

## Places No Longer There

### Dennis R. Sanchez

1        Their last email, their longest, concerned parking: “Get Day Past from Lorna at Lot 2.” Daniel smirked and changed “past” to “pass.” The lush pines coated with mist along Royce Drive whispered to him that this moment was special, and he felt in reach of each of his senses. Each individual pine brought back memories of a walk through the Champ Elysées in Paris with *her*, a wander in the ancient redwoods with *her*, and a stroll in the Black Forest with *her*. As drizzle met his windshield, he tried to focus on that time, but the memories were hidden away in a vault somewhere in his **subconscious**. He found himself returning to his troubled marriage.

2        In a football **analogy**, it might be time to punt. It was as though he and Corinne allowed fifteen years of marital contentment be compromised because of... dare he admit it? A child should only have make things better. Instead the marriage came tumbling down like a seagull shot at sea. Casey’s special needs had nothing to do with it. At least that was what Daniel tried to convince himself.

3        They had tried for their own baby. Everything from In vitro to Chinese herbs, but it did not happen. Crying, Corinne insisted she wasn’t a "real woman." Daniel held her whispering she was more than any woman could be. Adoption was the only choice left.

4        Now it seemed that every moment centered on Casey. No more philharmonic. No more Hollywood Bowl. No more opera! “Watch how loudly you speak! Turn down the television! Get wipes and help clean this mess!” Caring all day for Casey, Corinne was too tired to cook. Love-making was a distant memory. And so **melancholy** united with resentment like propane with fire, and the house turned as blind as Cio-Cio-San’s son at the end of *Madame Butterfly*.

5        Then during an expressly bad period, Daniel learned from a friend that Lorna was still working at UCLA. And after a **volatile** moment when Corinne suggested counseling, but Daniel stupidly said they needed legal advice, not counseling, it happened. Even Corinne had her limits. She did not speak to him for a week. Daniel, forlorn in his office, surfed the Internet googling **inchoate** constructions. One was: “Is there really magic in the world?” Another: “Is the mature life really about suffering?” The last was Lorna’s name. And simmering like the last glow of a great cigar, it appeared—“Lorna Valentina, Recruitment Supervisor UCLA!” He stared at the

screen while patting his mouth. No blowup quarrel had occurred between them. They'd simply plodded their own highways, he to graduate school at Berkeley and *she*? *She* wanted to attend Stanford Law School but *she* was still at...?

6           A few emails entitled "Blast from the Past," and here he was roosting with a temporary parking pass in Lot 2 awaiting an extended day pass for Lot 3 from none other than Lorna Valentina. His latest book, a book that received good reviews, rested beside him. He would present it to her at the right moment. They'd discussed many subjects in their emails, but one unmentioned topic was that he was married to a woman who for years had sewed buttons on his shirts, removed stains from his pants, and mended his socks and his ego.

7           *Recruits had warned him that a UCLA rep was not pleased with his unbounded recruitment of students to the "rival" school. He left a note on the desk they shared at a junior college (he used the desk on Tuesdays and she on Wednesdays). The note said he wanted to "meet up to share ideas because, after all, the best university was the one from which the student graduated." (At least that was his motto, but deep down he secretly relished "kicking her behind" in the number of recruits he enlisted). Expecting Queen "Bloody" Mary on a bad day, Daniel was surprised to meet a reserved young woman with full-rimmed glasses who reminded Daniel of a lost little girl looking for Mommy. No wonder she was no match for him. She'd have a better chance going 15 rounds with the heavy weight champ. They went for coffee and ended up talking for three hours. Later as they hugged goodbye, she held him tighter than he anticipated. "You're a nice guy for a rival," she whispered, an aura of sadness shadowing her, and he, hearing a song in the distance, something about 'not knowing who to cling to when the rain set in,' hesitated before saying "You can do it! I'll help you!"*

8           Who is prepared for parenthood? Daniel thought as he flipped through his book. During that first week, he stepped over Casey many times as she lay on the floor. Then one morning as they walked with Casey in the stroller, Corinne blurted, "You are having difficulty with a troubled child, aren't you? Do you...?" she continued.

