



GONZALO

Use the space below
to write "I wonder"
questions and notes

Excerpt 1

The older you are, the younger you get when you move to the United States.

They don't teach you that equation in school. Big Brain, Mr. Smoltz, my eighth-grade math teacher, hasn't even heard of it. It's not in *Gateway to Algebra*. It's Garcia's Equation. I'm the Garcia.

Two years after my father and I moved here from Guatemala I could speak English. I learned it on the playground and watching lots of TV. Don't believe what people say—cartoons make you *smart*. But my father, he worked all day in a kitchen with Mexicans and Salvadorans. His English was worse than a kindergartner's. He would only buy food at the *bodega* down the bock. Outside of there he lowered his eyes and tried to get on by mumbles and smiles. He didn't want strangers to hear his mistakes. So he used me to make phone calls and talk to the landlady and to buy things in stores where you had to use English. He got younger. I got older.

Then my younger brothers and mother and Tío Juan, her uncle, came north and joined us. Tío Juan was the oldest man in his pueblo. But here he became a little baby. He'd been a farmer, but here he couldn't work. He couldn't sit out in the plaza and talk—there *aren't*

any plazas here, and if you sit out in public some gang driving by might use you for target practice. He couldn't understand TV. So he wandered around the apartment all day, in and out of rooms, talking to himself, just like a kid in diapers.

Excerpt 2

One morning he wandered outside and down the street. My mother practically fainted. He doesn't speak Spanish, just an Indian language. I finally found him standing in front of the beauty parlor, staring through the glass at a woman with a drier over her head. He must have wondered what weird planet he'd moved to. I led him home, holding his hand, the way you would with a three-year-old. Since then I'm supposed to baby-sit him after school.

One afternoon I was watching TV, getting smart on *The Brady Bunch*. Suddenly I looked up. He was gone. I checked the halls on all five floors of the apartment house. I ran to the street. He wasn't in the *bodega* or the pawnshop. I called his name, imagining my mother's face when she found out he'd fallen through a manhole or been run over. I turned the corner, looking for the white straw hat he always wore. Two blocks down I spotted it. I flew down the sidewalk and found him standing in front of a vacant lot, making gestures to a man with a shovel.

I took his hand, but he pulled me through the trash and into the lot. I recognized the man with the shovel—he was the janitor at my old school. He had a little garden planted. Different shades of green

leaves were coming up in rows. Tío Juan was smiling and trying to tell him something. The man couldn't understand him and finally went back to digging. I turned Tío Juan around and led him home.

Excerpt 3

That night he told my mother all about it. She was the only one who could understand him. When she got home from work the next day she asked me to take him back there. I did. He studied the sun. Then the soil. He felt it, then smelled it, then actually tasted it. He chose a spot not too far from the sidewalk. Where my mother changed busses she'd gone into a store and bought him a trowel and four packets of seeds. I cleared the trash, he turned the soil. I wished we were farther from the street and I was praying that none of my friends or girlfriends or enemies saw me. Tío Juan didn't even notice people—he was totally wrapped up in the work.

He showed me exactly how far apart the rows should be and how deep. He couldn't read the words on the seed packets, but he knew from the pictures what seeds were inside. He poured them into his hand and smiled. He seemed to recognize them, like old friends. Watching him carefully sprinkling them into the troughs he'd made, I realized that I didn't know anything about growing food and he knew everything. I stared at his busy fingers, then his eyes. They were focused, not far away or confused. He'd changed from a baby back into a man.

LEONA



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questions and notes

Excerpt 1

Mama believed in doctors, but not Granny. Not even if they were black. *No*, ma'am. I grew up in her house, back in Atlanta. She drank down a big cup of goldenrod tea every morning, with a nutmeg floating in it, and declared she didn't need no other medicine. Dr. Bates tried to sell her his iron pills and told her straight out that that tea of hers would raise her blood pressure and burst her heart. He passed away that very same summer. Next doctor said it would give her brain fever. He died on his fiftieth birthday, I believe, right during the party. Had him a real nice funeral, later. Granny lived to ninety-nine, by her count. She kept a scrapbook with the obituaries of all the doctors she outlived and could recite the list of names by heart, like a chapter out of Genesis. We took to going to their funerals right regular over the years. She always laid some goldenrod on their graves.

I was thinking about her one day, walking home from the grocery store on Gibb Street. Then I came to the vacant lot and saw three people in different parts of it. I thought maybe they were looking for money. Turned out they had shovels, not metal detectors. When I saw they had little gardens going, I said to myself, "I believe I'll plant me a patch of golden rod right here."

Excerpt 2

There was a man standing and watching from the sidewalk and a girl looking down out a window. There were probably lots of folks who'd want to grow something, just like me. Then I studied all the trash on the ground. Don't know why anyone called that lot "vacant." The garbage was piled high as your waist, some of it from the neighborhood and some dropped off by outside people. The ones who don't want to pay at the dump, or got dangerous chemicals, or think we're such slobbs down here we won't mind another load of junk. We can't get City Hall to *pick up* our trash, but we got it *delivered* just fine. The smell's enough to curl up a crocodile's nose, especially in the summer. The gardeners had made some trails through it. But I knew precious few would join 'em until that mess was hauled away. Looking at it, I knew this wasn't a job for no wheelbarrow. This was a job for the telephone.

I marched on home. I've got two kids in a high school that has more guns than books, so I know all about complaining to officials and such about things that need changing. Next morning was Monday. At nine o'clock I drank me a tall glass of water. I knew I'd be having to say the same thing to fifteen or twenty government folks. I put Miles on the CD player and stretched out on the bed. Might as well be comfortable when you're on hold. Then I opened the phonebook and started in dialing.

You ever watch a sax player close? They push down a key and way at the other end of the instrument something moves. That's what I was looking for—the key that would make that trash disappear. I tried the City of Cleveland, then Cuyahoga County, then the State of Ohio, and finally the U.S. government. Six and a half hours later I found out the lot was owned by the city. But the people running Cleveland don't usually come down here, unless they take a wrong turn on the freeway. You can't measure the distance between my block and City Hall in miles.

Excerpt 3

Just the same, I kept working on it the next day. That Citizens' Information Center told me to call the Public Health Department. They sent me to someone else. They're all trained to be as slippery as snakes. And to be out to lunch, to not return messages, and to keep folks on hold till they get gray and die. I had the feeling I was getting farther from the key I needed instead of closer. Then on the third day, I thought on it. When people talk to you on the phone, you're nothing but a voice. And when you're on hold you're not even that. I had to make myself real to 'em.

That morning I took a bus downtown and walked into the Public Health Department. Told about the trash all over again to this dolled-up receptionist. Let her see me up close and personal and hear me loud and clear. She just told me to sit down with the others waiting. I did. Then I opened the garbage bag I'd picked up in the lot on my way.

The smell that came out of it made you think of hog pens and maggots and kitchen scraps from back when Nixon was president. It was amazing how quick people noticed it, including that receptionist. And even more amazing how quick I was called in to have a meeting with someone. I was *definitely* real to them now. I brought that bag along with me into the meeting, to keep it that way.