

INTRODUCING CALIFORNIA WASN'T GOOD FOR US: A Novel

Reid Gómez

The following story has been excerpted from a longer chapter, "Grandma's Hands," from Reid Gómez' forthcoming novel California Wasn't Good for Us. In her words, Gómez describes this work as "an urban Navajo story, a tingling maiden story, a story about the violence we turn in on ourselves in response to racism and Catholicism. Madness, alcoholism, greed, and violence destroy the Calabases. This is the story of the one survivor, Cebolla."

Grandma has a lot of rules, especially about leaving the house without your panties on. Sister would forget. Aunti Lee, Nizhóní, and Johnny would be on the bus with no underwear, just their dresses. I put mine on first, before I put my outside clothes on. I don't know how anyone can forget. But who knows what they did at their house when no one else could see them.

Some things are better left unsaid, and probably this is one of them.

Momi likes to remember all the things she can. Catching the girls without their panties was one. When the girls were small, Momi needed to take care of them for Sister. Her big responsibility, from prom night to Joost Street. It is important to be needed, but not be a slave to it.

After Patsy Cline and Charlie Pride, Momi tells the best stories. After dark, we shut the TV and listen to her music. When she was little, Grandpa would take her to see her Grandma, my Great Grandma with Rocks in Her Pockets. Neither sister wanted to go, only Momi and Grandpa. Grandma would give

Grandpa a stack of newspapers for Momi to sit on. No dirt allowed with Grandma.

They didn't pay her no mind, left the papers outside and let Momi sit where she wanted. The floor was exactly the same outside and in. Earth, fine as powder. She sits on the floor and watches everyone move around, Grandpa, Uncle Alvin, and her Grandma making fried bread.

In the daylight, they go outside. Grandpa plants and Great Grandma sits on a chair next to the door that faces sunrise. People in the north do not like her. They drive their cars by and point, "look at the Indian."

Great Grandma makes funny faces at the pointers, and Momi makes the same faces when she tells me.

"My Grandma had dirt floors."

She tells me this one lots. I like it, especially in the night, especially after summer's gone and the dark stays long.

Everything grows in darkness, especially Momi's stories. I like to lay in bed beside her. She smokes, and the cigarettes burn slow motion, like in the movies. Some things come all at once, but not stories. They come when they need to.

We go to Grandma's in the morning. She will be waiting for a ride to Tropical, and I will get dropped at Mama Lois's. Momi will go to work, and the week will be over before you know it.

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I do not like to sleep alone. My house with Grandma is different from my house with Momi. Pancakes come to Grandma's. She got a lot of pain, and she don't say nothing about Colorado.

I went there once to visit her brother. Going to Colorado in an airplane is different than driving. We are supervised by Cathy, but already I do not trust her. I have a white suit and a white hat to match. Momi wears a navy dress, cut A-line. Cathy looks dressed normal. Along the way, there's a great deal that could happen. I do not want to lose my Momi. She removes herself already; I notice when we pass South City. Her dress is pretty, but her body leaves it.

Grandma gives us leis she strung herself, to carry for the journey. Everyone thinks we're from Hawai'i, but we're on our way east to family. Someone takes a picture. Momi keeps it in a book to remember that she took me and did not lose me.

I heard their names before but don't know them.

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Grandma stays home. I don't understand why, but don't ask no questions. I'll figure it out while flying. I get to hold on to Momi. It is important not to lose one. It's important not to lose the other. Cathy is excited. This is her father, mother, brother, sisters. They have a giant house with pillars. I think it's very Southern. Momi thinks it's for strangers. Appearances are big doors, and they fold out.

We start in an upstairs bedroom with a sister. I learn new words, like these are second cousins. My Great Aunt explains all the removals in detail. I try to

remember 'cause I feel like I might get tested later. I don't get it, so it's hard to put it right in memory. I say nothing. It is always preferable to say nothing.

My eyes are wide-open vessels to hold the trip inside. Everything here says not too much emotion. I focus hard on not being retarded. Momi tells me never to act retarded. We sleep, and I am tired. Tomorrow we stay around the house to get adjusted.