9           "It takes time, just like appreciating opera," he told her. And now shaking his head at that memory as his windshield blurred, he thought about the fun they had together before Casey. He moved his seat back, closed his eyes, took in a deep whiff of pine, and allowed his mind to wander.

10        *Oh, yeah...Daniel remembered: "Papi, the Wizard" and his story about the magical bill. Papi supposedly gave a magical hundred dollar bill to Lorna for a supposed trip up north. There was a small town where the merchants were angry because of debt. Lorna stopped at the town's motel. She wanted to see a room before deciding and left the bill as collateral. The motel manager was so sure she'd take the room he happily took the bill to the angry butcher. "Here's the hundred dollars I owe you for the meat you brought me last week. The now happy butcher took the bill and went to the angry liquor store owner. "Here's the hundred dollars I owe you for the liquor you advanced me the other day."*

11        Daniel looked deeper into the mist, took another breath, and then remembered *the perilous spins in his moribund but faithful Dodge Dart to meet Lorna. He recalled the shimmering downtown lights, the fading red sunset, the Wilshire exit, and the Village. He remembered how firmly Lorna held his hand as they sauntered the Village and how good it felt to be needed. Daniel's mind shifted. The now happy liquor store owner went across the street to the angry masseuse. "Here's the money I owe you for last night." The now happy masseuse took the bill and went to see the motel manager. "Here's the money I owe you for the room last night!" "Well," Papi said, concluding his story, "Lorna decided not to take the room. The bill was returned to her, and the once angry merchants of the town were left happy." Papi smiled and tugged at his gray beard.*

12        The drizzle turned to rain, and Daniel rolled up the window. A ray of sunshine peaked over the pines, and a streak of red expanded across the roving clouds like a shockwave. The streak shifted in color to crimson and its intensity grew and moved in surges until it combed the tops of the pines like a shadowy flame and then just like that it was out. Strange how so much can be gained or lost in a moment's time, Daniel thought. If not for the "lawyer" remark, he was sure he would not be here. He had a few more minutes, so he closed the book and turned on the radio. A song was ending with the line, "It's a bad thing to let go." At this Daniel felt a chill creeping into the car. He looked around the parking lot for an exit. No, he decided. He was here and unlike the ray of sunshine, he would stay.

13        *Papi and Lorna lived in a house south of the 10 Freeway between Hoover and Vermont. The house was over a hundred years old and used to be a part of an equestrian center. In the backyard horse stalls from long ago had survived, but the horses were gone. The attic had been turned into an office for Lorna. Lorna took Daniel up there once. When she excused herself to give Papi his insulin shot, Daniel picked up a black and white framed photo of Papi, Lorna, and her mother. Papi had a proud smile. Lorna was the wide eyed innocent, and her mother had this angelic glow to her. On the bureau was a copy of the Daily Bruin, and next to it, the DVD The Little Princess. Next to it was an opened journal. "Dear Mommy," it read, "I just made a friend, and I've never been good at that. Lately, in fact, I haven't been good at anything. I still remember that time my mind drifted at the red light on Wilshire. I heard the horns, but like a caterpillar in a cocoon, I just couldn't move. That's how I felt about recruitment, but the other day Daniel, like a knight in shining armor, helped recruit students for me! I almost cried when he did the Bruin Eight Clap. He said when I have fears, to pretend that I am the most powerful person in the world. Oh, I NEEDED someone like him, Momma! I feel like a butterfly now! Course, Papi forces his magic tricks on him. The other day Papi asked him to think of a number between one and five. When Daniel said he was thinking of 3, Papi told him to pick up the phone. Underneath it read, I KNEW YOU'D PICK 3. Then Papi told Daniel that the number 3 would become an important number in his life. BTW: Papi still sleeps with the light on. He misses you so much!" Upon hearing Lorna's footsteps, Daniel grabbed the copy of the Daily Bruin and scoured it for any article he could find.*

14        Guilt still troubled him about reading her journal. He shook his head in disgust before spotting a maintenance man walking toward him. The man was carrying a large, thick hose as though he was going to purge vermin from the campus. Wanting company, Daniel stepped from his car. When their eyes met, Daniel asked him the time.

