

THE LAST SHOT

Modesta Sanchez woke with an ache in her bladder and a cramp in her toe. The bathroom drip, drip, drip – just 10 feet down the hall – seemed at once near and Antarctic. She opened her eyes and looked right out of her room, willing herself to roll off the bed, sit up, grip the headboard she and Philbert had bought on time so long ago, and steady herself on the walker. If the oxygen was untangled, she could go the 20 or so steps, work out the cramp and relieve herself in peace.

Modesta peered sideways down the hall. The olive-colored carpet looked pretty good considering how long it had been since a shampooing, and she could almost see her photo gallery, the gold-plated 8x10s of the kids, from First Communion to cap and gown. For Carlos at least. A GED for Tina, once she left that *sonamabiche*. Only Carlos had a real wedding. Well, at least there was a church. Even if it didn't last. But he'd made Modesta take down the photo. Then the grandbabies, whom she probably loved more than her kids, though one caused just as much heartache as her mother. Modesta couldn't recall a picture of her great-granddaughter but swore they'd given her one. She distinctly remembered taking down a picture of herself from so long ago she didn't even recognize that woman anymore and sliding another image into the frame. She thought it had been the baby. When she was feeling better she'd check.

When she was better, she often passed the time admiring her gallery of the people she lived for. She studied each face, mining her memory for that moment of the past. Her favorite was the family portrait taken at Momma and Daddy's 50th wedding anniversary party. The

photographer had somehow squeezed in the whole *familia*: Momma and Daddy, their nine grown children plus their spouses and kids. They all looked young, handsome and happy, even from so far away. Their kids were still school age. Her sister still on her first husband.

Modesta's hair still as black as Momma liked her coffee, and without any help from Miss Clairol.

How Modesta missed Momma and Daddy. All those years at the bakery seemed like someone else's life, but the ones at the *tamaleda* – Daddy cleaning *ojas*, Momma spreading *masa*, their eldest daughter scooping on red chile – had given Modie a reason for being, even if the only one getting rich was her brother. She didn't give a damn about the money. She'd give up every nickel to hear Daddy's old Pontiac pull into the parking lot again, no matter how many spaces it took, to sit on the stoop outside the kitchen during a smoke break with Momma and watch the girl dress the mannequins in the window at Janet Lee's Near New.

Modesta heard Philbert shuffle into the kitchen to make coffee. She knew it was harder for him. Not because he was sicker but because she had always been the strong one. When he'd been laid off, years ago now, she'd worked extra hours at the bakery, sometimes 4 in the morning till 6 or 8 at night. No matter when she returned, Philbert would usually be waiting for her, sitting at the kitchen table with his best friend Miller, in the can, and a pile of cigarette butts. On late nights he was starving and she'd fry potatoes and pork chops and warm up the leftover green chile before she even peeled off her dusty uniform.

Philbert had aged 20 years when he'd fallen off that ladder and broken his leg, probably because he couldn't fish and hunt anymore. When had that been? Only a couple of years, maybe, though it seemed like more. She had watched him shrivel up in that hospital bed and wondered if he would die. She thought that only happened to old people with broken hips. And she'd never thought of her husband as old.

But Philbert had been sick a long time, completely helpless for months. Modesta sacrificed everything for his care, all the while worrying about the tamale shop, long without Momma and Daddy and suddenly without her, too. She never stopped fretting that the kids would burn the lard and flour and make the whole crew puke with the stink. She kept promising her brother she'd be back, though she'd begun to wear oxygen by then. She was sick, all right, but not from any ailment of her own.

Modesta spent all day fetching cans of Squirt, changing the TV, opening and closing curtains, and, during the worst of it, when the cast came all the way up to his *nalgas*, having to help him onto the potty chair and then wipe. They didn't look at each other afterward, and she was glad.

Philbert didn't want to take the antibiotics. He wanted a Miller's. He was sick of soup and couldn't she make enchiladas instead? Damn that doctor and his bland diet. Should he starve to death? And when could he have another pain pill?

She thought she'd kill Philbert before he got well. Then he found her when she collapsed.

Modesta thought it was just a little cough. The doctor said bronchial pneumonia could have been the death of her, that she was lucky to go home.

How happy she'd been to see her room again, to sleep in her old bed. But if she had known how much time she'd spend there, she would have brightened the walls, hung something besides the tearful picture of Christ and the silver crucifix, and bought a new mattress, the firmest one they had, so she could roll over and not up the hill and out of the sleepy valley. Philbert had slept on the couch since his accident anyway and was happy there with the big TV. She didn't mind the small screen, so long as it had cable.