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Momi is a stranger here, like me, only worse 'cause she is already older. I am little, so they excuse me. She is crazy, so they hate her. Everything is silence. Wash your clothes at home, don't air dirty laundry.

Momi wears sandals. She hides her toes 'cause they are ugly. But I love to see her feet. Colorado makes her different. She hides herself with the rocks inside Great Grandma's pockets. Grandma's family is nothing at all like Grandpa's. They picked us up but didn't hold us.

Everything has a place here. Me and Momi fit nowhere. We walk around not breaking things. We don't move them either. The stereo has its own room, downstairs in a thing they call the basement. I ask Momi if we can play it. She says we have to ask Cathy. It is important we act right, 'cause all of this will go back to Grandma.

We can't go outside 'cause the snow is much colder than the clothes we brought. Cathy says, "Play the stereo, just don't break it." We put the radio on and search around for Country. There is no food, even though there is a kitchen. We are hungry, but we don't ask for favors. If we are lucky, someone will feed us.

I am quiet. It is lonelier than St. Teresa's after Father Dennis. Tomorrow we wait for snow to melt, and we stay with another sister. This one is the oldest. I know about her 'cause she got to live with Grandma in San Francisco when she was pregnant. The baby had no father. It's a very serious mistake and a secret, like Cathy and Momi. Nobody can know your business, especially if you're not married. They sent her for the time that she was showing. Then, they took the baby and sent her home again, no one the wiser. That is what Momi tells me. I ask how we're all related, 'cause everything is behind closed doors, just like Charlie Pride. Momi says you can learn everything from music. Listen to the words. They explain you how to feel. Everyone here talks right, so Momi tells me these things in private. We sleep on the sofa bed at the oldest second cousin's. These are Momi's first ones. In the morning we go to Red Rock.

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I have no words, only amazement. Blue frosting goes on forever. Even these cousins know this place is special. I thank to God, but they tell me humans made it. I thank to God again, but this time inside myself, so I don't get corrected. We stay there and eat our sack lunch. Momi looks pretty when the wind blows. Cold ice cuts through and shows what you're made of. She is made of white shell. Her hair cut short for the first time since she was in high school.

I like being so close to clouds and rainbows. Momi's naked feet stand beside me. The kids jump around, and someone takes our picture. You can't hear the city sounds below us. The flashbulb blows, even though the sun is strong enough for the right exposure.

We have to leave before I'm ready. I'd like to sleep here instead of the apartment. It has a pool. I don't care. I can't swim. We have to leave, even if I pretend I can't

hear them. I wait for them to touch me on the shoulder.

Humans cut this place from mountains. God's eye looks around me. We ride the car and go back to the apartment house they live in.

Soon we visit the Colorado. Momi tells me The Eldest is coming and bringing Christian and Martin. They are staying with Grandma's youngest brother. His wife believes in breast-feeding and the Bible. Their house is flat and not so open. Wooden panels on the walls keep the dark in. Light stays out with outside creatures. We go in once, only to meet them. Momi knows this uncle 'cause he is young, an artist. He looks like Yogi Bear except with fuzzy hair. His wife is small with hair short and straight like Momi's. They will meet us at the mountain top.

The river goes from where we're from to where we moved. I learn geography from listening to Momi and Grandpa. They tell stories. This family doesn't. Information leaks out of rubber tires. No flats. You just got to check the pressure. Keep it right for safety and good mileage. We stop on the road and check them.

They have big cars, and it only takes three of them to cart all of us to the cabins. We pile out and wait for instructions. When The Eldest is here, she bosses everyone, even her uncles. Children in one house, adults in another. I'd rather sleep with Momi.

We get to go to the river as soon as everyone eats their lunch, everything brought in sacks and coolers. We sit at benches, adults on one, children on the other. You know the drill, now follow it. We eat. We do not talk. With The Eldest, there is a time for talking, and it's not when eating.

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Momi hangs her clothes on her shoulders and sits down where she's supposed to. I act adult, but sit with cousins first and second. I send messages to Momi, but she is broken, no reception. I squeeze my energy thin, into threads long enough to reach her. I tell her direct. I am alone, squeezing while I am chewing.

I wish Grandma could be here to fix things. Make The Eldest stop bossing and make Momi feel me squeezing. But Grandma couldn't do it, not even if she was sitting at the children's table with me.