15        "The time? Got two jobs. Rent's due. The time? Got five kids at home. One was accepted here but decided he was the next Carlos Santana. The other one's goal is to be a bookie. The youngest one ...I don't even want to go there! La Mujer is an invalid, except when it comes to drinking her Tequila. The time? I got no time." The man was only half smiling when he showed Daniel his Cassio. When he noticed, he added, "Carnal, what's that on your wrist?"

16       A Rolex. A self-winding Rolex that didn't wind this morning. Daniel thanked the man and set the time and day on his watch. He understood that time was moving in the wrong direction, and he thought of a promise he made fifteen years ago.

17       *But his mind drifted well past fifteen years. Back when he didn't have much money. Papi knew. "What do we have here?" Papi would ask as he magically pulled one dollar bill after another from Daniel's pockets until a pile of bills rested in front of Daniel. "I guess you two can go to that movie after all."*

18       *When Papi took out his conical hat and wand that one time, Daniel asked him to predict the future. Papi put his hand on his forehead and closed his eyes as though in deep concentration.*

19       *"I see a princess and her knight living in an emerald mansion high upon a hill." Later when Lorna kissed Daniel goodnight, she asked, "Would it be okay if Papi lived with us? I don't mean right away but after a couple of...?"*

20       Years? Months? Weeks? Days? Daniel realized that that was one thing he'd never know. The fact was he'd thought about asking Lorna to marry him. Only he saw himself asking her in a restaurant, or on the Santa Monica Pier, or even on the Kiss Cam at Dodger Stadium. He never dreamed that such a momentous question would be asked the way she asked it. Besides he still had his doubts, not so much about Lorna, or even Papi, but about himself.

21       *That week was the hottest week on record for the city. Daniel tossed and turned every night. He'd received both an acceptance letter from Berkeley and also a full-time job offer in recruitment at his school.*

22       *Lorna told him that that weekend she would be housesitting for a professor who lived in Culver City. She mentioned that she would be ALONE. It would be a "splendid opportunity for Daniel to come by." When he went over, she'd already poured two glasses of red wine, and on a table was a dish of raw oysters, some cut up cucumbers and carrots, a plate of red chili peppers and bowl of chocolate fondue. After dinner and dessert and two glasses of wine, Lorna said she was going to slip into something more comfortable. Although Daniel definitely urged her to, he remembered thinking, "Bye, Bye graduate school. Hello work and family."*

23       *“Better move your car to the other side,” Lorna warned him when she returned to the room looking every bit like Julia Roberts in Something to Talk About. “No parking on this side after midnight.”*

24       *When Daniel tried to start his car, the Dodge Dart, (the one he boasted would never let him down), refused... to... budge. And Lorna, looking more beautiful than Daniel thought she could, had to put on a man’s robe and fetch jumping cables because her knight in shining armor didn’t have any. By the time his “faithful” car finally started, the moment was lost. The next day Daniel purchased a new battery and packed his things. The following day with the flavor of raw oysters still on his mind, he headed to Berkeley.*

