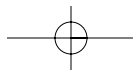
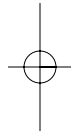
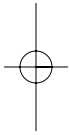
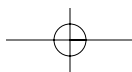
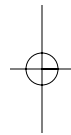
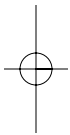


across
a hundred
mountains





across
a hundred
mountains

a novel

REYNA GRANDE



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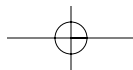
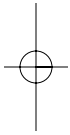
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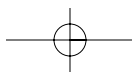
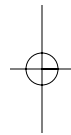
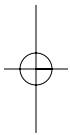
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to my son, Nathaniel,
and to those who have
perished trying to get
to El Otro Lado





adelina

“That’s your father’s grave,” the old man repeated, in a voice that was barely audible. He’d been silent most of the crossing. When he had to speak at all, he did so softly, as if this place was as holy as church.

The U.S. border.

Adelina looked at the large pile of rocks he was pointing to. The old man had to be mistaken. Her father wasn’t under there. He couldn’t be.

She wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. Then she used her hand as a shield to cover her eyes from the glare of the sun. She took a few steps forward until she was in the shadow of a boulder towering above them and the pile of rocks.

Could her father really be buried there?

She gulped. Her mouth was dry, and swallowing made her throat ache, as if she were swallowing a prickly pear, spines and all. She felt tears burning her eyes and quickly rubbed them dry.

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“It’s not too late to turn around and go back,” the old man said. “Maybe it would be best.”

Adelina took a deep breath, then turned to look at the sea of shrub and cactus stretching out around her. The terrain seemed to never end. It had taken almost all day to get here. They hadn’t been caught by the immigration patrol this time.

She looked back at the old man. He must have been a good coyote back in the day when he was young and agile. Even now, with sixty years on his back, a bad eye, and a lame knee, he’d managed to get her past the ever-watching eyes of la migra on their second attempt.

“We can turn around now,” the old man said again. “You’ve seen his grave, let that be enough.”

Adelina shook her head and began to walk down to the pile. “I didn’t come to see a grave,” she said as she took off her backpack. “I came to find my father, and I will take him with me, even if I have to carry his bones on my back.”

The old man looked at her with surprise. Adelina didn’t look at his good brown eye. Instead, she looked at his left eye, the one with the blue film over it. She had discovered that this was the only way she could make the old man look away. The old man looked back at the rocks and said nothing.

Yet Adelina knew what he was thinking. She had lied to him. She had not told him she was planning to dig up the body and, if it really was her father, take him back with her. He would not have brought her here had she told him this.

She bent down and began to remove the rocks one by one. So many rocks on top of him. So much weight to support. Maybe once the rocks were gone, maybe once he was free, she, too, would be free.

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“It may not even be him,” the old man said as he grabbed her wrist to stop her from removing any more rocks.

“I have to know,” Adelina said. “For nineteen years I have not known what happened to my father. You have no idea what it’s like to live like that—not to know. Hoy sabré la verdad.” She yanked her arm and continued removing the rocks. The old man walked away from her.

She tried to hurry. One by one the rocks were lifted. Some rocks rolled down and hit her knees. Her fingers began to hurt from being scraped. There was still a possibility the old man was right. Maybe it wasn’t her father. But which would be worse, that it was her father or that it wasn’t?

Nineteen years not knowing. Too many years thinking he had abandoned them.

“Look!” the old man said.

Adelina turned around and saw a cloud of dust rising in the distance.

“La migra,” the old man said. “We must hide.”

Adelina turned back to the rocks and in desperation began throwing them against the boulder. The sound echoed against the settled dust. She had to know who was buried there. She had to see for herself if it really was her father.

“What are you doing? Hide!” The old man quickly made his way to a crevice in the boulder. But Adelina kept throwing off the rocks and didn’t move from where she was.

“Let them come,” she said. “Let la migra find us. Maybe they can help us take this man’s bones back—” She gasped at the sight of a small metal cross. She quickly lifted more rocks and then covered her mouth with her hand to stifle a cry. She looked at the old man, at his bad eye, but this time the old man didn’t look away.