Grandpa is the only one who can make Momi feel better. And he wouldn't be caught dead in fifty yards of them, so I know better than to wish for him. Momi is farther away now than ever.

We throw our garbage into cans. I'm the only girl in a sea of boys, so I get to stay close to Momi. I clean my mess and stand beside her. Her skin is hot, even though she isn't in it. She leaves some things behind so I can find them. We are told to stand and walk, all of us, down to the river.

This water brings Momi back to me immediately. I dip my feet. She dips her hands. Inside the water, you can hear relatives down south, north of Albuquerque. The San Juan crosses us in a soft whisper. Voices travel, connect, and drift off again, like summer, fall, and winter.

The Colorado is shallow and deep in both directions: just north, a change of power; river rock, water, and white foam just south. These are my Grandma's people, here gathering at the juncture.

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You can never predict what you might find. Walk with your mind in all

directions. Sit to reset the legs. Keep all eyes open. Do not think; pray. Act like the cross can save you. Believe everything. Believe nothing. The generations will make sense of it or it will die in fire. Big thoughts sometimes squish me. I reach out for water to cool the knowledge flowing inward. I like the soft sand water of Great Grandma with Rocks in Her Pockets.

Momi sits on the stones beside me. The rest of them want to see the rapids. I do not want to move from this moment. I am too little. It is too pretty. In a miracle, they trust us to stay together, me and Momi. At the shallow point, we can walk the bank, ankle deep in trickles.

They trust the river. They do not trust my Momi. Even though we can't swim, we float, face up, to heaven. We sit on rocks floating. The Sky God tells me Grandma cannot make the move to San Francisco with my Grandpa. She will hate him as deeply as she loves him. I take it in and do not let it spill out beside me.

They do not know what they know. We belong here. We would never die here. I am happy to be alone with Momi. We sit here all afternoon, listening to the river, the sky, and Grandma. She couldn't bring us. It might shatter the delicate pieces she has left.

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There is no reason for such long distance. You can't understand the journey. You can only make it, by airplane, Chevy, or pony.

Momi's toes are naked. I belong here a little more than she does. It has to do with Grandma. Momi tolerates the distance. She is complete, a girl child of my

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Grandpa: Grandma scrambles her brain like eggs, even though she doesn't need to. Momi is silver when you heat it, no shape held, just nizhóní girl, nizhóní.

Momi believes anything anybody tells her. Especially if they got a book to back them, especially a book with pictures.

She starts saving and buying Avon, and I think it's pretty strange to buy perfume just for the bottles. Hawaiian White Ginger smells the best. It comes in a white frosty bottle. I am smelling it, when I learn you're not supposed to open them. It brings the value down.

I had no idea I was ruining them by smelling them. Now, when the bottles come, I don't touch. I only look.

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Silly Millie has a granddaughter; and they are like me and Grandma, which means that the girl lives with her grandma 'cause something's wrong with her Momi. I don't know what, but it is worse than me, 'cause she never sees her Momi.

She has blond hair, that girl, and is much older. We are going to the San Mateo County Fair. They got lots of rides. We drive the Nova and pick them up on Cortland.

I ride every ride; I am afraid of nothing. Momi takes my picture on one that looks like a dragonfly. This will help her remember later. They have pigs, horses, rabbits, and they even have a cow, but the best thing is the ponies.

I pick one with spots. My Appaloosa. They put us on, and it goes round and

round. I'm in the wind, on a mountain, going to see my Great Grandma, till the man asks me if I got another ticket. No ticket. No ride.

I get off, and we get ready to go. Sometimes, it takes more time than others. We have a long drive back, and we still have to drop off Silly Millie. I sit in front, even though I'm little. I am still in charge of directions, and her granddaughter doesn't like me. I'm supposed to be a wild monkey, but I don't have it in me. I sit on Momi's lap, and I'm not wild at all. I am a baby. The girl doesn't like little monkeys. She only likes the wild ones.

Momi tries to make us talk about cartoons. I love them. Everything falls at her feet like water balloons. We stand in the muddy space of I don't care; I don't like her.

Silly Millie is pretty funny, so we focus on her, and I don't throw anything else out for the granddaughter.

