ONE

Elsa

"We want to hold our kids close forever"

THE THUNK AND SLAP OF a volleyball game echoed through the junior high school gymnasium in Elsa, Texas. Sweat streaming from her forehead and a long dark ponytail flopping on her shoulders, Maribel Saenz connected with the ball, setting it up for a teammate who spiked it over the net. With a whoop of glee, the seventeen-year-old led her fellows in a brief victory dance. But the game eventually went to the other team, led by Mari's sister, Carolina, a lanky fifteen-year-old and the strongest player on the court.

The relative cool of the gym was a welcome respite from July's steamy heat in this little South Texas farm town twenty minutes from the Mexican border. And the morning pickup game provided a bit of diversion for a handful of Mexican American teenagers on summer break. Coach Mary Cruz, who grew up a "gym rat" herself an hour north in Falfurrias, had known Maribel and her sister since she began coaching them as sixth graders. "They're very well-mannered kids," said Cruz, as she stretched her hamstrings on the bleachers, half watching the game. "Their parents are very old-fashioned. Her mom has said to me, 'If she does anything wrong, you let me know about it.' "

Elsa, with a population of 5,500, is the kind of town where it's not too hard to keep an eye on a teenager. It's a town where just about everyone turns out for high school football games, and scores of fans drive hours to support the Edcouch-Elsa Yellowjackets at away games.

The town is in the heart of South Texas—a region with some of the strongest and most enduring cross-border ties anywhere. Maribel's life was deeply embedded in that world, and the conflicts she faced in coming of age were uniquely those of a border girl. In Elsa, as in most of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, store clerks address their customers in Spanish as often as English. Nine out of ten residents of the region are Hispanic.[1] Some, like Maribel's parents, are immigrants from Mexico. But many families in the area trace their roots to the land grants of the eighteenth century, when both sides of the Rio Grande were settled by ranchers from Spain. Still other families have migrated back and forth across the river over time. The long relationship with Mexico has helped shape a distinctive Tejano culture, blending Mexican and American traditions.

Maribel and Carolina were in their element browsing the mall in McAllen or gossiping with friends at the local Whataburger, but they also drew freely on their Mexican roots. "At Caro's *quince* we put on CDs," said Maribel after the game was over. "My sister likes to dance to hip-hop. I like Norteño and Colombiano."

In her final year of high school, Maribel didn't challenge her immigrant parents openly, but her plans extended well beyond their dream that she stay close to home and join the family plumbing business, where they hoped she would put her fluent English to use in the front office. When it came to dating, though, her parents prevailed. In her wallet she carried a photo of Luis, a football player she'd been seeing for seven months. At her parents' insistence, however, the couple always took along Carolina and the girls' thirteen-year-old brother Juan Carlos when they went on a date. "At first I was so embarrassed, but then I got used to it," said Maribel. "Now we don't go out, though, because Luis got sick of going with my little brother. I see him at school or at the football workout and we talk on the phone. That's it."

Like countless Tejano teenagers in this border region, she felt torn between staying true to her parents' traditional Mexican values, which emphasize family connectedness above all, and striking out on an individual American path to success. Maribel mused about applying to colleges as far away as California and Washington, D.C. "My parents won't be thrilled," she acknowledged. "I told them I want to leave the Valley, and they were like, '*¿Porqué? ¡Tan lejos!*' I'm going to tell them it's best for me."

The Rio Grande meanders to the Gulf of Mexico through a vast alluvial plain where Mexico and the United States have rubbed off on each other

for generations. In the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, the flat river valley—known there as La Cuenca, the basin—is part irrigated farmland, part thorn scrub, and part urban sprawl. The cities of Reynosa and Matamoros have burgeoned in recent decades with the proliferation of foreign-owned manufacturing plants or *maquiladoras.* On the Texas side, the Valley—as locals call this three-thousand-square-mile region, is a checkerboard of cotton, sorghum, citrus, tomato, and sugarcane fields—punctuated by an occasional water tower. Strip malls of Wal-Marts and Home Depots flank U.S. Route 83 as it hugs the river. The small cities of McAllen and Brownsville are hubs of border commerce. But the back roads are dotted with modest farmhouses and struggling *colonias,* or shantytowns.