And she didn't mind his coffee. He wasn't always careful to place the filter, so she fished out black specks before she drank. But at least he'd learned to make it. Better than live without it. She could hear him still, banging around in the kitchen, and she waited for the gurgle of the coffee pot. The blast shook her off her pillow.

"Philbert?" she called, already reaching for the phone.

"It's OK, Modie," he said, his voice too small to be reassuring. "Goodbye."

The sound of the second shot caromed through her body. "Philbert?" she called. "Philbert!" she shouted, her hand trembling so she could hardly dial 911. "There's been an accident," she said, forcing her words past the blockage in her throat, the tightness in her ribs. "I can't get out of bed."

Modesta called her grandson next. Program and 1, just like he'd shown her.

"*Mijo?*" she said, her voice quavering.

"Grandma, what's wrong?"

"Your grandpa..." The words crumbled in the air.

"I'll be right there."

She listened to the dial tone to avoid the silence, then dropped the receiver.

"Philbert!" she screamed.

Modesta looked down the hallway, strained her eyes to see past the walls, around the corner. She pulled off the blankets. Looked down the hall again. "Philbert!"

A distant cry paralyzed her. Laying perfectly still, she heard it grow louder, whining with each turn. She looked down at her chest, for the thumping of her heart, and realized she battled to draw breath. The oxygen tube had shifted, twisted off her ears and away from her nose. She reached up for the prongs that were supposed to sit on her upper lip and found skimpy, messy

curls and flaccid skin, a cheekbone once high and proud and now a knob in her face. When had she grown so thin? Like Momma. Just like Momma. A bag of bones.

Modesta wanted to call out again but could not. She finally righted the oxygen and lay waiting for it to fill what small segment of her lungs still functioned. The howl of the siren grew louder. Her heart pattered in her chest. They'll be here any second, she whispered, to herself and her parts, pulling up the blankets again. Everything will be OK. Then she gasped, small but sharp.

What if they couldn't get in? Philbert had installed so many locks on the front door – a deadbolt, a chain, a bar – an ax might be the only way past. And who could afford a new door? Modesta looked again down the hallway. If the bathroom lay at the end of the earth, the front door lodged on the moon. The knock hammered home her uselessness.

The firefighters pounded. They shouted. Modesta tried to reply. She heard boots tromp past her window and up the driveway toward the back. The screen door to the covered patio squeaked then crashed against the wooden frame. The knock on the back door was quick, perfunctory, and then a strong voice filled the kitchen: "Fire department."

Philbert had left the back door open! A shocked Modesta cried, "Help him!" She was sure the fireman wouldn't hear but both startled and immeasurably relieved when dark blue pant legs appeared in the hallway. She heard other footsteps and the murmur of male voices but they seemed so far away. Her fireman spoke softly, took her pulse, and checked her oxygen.

"A little poke," he said, pushing a needle into her arm. He wasn't Spanish, but he had kind, brown eyes. "Just breathe," he said.

Modesta tried to push the morning out of her mind, attempted to roll it back to her first thought of the day. Her face flushed and she squeezed her eyes tight when she realized there was

no longer any pressure on her bladder. She drew the blankets up to her neck with her free hand, vowing not to let the fireman pull them down.

With her eyes closed, the sounds from the other room amplified. The men spoke quietly, and though she told herself she didn't want to hear, she strained to make out the words. "Is he OK?" she asked.

The fireman patted her hand. "Worry about you right now," he said.

Modesta forced back tears and extracted her hand. She never worried about herself. And how could she not worry about Philbert right now? What a ridiculous thing to say.

At the sound of a louder voice, urgent and demanding, they both turned.

"My grandson," Modesta said, already reaching for him.

The fireman nodded and left the room. He returned with Amory, who fell to his knees and cried beside his grandmother's bed. She ran her fingers through his dark curls.

Amory was her daughter's only son, from her first marriage to that hard drinking, heroin shooting, good for nothing hippy son of a bitch. It was his fault her daughter ever did any of those things, his fault Amory was born a firecracker, shooting off in every which direction, fast and furious and out of control. His mother was too young, too spaced out to handle him. Funny how things worked out.

Modesta's first husband had been killed in Korea, before he ever held their son. Maybe Philbert hadn't liked the boy because he wasn't his. It was a different time. Then she gave Philbert only a daughter. He spoiled her rotten, didn't even allow spanking, and never said he wanted a boy.

