

Breakthrough

A Short Story by Rebecca Balcárcel

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Guatemala

wanted the sledgehammer.

Twelve pounds of steel on the end of a thick, hickory rod.

I ran my fingers over the brand name burned into the handle in the Tools section of the home improvement store. I watched light strike the flat planes of its dull silver head. I even hefted it just to feel its weight, its power. My power.

But the YouTube video said no.

The ponytailed couple in "Remove a Wall Like a Pro!" showed how crashing through a wall with a sledgehammer could snag electrical wires or burst a pipe. So much for those reckless demolition scenes on "Property Brothers" or "Flip or Flop." It turns out you have to be careful.

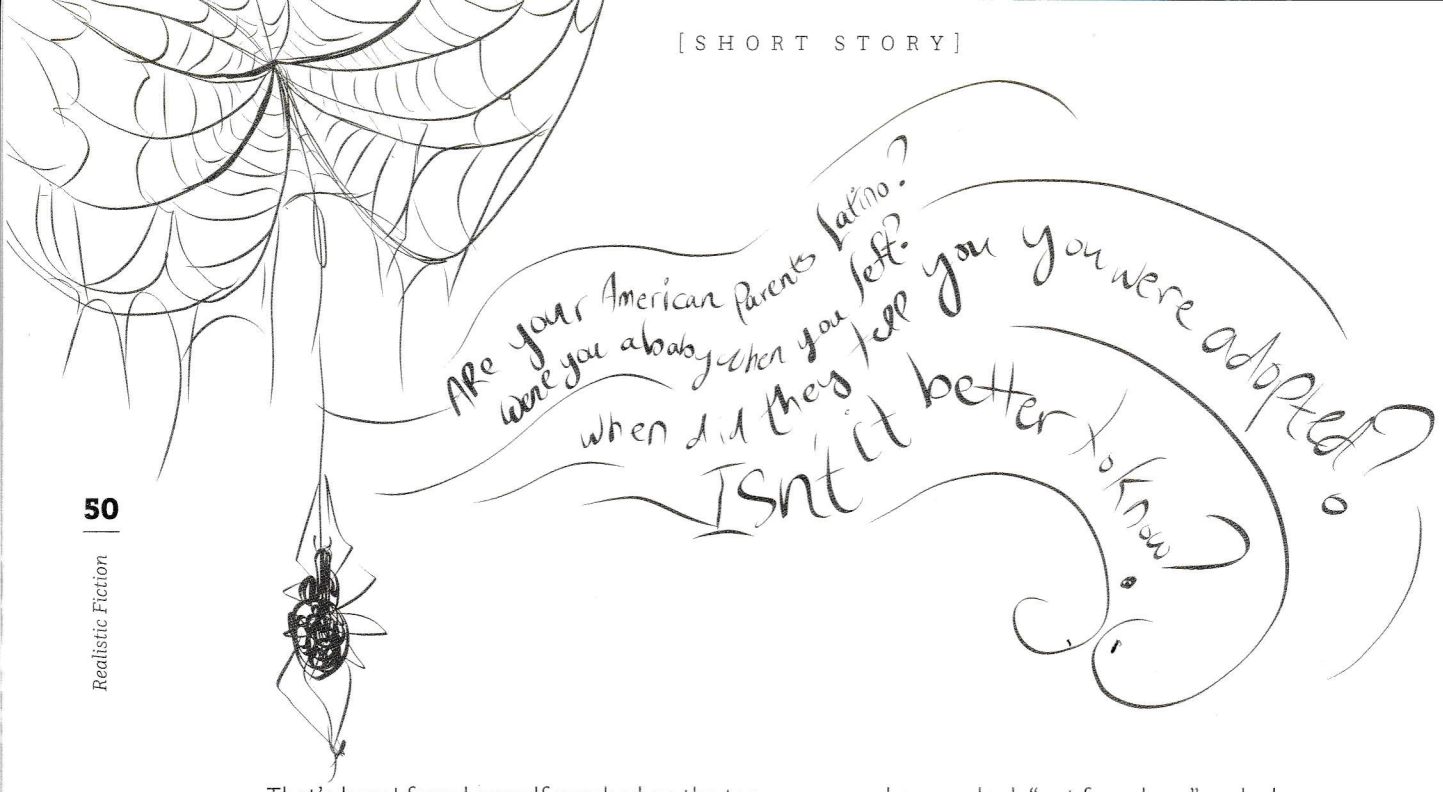
And careful is something I know about. I'm the person who never paints over a hinge, always measures twice (OK, three times), and definitely turns off the power, even to change a light bulb. My husband calls me thorough; my daughter calls me an uptight, worrywart perfectionist. Being 14, she doesn't believe in sugar-coating these things. And she's not entirely wrong.