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“It’s a white rosary with heart-shaped beads, yes?” he asked.

Adelina nodded, looking down at the rusted metal cross, at the white beads, at the bones that had once been a hand.

The old man hadn’t lied.

“He was clutching the rosary so tightly when I found him dead, right there where he is now,” the old man said. “It’s as if he had been praying right until his death. Praying for a miracle, perhaps.”

“That son-of-a-bitch coyote just left him here to die!” Adelina said.

“Your father was bitten by a snake. The coyote probably left him here thinking la migra would find him. Look, here they come now.”

Adelina turned around and saw a white vehicle approaching. La migra was here.

But they were nineteen years too late to save her father.

juana

Mexico

Juana looked at her mother standing in the doorway. Amá was trying to see through the watery veil and down the road, hoping Apá would appear. She'd been there for over an hour as the rain filled the puddles outside. Juana rocked the hammock back and forth inside the shack, humming a song to her baby sister, Anita, who would not fall asleep. It was as if Anita was also waiting for Apá to come home.

Darkness fell and the rain continued. Juana lay in her cot, wondering where Apá was. He was a campesino, and he worked in the fields planting and harvesting crops on the other side of the river. She knew that once in a while he would be delayed if someone got hurt with a machete, or bitten by a snake. Could something have happened to her father? If so, why wasn't anyone coming to tell them?

Amá sighed as she wrapped her rebozo tight around her. Her dress was wet, her legs were speckled with mud, but still she stood, exposed to the elements, refusing to warm herself inside the shack and eat a bowl of beans.

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“Tu padre no llega,” she said to Juana as she gave one more glance up the road, before she finally came inside. She headed straight to the altar in the corner where many statues of saints were glowing from the light of the candles. She took her rosary out from her brassiere and gently caressed the shiny, black beads.

“Maybe he can’t cross the river,” Juana said, joining her mother at the altar. She knew that sometimes when it rained hard, the river swelled, making it impossible for anyone to cross. Sometimes it swelled so much the water would overflow, creeping into the shacks like un ladrón, a thief.

Amá nodded, then knelt on the dirt floor and made the sign of the cross. Juana watched the flame of the candle flickering on La Virgen de Guadalupe’s brown face and dedicated all her prayers to her. Then she picked up her rosary and kissed the metal cross hanging from it. Apá gave her this rosary the day of her first communion, a year and a half ago, on her tenth birthday.

“Ave María Purísima,” Amá said.

“Sin pecado concebida,” Juana added. Their voices filled the shack and lulled Anita to sleep. As they prayed, Juana was glad their voices drowned out the unforgiving rain beating on their tar-soaked cardboard roof.

The rain didn’t want to be silenced by their prayers. Thunder shook the walls, making the bamboo sticks rattle like wet bones. Juana said her prayers louder, just in case La Virgencita couldn’t properly hear her. After a while her throat ached, and still, Apá did not come.

Her prayers became softer and softer, until they were

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merely whispers, until she only echoed every other word her mother said. Then, finally, it was only her mother praying.

Juana's eyes wanted to close. She'd been kneeling for so long she could no longer feel her bony knees. But she couldn't leave Amá alone to wait for her father. The image of La Virgen blurred in front of her. Her body swayed to one side. Her rosary fell to the dirt floor.

"Go to bed, Juana," her mother said in a raspy voice. "You've done your part, my daughter."

Juana shook her head and opened her mouth to say another prayer, but she could no longer think of any.

"Go to sleep. I'll wake you when Apá comes home." Amá made the sign of the cross in front of Juana and tried to help her get up. Juana couldn't stand up, so instead, she crawled all the way to her cot, being careful not to spill any of the pots Amá had placed around the shack to catch the rainwater leaking through the roof.

Juana was wet all over when she woke up. For a brief moment, she felt embarrassed, thinking she had peed her bed. Her mother stood beside the cot, holding a candle. Even in the dim candlelight Juana could see the shack flooded with water.