We drop them off, and Momi tells me about Grandma and her white pony. That's how she met my Grandpa. "He saw her riding on her horse, and he said, 'that's the girl I'm going to marry.'" There is nothing like riding ponies. The dark is a thick blanket. We are under it before I notice. Down Old Bay Shore, to Parisian, then Army. I'm still thinking about my Appaloosa, when Momi parks the car at Grandma's. I sleep here tonight, 'cause country fairs are a special privilege, and so are work friends. Tonight, we had a double, so no complaining about separation.

We're an egg. She's the yolk. I'm the white stuff. Grandma's the shell. She keeps everything from spilling.

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I go upstairs, and Grandma quizzes, Who's the lady? Where'd you go? This is to double-check the information, not for lies. It's hard to tell the difference. Same questions, different feeling. You get into a lot of trouble if you confuse things.

Momi told her the whole story before she left, but Grandma is very suspicious. Momi has big problems getting her stories straight. They always fall down. Especially when there's pressure. Everything causes pressure. It's just a matter of how much.

Tonight is pretty open.

We sleep good, and in the morning, we make fried potatoes, tortillas, eggs, and bacon.

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I go to our room. I like the way the light falls through the window, like one of Grandma's arrangements. She has a rose pin. I look at that. White doilies on the dresser. Mary and Jesus on the wall. He has a crown of thorns made out of holy palms from Palm Sunday. Their eyes are brown. My eyes are brown, too. The light is satin. It reminds me of material from Grandma's sewing. This time alone feels endless.

She comes home. It's almost 4:00. We skip church and sit in the living room, where the air is cool as light. She don't ask me who I been with, and she don't ask me what I been doing. She asks me if I want to watch her embroider. I love that word, today especially more than ever. She is making a flower bouquet, pink, green, brown, light blue, and yellow. The yarn is thick. She makes it with

her mind and not from marks on cloth. There are none. She shows me running stitch, knot balls, and backstitch. Last week, she showed me blanket stitch, and this week I get to practice.

Backstitch is the easiest. I like the mismatched stitch that gives the flowers feeling. I don't remember how you call it. It looks like scratch marks made by chickens, except it's really complicated. If you don't take your time, it looks too planned out to be in nature. We take our time, sewing all night with the light on. On my practice cloth, I have two knots, a row of small stitch, a row of long stitch, one X—'cause I was beginning to get ahead of myself—and the blanket stitch around the edge in yellow. Next week, I get to pick my own project, a pillow made of yellow satin and green stretchy cloth. Two types of materials make it harder. This is sewing by hand, not machine. Learn this first. Learn that later.

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It's almost midnight when we hear Uncle. We shut the light and sneak off quick to the bedroom. I jump in bed and pretend I'm sleeping. I almost forget I'm already in my PJs. I panic, remember, then get still again. Grandma slides in with her clothes on. You are never allowed to lay in bed with your street clothes. Something must be wrong with her. It's dark till he finally gets the door open, up the stairs, into the kitchen for food, then he turns on the TV. The light makes fire in the hallway.

Hiding is easier than avoiding. In the morning, we will check his room and clean him. He'll be different. We won't need to disappear ourselves. I fall asleep not thinking about the morning. My embroidery is on the floor next to me. I want to sleep with it, but I don't want to stick myself. I dream of nothing. The

sun reaches through the window and wakes me. I am alone in bed without Grandma. She's already in the kitchen, drinking tea, and heating rags.

We never wash the house, but we always wash Uncle. He's swollen and stinks. He got beat up bad, and then he wet himself. Hot towels. Grandma believes in boiling water. She keeps Icy Hot in the door of the refrigerator. She tells me to bring it to his room so I can help her. He is naked except for the white sheet across his privates. There are bruises and marks everywhere not covered. We are quiet. He mumbles. She takes a scoop of Icy Hot and puts it on his leg, which aches him. He is crying. She says for me to do the other one. The Icy Hot feels like freezer pops before you freeze them.