For example, I'm also this kind of careful:

Two days ago, the letter came. The moment I saw the return address, *Guatemala*, my stomach seized. I dropped the envelope as if battery acid rimmed the edges instead of red, white and blue express stripes. I almost put on dish gloves to lift it to the counter and scotch a corner of it under the wooden fruit bowl. For a while, all I could see was *the letter, the letter, the letter* until my eyes skittered away, scanned the ceiling, and then fixed on two apples, dented and bruised, in the bowl. Somehow, they annoyed me, maybe because I had bought them Sunday and it was only Wednesday, maybe because everything looks like a symbol when bad news is about to smash through your afternoon and maybe your life. I haven't touched the letter.

So, I listened with care to the ponytails. I took notes on "Remove a Wall Like a Pro!" I put a big star next to "Clobber a line of load-bearing studs, and your roof could fall in."





That's how I found myself perched on the top step of a pull-down ladder, shining a flashlight into the attic, looking at trusses. Step one was to see whether any of these giant triangles were resting on my wall — the wall I wanted to sledgehammer.

Through dustmotes and between gauzy mounds of blown-in insulation, I could make out the floor plan of the house below. *That must be the kitchen. That must be a bedroom.* My wall had to be ... yes, between trusses and not under one. Little victory No. 1.

"When are you going to open that letter?" my husband asked, sipping his coffee and scrolling on his phone.

I answered by setting the flashlight gently in a drawer and opening the fridge.

"Isn't it better to know?"

Michael's a good guy. Great, in fact. But even he has trouble understanding what it's like to have family that's not truly family, to be related to people who know nothing about you, to wish for a bond that DNA doesn't quite deliver.

I told him early on that I was adopted from Guatemala. It's a topic that comes up pretty fast

when you look "not from here" and when your Spanish comes out with an American accent. His journalist's instinct was to ask a dozen questions. "Were you a baby when you left? Have you ever been to Guatemala? Are your American parents Latino? When did they tell you, you were adopted?" Soon he laughed at himself. "Sorry. My boss at the paper says curiosity is my superpower, but my friends say it's my most annoying trait."

It was slightly amazing that he hadn't torn into the letter himself.

"Not ready," I said.

He raised an eyebrow at me but didn't push.

I flipped the breaker to cut off power to my wall and pulled the cardboard cover off my new drywall saw. I admit it was fun to buy a new tool. Checking out with an item called a Shark 10-2206 Rockeater would make anyone's day. A 6-inch, diamond-cut blade was almost as good as a sledgehammer.

My next step was to cut through the sheetrock without cutting into any studs or wires coming from outlets and switches. Not too hard. I also needed to cut along the ceiling so that pulling off a piece of drywall wouldn't pull off the ceiling texture.

I was on a ladder when Morgan almost phone-walked into it.

"Oh! What's this doing here?" Her thumb still hovered over the screen.

"This wall is outta here!" I smiled down at her and let my satisfaction glow around the words. I don't think she noticed this.

"But you always loved disappearing in there."

"Well, I'm tired of disappearing."

"But where's all your stuff going to go?" She pronounced "stuff" like she was itching to say something stronger.

"I have a plan."

"Of course, you do." This wasn't a compliment.

It was true, though. I planned for my craft *stuff* to relocate to a few places around the house. A glass-front cabinet, a bookshelf, a space I cleared out in the pantry. Instead of being confined, I would spread out. Instead of me fitting in an 8-by-6 rectangle, *me* would fill the house. Not to crowd out Morgan or Michael, but to include myself in my own home.

When we moved in, I loved the cramped space that my husband called The Her Hall. It let me scrapbook without a toddler underfoot. Lately, though, it felt more like a Her Hole, too dark and narrow. Craft supplies lined one wall, and a worktable set against the other. One end was open, and the other was floor-to-ceiling shelves filled with how-to books, histories of old houses, and a decade of *Country Living* magazine. OK, so we'd never lived in the country, but those pages inspired. That entire shelf I would turn 90 degrees. Facing out.