"The river has flooded," Amá said. "We must get on the table." She was cradling Anita in one arm. Juana noticed that Amá's wet dress clung to her, as if afraid.

Amá turned around and waded to the small dining table. Juana's body trembled as she lowered her legs into the cold water. The water reached to her waist. She guided herself by the flame of the candle her mother held and made her way to

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the table, pushing plastic cups, clothes, pieces of cardboard, soggy tortillas, flowers, and candlesticks out of the way. She glanced in the direction where the altar should have been, but all she saw was water.

Juana got on top of the table and sat next to her mother. Both tucked their feet underneath their legs.

“It’s the river that doesn’t let Miguel come home,” Amá said. Juana nodded. She wondered if Apá knew the shack had flooded. She hoped that soon he would try to cross the river to come for them and take them to town, to her godmother’s house. There they would be warm and dry.

Juana leaned against her mother and listened to Anita’s sucking sounds as she nursed from Amá’s large, round breast.

“Don’t worry, mi’ja,” Amá said. “Your father will come for us soon. Tomorrow the rain will stop, and the river waters will go back down.”

The rain continued, and the river waters did not recede. By now their bodies shivered and their stomachs growled, but they were helpless to do anything about it. Only Anita was warm inside her mother’s rebozo. And only her stomach was soothed by her mother’s milk. Juana clutched her stomach tight and tried not to think about how hungry or cold she was, or how heavy her eyelids felt. She only thought about Apá. Soon, he would come for them. Soon, they would be at her madrina’s house, drinking a cup of hot chocolate, all of them together.

A few hours after daylight, there was still no sign of Apá. Amá waded through the water and yanked the door open. The sky

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was still heavy with clouds, and the rain was now falling in a drizzle.

“I’ll go look for help,” Amá said. She walked back to Juana and handed her the baby.

“But Amá—”

“I must try to make it to Don Agustín’s house farther down the river. They have a boat. Maybe they can row us to the other side.”

Juana grabbed her sister and held her tight. The baby let out a cry and opened her arms to her mother.

Amá shook her head. “Stay with your sister, Anita. Mami will come back soon.”

Juana lowered her head as Amá made the sign of the cross and blessed her.

Amá took off her shawl and placed it over Anita. “I won’t be long. Take good care of your sister, Juana. Hold her tight and don’t let go of her.”

“I won’t, Amá,” Juana said as she tightened her hold on Anita. She leaned against the wall and sat very still on top of the table. Amá looked at them one more time and then struggled back to the door, splashing the muddy water as she left.

Juana watched the ripples her mother had made get smaller and smaller. Soon, the water settled down again. It was so still, as if Amá had never walked through it.

“... Dios te salve María, llena eres de gracia, bendita eres entre todas las mujeres y bendito es el fruto de tu vientre, Jesús. Amén.” Juana wet her lips with her tongue. Her throat was

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dry, but she kept praying because every time she paused she could hear the rain pouring down again. Why couldn't it stop raining?

Anita stirred awake once more and began to make funny sucking noises. She pressed closer to Juana, searching for her mother's breasts.

"There, there, Anita, go back to sleep." Juana rocked the baby up and down. Anita wailed and waved her fists in the air. "Go to sleep, Anita, go to sleep."

The baby's cries cut straight through Juana's ears, leaving them ringing. Juana began to pray once more, hoping the sound of her voice would make her sister go to sleep. But Anita cried and cried. Juana put her finger inside Anita's mouth. Anita latched on to it quickly and immediately began sucking on it. Juana smiled at the tingling she felt on the tip of her finger. But too soon, Anita pushed the finger away and let out another loud scream.

"Please come soon, Apá," Juana said over and over again. Her eyelids began to close. She tried to grab some water to splash on her face, but she couldn't reach it. She held Anita tight as she pushed herself closer to the edge of the table. Her hand slipped from under her and she almost fell.

