The personification of the desert came in the form of Bell Wright's protagonist Barbara Worth, another white American but a female who is idealistic in her love of her adopted land. Losing her parents in a sandstorm, she is discovered by group of surveyors in the middle of the desert, stranded and thirsty. At the end of the novel, it is assumed she will marry a handsome irrigation engineer from back east who learns to love the desert as much as she does.

No surprise, the story itself is riddled with many racist overtones. But this book helped draw me closer to the novel I wanted to write. What especially inspired me was the anger I felt that a woman represented something had to be harnessed or tamed. There is no doubt that Barbara is put on a pedestal in Bell's novel while the male characters get to partake in the heroism. I began to ponder how it would always be a tough road for women to enjoy individuality and freedom men seem to be easily privileged with. This book became my point of departure. I had my protagonist's mother insist that Barbara Worth was her mute grandmother who married a Mexican man and moved to Sonora Mexico only to return to Rubio City a widow. I decided to rename the Valley after Bell Wright's La Palma de La Mano de Dios and changed the names of Calexico and Mexicali to Rubio City and Frontera respectively.

At some point in writing and rewriting, frustrated by my own novel writing skills, I also realized that I didn't want to write a story making a woman's road to freedom or individuality precious, I wanted to depict it as a cyclical journey where the protagonist is affected by her ancestral/familial burden and this is what shapes her uneven destiny. Her mother kills herself and while stripping her of an opportunity to educate herself, it simultaneously forces her to mourn her, and through mourning people tend to seek a better understanding of who they have lost. Her father abandoned her a long time ago, so she has been taught since a

young age to expect nothing from him. Her grandmother is wise but unstable. Her sister is in a similar situation, having married a man as destructive as her father and this makes her incapable of emotionally supporting Catalina as she is in survival mode with her daughter Daniela, the last generation in the line of Canales women.

In the end, Catalina is successful in a traditional sense but because she loses both parents and faces economic hardship, misogyny and tragedy, there is a price she must pay in order to move away from the Valleys oppression, a desert controlled by men, both American and Mexican which is personified by her lover Felipe. She also mourns her mother through her relationship with him (as he does) allowing herself to reach a better understanding of who her mother was and who she seems to think she is destined to be.

The story ends in Madrid, Spain where the desert's first explorer, Juan Bautista de Anza originated from. Counting Barbara, Daniela is the fourth generation Canales woman and I wanted to give my novel a definitive ending by presenting it from her point of view. While she is still cycling through a world where male privilege is prevalent, it is to lesser degree for her as she has been raised by two strong women.

The theme of water is important to my novel, to me it feels like a form of love whereas canals irrigate and allow mineral rich land to yield its fruit Natalia also drowns in one broken hearted, seeking love. In his love for Catalina,

Miggy wants her to move on from her mother's suicide by swimming in canal for her. Catalina never gets to really experience the natural water of Los Arcos or real love for that matter, she decides to take advantage of Felipe wanting to possess her and she is called back to Rubio City because of Miggy's accident. The last scene where Daniela after a night of revelations and drinking finds herself thirsty in front of Madrid's Cybele's fountain, a throwback to Barbara being found in Harold Bell Wright's novel as a child thirsty in the heat. It also brings us full circle to this novel where the beginning has Catalina watching Miggy swim in the canal, trying to show her that her mother could have survived if she wanted to and where Catalina's youthful trajectory ends when she throws coins like dice into the same canal and calls Felipe.

In the end, Catalina drowned in her love for Felipe by not letting him go but she is more successful than her mother, educated and financially independent. It was her mother that helped create this destiny as Catalina then creates a destiny for Daniela by leaving her college money so she may feel empowered enough to not depend on a man. To me this ending never was about Catalina telling everyone off and going it on her own, she was not capable of that, but she was capable of achieving what her mother couldn't as Daniela is set to achieve what Catalina couldn't.

Thesis Process

I wrote the first five chapters of this novel in Novel I during my first semester at MSMU and continued with three more chapters a year later. The first semester was an exercise in understanding the basic novel writing while experimenting with what we learned from Professor Payne and the various commentaries by novelist in Philip Stevick's, *The Theory of the Novel*. The second Novel I course prepared me for rigorous thesis process I was about to enter into for two semesters. Professor Payne's critiques were very specific and touched upon the inconsistency of the narrative thread of my work, my protagonist's self-involved interiority and that my overall lack of technical skill in writing a scene was being masked by me writing pretty sentences.