25       Amazing, just amazing, how so much can be lost or gained in a moment’s time! Daniel recalled the photo he picked up in Lorna’s room and imagined himself in place of Lorna’s mother. THE FAMILY DYNAMIC! If Lorna only knew that that was the real reason he decided to leave. Lorna needed a knight, or at the very least a real man, and the truth was he was neither. If anything, he was the court jester. His father was an alcoholic whose only magic trick was sneaking undetected vodka bottles into the house. His younger brother was incarcerated by 16. His mother was bitter and her **acidity** was aimed at Daniel because he looked so much like his father. The oldest son Donald was her everything. “Donald this...and Donald that.” It made Daniel sick. His mother paid for Donald’s trumpet lessons. When that didn’t pan out, she paid for his clarinet lessons. When that didn’t pan out, she paid for French horn lessons. Daniel, meanwhile, never got a dime. When Donald practiced the French horn in the garage, Daniel would say, “Ma, I think we should call animal control. Some animal is dying in there!” There was a sock box for Daniel to figure out which torn polyesters to match while Donald’s cotton socks were always neatly folded and put away in his drawer. Although Daniel tried to mask his feelings through jest, it wounded and left him with deep rooted issues. His hard work and good grades were not a **testament** to his intellectual curiosity, but to his trying to win his mother’s approval. During their time together, Lorna had needed Daniel, and he needed to be needed, but he knew that his faithful Dodge Dart was right: he was not the right fit for her. At least not at that time. He was older and a bit more mature when he met Corinne, and Corinne patiently let him find himself, faults and all. She sacrificed for *him*, going to games she never wanted to go to and rooting for teams she never wanted to root for because it made *him* happy! She ironed *his* pants, folded *his* socks, bought *him*

a guitar and encouraged *him* to take lessons. And the work ethic that Daniel possessed because of his family's undercurrent remained with him, and he worked hard so that his mother would realize she'd bet on the wrong horse, and he and Corinne could enjoy a comfortable, loving life together.

26 It was now twelve o'clock. Water was still oozing from the pines when Daniel saw a woman step between cars. Darting from his car, he waved before seeing the woman hop into a car and drive off. He leaned against his car and inhaled the scene of freshly minted pines. What if she decided not to show? Could he blame her? What did he expect? For her to be singing *Un Bel Di*? The drizzle had stopped, yet a tender mist fondled his face, leaving him to ponder younger days long ago filled with space. At three minutes after, he spotted another woman stepping between cars. He started again, but stopped when he thought that this woman was older... Then like a thunderbolt between the eyes, it hit him! Shivers, extending to places he thought no longer existed, oozed from him as he watched her eyes dancing in anticipation. The words were unsteady when he half-sang, half-whispered, "And I would have loved to have loved you, but I was just a kid. Our candle burned out long before our longings ever did." He felt water running from his eyes like the rain that was on his windshield, and he felt *her* sobs again, and it brought him back to his present anguish. Finally, he called out her name. When she was upon him, her eyes hesitated, but her body betrayed as she embraced him harder and longer than she did that first time. "When all else fails, pretend, remember?" She whispered. Through her tears, he heard whisperings about saving letters they'd exchanged when he was at Berkeley. At that, he remembered the box of **paraphernalia** stored in his garage, and between old magazines were letters she'd written him.

27 Later Daniel couldn't remember the direction they took to another part of the campus where the café was located. Couldn't remember the food they ordered. Of this, he remembered clearly: he recalled looking toward the pines and feeling the breeze slapping his face as Lorna spoke of the everlasting promise of a marriage and the infinite anguish of a divorce.

28 The clouds were separating when he was tempted to ask about Papi, but he knew, he knew: Papi was old even back then. No doubt his light was off now. Daniel was thinking of him when he felt for something on his shirt. It wasn't anything magical. It was simply a button that Corinne must have sewed on that morning. The funny thing was Daniel never mentioned it was missing.

*It is a bad thing to let go*, he remembered as he fumbled with the button. He recalled the walks in the Champ Elysées, in the Redwoods, and in the Black Forest. They were all with Corinne.

29 As Daniel felt the warmth of the day begin, he realized that some affairs come to pass faster than others. The hour and a half was so enchanting that Daniel wanted to sing *Dovunque al Mondo*. And as they stood to return to their places of duty, she to her office, and he? He had an office in need of organization, but it could wait. The aria wasn't quite finished. Lorna had one more bit of drama. It would be something that Daniel would feel for some time. "My cousin," she said, "has tickets for *Madam Butterfly* this Saturday, and" she added slowly so that Daniel heard every word, "she... can't... go."