But Amory was the son Philbert never had, the one he taught to tie a leader, to cast away from the trees, to clean a rifle and track elk. As difficult as the boy had been – they'd had no

choice but to swat his bottom occasionally – it had always seemed easier just to love him.

Maybe the pressure was less because he wasn't truly theirs. Or maybe they were making amends for her son.

And thank God of that. Because who was there when Philbert and Modesta needed to stop the toilet running or to keep the dryer drying? He kept Philbert company, even if they only watched the Broncos on TV and drank beer. Amory made a good red chile, too – not as good as hers, of course – but he kept her from starving altogether.

Who knew he'd turn out to be such a good boy? No. A good man. Modesta's hand rose and fell with his sobs, which hurt her deeper than the arthritis. "*Ya, ya, ya,*" she said. Enough already. "You'll give yourself a headache. He'll be OK."

What did the fireman say? Amory smoothed back his grandmother's bangs and kissed her forehead. The fireman swapped out her tubes for a mask. When another fireman appeared, pushing a gurney, Modesta protested. Amory would take care of her. He'd clean up the mess. But they lifted her so quickly that maybe nobody noticed.

They whisked her through the hallway, her photos a blur. They raced through the kitchen, too, giving her no chance to check on her husband, and out the back door. She couldn't speak through the stupid mask. The early morning sun burned her eyes. She opened them again when she felt the wheels collapse beneath her. "What the hell are you doing?" she asked. Her firefighter patted her hand and left. Damn him.

Why did they whisper? *Aii!* She hated IVs. Her whole arm would bruise. And the bright lights. She couldn't lift her eyelids. The siren's cry slowly faded away.

Carlos's raspy voice woke Modesta from a deep sleep. She didn't need her glasses to spot him, standing by the window, nearly a head taller than everyone else.

"What are you doing here?" she asked him.

Despite his long legs, Carlos was the last one to reach her bedside. "How're you feeling?" he asked.

"Fine," Modesta lied. She felt heavy and sticky, her body and brain so gooped up that nothing moved right. "What are you doing here?" she asked again.

Carlos looked down, his lower lip pulling his mustache over his upper teeth. He covered her hand with his. "I've come to take you home with me," he said.

Modesta caught her breath. She looked around the hospital room. Tina took her other hand. Amory bit his lip. "What did you say?" Modesta asked her son.

"I said I'm gonna take you home with me."

"Home where?"

"My home."

"In the desert?"

"Tucson, Modie."

Modesta looked at Amory, whose gaze fell, and then at Tina. "What about your dad?"

"Momma," Tina said, squeezing her mother's fingers. "Daddy's gone."

"Gone where?" Modesta demanded. "What the hell are you talking about?" Her kids looked at each other like they'd broken one of Momma's *santos* and couldn't come up with a good lie. "Where's Philbert?" she demanded.

Tina held tight her mother's hand. "He's dead, Momma," she said. "He shot himself."

"No," Modesta whispered, as it all came rushing back. She jumped at the memory of the

sound, sickened by the image that came to mind: Philbert, her Philbert, with his shotgun in his mouth, pulling the trigger and ... “No!” she cried.

Modesta dug her head into the pillow, begging her mind to stop, but the scene kept replaying until she thought she would vomit. The kids tried to comfort her, she heard their murmurs beyond the blast. And when the nurse came Modesta asked her to please help Philbert. “Please,” she said. “Please.”

In her dreams, Modesta saw Philbert, young and good-looking, his dark curls slicked back, his uniform perfectly creased, his chocolate eyes melting her. Oh, he was such a fabulous dancer! How happy she was when he reached for her. Her skirt swished on the turns and when her smile met his, he pulled her close enough to smell his Aqua Velva. She felt girlish and gorgeous and free, forgetting for the moment that her husband would never return, that she had a son to raise alone, and that she had cursed God when the sun returned that morning.

When the song ended, Philbert grasped her hand, walked off the linoleum dance floor, past the tables and chairs, the clinking bottles, glowing cigarettes and drunken giggles. He didn't say a word, but Modesta followed, out the double doors and right into their kitchen. His shotgun sat on the table. The blast woke his wife.

Modesta looked around the darkened hospital room. Carlos slept on a chair, poor thing. He'd get a stiff neck. A line of light leaked around the door, letting in more silence.

Modesta woke her son. “There were two shots,” she said. “I heard two shots.”

“It doesn’t matter, Modie.”

“Why two? Did he miss?”

Carlos shrugged.

“He *missed*?”

