Prologue: All this used to be ours…

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Rebecca Gómez and her two younger sisters sensed immediately that something had broken the monotony of a steamy summer day in the barrio in 1960. Their mother, Carolina García, fluttered about the gloom of the two-room shack, patting her dark, curled hair, clipping on her favorite red marigold earrings, peering at her face in the bit of mirror hung from a stud in the wall. She flicked a naked light bulb on and patted some make-up on her skin to dim the slight shine of her 30-year-old complexion, the youthfulness of which she took great pains to preserve. They were all slightly sticky with the perspiration of a typical, 100-degree summer day in Brownsville, Texas, but Carolina had an additional fever to combat, that of anticipation. Beatriz García, her sister, housemate and aunt to her three daughters, bustled about in her wake, scooting over the worn wooden floors, dodging the small metal table scattered with Matamoros newspapers and Mexican *novelas*, to remain close to Carolina's ear, which was like a dainty, perfectly formed seashell.

"Ya llegó," Beatriz hissed into it, *He's here.*

Who was here, wondered Rebecca, as she pulled her two sisters from the obscurity of the shack toward the door to catch a glimpse of the spectacle taking place outside through holes in the screen. There, among the skinny mesquite trees and struggling cactus and the gaggle of curious Garden Park neighbors, stretched a shiny, turquoise automobile with audaciously prominent tail-fins: a 1959 Chevrolet. And

stepping out of the car's white leather interior was the tallest and whitest and blondest man Rebecca had ever seen. As she pressed her nose against the screen to absorb it all with the big, brown eyes of a 7-year-old, she felt her mother yank her by the arm into the small bedroom, along with her sisters.

"Cállense, no hablen, pórtense bien," she commanded, *You all be quiet, and you all don't talk, and you all behave,* and they knew she meant it. "El nos va a llevar de la pobreza," *He's going to take us out of the poverty.*

With the urgency of Carolina's voice, the girls believed their mother. The tall *gringo* with the blond crew cut and piercing blue eyes, 49-year-old James Frederick Butcher, stood at the screen door of their broken-down shack, where they hung what few clothes they had on the exposed wall studs, cooked chicken on a gassy kerosene stove, and had to relieve themselves in an outhouse. Before he could knock, Carolina was at the door. Sporting a wide grin, Butcher struggled to greet her in Spanish, and she nodded and smiled through his salutation. Rebecca stared silently at the unattractive older man, wondering how her mother – who never let anyone keep her from retiring to her bed by nine o'clock each night in order to preserve her youthful beauty – could have met him. Carolina was a devout practicing Mexican Catholic, one who didn't want any more children. Rebecca knew, even at her tender young age, that this made relating with men an infrequent event at best. And Carolina didn't speak any English. How could she possibly have been wooed by this *gringo*?

But James Frederick Butcher and the 1959 Chevy weren't the biggest astonishments the day would hold. As Rebecca and her sisters, their bare feet dusty, followed their mother outside, Butcher said in broken Spanish that he had a surprise for

them, that he was going to take them on a jaunt to *la Isla del Padre.* Padre Island, wondered Rebecca, what was that? As Butcher swept open the back door of the sleek Chevy, Rebecca inhaled a whiff of leather laced with another pungent fragrance. She was so excited and intimidated by this white man, she could barely climb into the back seat of his car along with her two younger sisters, 6-year-old Esmeralda Gómez and 5-year-old Sandra Gómez. The leather felt soft and dewy to the touch, and her sweaty legs, clad in shorts, clung to the seats. She was uncomfortable in her bulky underwear, made of scratchy burlap from 25-pound flour sacks. It was the first time she'd been in a car.

As the Chevy's engine began to hum, and the residents of the barrio oohed and aahed and practically hung their faces inside the open car windows, Butcher stuck a frayed brown object like a sausage in his mouth and lighted it with a match. A fog of tobacco smoke made a hungry Rebecca slightly sick to her stomach as she discovered the source of the pungent odor. Her mother turned around and pulled a face, but was careful not to let Butcher see her. Rebecca was looking forward to eating the thin lunch of tortillas and chicken her mother had packed. The car inched down the caliche path called West End Boulevard and turned onto Military Highway, the only paved road near the Garden Park barrio. From there, it traveled to the Port of Brownsville, where Carolina went to work each day.