It's dark, except for the light in the hallway. On days like this, she covers up his windows. We rub both legs, and Grandma helps him roll to his side, then flip over. She carefully places the sheet again to cover his privates. We rub his back and between his shoulders. There is a giant mark across his back, and he muffles words into the pillow. It smells good 'cause of all the medicine. We leave him alone, and then she brings him a bowl of liquid. He drinks like a dog. His head is too heavy for his neck; someone choked him. I can see their fingers.

The house is extra quiet, like it knows he is broke. We don't make noise. We go out. Walk to the top of the hill and back. Dave gives Grandma something to take care of Uncle, like always. We get home, and he is still laying there, but without his sheet on. She covers him and gives him the thing we got at Dave's. We get our clothes ready for the morning. Practice sewing will have to wait till next week. We read from the brown book.

When he needs her, he calls out, "Ma." She goes in fast but smooth. He usually don't get beat much because he is stronger than all of them. This is the second

time this month, and it scares Grandma so much, she swallows more than ever.

At night, he wakes up and goes to eat hard food and watch TV. He falls asleep on the chairs, like always. He stays broke for a week, and then he cuts his hair off. Grandma don't ask questions. Some things are better if you don't know them. He don't say nothing, not even to me, who he says he can tell anything.

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We don't see much of him for a long while after. I don't ask for favors, so I don't owe none. I take care not to get in trouble. I'm alone. No adult supervision. During the days, I entertain myself. Especially on the weekends. Grandma works overtime, and Momi is busy working on Grandma's Brother's house so we can live there. He's got two houses and says we can stay in one if we fix it. I'm not allowed to help with housework. Momi goes down there and works till dark. She says a house is better than an apartment. But I like living next door to Jesus.

I don't get a say. Not with Cathy. Children should be seen, not heard, and that's why her and Momi fight in private.

I'm not allowed to be alone on Naples. Jesus don't stay home. He's always leaving. And I didn't keep my word about not going to the street to look for Momi. Once you break your word, you gotta earn it back, no giving. It's harder 'cause of doubt. Once you give doubt, there's no taking it back. So you gotta do a lot to earn some trust, even if it's a little.

So I entertain myself at Grandma's. Momi built me a playhouse, out the window in the TV room, on top of Grandpa's. The window is behind the red couch. So I slip back there and climb through the window to my playhouse

with the roof that opens to the sky. She put in indoor/outdoor carpet and made throw pillows from scraps and stuffing. In the corner is a stack of cardboard boxes. Mrs. Beasley lives there while we play.

I got lots of stories, so I don't mind being there all day.

The playhouse is only good for summer. No roof makes it easy for the rain to come in and soak me. I sit there 'cause it's quiet. I like the view. Grandpa is building a work shed and making a lemon lime tree from parts. There is no wall to the yard, only a double railing of two-by-fours. One is sawed in half. Grandpa climbed up there once 'cause Grandma locked the garage door, and he said he needed to talk to her.

He climbed up there with his saw and started sawing. He cut the board, threw it down, and pulled himself through the open space. It's big enough to fall through.

I don't know why he didn't climb next door, jump the roof, and then hop over. You slip down the back porch and kick the door in. Uncle showed me.

Grandpa pressed his face against the window. It was raining, so he looked like the wicked witch, melting. He just kept staring. Even he knows better than to break the glass, so he just knelt there, tapping. Grandma ignored him and swallowed. The rain and tapping made it so we couldn't hear what he was saying. The mouth just kept on moving. Grandma turned the TV up and swallowed. No light except the program. We went to sleep, and in the morning, he was gone. Grandma didn't mention it again. Momi took the saw and built the playhouse.

Uncle said that was stupid. Anyone can get in the house if they want to. Grandma is still working, so I gotta stay here, listening to Uncle. He says the back door is the easiest, and then the window by the kitchen; if that isn't open, you can always get the lock off the side door. Besides, Grandma never locks it. He knows all the ways in and all the ways out; stick with him, and he'll protect me.

You can't shut him out, don't even try. He goes where he wants. I gotta learn; stick with him, he'll teach me. This is what he tells me.

Still three more hours till someone comes to get me. I'm stuck. Uncle talks so much, I think he'll run out of things to show me. You can't exhaust him. Just throw yourself in and hope that you'll float face up. Never underestimate the current.

He's going out with the Uncle White Boy. They got things to do, when I hear the door shut.

Momi's home, early.