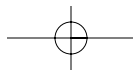
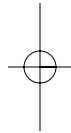
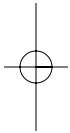
After what seemed an eternity, Anita finally fell asleep sucking on her tiny fist. The sound of the rain falling on the roof began to penetrate Juana's sleepy mind. It was still raining. Her parents still hadn't come.

Juana's body trembled, her stomach had begun to eat itself, and it seemed her eyelids were tied to rocks. She forced her left eye open with one hand while she held her sister with the

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other. The right eye closed, demanding sleep. Juana wondered if it was possible to let her right eye sleep, while the left eye kept guard.

“I must not fall asleep,” she told herself. “I must not fall asleep, I must not . . .”



adelina

Adelina listened to the sounds inside the dark airplane. All around her people were snoring. Even the man sitting next to her was leaning back on his seat, his eyes closed, his chest rising and falling to the rhythm of his snores. The sound was annoying, but Adelina was not annoyed. She tried to imagine that the snores were coming from her, that it was she who was enjoying a good sleep.

Sleep.

Even thinking about that word hurt.

The man next to her leaned against Adelina and loudly snored in her ear. She didn't push him off. The sound reminded her of her father. There was once a time when he had enjoyed a good sleep like this.

She looked down at the wooden box on her lap and pressed it against her. Her father's ashes. Her redemption. Perhaps after she delivered the ashes to her dying mother there would be no more demons to haunt her, and she would be able to lower her head on a pillow and sleep.

Finally sleep.

juana

“Juana, wake up, wake up.”

Juana opened her eyes. She could barely see her mother leaning over her. It was dark in the shack, and she wondered what time it was.

“Cómo está mi Juanita?”

“Apá!” Juana said. Behind Amá, her father and two other men were standing in the water. Juana lifted her arms to him so he would come and hug her. The shawl on her lap fell down to the water, and that was when Juana realized that something was gone. What had she been holding so tightly right before she fell asleep?

“Juana, where’s your sister?” Amá asked.

Juana rubbed her sleepy eyes. Amá grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her.

“Where’s Anita, Juana? Answer me!”

“Where’s your sister?” Apá asked as he stepped forward. Juana looked down at the water, but it was too hard to see anything in the darkness.

She covered her ears to block out her mother’s scream.

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Amá dropped to her knees and frantically flapped her arms, splashing the water as she searched. Apá and the other men bent down and did the same. Only Juana did nothing. She pressed her knees against her chest, feeling her heart beating fast, so fast it was making her dizzy.

“My daughter, where’s my daughter!” Amá yelled as she blindly moved her arms in a circle. Then Apá pulled something out of the water, and even in the darkness, Juana could see that it was Anita.

“Nooooo!” Amá yelled as she grabbed the baby from Apá. “No, no, no!”

Juana lowered her head and hid her face inside her cupped hands.

adelina

Adelina took out the rusty white rosary she had in her purse. The rosary had not protected her father as he had lain on the ground, dying. How foolish she had once been, thinking that it would.

She thought about the past week, how she had walked around Tijuana, asking every coyote she met if he had seen or helped her father cross the border.

She knew from experience that coyotes kept things to themselves, so she'd offered a reward to anyone who would help her find her father. She'd offered all her savings. The coyotes had been afraid she was an undercover cop and had kept their mouths shut. She had almost given up.

Three days ago, after walking around downtown Tijuana, inquiring about her father, something strange had happened. An old man followed her as she headed back to her hotel. She walked faster, but even though the old man was limping, he still kept up with her.

She stopped at a corner to wait for the red light to change. The old man got close and asked her a surprising question.

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“Was your father carrying a white rosary made of heart-shaped beads?”

Adelina turned to look at him. Under the light of the streetlamp she noticed that he had a film over his left eye.

A long time ago, she'd met a man with an eye like that. She could barely remember this, but she knew it was true.

“Well, did your father have a white rosary?”

“Yes, he had a white rosary. Do you know my father? Do you know where he is?”

Adelina clutched the sleeve of the old man's shirt and looked at his blind eye as she waited for him to answer. The old man didn't look at her; he looked at the green light on the other side of the street.