Some Texans draw an imaginary demarcation they call the Mexican-Dixon line from El Paso east to Houston, which essentially consigns heavily Latino South Texas to Mexico. The sense of living in a world apart is common among Valley residents. "We're pretty cut off from the rest of Texas through distance, geography, culture, and custom," said Juan Ochoa, a Mexican-born lawyer who teaches junior high school in the Valley town of La Joya. "You drive sixty miles out of here and there's a federal checkpoint that says, 'Protecting America's Frontier.' It's as if the United States starts sixty miles north of here."

The border region today is shaped by its history. The entire borderlands, including all of the U.S. Southwest, once belonged to Mexico (and before it, the colony of New Spain). In Spanish, the word for border is *la frontera,* the frontier. For the Spanish colonizers, and later Mexican leaders, these northern territories were a frontier to be conquered by missionaries, soldiers, and settlers, in much the same way as the United States approached its own western frontier. In the chaotic years after gaining independence from Spain in 1821, Mexico had trouble establishing control over its outlying northern provinces and permitted Americans to colonize Texas. By 1835, more than twenty thousand English-speaking Americans—with little loyalty to Mexico—had settled there. When Mexican president Antonio López de Santa Anna acted to centralize power, reduce the authority of Mexico's states, and enforce the country's law against slavery, the Texas settlers rebelled, declaring independence from Mexico in 1836. But when the United States, bent on westward expansion and motivated by a sense of manifest destiny, moved to annex Texas in 1845, Mexico resisted, still considering the state part of its national territory. War erupted in 1846, and a U.S. invasion of Mexico culminated in the taking of Mexico City nearly two years later.[2]

Under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the fighting in 1848, Mexico ceded one-third of its territory (one-half, counting Texas), and the United States paid $15 million in compensation. University of Southern California geographer Michael Dear has called it "the most important belligerent land grab in history."[3] With the stroke of a pen an estimated seventy-five thousand to one hundred thousand Mexicans, many of them Native Americans (whose own claims to the land predated the existence of either nation), became U.S. citizens. Though nominally guaranteed the full protections of the U.S. Constitution, these first Mexican Americans were soon relegated to second-class status.[4] The physical boundary between the two countries was adjusted in 1853 by the Gadsden Purchase, by which the United States bought an additional strip of land in southern Arizona and New Mexico to obtain a more favorable route for the transcontinental Southern Pacific Railroad. With the boundary thus established, the frontier was converted into a border, an edge, where the two countries began marking off their territorial limits.[5]

Cities and towns along the border exist as pairs: one Mexican, one American. Some, like Laredo, began as single communities that were divided in two when the international boundary was established. In other cases, a second town grew up after the Mexican-American War, as a counterpart to the original city across the border: Brownsville began as a U.S. fort across the river from the colonial city of Matamoros; El Paso grew as a railroad town opposite old El Paso del Norte, later renamed Ciudad Juárez; and the little cow town of Tijuana—south of the eighteenth-century Spanish mission and garrison at San Diego—gained importance only after the war placed the border there. More recent settlements—Ambos Nogales (the pair of towns of the same name, one in Sonora, one in Arizona), Douglas/Agua Prieta, and Calexico/Mexicali—emerged side by side later in the nineteenth century as gateways between the two countries. Nowadays, the Mexican cities tend to be much larger than their U.S. counterparts, a consequence of industrialization, tourism, and U.S.-bound migrants who haven't made it over the border.[6]

The inhabitants of this fast-growing, in-between place at times feel like outsiders, misunderstood even within their own countries. "The border is really a bundle of paradoxes," says Jorge Bustamante, a Mexican sociologist on the faculty of the University of Notre Dame and founder of Tijuana's Colegio de la Frontera Norte, a research institute on border issues. "It's sort of a sandwich between the prejudices from the North and from the South."[7]

In Mexico, the border region, distant as it is from Mexico City, has nevertheless developed rapidly over the past two generations, its economy and population growing on the foundation of a manufacturing base and proximity to U.S. resources. Mexican border residents benefit from the relative prosperity of their region. But because the border has long been an outpost, remote from the center of the country's political power and culture, its inhabitants are sometimes viewed with suspicion as not being Mexican enough. In the 1960s, the Mexican government went so far as to launch a campaign in border cities to strengthen national identity through educational and cultural programs and insistence on the use of proper Spanish, unadulterated by Anglicisms.[8] Mexicans who live near the border may be derided by their countrymen as being too *agringados,* says Bustamante, yet they are, if anything, more adamantly Mexican because when they cross into the United States, "we know for sure that we are not gringos."