“Who knows?” Carlos said. “Maybe he was just getting his courage up.”

“I want to go home,” Modesta said. “I want to see Philbert.”

“He’s not there.”

“Then take me where he is. Then take me home.”

“You can’t see him, Modie,” Carlos said. “There’s nothing left to see. You can say goodbye to him at the funeral home later. Or at the rosary.”

“Then we can go home?”

“We’ll go home to Tucson in a week or two. Once we get the house packed and cleaned and ready for sale.”

“You’re selling my house?”

“Modie,” Carlos said. “Remember I told you I was taking you home with me? You can’t stay in that big house by yourself. Who would take care of you?”

“Who took care of me before?”

Carlos stroked his mustache with a finger and thumb. She was surprised to see spots on his hands. “What difference does it make?” he asked.

“Amory could do it.”

“He has to work.”

“Tina doesn’t work.”

“Tina also can’t keep a roof over her head.”

“She could move in with me.”

Carlos smiled, one corner of his mouth higher, his eyebrows raised. “How long do you think that would last? What was it the last time? Three weeks? A month?”

Modesta stared at her son and wondered if the dim light was fooling her old eyes. The shadows hid her boy from her, carving a new man from familiar flesh and bone. Where was the miniature of the young man she’d loved?

Carlos was decades older than his father ever lived to be. His eyelids had begun to droop and white hairs sprung from his eyebrows and salted his mustache. She wondered if his father would ever have looked like this. It was like running into a familiar stranger at the Kmart, smiling and nodding and then puzzling the day through about who the hell that was.

Had it been so long since she’d seen him last? He’d come for Christmas. Wait. No. They’d come on vacation and then spent most of it in a tent or some nonsense.

But wasn’t that years ago?

“Steph and I are gonna take care of you now,” Carlos said. “But we can’t do it from Tucson, and we’re not moving back here.”

“But I’ve never lived anywhere but here.”

“You’ll like Tucson,” Carlos said.

“I like Denver,” Modesta said.

Modesta had been to Amory’s home only once, when he first moved in. The emphysema was already a hassle then, but she’d insisted he needed her help to clean so that he would take her and Philbert over. The tiny bungalow, on a small lot with a sour cherry tree in the front yard,

wasn't too far from her house. Amory talked of his plans to replace his avocado-colored appliances and pink toilet, maybe tear up the carpet and refinish the floors. She teased that the timing was good since he didn't have any furniture to move out of the way.

He had already set up the stereo and put on Perry Como for his Grandpa. The cable guy was coming Monday. They ordered pizza and Amory made a table and chairs out of boxes. Then he pulled his only real chair – Philbert's old recliner – into the kitchen so Modesta could talk to him while he scrubbed the fridge. She offered to tackle the sink.

“This is the only sponge I've got,” Amory said, closing the cabinet when she swore she saw some there. He found a screwdriver for Philbert so he could “fix” things.

This time, when they arrived from the hospital, Amory's place was not quite so empty, and they had a hell of a time fitting her wheelchair through. She didn't even recognize the ridiculous room he put her in: A stripe of flowered wallpaper wound all the way around, with matching bedspread and curtains. The floral stripe lined the sheets and pillowcases, too. Butterflies hung on the walls.

“The baby stays here a lot,” Amory explained. It took Modesta a moment to understand that he meant her great-granddaughter.

The room was barely big enough for a twin bed, a toy box and a nightstand, where Carlos stacked Modesta's medicine vials and a giant water bottle with a straw that all the kids scolded her for not drinking. Heavy to hold and impossible to suck, they said she was just being difficult. “You have to drink your water, Momma,” they scolded. Like they had ever drank their milk or ate their broccoli. They could have at least brought her TV.

With nothing else to do, Modesta slept. Once she woke to the sound of rustling and discovered her great-granddaughter digging through the toys and tossing them onto the floor.

“What are you doing, *mija*?” Modesta asked.

The little girl toddled over to the bed and tried to pull off the blankets. “Mine,” she said. “Mine,” she screamed again and again as Amory carted her out.

Modesta traced the vine from one end of the wallpaper border to the other. In two spots, it didn't quite line up, and the stem just vanished. It was no reason to get angry, but she did anyway. She refused to answer when Carlos called her Modie, though he had called her nothing else for at least thirty years. She snapped at Amory when he came to check her water and make her take another fistful of tablets. And when Tina inquired about the proceeds of the house, Modesta said, “I'm dropping every dollar into a slot machine, one at a time.”