After her husband had abandoned her in the late 1950s, Carolina brought her sister and her three daughters to the Garden Park barrio from a hut alongside the Rio Grande in San Pedro, Texas, where she used to work in the fields as an agricultural worker. In Brownsville, she got a job working at a shrimp-packing plant at the port. Each morning at five o'clock, Carolina got up, put on her starched white uniform, and

trudged, sometimes knee-deep in mud, through the barrio to the bus stop. The dilapidated bus carried her and other port workers all the way across Brownsville, a city of 48,000 people, to the port, where large quantities of Mexican cotton, delta fruits and vegetables, and Texas oil and gasoline were shipped. The shrimping industry, which operated out of the Fishing Harbor four miles east of the port's Turning Basin, had exploded in the 1940s, and the port served cities like Monterrey, Saltillo and Torreón, Mexico. Carolina's work was difficult with long hours, but with her future and the well-being of her daughters in mind, she had found discrete moments to flirt with Butcher, the *gringo* who gassed up the bus. He claimed he was part Oklahoma Indian and had jagged enough features to prove it.

Rebecca and her sisters eagerly peered through the car's windows as endless patchworks of fields that harvested sugar cane, citrus and cotton slowly turned into sandy swells flecked with white residue that looked like desert, or what the girls envisioned to be desert. In fact, the scoured land they gazed at as they traveled to the town of Port Isabel was called the Aeolian Plain and at times the landscape became so obscured by windswept dust that cars had to pull over to the side of the road. Eddies of white dust, called *remolinos* in Spanish, kicked up their heels over the land like feisty stallions, and, in fact, 19th-century travelers had dubbed the region the Wild Horse Desert. From the tiny town of Port Isabel there was a rickety wooden bridge, opened in 1954, that connected the mainland with Padre Island. Carolina was ecstatic as the car moved across the Laguna Madre toward the empty strip of sand, but Rebecca was uneasy at the instability of the bridge. Abruptly, the rat-a-tat of the wooden boards stopped as the Chevy's tires hit soft sand and began to spin ever so gently. The island was nothing but

giant sand dunes stretching as far as the eye could see, topped with clusters of live oak and sea grass whipping in the salty air. There were no people, and other than a small fishing shack, there were no buildings. The Chevy fishtailed through white sands toward the eastern coast of the island, where the beach met the Gulf of Mexico, and came to a halt facing the rolling green sea. *El mar.* Rebecca let the word wash over her, a word she'd heard before but had never experienced, as Carolina explained to her daughters about the sea. Slightly scared to confront the sweeping magnitude of this powerful natural presence all at once, they rolled down the car windows. The breath of sea salt whisked the heavy Brownsville air from Rebecca's lungs.

And then, Carolina did something extraordinary. Her pretty face shining with excitement and pride, she turned to her daughters and, in language undecipherable to her husband-to-be, said: "Esto, todo, fue el nuestro."

All this used to be ours.

Almost 200 years earlier on a warm September afternoon in 1765, a 25-year-old man named Nicolás Ballí Pérez also made a trip out to the skinny barrier island. Instead of a car, Ballí made his journey on horseback, accompanied by various dignitaries and scribes who would bear witness to a land conveyance. Land grants by the King of Spain were typically made with much pomp and circumstance, in the presence of a priest, and often the party receiving the land from the Spanish crown would do so in the nude. But Ballí, the descendent of a Spanish printer named Pedro Ballí, who came to the New World in 1569, apparently was fully clothed as he headed toward the island, which

stretched dozens of miles from just north of the Rio Grande to the Bay of Corpus Christi, shielding the inland Laguna Madre from the ravages of the Gulf of Mexico.

The island had never really been inhabited. The Karankawa Indians, known for their fishing skills, ferocity and cannibalism, had infrequently used the island through the 1500s, but without fresh water and other resources, the ribbon of sand was essentially useless for purposes of settlement. When Spanish explorers landed there in the early 1500s, they didn't pause for long, driven away by harsh climatic conditions and hostile Indians. Still, the abundant wild horses, longhorn cattle, burros and deer on the mainland, indicated a land amenable to ranching, if nothing else, and eventually drew Spanish explorer José de Escandón to the region to found several small hamlets in 1746. Further settlement of the region was dominated by a small coterie of families with prominent names, which did its best to accrue as much land as possible for ranching. That group included the powerful Ballí family. The region's native residents, many of them Coahuiltecan Indians, were given enough land to raise subsistence levels of corn, beans and squash, and were expected to serve as poorly paid ranch hands.

