Tia Alvarez

by Gloria Harrison

There was storm on the horizon, a sunset casting a kaleidoscope of oranges and yellows in the rearview mirror, and a cigarette with an inch-long cherry hanging from between Penny's fingers as she sped toward the ranch. “Skinny Love” blared from her speakers but both the song and her loud singing were muffled by the wind rushing in the rolled-down windows. The air whipped her hair in great swirls and dried her tears. The song ended, there was a pause, and it began once again as it had for the last 17 miles.

Penny concentrated on the wide panorama of layered color in front of her - the black block of upper sky, the gushing rain that fell in slanted lines against a middle-layer of slate gray and landed on the brown earth spotted here and there by green scrub brush and cactus. A line of lightning lit up the sky in great arcs that leapt from the black clouds to the ground. A few seconds later, there was a loud boom of thunder. She stepped harder on the pedal.

Soon, she turned from the highway onto the long, bumpy dirt road leading to Tia Alvarez's house. Just as she did, fat drops of rain began to fall in great plops onto her car. She turned off the stereo, nervous now about the weather, but hesitated to roll up her windows and instead stuck her head out, breathing in the deep, earthy smell of petrichor as the ground drank the first drops of moisture. She loved that smell. She had, in fact, dreamed of it many times in the years since she left this place. She sucked the smell, the air, the sky into her lungs, closing her eyes for just a moment. She drove the rest of the way in silence.

“Mija!” greeted Tia Alvarez, arms outstretched, when she opened the door.

“Tia!” said Penny throwing herself into the woman's warm embrace.

“Look at you! You're such a grown woman now!” said Tia Alvarez holding Penny at arm's length for a moment. She turned and started

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inside saying over her shoulder, “Come in, come in. I've got everything ready for you.”

Penny followed the woman into the warm, dark interior of her home, which smelled strongly of cumin and other familiar spices she couldn't name. Penny noted that the tia's hair had turned almost completely white and had grown very long since Penny had last seen her 12 years ago. She had it tied into two braids that fell thick and heavy down her back. Her form wasn't as straight or strong as Penny remembered and Tia's shoulders curved forward slightly, her walk more shuffle than march.

“That's a beautiful robe,” Penny said, gesturing to the tia's shabby silk kimono, which she was wearing with an old pair of huaraches.

“Oh, yeah. Oh, I just got a box of them from a lady who was passing through. She was from Chicago, I think. But she couldn't pay me for my cooking because her dog was sick, so she let me take whatever I wanted from a big box of old crap she had in her bus. It's pretty, no?” asked Tia Alvarez, kicking out one leg and doing a little dance.

“Oh, Tia. I've missed how great your house smells,” said Penny. “You can't find anything like this in Oregon.”

“Oh, no?” asked Tia Alvarez. “You don't have good Mexican food out in Orygone?”

“Not at all. Everybody wants to put mango in it. Or pineapple. Or it's dripping in cheese. And the green chilies taste like bell pepper.”

“Oh, mija!” Tia Alvarez exclaimed going to her freezer and pulling out a large plastic bag full of roasted green chilies. “You can't eat bell papers with your Mexican food! Here, you take these.”

Penny took out the wad of bills and counted. She only had enough for what she'd come for. “Sorry, Tia. I didn't bring any cash. I only have the money my mom gave me for the tamales. Thank you, though.”

“How is your mom, mija? I don't see her anymore. She never comes to see me!”

“She's good. You know, she's getting old and she's not in great health. She doesn't travel much. She told me to tell you hi, though.”

“Oh. That's not so good. What's wrong with her?”

“You know. She just smoked and drank a lot for a long time. She has emphysema we think. I don't know, Tia. She won't go to the doctor. Plus, you know, with Michael…”

"Oh, yes,” said Tia Alvarez, drawing out the word oh in a long, doleful moan. “Lo siento, mija. That's terrible. I didn't even know he felt so sad! It's a shame that he did that. Your poor mama. How long did he live with her?”

“About seven years,” replied Penny. “And he wasn't just sad. He was sick. And he should've gone to the doctor, too!” Her cheeks warmed; she was shouting. “Sorry, Tia. I didn't mean to yell. It's just… this is hard.”

“The funeral. It's tomorrow?”

“Yeah.”

After a long pause, the tia turned toward the refrigerator and began pulling out large, sealed bags of tamales. “Well, I hope these will help make the guests feel better afterwards. I put in six extra ones. I made them bigger, too. I know you have a lot of people. People liked Michael.”

“Yeah” said Penny. She looked out the window. “I would love to stay and talk more, but I want to get back out to the highway before the rain turns your road to mud.”

“Okay, mija,” said Tia Alvarez handing Penny a paper bag to put all the tamales in. She looked at the frozen green chilies on the counter. “You sure you don't want to take these back to Orygone with you, huh? No one should eat bell papers with their Mexican food. I'll take a trade!”

Penny considered the bag on the counter and suddenly the smell of green chilies roasting in the town square in the fall when she was a child consumed her. She and Michael played in the falling leaves, chasing each other around while their parents haggled with the local farmers over their baskets of overflowing vegetables. The chili vendors would have mounds of the spicy green peppers in a giant

metal, spinning tub over a fire, filling the air with the pungent scent of what Penny would one day associate with home and family and youth. And, now, Michael and his young, smiling face and the early fall sun shining on his golden brown hair. She thought for a second.

“Sorry, Tia. The only thing I have is a CD in my car. But it's not even a store-bought CD. It's just a bunch of songs Michael put together and sent me a couple years ago. It's not worth any money.”

“Are the songs good?” asked Tia Alvarez hopefully.

“Well, yeah,” said Penny. “They're very good. They're all a little sad, but I like them all a lot.”

“How many songs?” asked Tia Alvarez.

“Twelve, I think,” said Penny.

Tia looked at the bag of chilies doing some sort of mental mathematics. “Okay,” she said, finally. “That is the right number for all those chilies. You take them, Mija. I'll take the music.”

Penny loaded the tamales into the paper bag, leaving the frozen chilies on the counter. She rushed out to her car, great sheets of rain falling hard on her. She threw the bag into the car and stood by the door looking in. The CD, Michael had actually burned it for her himself. She'd transferred all the music to her online album, so she still had it. But it was the last mixed CD he'd made her, the last one he'd touched with his own hands. He used to make her song mixes all the time. It was something he did for many years, since they were teenagers — back when cassette tape was the popular format. Over time, the songs became more wistful. Over time, the gifts became fewer and fewer. And then he sent her this final one, full of songs that cried of pain. Songs that had a message Penny had been trying to decipher for a week now. But there was no hidden message. It was terribly, wholly clear what it meant. And she was getting drenched.

Penny pulled the CD out of the car CD player and went back to the house. She knocked and the tia greeted her with the bag of frozen chilies. Penny handed the CD over.

“Here you go,” she said.

Tia Alvarez handed her the bag. “Awesome! Thank you, mija,” she said, leaning in and kissing Penny on the cheek. “Now you quit putting bell papers on your Mexican food, okay?”

“Okay, Tia.”

“Say hi to your mama for me, okay?”

“Okay, Tia.”

“I hope I get to see you again before you're an old woman!” Tia Alvarez said.

“Me, too, Tia,” said Penny. She hugged the old woman one more time, said goodbye, got in her car, and began the long drive home in silence.