“You're just talking crazy, Momma,” Tina said. “You'd never do it.”

“As soon as Amory can take me to Vegas,” Modesta said, glaring at her daughter until she left her alone.

Modesta wished all of them would just let her be. She needed sleep, her body begged for rest, pulling on her eyelids, weighing down her limbs. But sleep came with dreams and Modesta fought it until her body fought back.

The pains began on her left side and spread up and down until she looked to see who was stabbing her. She didn't complain but accidentally let out a cry that betrayed her.

“No more hospitals,” she said. “No more medicine.”

The doctor said, “Shingles.”

The chain link fence did little to separate the funeral home – a flat-roofed building with neat bushes – from an abandoned Kmart. Carlos drove his rented compact up to the ramp on the west side. He left Modesta in the car, with the air-conditioning on frigid, while he retrieved the wheelchair and oxygen tank from the trunk.

Modesta's children had been at the home all day, welcoming guests and sitting with Philbert. She had passed the time in Amory's flowered room, tortured by the pain and fever of her own body, by a useless bladder and by horrific dreams – sometimes Philbert shot her with that first bullet, the practice one, the one they said took a chunk out of the ceiling above the refrigerator.

As each took a break from the visitation to care for her, she begged them to take her to the funeral home. "Wait till the rosary, Momma," they'd said. Damn them.

Carlos opened the door. "Let me help you out, Modie," he said, reaching into the car, his gentle fingers like paring knives.

"What time is it?" Modesta asked.

"About 5:30."

"But it's not even dark."

"It's July."

"Shouldn't we wait until dark?"

"For what?"

"For the rosary?"

"Why?"

“Rosaries should be at night.”

“Who said? Watch your leg.”

“And they should be at a church. This isn’t a church.”

“Modie. We’re lucky Uncle’s a deacon or no one would even be saying a rosary.”

Amory kissed his grandmother and carried her oxygen tank. Tina kissed her then rattled on about the unbearable heat. It wouldn’t be so bad if you lost a few pounds, Modesta thought as Carlos wheeled her into the home.

The entrance hall, bright with light pouring in large windows, their heavy wine-colored drapes not drawn, was as cold as the walk-in freezer at the tamale shop. Modesta caught a chill the moment they entered, though she wore a sweater and thick knee-high stockings. A hunched old man in a charcoal-colored suit greeted Carlos by name and handed both him and his mother a small card. Philbert Sanchez, the cover said, over a wavy American flag. Modesta didn’t open it. She didn’t even turn it over. But she gripped it so tightly it curved around her thumb.

She heard Amory whisper to Tina. “Should we let her sit over here for now, Mom?”

“She’s supposed to greet everybody out here afterward.”

“But Grandpa’s in there.”

“And where else would he be, Amory? Fishing?”

The casket stood at the front of the chapel, draped in an American flag. Beside it, on a spindly table surrounded by foiled baskets of mums, sat Modesta’s one big, framed photo of her husband, which was probably forty years old. Carlos wheeled his mother to the first pew on the right, not ten feet away. “You OK, Modie?”

“Don’t call me that,” she said. “I’m your mother. Did you take that picture off my wall?”

“We needed something since we couldn’t open the casket.”

“That’s mine, you know.”

“I know.”

“I want it back.”

“You’ll get it back.”

“Did you take any of the others?”

“We just needed that one, Modie.”

Despite the pain the motion caused her, Modesta grabbed her son’s hand. Since that very first time he’d addressed her by her given name – strutting into her kitchen waving his new driver’s license and the keys to Daddy’s sputtering Mercury, which he’d bought for fifty bucks – the question had nagged her. “Why?” she asked.

“Why what?”

She looked into her son’s face, searching for the baby she’d once loved so much and finding a man she hardly knew. It was too much. “Don’t call me that,” she said, wishing she’d said it long ago. “I’m still your mother. And those are my pictures. You can have them all when I’m dead, but I’m not dead yet.”

Wiggling her cold toes, Modesta wished for a blanket. She looked at the photo of Philbert, how he used to be – handsome and smug – and was surprised at just how long it had been since she’d last seen that man, that smirk. How long had he been gone? She couldn’t recall that either.

Her eyes were drawn to the red, white and blue. Philbert lay under there. What was left of him. Her Philbert. Her husband. Forty-seven years together boiled down to this. The son of a bitch.

In all those years, they'd been apart only when he'd gone hunting or fishing, or while she worked or visited her sister in Texas. Oh, they'd fought, too. Damn had they fought! He'd pushed her around some when they were young, and drunk, and she'd thrown him out two or three times. He'd taken a girlfriend once, too. A fling. An extended fling. But that was it. Forty-seven years minus a few weeks.