Nicolás Ballí Pérez's ancestor, Pedro Ballí, was a Spanish noble educated in Strasbourg, France, who had been the official printer of King Felipe II of Spain. He set out for the New World the same year King Felipe began an inquisition in South America. Like all dutiful imperialists, Pedro Ballí reproduced contentedly after coming to the New World and was succeeded by a rapidly growing family of intellectuals, military officers and rancher businessmen. His descendants began migrating north to what is now the Mexican state of Nuevo León and by the 1750s, settled with Escandón the Spanish colony of Nuevo Santander, which bordered the Rio Grande. Over the course of the next

century, the Spanish crown partitioned the land, and, fortuitously, the Ballís had at least one family member on the surveying team.

The island eventually came to be known as *la Isla de Santiago,* possibly because Nicolás Ballí Pérez's ancestors had been Knights of the Order of Santiago. Whether they had been true Christian believers or mere mercenaries, the Ballís had joined together to fight the Moors, Arabs from Africa who invaded Christian Spain and set about desecrating churches and cemeteries in the 14th century. The Ballí warriors fought for the Spanish crown with such success that, in 1326, a Ballí was knighted. Four centuries later, that noble title continued to dignify the family name and certainly helped to ease Nicolás Ballí Pérez into the realm of the New World's Spanish landed gentry.

Ballí and his companions forded the shallow Laguna Madre on horseback in an area where the lagoon was particularly narrow and soon arrived on the crystalline sand dunes of the island. In ritual fashion, Ballí took possession of the land mass by shaving off stalks of prairie grass and tossing some surf-worn stones to the four winds. In a small boat trekked to the island by his companions, Ballí floated out into the Laguna Madre to take possession of the water body. He listened to the recitation of fishing regulations while choking down the shallow lake's water (some of the saltiest on this continent). He was assured that the corals and mollusks, with their iridescent insides of valuable mother-of-pearl, all belonged to him. After making his way through the complicated rituals of colonial land transfer, Ballí returned by horseback to his home near the downtown plaza of Matamoros, at that time named San Juan de los Esteros.

Through subsequent years, the Ballí family's wealth continued to expand along with its numbers. By the 1790s, the grandson of Nicolás Ballí Pérez, who was named

after his grandfather, was wealthy enough to travel back to Spain to be educated and ordained. Padre José Nicolás Ballí had been raised, along with his two older brothers, on a cactus-fenced ranch on the mainland in what still called Nuevo Santander. His father, Capt. José María Ballí, and his mother, Rosa María de Hinojosa de Ballí, operated a large livestock operation at Rancho de la Soledad de la Feria on the north side of the Rio Grande. The family was well-off. The captain's will, dated 1788, enumerated 1,000 head of mares and stallions, 35 donkeys, 100 horses, 10 to 12 other types of donkeys and 200 branded cattle. The ranch itself consisted of three *jacales*, or dwellings, four corrals, a fenced irrigated field and pasturelands. The captain claimed that he owned some "other animals" in addition to 2,000 sheep that were leased.

After returning in 1794 from his studies in Spain, the newly-ordained Padre performed his first wedding in the family chapel at Rancho de la Soledad de la Feria. Rosa María threw a three-day party to celebrate her son's return. Later, she developed the habit of tossing coins down to worshippers from her balcony while her son celebrated Mass in the ranch's chapel. Thus, the town that eventually evolved where the ranch had once existed became known as La Feria, which in the border dialect means "change." Padre Ballí was the region's priest for 29 years and founded a string of churches with Rosa María, who was known as the Queen of Cattle for the vast expanses of ranchland that she owned. In 1798, Rosa María's will claimed 200 mules as well as a group of 20 tamed mules. The Father also shared the interests and abilities of his mother in accruing land. Besides acquiring the Rancho de San Juan de los Esteros, which lay outside of Matamoros and housed the Padre's many gold, silver and silk heirlooms, he also received the Rancho Santa Cruz, 15 miles from the southern end of the island granted 35 years

earlier to his ancestor, Nicolás Ballí Pérez. The Padre's ranch had 300 head of steer, and he bred horses and mules there. By 1800, the Padre claimed to have placed 1,000 branded cattle on the island, for which he filed another successful land-grant claim to re-convey the island to the family. Eventually, the Padre, who gave the island his name, split ownership of the island with his nephew, the son of José María Ballí II, who was an ancestor of Rebecca Gómez's by direct lineage.