On the American side of the line, the border region varies from affluent, conservative, predominantly white San Diego County on California's Pacific Coast to the low-income, politically liberal, overwhelmingly Mexican American counties of Cameron and Hidalgo in South Texas. In the Lower Rio Grande Valley, where 85 percent of the population is Hispanic, residents complain of neglect by officials in Austin and Washington, D.C., feeling that because they live so far south in Texas—or rather, so close to Mexico—their needs and aspirations are little appreciated. Yet Valley natives point to the musical, culinary, and literary offerings their region has generated; while Tejano writer and anthropologist Américo Paredes and Tex-Mex *conjunto* accordionist Narciso Martínez may not be household names, they have contributed to the roots of American culture.

After the volleyball game, the players exchanged high fives and clustered, chattering, around the water fountain, then drifted out into the parking lot. "See you at home," called Carolina. She and Maribel each climbed into her own beat-up sedan and departed. Neither girl had a driver's license. But in the way of many country kids, both were competent drivers. Maribel drove home to change out of her sweat-soaked gym clothes. She steered her little Kia over the back streets of town, crossed herself as she passed the Sacred Heart Catholic Church, and pulled into her driveway. "We have *gallinas,*" she said, switching seamlessly between English and Spanish, her first language and the tongue she shared with her parents. She showed off the chicken coop and the young orchard. "And my mom has her papayas and banana trees . . . *apenas están creciendo.*"

The Saenzes' modern brick ranch house was set back from the road behind a low cyclone fence. For Juan and Raquel Saenz, purchasing the house two years earlier was the culmination of decades of hard work and savings. They had each immigrated to Texas as teenagers, he from the border state of Nuevo Leon, she from a little *terreno* in Zacatecas. The couple had met and married in Houston, eloping after Raquel's family refused to bless the union. They had settled in Elsa when Maribel was ten, Carolina eight, and Juan Carlos six. Together with his four brothers, Juan Saenz had built a flourishing plumbing company, installing water and sewer lines for new construction projects throughout the Valley.

The town had its own bank, the Elsa State Bank and Trust Co., and an H.E.B. supermarket. But the main drag, State Route 107, was struggling, flanked by a used muffler shop, a trailer park, a convenience store announcing, "WIC accepted here," and an evangelical church housed in a corrugated metal warehouse, the Iglesia Betesda de la Palabra Viviente. A farmer sold tomatoes from the back of a pickup truck. A scrawny horse grazed a stubbly field beside an irrigation canal. A tire swing dangled from a tree in the corner of a dirt yard.

The Saenz's new, four-bedroom suburban home—one of a handful in town that display prosperous aspirations—was a welcome change from the family's previous abode, a cramped little house close to the school. But just like its humbler neighbors, the Saenz home sat in the path of a yellow crop duster that targeted the cotton fields surrounding it. "In the morning you can see the planes overhead spraying pesticides," said Maribel. "Sometimes they don't aim right and it lands on the house. My mom yells 'Get indoors!' I think sometimes people get sick."

Inside, the house was as neat as a pin, with a cheerful sunflower motif in the kitchen. The key rack held rosaries and a green flyswatter. A small bowl of chili peppers sat on the dining table. Carolina was already home, standing by the fridge eating crackers topped with chicken salad she dipped from a plastic container. Her cell phone rang. "Hi Mom . . ." she answered. "*En la casa. ¿Y tu?"* The girls arranged to meet their mother for lunch, and Mari headed for the shower. In the living room hung enormous studio portraits of Maribel and Carolina dressed in formal gowns at their *quinceañeras,* the coming-of-age celebrations that marked each girl's fifteenth birthday. The framed photographs dominated even the overstuffed furniture.

More than three hundred friends and relatives had attended Maribel's *quince.* Her pale pink satin dress had been handmade across the border in

Mexico, and she had been escorted down the aisle of the church by fourteen attendants, representing the fourteen years of her childhood. Following the mass, her parents had hosted a catered *fiesta* under a tent in their back yard. "We danced the whole night away. It was crazy," remembered Mari, transported. "Even when the band took a break we put on the radio and kept dancing. It went on until three in the morning."