Had they been happy? Long ago, perhaps. She couldn't remember. But would he have done this if they had? And what kind of life were they living, anyway? Seldom seeing anyone other than Amory, and a daughter and granddaughter who came when they needed money. They didn't really have much to say to each other. But 47 years, after all, was a long time. They'd said pretty much everything at some point.

Modesta knew Philbert like she knew how to breathe. She knew the sound of his truck from a block away, his limp in the driveway and the smell of his skin when he drank rum instead of Miller's. Modesta knew Philbert's disappointments and desires before he did. Or so she had believed. His suicide had been his first surprise in years. And suddenly everything was suspect.

Modesta stared at the stripes. How neatly the red and white were stitched together, and what a pretty contrast between. If she felt better, she'd get up and touch the cloth. The material looked so thick and fine. So warm. But her subtlest movement triggered pain, sharp, mean, and unforgiving.

So Modesta sat, listening as people filed into the pews. Her siblings hugged her and it hurt. Her daughter, granddaughter and great-granddaughter, as alike as those stacking dolls, took

seats in the pew beside her. She turned to ask about the baby's picture and noticed their dresses, sleeveless and colorful and bright. But before Modesta could criticize she realized she wasn't wearing black either. Nor was Carlos, nor Amory. Nor anyone else. And they weren't crying. Modesta heard laughter and chatter instead of weeping. Her own eyes remained dry. She peered again at the stripes then looked away.

Modesta searched the chapel for sorrow. Philbert's brother held his wife's hand and stared straight ahead, but he smiled when a cousin patted him on the back and asked, "How's it going *comp*?" Their own *compadre*, Tina's godfather, grinned and waved at friends and family he probably hadn't seen since the last funeral as he made his way to the front pew. He stopped smiling as he bowed and made the sign of the cross, as he kissed Modesta's cheek and said, "I'm sorry," but not two minutes later she heard him chuckle. She thought she heard a woman's sob, but it, too, turned out to be laughter.

Modesta's granddaughter answered her cell phone and tried to keep her daughter from crawling under the pew. Their giggles embarrassed Modesta. The baby didn't know, but what excuse did her mother have for showing so little respect to her grandfather? He was dead for chrissakes. Didn't anybody care?

Maybe Modesta's tears would help them realize. She looked again at the casket. Philbert. Her Philbert. The one who ... who ... Modesta searched her memory for special times, scoured her heart for tender feelings. Philbert had inspired plenty of things in her. Perhaps tenderness wasn't one of them.

Surely she missed him. Not quite like she missed Momma and Daddy. But that was different. And thank God it didn't feel like it had when her first husband died – like a January wind swirling through her chest. Their son was just sitting up at the time, and Modesta couldn't

look at him, the spitting image of his father, without collapsing to her knees from the weight of the sorrow. She'd wanted to kill herself, would have maybe if not for the boy, whom she maybe never loved quite the same way again.

Then Philbert had come along. And she was saved. But without her son – who chose to grow up with Modie's little brothers and sisters rather than move in with her and her new husband.

She pictured Carlos suddenly, all curls and chubby cheeks, clinging to Momma and crying, "Mommy! Mommy!" She remembered his dimpled fingers reaching as she got into Philbert's car. "Mommy," he cried. "Mommy!"

Philbert pulled away. "Look at that," he said. "He's already calling her Mommy."

She recalled the words as his first slap but couldn't remember how long it had taken her to believe them.

As Modesta's brother asked them all to pray, Amory reached for his grandmother's hand. He didn't seem to notice how cold it was, and Modesta tried not to shiver.

"Take me outside," she said.

"But Grandma, we're starting."

"I'm not starting," she said. "It's too cold in here."

Her brother spoke into the microphone, "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with Thee."

Around her their relatives replied, "Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus."

Again and again they spoke the words. Modie wondered if anybody heard them. She

didn't want to. So she sang. "Don't sit under the apple tree with anyone else but me, anyone else but me, anyone else but me."

Amory shushed her gently, and when she kept singing, put his finger to his lips.

"I used to sing that song to you when you were a colicky baby," she said. "Until we were both hoarse and you collapsed right here in a precious lump." She patted her chest. "Do you remember?"

"I don't remember, Grandma," he whispered. "But we should probably talk about it later, OK?"

"There is no later, Carlos," she said. And she sang the chorus again.