“Your light is green. You must hurry if you want to cross.”

“Forget the light,” Adelina said. “Answer my question. Do you know where my father is?”

The old man nodded. “Yes, I know where he is.”

“Take me to him, please.”

Adelina could sense in him the desire to turn around and leave.

But then he said, “Tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll take you to see your father, then you can finally go home.”

Go home?

“Where is he?” she asked. “Is he well, at least?”

The old man looked at her briefly, but then he lowered his gaze once again.

“In the middle of the border, at the foot of a boulder, is a large pile of rocks. Your father is buried there.”

juana

Juana watched the candles flickering in the darkness. So many candles surrounding such a tiny coffin. Maybe around a large coffin the candles wouldn't have looked so overwhelming, but Anita had only been a baby.

Juana looked through the cloud of incense smoke at her mother and father. They were holding on to each other and praying along with the neighbors and her father's distant relatives. Four years ago, when her other younger sister died from a scorpion sting, Amá and Apá had held on to each other like now, but Juana had been put in between them, so they could share their grief as a family.

She wondered why they hadn't called her to them now. Wasn't she still part of the family?

She turned around and headed to the door.

"A dónde vas, Juana?" Apá's mother, Abuelita Elena, stood in the doorway. She wasn't praying along with the rest of the women, and Juana wondered why she'd even bothered coming.

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“Outside,” Juana said. Her grandmother looked at her for a moment, shook her head, and then moved aside to let her pass.

Juana walked to the train tracks in front of her godparents’ house. She sat on the rail and prayed silently as the rest of the women chanted inside.

In a few more hours, they would make their way to the cemetery to bury Anita. Juana rubbed her eyes dry. Her tears reminded her of rain. Rain reminded her of floods. And floods reminded her of Anita.

“Juana, what are you doing out here all alone?” Apá asked, making his way toward her. He sat next to her on the rail and picked up some pebbles from the ground. He moved them around in his hand.

“I’m listening to the prayers,” Juana said.

Apá was silent for a moment, then wrapped his arm around her and said, “Pain takes time to heal, Juana. In time, we will all heal, especially your mother.”

“She’ll never forgive me, Apá.”

“She will. But you must give her time.”

“Do you forgive me, Apá?” Juana looked at her father. He kept looking at the pebbles in his hand.

“It was my fault, Juana. I should’ve worked harder to get us out of there. I should’ve worked more hours, and little by little I could’ve built us a better house closer to town.”

“But Apá—”

“I should’ve tried harder to swim across the river to get to you in time. Then this would never have happened.”

“But Apá—”

across a hundred mountains

“Hush, Juana. I never want to hear you say it was your fault. Fue mi culpa. Mi única, maldita culpa!” Apá hurled the pebbles to the ground. “Just give your mother time, Juana. She had already suffered the loss of two children. Now she’s lost a third.”

María died from a scorpion sting because they didn’t have enough money for a doctor and the healing woman couldn’t save her. Josefina died before leaving her mother’s womb. It was as if she had given up on life, even before she was born. One day she loosened her hold and was stillborn at four months.

Only Juana had survived. And now, Juana wished that she hadn’t.

Sleep became a stranger to Apá. Juana knew because she was the same way. Every time she closed her eyes, her mind would shake her to wake up. *You mustn’t go to sleep, Juana. You mustn’t sleep*, it said to her.

She lay in her cot and strained her eyes to see him. The tiny shafts of moonlight that cut through the gaps between the bamboo sticks were too weak to chase away the darkness, so it wasn’t easy. She knew he wasn’t sleeping because Apá always snored when he slept. Instead, he breathed in and out softly. Sometimes a sigh would escape his lips, sometimes a curse, sometimes the sounds of weeping. She listened and followed his movements around the shack. He walked up and down, like a trapped animal, then he would drop onto a chair and stay there for hours.

At times like these Juana wished she could get up and go to her father, but she was afraid. And she didn’t know why.