For Maribel's mother, the most important moment had come at the beginning of the evening when her daughter knelt on the dance floor and all four grandparents prayed over her. "One by one, her *abuelitos* went to her and gave her their blessing," recalled Raquel Saenz. "We were so proud, because she had always been so well-behaved—she didn't drink or go with boys—and she was growing into a beautiful young woman. I didn't have a *quinceañera* because my parents were so poor. I wanted it to be possible for my daughters."

For several decades after the Mexican-American War put this once-Mexican territory firmly in the control of the United States, Texans of Mexican descent, or Tejanos, continued to exert leadership in the Rio Grande Valley—as landowners and merchants, local politicians and law enforcement. The English-speaking white Americans (known in the region as Anglos) who first settled here intermarried with Tejano families, converted to Catholicism, and adapted themselves to Mexican American traditions. But over time, and with the backing of occupying U.S. troops and the Texas Rangers, the state's mounted frontier police force, the balance of power tipped toward the Anglos. With the arrival of the first railroad line in Brownsville in 1904, the shift accelerated drastically.[9]

The Valley's economy had been dominated by Tejano cattle ranches that produced beef for the local market. But some Anglo ranchers began clearing the chaparral and experimenting with irrigation systems to water row crops. Once the railroad opened an easy route to a national market for agricultural products, a land boom ensued. In the first decades of the twentieth century, cash-poor *rancheros* found themselves unable to pay their skyrocketing tax bills and were forced to surrender their lands. In some cases they were expelled by intimidation and threats. In a few short years, a wholesale transfer of land ownership from Tejanos to Anglos took place.[10]

Real estate developers advertised aggressively to midwestern farmers, touting the Valley's rich alluvial soil, eleven-month growing season—and docile Mexican labor. The region's once-proud *vaqueros* were reduced to working as field hands, stooped over endless rows of cotton, cabbages, and onions, under the watchful eye of a crew boss. And the new wave of Anglos,

who arrived by the thousands, were not inclined to adapt themselves to Tejano ways. Instead, many cultivated disdain for ethnic Mexicans and often outright racism.[11]

In 1915 and 1916, fueled by a bitter sense of injustice and inspired by the Mexican Revolution just over the border, some Tejanos launched an uprising, seeking to force the Anglo settlers out of South Texas. A couple of hundred loosely organized rebels sabotaged railroad lines and launched sometimes brutal raids on Anglo farms, then melted back into the countryside or retreated south across the Rio Grande. But the rebellion, known as the Plan de San Diego, was unsuccessful in its aims. And it unleashed a furious backlash of anti-Mexican vigilantism, including hundreds, possibly thousands, of lynchings and summary executions, according to historian Benjamin Heber Johnson, whose book *Revolution in Texas* gives a thorough account of the period.[12] The violence unleashed on Mexicanos by local Anglo landowners and sheriffs, and above all the Texas Rangers, echoed the campaign of terror endured by African Americans in the post-Reconstruction South. In the years that followed, Anglos cemented their control of the region through poll taxes and whites-only primaries, which disenfranchised Tejanos, and through the racial segregation of schools, neighborhoods, and public facilities.[13]

Juanita Garza, sixty-two, traced her family roots in the Valley back to 1760—before the American Revolution. But her parents had sent her and her siblings to school in San Antonio, 250 miles north, rather than put them through the segregated public schools in Weslaco, six miles south of Elsa. "Where I grew up, there were three schools: one was for Anglo Americans, another was for Mexican Americans, and then African Americans had their own little shack of a school," said Garza, now a professor teaching border history at the University of Texas–Pan American (UTPA) nearby. "My parents sent some of us off to boarding school for high school. It was either we went to a school where we were segregated or we went to a school where there was integration but it was away. My parents weighed what was worse." Their commitment to education and equity eventually led Garza's mother and father to establish a religious school in Weslaco, open to students of all backgrounds. Her mother went on to serve on the local school board in the 1970s and finally helped oversee the integration of the public schools.