30 Daniel felt the shame and guilt that Lieutenant Pinkerton must have felt in that very same opera. A time exists when one realizes that true love and true need are not the same, yet the player wonders—wonders with every fiber—is it still legal to dribble off the highway just once? In this instance, not just into her tempting, small tender breasts and deep dark set eyes, but every bead of perspiration, and every single breath she took. But the gypsy that brought Daniel this far now anticipated the next train back, and Lorna's cousin, whoever she was, had run out of tokens one stop before the main station. Daniel did not hesitate when he pulled a photo from his wallet. He looked at himself before handing it to Lorna. "She's got a great pediatrician. He suspected something early. Autism comes in spectrums."

31 When Lorna looked at him, he was pointing to the part of his chest where the heart should be. "Someone once said you're not really a father until you have a daughter. Well, I have a daughter with special needs, so it offers me the chance to be a special father."

32 The sun was filtering through as they sauntered toward his car. Daniel noted the clean pavement beneath him as they walked. They stopped long enough for Lorna to hand Daniel a photo of her eight year old son, Pablito. He was wearing a wizard outfit with a magic wand and conical hat. No photo before or after would ever bring Daniel such relief. She talked about how difficult it is to find another job at her age. "I wish I could just go off and write a book!" she said, taking back the photo, and as she did, Daniel thought about the impatient book waiting in his car. Parking Lot 2 was upon them when Lorna, smiling, pulled out a card that read "Extended Parking Lot 3" and stuffed it into his pocket. Only then did Daniel remember the parking plan, but no ticket was on his windshield, and if some parking Nazi had written one that instant, Daniel probably would



have tipped him. There was no hesitation this time as they embraced firmly and long. "I've always regarded you," she whispered, "as the sincerest man I've ever known."

33 And as he watched her walk away, her head up, toward her office, he thought, "Sincere? Me?" Then turning toward the Santa Monica Mountains standing taller than he remembered, he understood. "There—right over there—that's where my sincerity belongs!" It wasn't quite fourth down, but even if it were, he planned to go for the first rather than to punt. Long ago, he figured out Papi's hundred dollar brainteaser: you simply remove Lorna from the narrative, and everything fits into place. He had female friends—lots of them—but it was clear *she* could not be one of them.

34 The day was clearing. Winter's long awaited visit was far off in the distance somewhere and so was the rain. The mist was gone. It was a moment, he thought, one safe to walk, to hop, or even to run. He looked up at the pines. They were now just trees along a street. He'd plant himself in his car, toss the closed book in the back seat, and drive the Village one last time before turning down Sunset. Driving down that windy road, he'd gaze at houses and think about the people inside them. In the far distance, Casey's voice tiny, fragile, but brilliant rang true, "Da, da," she'd said that morning as she reached for him, "hold..." At that, he remembered. "Almost Casey's nap time, I'd better hurry. Sweet dreams, princess," he whispered, "Sweet dreams princesses everywhere!"

### **What Are Your Thoughts?**

1. How does the setting like the mist, pine trees, and rain affect the meaning of the story?
2. What is the difference in the relationship Daniel has with his wife Corinne that he does not have with Lorna? How does the sewed button on his shirt symbolize how Daniel feels about his marriage?
3. What is the meaning of Papi's "Magical Hundred Dollar Bill" story? How does it help bring Daniel back from fantasy to reality?
4. How does Daniel's family dynamic affect his relationship with Lorna and his ultimate decision to leave Lorna for graduate school?

5. What is the significance of the number three in the story? Why is it repeated throughout the story?

### **Style**

1. Which techniques does the writer use to take us from fantasy to reality? Would you say that this story is a fantasy or a reality or a combination of both?
2. Point out how the use of symbolism affect the depth and meaning of this story?

### **Grammar in Context**

1. An intended fragment is one where the author purposely uses a fragment to intensify what he or she is trying to convey. Look at three intended fragments in either paragraphs 4, 7, 15, 16, 17, 20, 25 or 32. Mention how the intended fragment helps to intensify the passage.

### **Journal Assignment**

Daniel's family dynamic definitely affected his destiny. Describe how your family dynamic is affecting you, either in a positive or negative way.

