My father’s death certificate told one story:

_Cause of death: dilated cardiomyopathy; other significant conditions contributing but not resulting in the underlying cause: Parkinson’s, chronic liver disease, acute cholecystitis._

My brother told the following story.

Since he was the only one who could move back and forth across the international border with facility, he made daily trips to the hospital before or after work. Abuela and Amelia didn’t drive, so it became difficult to coordinate rides, and he could see how upsetting it was for both of them. Abuela was losing a son. Amelia was losing a husband for the second time.

“I never felt so sorry for a person,” he said, describing Amelia’s look of defeat.

Over the years, we caught snippets of gossip about the death of her first husband, most of it malicious and coming from our very own relatives in Michoacán because she too had roots in Zacapu. In one version, Amelia was married to an abusive policeman, and when they struggled over a loaded gun, it went off, killing him instantly. She was pregnant with her third son, but they locked her up anyway until the investigation concluded that it had indeed been an unfortunate marital scuffle resulting in an accidental death. In another version, the policeman shot himself while in a drunken rage. Her pregnancy didn’t spare her from getting jailed.
until the investigation cleared her of any wrongdoing. In any case, there was a stigma attached to her reputation. It was my father who took her away from the community of wagging tongues when he met her in Zacapu during one of his visits and brought her back to El Rancho. It was difficult to reconcile Amelia’s loud bursts of laughter to this troubling past, so no one brought it up. If I felt any animosity toward her and her children, it was because they came across so happy and carefree, benefiting from my father’s choice to be the head of their household and not ours.

“I started lying to them about visiting hours,” Alex said. “They were determined to sit there for hours on end, exhausting themselves. The doctors kept sending them home and they wouldn’t budge, so they told me not to bring them around as often. It wasn’t healthy.”

But my brother did stop by as frequently as he could. My father went in and out of consciousness, and when he spoke, he was slightly incoherent and his sentences didn’t make any sense. And when he did make sense, it was devastating, asking for forgiveness, calling out for his wives.

“At one point, I had to take him to the bathroom. I had to wipe his ass.”

During one difficult afternoon, the doctor came in to check on my father. Alex sat quietly as the doctor studied his patient, but afterward he stood for a moment, staring at my brother.

“You know,” the doctor said. “Whoever was taking care of your father was doing a good job. He shouldn’t have lasted this long with all those problems he had. And he certainly wasn’t taking good care of himself.”

“He wouldn’t stop drinking,” my brother said.

“I can tell,” the doctor said. “He was also suffering from depression?”

The question surprised my brother. “I guess so. He had a hard time with the Parkinson’s.”
“Do you think his depression was so bad that he might have tried to harm himself?”

My brother became uncomfortable with the line of questioning, so he asked the doctor to spit it out. He had been sitting on that chair too long for riddles.

“We found a foreign substance in his system,” the doctor said. “Anti-freeze. It’s not the kind of fluid a person would imbibe accidentally.”

“Is that what’s going to kill him?” Alex asked.

“No, his body is what’s going to kill him. But that anti-freeze—that complicated matters. And it opens up all kinds of other questions.”

“You mean, that someone might have poisoned him?”

The doctor sighed. “No, young man. That he might have tried to poison himself.”

When my brother related this conversation to me over the phone, I didn’t know what to make of it either. The only silver lining I found was that there was evidence that Amelia loved my father. He had been a father to his stepsons since the oldest was six. He had been a father to his two daughters all their lives. I was sure they loved him back. This man was loved.

“Perhaps it’s best to keep that part quiet, Alex,” I said. “We don’t know what our father was thinking. Clearly he wasn’t. And it would be too painful for Amelia, given the history with her first husband.”

“But you don’t really believe all those stupid stories about her husband, do you?”

“It doesn’t matter what you or I believe. It’s what our fucked-up relatives want to believe. They’ll use this information to hurt her. So let’s not give it to them.”

“Okay,” Alex said.

But we kept coming back to it repeatedly. Had my father attempted to end his suffering? Had he decided he was too much
of a burden for his family to deal with? My brother never dared to bring it up the few times our father was lucid.

“Once, he told me to grab his wallet,” Alex said. “I dug it out of his pants in the closet. He pulled out his boxing ID.”