Elsa, like many Valley farm towns, was segregated from its inception. Fifteen miles north of the border, the settlement, along with its smaller neighbor Edcouch, was established in 1927 when the Southern Pacific

Railroad laid track across the broad delta. Scottish speculator William George had bought the land in 1916 and persuaded the railroad to build its new line across his property. He named the new community after his wife and held a land sale, advertising Elsa as "The Planned Valley Town" and offering residential lots for $75 to $600 and business lots for $150 to $850 apiece. Parcels to the south of the tracks were reserved for Anglo residents and businesses and were served by paved roads and a sewer system. Those to the north included the "Mexican colony," which had no such amenities. The city fathers enacted a Hispanic curfew during those early decades, allowing Tejanos to cross the tracks to shop during the daytime but subjecting to arrest any Hispanic caught on the south side after sunset. Mexican Americans found work in the area's cotton gins and vegetable packing sheds, but few made it to high school.[14]

Frank Guajardo, a graduate of Edcouch-Elsa High School, had been born just over the border in Mexico. His grandparents, Texans who had owned a small *rancho* on the north bank of the river, fled to Tamaulipas in the 1920s when the Texas Rangers were persecuting Tejanos. His wife's ancestors, also Mexican American, had lived in Texas for more than two hundred years. The emphasis on family was a source of strength for Guajardo, age forty, founder of a college-prep program in which Maribel participated called the Llano Grande Center, named for the broad plain here that constituted one of the first Spanish land grants north of the Rio Grande, made to Capt. Juan José Hinojosa in 1778.

"When our first child was born, my wife and I were still in grad school," Guajardo said. "We decided that we wanted him to be raised not just by his parents but by his grandparents, his *tíos* and *tías.* So for us, living many miles away from home in San Antonio didn't make sense. What made sense was to go home." Guajardo earned his PhD at the University of Texas at Austin, then settled back in Edinburg, the seat of Hidalgo County, where he joined the faculty of the College of Education at UTPA. Since moving back home he had taken his three kids to dinner at grandma's house every Sunday.

On the Fourth of July, Guajardo accompanied his fifteen-year-old son Danny and a teenage friend to a minor league baseball game between the Edinburg Roadrunners and the El Paso Diablos. Many in the overwhelmingly Hispanic crowd were decked out in American flag T-shirts, and a number of women had thrust little plastic flags into their buns or ponytails in celebration of the holiday. As the balmy evening descended, families chatted in Spanish and English over the booming voice of the announcer

calling the lineup. "Now at bat, Al-e-jaaan-dro Fer-naaan-dez, No. 19 for El Paso." Vendors hawked watermelon—by the slice or the whole melon—and roasted ears of corn, slathered with butter and salt, American style, or chili pepper and lime juice, *a la Mexicana,* depending on the customer's preference.

Meandering through the crowd and greeting friends, Guajardo suddenly spotted an old hero: Pedro Borbón, a former major league pitcher who had played ten seasons for the Cincinnati Reds, was lounging at the back of the open-air stands, taking in the game. The aging Dominican player had made an unlikely move to the Rio Grande Valley two decades earlier, after having fallen in love with a local girl who had cut his hair at a barbershop there. Family ties in the Valley being what they are, the girl was not prepared to move away just because she had married a baseball star, so Borbón settled down and pursued a second career in the Mexican leagues. "When I was a kid I used to listen to your games on the radio when my family drove north to Michigan to pick crops," Guajardo told Borbón, his all-time favorite ball player. "That's how I learned English."

Guajardo also ran into one of his former students, a graduate of the Llano Grande program who was home from Occidental College for the summer. Celebrating Independence Day in the United States was bittersweet, said the young woman, who had crossed the river from Mexico without papers a decade before, because she sometimes felt she didn't quite belong in either her adopted country or the country of her birth. Then after a pause, the young woman observed: "I love living at the border because it's not a crash of cultures, it's a flow of cultures. Coming here tonight, I can enjoy baseball but still be Mexican."

After the game, the fans rose to their feet to sing the national anthem and watch the indigo sky erupt with fireworks. Little boys ran around waving glow sticks, while young men smooched in the dark with their girlfriends. Guajardo and the boys ambled out of the stadium. In the Valley the most American of holidays had taken on a quintessential Tejano twist.