"So, what's with the letter?" Morgan gave me the honor of her full face and not just the top of her head. She's actually pretty awesome, a word that's too dated for her, but it's true. "It's from Guatemala."

"Yeah." I climbed down the ladder. "Want to help out?" I offered her the Rockeater. She managed to resist it and shook her head.

"I'm going to Ariana's."

"Have a good time. Tell her hi from us." I pulled a pencil from my pocket and marked the location of a stud.

"Mom."

I pretended to concentrate on my pencil mark.

"You have to open it."

"I will."

"You're avoiding it."

I faced her and found myself surprised again that her height equals mine now. "Yes."

"Well, stop. Your birth mom has something to say. Don't you want to hear it?"



"It's complicated." I didn't mean this as a cop-out, though I guess it sounded like one. I meant that of course I want to hear it. I meant that I always wanted nothing in the world more than one deep, long conversation with my biological mother. I meant that when I traveled from Dallas to the shores of Lake Atitlán at Morgan's age, I took every hope of hearing words I'd never heard, in a voice I'd never heard, from a face that looked like mine. But when dreams and reality crash, it makes a sound that echoes for decades. "You go have fun."

Morgan hugged me goodbye. She hadn't been as huggy lately, so it surprised me for a second.

"Love you, Mom."

Like I said, she's actually awesome.

I put on gloves and goggles, then plunged the drywall saw through a wide-open space between studs. I made a line, turned a corner, made a line, turned a corner. The square started to sag. I gave it a tug, and it pulled away with a satisfying crack.

First section of sheetrock off. Little victory No. 2.

It wasn't that the woman in Guatemala wasn't nice. She was gentle, kind. She reached out to hold me. But mostly she was sad. Mostly her eyes filled with memories of cruelty. My body was a living scar, proof of pain. Breathing evidence that the rich man whose house she'd worked in had not only taken her body, but her baby. And lied.

Through an interpreter, she'd cried out the story.

My Spanish lessons useless, I'd tried to open my ears wide enough to understand even a phrase of Kaqchikel. He'd raped her and kept her from returning home during pregnancy. She had missed her husband and her other children terribly. When I was born, I was whisked away. They told her I died. She'd asked to hold me, but they'd refused. Until my American parents looked for her a decade later, she'd never heard anything about me. She'd been allowed to return home, was not "charged" for prenatal care, and restarted her regular life. A life without me.