Rebecca's gilded family history, however, had little bearing on her life. But the visit to Padre Island in 1960 left a deep impression on her, even if she didn't believe a word of her mother's fanciful talk. After all, Rebecca thought, if the Ballí family once owned Padre Island, what had happened to it? Why was it taken away from them? It just didn't make sense to her, and she quickly forgot it. However, meeting a tall white man, driving in a car over a bridge, sinking her toes into the sand of an island beach, eating her first hamburger at the Whattaburger in Brownsville – that was important to Rebecca. For the first time, she realized there was a world outside of the dingy shack and dusty roads of the barrio. It was a world that opened up to Rebecca for only a brief moment, beginning that day on Padre Island and the day several weeks later when she and her sisters watched their mother flip her hand at the Garden Park barrio from the front seat of Butcher's car and cry, "I'll never come back!"

Carolina would live to rue those words. Two years later, finally established in a nice house with a blonde-haired, blue-eyed baby brother and attending Russell Elementary School in downtown Brownsville, Rebecca recalled her mother's uppity

dismissal of the barrio. She remembered it the day in late November 1963 when her world suddenly fell apart. It was the week of her tenth birthday and first menstrual cycle, the same week that President John F. Kennedy was shot. While she was torn with grief over the death of the handsome, charismatic President, Rebecca quickly had another problem: Her step-father molested her. Rebecca went and told her mother, and Carolina pulled at her daughter's hair until she yanked a tress from Rebecca's scalp to get her to take back her allegations against Butcher. But Rebecca would not. Then her mother grabbed Rebecca by the hand, marched down to the gas station and hurled an oil can at Butcher, who called the police. Rebecca spent the next 16 days dodging Butcher's lecherous advances, caring for her younger sisters and 9-month-old brother, and visiting the county jail, where her unrepentant mother was incarcerated without bond. After Carolina was released, Rebecca's humiliation at the hands of her step-father landed mother and daughters back in the Garden Park barrio once again.

Carolina García, who plunged into depression, would never really leave the barrio again, and life there would not be kind to Rebecca, who dropped out of school at 14 to support her mother and sisters as a waitress. At 16, she had her first daughter, Carolina, in 1970 and her second daughter, Crystal, was soon to follow. When times got particularly tough, Carolina's dark eyes would go misty, and she would tell her daughters, "We really shouldn't be suffering through this. We should have received something from our ownership of Padre Island." Years and years ago, a *gringo* had bought the island from the Ballí family, and Carolina's father had signed one of the deeds of sale. But Rebecca didn't place much stock in her mother's ramblings. Instead, she focused her efforts on saving money for a decent house with indoor plumbing and

learning English. Once her English was good enough, the great-great-great granddaughter of the refined, well-educated Padre was able to obtain a high school graduate equivalency degree of her own and eventually a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from Pan American University in South Texas. Years later, it seemed to her that her life was inevitably traveling toward one significant moment.

On a muggy day in June, 2000, Rebecca Gómez Sexton, in a form-fitting gray skirt and blazer, strode into the huge new federal courthouse in Brownsville, Texas. She traveled up three flights in the steel-door elevators, keeping her gaze straight ahead and forsaking communication with the small clusters of people. She walked into an elegant, wood-paneled courtroom, shiny and antiseptic with its etched glass depictions of the region's early settlers. The courthouse typically handled a disproportionate number of criminal cases involving some of South Texas' legendary organized crime figures, many the romanticized subjects of Mexican *corridos.* But on this day, a civil trial was taking place. The courtroom was overflowing with hundreds of Rebecca's relatives. The warm greetings in Spanish and English, the hugs, the general clamor of the familiar atmosphere had prevailed to such an extent that Judge Pat McDowell had scolded onlookers frequently and eventually issued a gag order. But Rebecca wasn't here for a family reunion. She was here representing herself and six family members in a trial that might unlock the secrets of Padre Island.

And as she carefully placed her files on the maple table used by the Ballí family's lawyers, she rearranged her gray suit, ran her hands through her long, blonde hair, and strode up to the witness stand. There sat an old, 90-year-old *gringo,* who peered at her

with watery blue eyes from behind thick glasses. The courtroom's yellow lights made his naked forehead, covered in only a few damp wisps of hair, shine like a beacon. His feathery hands rested uneasily in front of him, and he looked so bent and frail, Rebecca thought she could snap him in two. She felt she wanted to snap him in two. Rebecca had been shocked at the historic gems that the trial had revealed up till that moment, gems which the Ballí family were just beginning to piece together into a story of a land purchase and a broken promise, a tale of confidantes and betrayal. Rebecca steeled herself to confront this man, locking his blue eyes with her black ones, and began an examination of her reluctant witness, Gilbert Kerlin.