As Guajardo's family did a generation ago, many Mexican Americans from the Valley even today spend half the year as migrant workers, following the harvest to California or Michigan with their children in tow. The border region struggles economically. The median household income in Hidalgo County, which includes Elsa, is $30,000 (well below the national average of almost $51,000), and almost 40 percent of all families with children in the county live in poverty.[15] Just 58 percent of Hidalgo County's adults have a high school diploma, compared to 79 percent of Texans and

84 percent of Americans overall. And in the seven counties along the river that make up the greater Rio Grande Valley, four in ten students are classified as "English learners," seven times as many as in the United States overall.[16]

But Guajardo bristled at the notion that such statistics mean that the Valley's youth are incapable of success. "We've been conditioned by signals in the mainstream that suggest that along the border, schools, economies, and people are expected to do according to one level of achievement," said Guajardo. "Those assumptions . . . suggest a lower level of expectations for people from here. But when we think that way, we're not able to cultivate genius; we cultivate mediocrity. We say, 'You're not going to find the cure for AIDS.' 'You're not going to be the next governor of Texas.' "

Through the Llano Grande Center, Guajardo and his colleagues take youngsters like Maribel on annual tours of elite East and West Coast universities to show them the educational possibilities beyond the Valley. The center has helped dozens of students garner scholarships to schools like Yale and Stanford. But the program also teaches the kids to value their own culture and community. Llano Grande kids have interviewed their grandparents for oral history projects and produced a video documentary that persuaded the city council to clean up a derelict park. Perhaps most remarkable is how many of the center's alumni return to the region after college. But Guajardo said family ties still keep many Hispanic kids from going away to college in the first place, just as they did when he was a youth.

How much young people feel the pressure to break away depends on how close they are to their family and how traditional their parents are, said Juanita Garza. "For the most part, the break does come. It's very American. But it's a major difference between Anglo society and Hispanic. We want to hold our kids close forever. It's okay if they're married and come back to live with us. But that's not part of the American way of doing things. It's totally different in the Valley."

At thirty-nine, Raquel Saenz was a pillar of maternal wisdom and warmth, though her eyes still twinkled with some of the same spunk that enlivened her daughters' faces. She met the girls, and Maribel's best friend Marylu Rodríguez, at Elsa's new Subway sandwich shop and chatted and joked easily with them over lunch. Carolina, the athlete of the family, wolfed down two subs, then prepared to head back to school to run bleachers and lift weights at a football team practice that was open to all

students. "Caro can eat a whole pizza by herself," teased Raquel fondly. "She's always working out."

For Raquel, maintaining a close relationship with her children—and keeping them physically close—was of paramount importance. She knew the pain of separation firsthand and told her oldest daughter: "It's better for the family to stay close. It's better for you to study in the same town and marry in the same town."

By the time she was nine, Raquel had been in charge of looking after her younger siblings and feeding and watering the livestock on her family's small plot of land in rural Zacatecas. When she was fifteen, instead of preparing for a coming-of-age party, Raquel left home with her eighteen-year-old brother and made her way north. "There were eleven children in my family and not enough food," she recalled. "We were the oldest. There wasn't any work, so we came here."

Swimming across the Rio Grande was "the hardest thing I had done in my life. I was so afraid. It seemed like an impossible mission." But the pair made it across and found their way to Houston, where Raquel got work in a factory, making dining room chairs. Other siblings joined them over time. Her education, which had been interrupted after ninth grade, was resumed only many years later, when she was already a mother of three trying to help her kids with their homework.

In Houston Raquel met Juan Saenz, three years her senior, and the two began courting. But with their parents back home in Mexico, Raquel's brothers assumed the job of protecting her honor. "My *tíos* were very strict," said Maribel. "She would only get to see him outside the house for ten minutes." Raquel reflected later that she had missed out on her own mother's influence during those teenage years—someone to whom she could confide her romantic yearnings and get a sympathetic hearing. Even when her father migrated to Texas and Juan asked him for her hand, the young couple was denied. And so one night, after Raquel turned eighteen, they eloped.

Though she and her husband had since become citizens of the United States as well as Mexico, and could travel freely across the border, Raquel was still seized with pity when she heard stories of migrants drowning in the river or dying in the desert as they attempted the same crossing she had once made. "She'll say, '*O, pobre gente,*' because she went through it too," said Maribel. With Mexico so close, Raquel easily maintained a connection to the country of her birth. She took her daughters on grocery errands across the border a couple of times a month, purchasing her husband's

favorite tortillas and *aguacates,* or shuttling the children to doctor or dentist appointments in Mexico.