Once the thesis process began, while he and I were well aware I had a skill set, as a writer I had to face that I has many bad habits I had to break in order to get to the next level of being a proficient novelist. This first draft is by no means the finished product of my novel, there are so many issues I need to address in the second draft. I consider it a success because early on and throughout these two semester's Professor Payne enforced that scene structure, conflict and action is what is most important, and that "everything else, (character, theme, mood, insight, etc.) is a consequence of the former." and I kept diligently working at this, trying to rid myself of the flowery (but often vacant) prose I liked to write. The end result

is a first draft the moves forward adequately, that limits the protagonist in drowning in her feelings and attempts to create an authentic world.

The hardest thing was doing away with what Professor Payne referred to as “a miasma of past, present future and constant digression.” In other words, writing intuitively and not methodically, something I have done for many years even before I entered this graduate program. In the first semester of thesis, I forced myself to begin writing in the present tense so that I could kick this habit. As a reference point, I used Imogen Hermes Gowars novel, *The Mermaid and Mrs. Hancock* which Professor Payne had on his syllabus in last fall’s Novel Class. This did the trick (although it felt like I was sitting on my hands) and I began to write more swiftly, my setting was more pronounced according to Professor Payne he could now “take her (my protagonist) more seriously now in terms of her goals.. she is more appealing as a main character. I can take her seriously her romantic aspirations and struggle for self-definition.”

In his March 30th critique, professor Payne wrote, “a novel invites psychological complexity, a coherent story that is not merely contrived, and a point of view that cues us into the subtleties of both action and character.” At this juncture, we discussed my novel walking the line between "novel and telenovela.” This is where he had introduced me to the idea of situational irony where irony is grown out of scene instead of tone of voice. He recommended that I

read “Old Mortality” by Katherine Anne Porter because of her feel “for how mythologies play out over time are what turn what could be idle gossip into enduring legend.” In reading this short novel (Porter insisted the reader not call it a Novela), I was inspired and moved by the passage as it reminded me of being in my grandmother’s old den scrounging through her old things, listening to family voices and being that little girl that was listening intently.

Maria and Miranda, aged twelve and eight years, knew they were young, though they had lived a long time. They had lived not only their own years; but their memories, it seemed to them, began years before they were born, in the lives of grown-ups all around them, old people above forty, most of them, who had a way of insisting that they too had been young once. It was hard to believe.

Moving forward, I had a decent sense of dialogue, place, characterization, sense of language and a protagonist that wasn’t as “off-putting” as she used to be. However, he warned me about my novel being too episodic, my tone was questionable, the dialogue not “growing out of character conception” and using subplot to, “push everybody forward together” to the ‘inevitable conclusion,’ as Professor Payne advised.

Inevitable conclusion were two words that haunted me in the second semester. I kept asking myself, how do I end it? I had deleted so many scenes, gotten rid of characters, changed my vision of this story so many times, I was uneasy. Per Professor Payne’s earlier suggestion, I read most of

Backwards Forwards by David Ball and decided to write the last chapter first and the penultimate second.

What I discovered after reading Professor Payne's critique was that through writing my last chapter from the Daniela point of view, I could "write with restraint and narrative discipline" however my penultimate scene with my protagonist was a telenovela cliché. One of the hardest things I had to learn about thesis was that progress isn't linear, there are highs and tremendous lows. I got rid of the scene and decided to start over.

In my next submission I took into account what Professor Payne said about Porter's character's "go in for the drama, gossip, myth making, pseudo tragedy but the narrator does not." I had an epiphany, who is the narrator? Professor Payne observed that Catalina worked better as point of view character, so the next two chapters were my breakthrough in that I was finally able to be more vigilant of the narration, depicting the complex relationship between Catalina and Felipe and how she and his wife deal with one another.

But how could I bottle this success? As I filled the gap between this submission and the final chapter of my novel, writing five more chapters, I found that I could not, so I threw away one scene with Irene, Felipe's wife and reworked Catalina's last scene with Felipe. The others give the closure Catalina needs with the other characters, especially her sister Isa.

In terms of ending it in Madrid, fifteen years later with Daniela's POV, we get a harder look at the decisions Catalina made. A line in *Old Mortality* has the protagonist Miranda saying to herself, "at least now I can know the truth about what happens to me, she assured herself silently, making a promise to herself, in her hopefulness, in her ignorance" and it echoes what I was trying to go for in the penultimate chapter, with Catalina assuming she is a master of her own destiny.

Through Daniela, the reader understands that what we perceive of ourselves is a concocted myth, and it takes others to expose that.

For the second draft, I am considering creating a specific narrator, perhaps Natalia, Catalina's mother or Barbara worth herself reimagined as Natalia perceived her. I believe that this maybe what creates a better distance from the protagonist and captivates the reader, bringing to light every Canales woman's struggle not just Catalina's.

I have enjoyed as I have struggled through the thesis process. I am very proud to say I have completed a first draft of a novel.