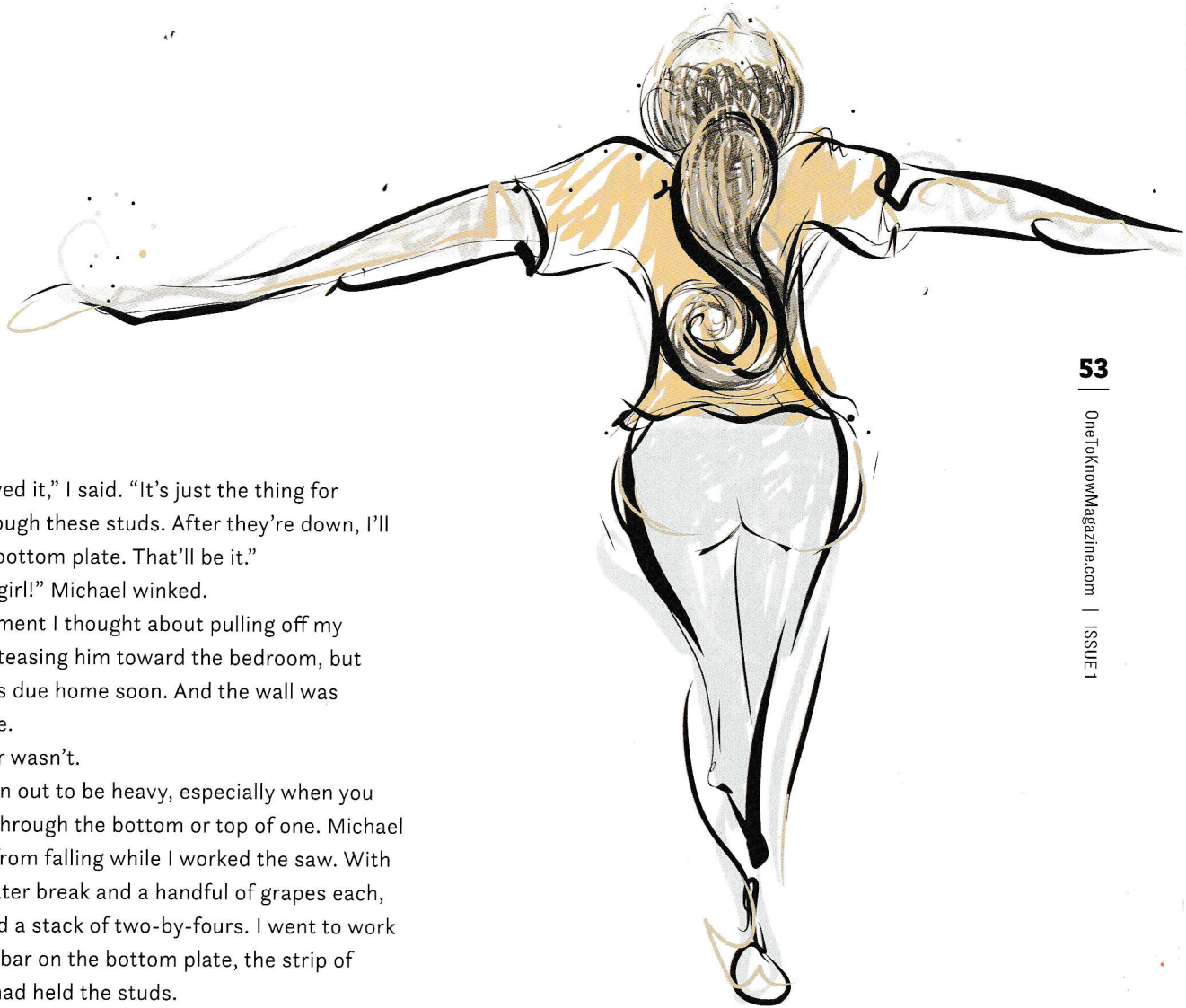
It took the whole afternoon and most of the next day to pull off all the sheetrock on both sides of the wall. Michael offered to help, but I needed to work. I needed to saw and heft and wipe sweat off my forehead with my glove. The sound of the Rockeater drowned out the sound of my not reading the letter. I loved the clean look of bare studs.

"Where did you get that?" Michael was openly admiring the thing of beauty in my hands. A reciprocating saw with a 10-inch demolition blade. Or maybe it was I who was doing the admiring. He was mainly curious, as usual.

"Too bad we can't keep it, right?"

"Are we talking about a saw or a kitten?" He gave a half-laugh before picking up his book, a biography of a president, it looked like.





"I borrowed it," I said. "It's just the thing for cutting through these studs. After they're down, I'll pry up the bottom plate. That'll be it."

"You go, girl!" Michael winked.

For a moment I thought about pulling off my gloves and teasing him toward the bedroom, but Morgan was due home soon. And the wall was almost gone.

The letter wasn't.

Studs turn out to be heavy, especially when you are slicing through the bottom or top of one. Michael kept them from falling while I worked the saw. With only one water break and a handful of grapes each, we soon had a stack of two-by-fours. I went to work with a crowbar on the bottom plate, the strip of wood that had held the studs.

No more wall. I bet the ponytails would be proud. Victory No. 3.

"I love the space, honey," Michael said. "This was a great idea you had."

There was plenty left to do — cleaning up, moving the bookshelf, returning the saw — but there it was. Or there it wasn't. I found it fun to walk through the line in the air where the wall had stood. I crossed back and forth, feeling like the temperature was cooler or the ceiling was higher. I planted myself on the line between Her Hall and the whole house and spread my arms wide. I looked from one side of the

room all the way to the other. I took up space.

We ate a rare together-supper and talked about how to use the new space and whether to paint the entire living-dining-den area, and if so, what color. Morgan had opinions and even asked if she could paint her room. She knows how to use a brush. And a hammer. I made sure of that.

She and Michael cleared the table, and I knew what my next project would be.

The letter.

Victory No. 4. ●