Maribel and Marylu finished their lunch of turkey subs and Sun Chips and bade Raquel goodbye, then drove the fifteen minutes into Edinburg, the county seat, to enroll in college-level summer classes at UTPA. The girls knew that if they took four college-level courses and kept up a B average they'd qualify for a four-year scholarship at UTPA, through a program designed for students from South Texas counties underserved by the state's public universities. It was their ticket to the future.

Sitting in a counselor's office, Maribel trained the same fierce concentration on the registration process as she had on the volleyball earlier in the day. "I think the principal is out of town. Do we really need his signature on this form, or is a counselor's enough?" she asked. Then: "I've already taken pre-calc in high school. Do I need to take it again?"

Jaime Garza, the counselor in charge of the federally funded GEAR UP program, was brisk but encouraging. "We try to make sure their first experience is going to be positive," said Garza, who spent his days helping students who were the first in their families to make it to college.

Over the years, the obstacles for students like Maribel and Marylu to getting a quality education and a shot at college have been formidable. In 1977 the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights found that 19 percent of Mexican American adults in Texas were illiterate. Seven years later the National Commission on Secondary Schooling reported that the majority of Mexican American students in Texas attended "inferior and highly segregated schools."[17]

In 1987 two Latino civil rights groups, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund and the League of United Latin American Citizens, joined forces to bring a lawsuit against the state of Texas. They charged the government with short-changing the border region's largely Latino population out of full access to higher education. The Texas Supreme Court did not find the state guilty of discrimination but noted that the state legislature had failed to establish a "first-class" university system for border residents—who accounted for one in four of the state's residents. The legislature got the message and in 1993 launched the South Texas Initiative, which pumped $600 million into five public colleges in the region and brought them into the state university system.[18]

Those resources—combined with the federal program for first-time students, the guidance of the Llano Grande Center, and more than a little personal gumption—put college within the girls' reach in a way it would

not have been a generation earlier. "Since I was little I knew I wanted to go to college. I instilled it in myself," said Marylu, sixteen, on the drive back to Elsa. "But if GEAR UP wasn't paying, I wouldn't have the money to go to college classes."

The youngest of seven children of Mexican immigrant farmworkers, Marylu had watched one sister get pregnant and drop out of high school. Two others had gotten their diplomas only to end up working at the local supermarket. A fourth sister, though, had gone on to earn her bachelor's degree at UTPA and become a social worker. "She said she chose social work because of our family, because we were poor," said Marylu, her dark eyes pensive. "Well, we still are. But she wants to help other poor kids have a chance." Marylu's oldest sisters had helped her cover the cost of clothes and other expenses, filling in what their parents couldn't, because they didn't want her to take a job and lose the focus on her studies. "They know that school will get us out," she said.

The rich yellow walls of Maribel's tidy bedroom were decorated with family photos, school sports memorabilia, and a beribboned corsage from the previous year's homecoming dance. Dozens of stuffed animals lined the headboard of her double bed, and a stack of folded laundry sat on the bedspread. The girls plopped down, and Maribel idly ran a brush through her glossy hair, which showed delicate streaks of crimson from a recent coloring experiment. As they talked, Marylu settled herself comfortably on the bed behind Maribel, took the brush, and began weaving her friend's hair into braids. The talk turned to boys.

Maribel and Luis had known each other since eighth grade. But it hadn't been until the previous Christmas that he had started getting sweet on her. When she had gone to Houston for the holidays, they had gotten to talking on the phone—long, lingering conversations where little was said but much was expressed. She chafed at her parents' protectiveness and the sibling chaperones they required, yet accepted them at the same time.

"They won't let me go out without my sister or let her go out without me. I guess they figure we'll look out for each other," Maribel reflected. "To my parents, it's like 'We're being free with her.' I think they're so strict because my mom was brought up really strict. My mom supports me, even about Luis. But she says, 'Don't get too serious.' She ran away with my dad and she regrets it. She said it's more supportive to have a church wedding." It was a common refrain, reiterated by Coach Cruz and Maribel's aunts and uncles: "Don't get too serious." If you get pregnant,

Figure 3. As her friend Marylu Rodríguez styles her hair, teenager Maribel Saenz chats about school, while Maribel's sister, Carolina Saenz, braids her own hair at their home in Elsa, Texas, in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Photo by Chris Stewart/San Francisco Chronicle.

was the unspoken message, you'll ruin your prospects for an education and a career.