“Boxing ID?” I said. “From like the 1960s? He carried that around all these years?” It was one of the few images we had of our father at the end of his adolescence, his face clean-shaven and glowing with innocence.

“Yeah. And he gave it to me. Told me that he didn’t trust his stepsons to take care of it the way we could.”

“We?” I said, seizing on the moment. “As in the two of us? He included me?”

“I assume he did,” Alex said.

I became crestfallen. Very selfishly I wanted to be part of something. I had made my choice not to travel all the way to California, but now I was starting to regret it. And when my father slipped into a coma, one that the doctors were certain he wouldn’t come out of, I punished myself for my stupidity and walked about aimlessly up and down Manhattan until my brother called to tell me our father had died.

“What was the last thing he said?” I asked. But Alex wouldn’t tell me. I needed those last words; I wanted to unpack them into a message I could carry with me for the rest of my journey without him.

“Tell me, tell me,” I pleaded with Alex. “I don’t care what they were; I just have to know.”

“I’m not sure about this,” Alex said. “But you have to understand that he was out of it, that he didn’t make sense half of the time.”

“I got that,” I said. “I understand. Now, tell me. What was the last thing he said?”

I stood at the corner of the street. All afternoon, I had been looking for signs and omens. What did it mean to come across a
poster of a father standing next to his son? What could I make of
that man’s tattoo that reminded me of the one my father had on
his calf? Should I read something into the moment I came across
a bulldozer like the one my father used to drive? What did I know
about the man my father became in his forties? In his fifties?

“Turrútut?” I asked again.

“He said, ‘I know your brother resents me.’”

Guilt overwhelmed me so completely that I wasn’t sure how I
made it back to my apartment. My father’s last words became
branded onto my flesh like a curse. It was then that I realized that
all this time I really wasn’t looking to forgive my father; I was
asking him to forgive me for holding on to this hurt, for blaming
him for the wound I kept salting each time I thought about him.
What more evidence did I need that he loved me? It was I who
had been withholding that affection: the impetuous and stubborn
child who never stopped crying about his loneliness as he faced
the corner. He was never alone in that room. All he had to do was
turn around.

The only thing that still angered me was that my father made
orphans of his daughters. The youngest was only eleven, which
was the same age Alex was when our mother died. It was a cruel
cycle. But my father’s death didn’t compel me to build a relation-
ship with the second family he had left behind. It didn’t seem like
an honest thing to do because even though we shared a father,
there was no affection between us. The only kind thing I ever did
for them was to make sure that my father’s house became Amelia’s
legally. Our nosy relatives stepped in to tell us that our father’s
house was rightly ours now, and that we could throw those people
out whenever we wanted to. But the doctor’s words resonated
with me: Whoever was taking care of your father was doing a good
job.

“Oh on that score alone, they earned that house,” I said to Alex.
And he made sure to draw up the documents in Amelia’s name.
“She seemed quite relieved,” my brother reported back. “She really did think we were going to kick her out of her house.”

My God, I thought to myself. We really know nothing about each other.

And that was the last I heard of Amelia and her family. Once in a while, Alex saw them passing by, but there was very little interaction between them—maybe a wave or a nod in acknowledgment, if that. Eventually they became neighbors like any others in that growing neighborhood—a unit of strangers swallowed up by other strangers who were just as disinterested and disconnected.

Many years later, I happened to mention to a friend of mine that I had two half sisters whom I had no contact with.

“Have you tried to reach out?” he asked.

“Not really,” I said. “I wouldn’t even know how.”

“Have you tried Facebook?” he suggested.

Since I never used Facebook, it hadn’t occurred to me. So out of curiosity I looked them up, expecting to be inundated by a sea of women who happened to share such common Mexican names. But it only took me a matter of minutes to locate their pages. I was stunned by what I saw: My stepmother looked much older, but jovial among her brood; my half sisters were mature young women, having outgrown those girl bodies I called up from memory whenever I thought about them; and, most surprising of all, there was a picture of my father taken only a few days before his hospitalization. His body appeared shrunken and worn-out, but the expression on his face betrayed a level of contentment, even peacefulness. I copied the image and sent it to my brother, who became just as devastated by it.

“But you can see it in his face,” I insisted. “He was happy. He was a happy man.”

I had to say that to feel better about myself. I had to say that to forgive the hurt I had caused.

“I think so, too,” Alex said. “I can tell he was happy.”