Her parents were eager to see their daughter attend college, but they were also anxious to keep her close. Around the dinner table, over a meal of *pollo en mole* that night, Raquel Saenz said she didn't think her daughter was ready to go away. "Mari wants to travel and travel," she said. "Some people go so far to college. They go from California to Miami and from Miami to California. It doesn't make sense to me."

Juan Saenz arrived from work during the meal and was greeted by his wife and daughters, who each stood up in turn and kissed him on the cheek. *"Todavía está un bebe,"* he put in, joining the conversation. "She's still just a baby." Her parents hoped Maribel would live at home and attend UTPA, then put her education to work for the Saenz family's company. "My husband knows how to do the work, but he doesn't speak much English," said Raquel. "Maribel could take charge of the business side of things."

When autumn came, Maribel took her SATs and started filling out college applications. She visited colleges in California on a trip funded by the Llano Grande Center. In spring she was turned down by Stanford and wait-listed by Occidental, but she got offers from Kalamazoo College, Dakota Wesleyan, UT Austin, Texas A&M, and, of course, UTPA.

Dakota Wesleyan was tempting: the school extended Maribel a soccer scholarship and Marylu had accepted an offer to play softball there. But Maribel had decided to study civil engineering—she had glimpsed the field because her father worked with civil engineers, and it seemed a practical, versatile, and portable profession—and the South Dakota school did not offer an engineering major. Texas A&M came through with a four-year scholarship that almost matched the full ride at UTPA, and the huge College Station campus offered engineering. But A&M was eight hours from home. It had an entering class of seven thousand freshmen, more than the entire population of Elsa, and the vast majority of students were Anglos.

"My mom was like, 'No. You have to stay here,' " recounted Maribel. "She got all these people, teachers and counselors and stuff, to tell me I had to stay at UT Pan American because I had four years paid for. But I had already been there. I didn't want to go there any more."

"Our plan was for her to go to the university here in Edinburg," said Raquel. "I did everything in my power to keep her home."

And so the battle began.

"We never really yelled," said Maribel. "But we made each other cry. When I told them I wanted to go because there were better opportunities, I was crying because I knew I was going to miss them."

"She fought me," put in Raquel. "She thought I was keeping her close to home because she was a girl. She said, 'Why do you want me to stay? You taught me to do things for myself. I'm not afraid. I need to grow more.' We cried a lot. She said she was ready. I didn't see it."

A month after her parents delivered Maribel to her dormitory at College Station, they were adjusting to her absence. Raquel missed her daughter acutely. "I'm getting used to it, but it's very, very hard," she said. "She was so animated. When we would cook out and grill *carne asada* she used to put on Mexican music and dance. It's not the same with Maribel gone." But mother and daughter spoke by phone every day. Raquel had already made one visit to the campus, delivering forgotten items from home, and Maribel had plans to return for her father's birthday a few weeks later.

Maribel was embracing A&M traditions full bore, yelling her heart out with her fellow freshmen when the class of 2010 was announced at

an all-school gathering. Though the campus was huge, the people were friendly, she said, and more than once strangers helped her find her way when she got lost. She liked her roommate. And her room—its walls a familiar yellow—felt homey.

She had adopted an Aggie greeting: "Howdy." But she did have to make a few adjustments. "I can't talk Tex-Mex any more, with Spanish words that just slip in," she said. "If I speak Spanish here, no one will understand me." For the first time in her life, Maribel felt like a minority. But so far it hadn't shaken her. "Since I grew up with Mexicanos in the majority, nobody can put me down," she said. "In the Valley, the mayors are Mexican, the judges are Mexican. We have the opportunity of meeting Hispanics who are doctors, who have their PhDs."

And surprisingly—but compellingly—Maribel felt something else in College Station that fit with her Tejano upbringing: "There are so many traditions here, you feel like you're part of something bigger than school. You're part of the big Aggie family." She grinned to think she could replicate the familial bonds of the borderlands in this new setting. "You can actually feel the love of family. It's exciting."