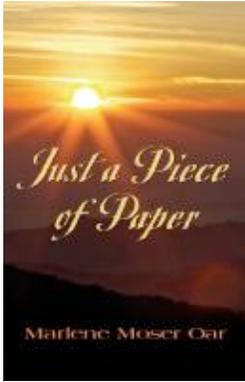


# **Just a Piece of Paper**

**Marlene Moser Oar**



*Destina's long, hot bus ride is almost over when an ordinary day turns into one of terror. As Destina looks at the rifle pointed at her, she promises God that if He gets her through the day alive, she will fight for a dream that she had given up as hopeless. Just when her goal seems within reach, everything crashes. Destina must choose between her dream and the young man who loves her.*

## **Just a Piece of Paper**

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First Edition

Illustrations of El Instituto de Jamastran and  
La Pulperia Karlita  
By Sasha Gill.

## **Dedication**

For Tim, my beloved son, editor and friend.



# 1

Outside the window cattle grazed on grass in the fields. Destina stretched her short legs as far under the seat ahead as the cramped space would allow. She closed her eyes and sighed. *It will be so good to get back home.*

Clouds of dust billowed behind the bus as it approached the little village of Arjelia. The old bus rattled as it bumped across the bone dry riverbed.

Without warning, the vehicle jerked to a stop. Packages flew from overhead and tumbled onto the floor. Destina's chin slammed against the seat in front of her.

Beside her, Tavio rubbed his head where it had banged against the side of the bus. "Wha...what's going on?" he asked, his voice slurred from sleep.

Destina touched her face. There was blood on her fingers. Dazed, she looked out the window and saw two men standing in the dry riverbed in front of the bus. Their faces were covered with ski masks; their arms raised with rifles pointed straight at the bus driver. On both sides of the bus stood more masked gunmen, rifles raised and legs planted apart in an aggressive stance.

"Let us on!" shouted one of the men.

The bus driver's hand shook as he swung open the doors.

*Not everyone walks away from a robbery,* Destina thought. Sometimes just not having what a *ladron* wanted could get you killed. *What if they kidnapped someone?*

Tavio placed his hand over hers and gently squeezed.

Four of the men stepped onto the bus. Two stood guard at the front.

The other two walked down the aisle slowly, looking everyone over. The taller one was dressed in a black tee-shirt and frayed blue jeans. He cursed as he stumbled over the worn pants. The stocky one followed him. Under his green and black tee shirt protruded a slight hump in his back. He took one hand off his rifle to wipe it on his khaki cargo pants and grasped his weapon again. He jerked it erratically from one side to the other as he moved down the aisle.

They walked past Destina's seat and went straight for a group of men at the back of the bus. There were six in a cluster. They had been laughing and talking together since they got on the bus at the village of San Diego.

The taller man poked a pock faced man with the barrel of his rifle. "Empty your pockets."

The man dug into his pockets. He pulled out a small stack of bills. A 500 *lempira* bill fluttered to the floor as he tried to hand over the money. His hands trembled as he bent over to retrieve the bill.

"Hurry up!" The *ladron* swung his rifle toward the rest of the group of men. "You too."

Handfuls of 500 *lempira* bills tumbled out of the men's pockets as they obeyed.

"Now," shouted the hunchback, "Watches, guns and jewelry—all of you!"

He slung his rifle over his shoulder and walked up the aisle holding a bag. People dropped everything they had into the sack.

As the gunmen neared their seat, Tavio put his arm around his younger sister. "Don't look at them and don't say anything."

Destina's heart felt like it was going to come through her chest.

The men stopped at their row. The old man across the aisle fumbled with his watch strap before he got it off and dropped it into the open bag.

The man with the bag glanced over at Tavio and Destina and started to move on.

“Wait!” The tall one pointed his rifle straight at Destina. “What’s in the plastic bag?”

Tavio didn’t give Destina a chance to answer. “It’s just our lunch.”

“Or a cell phone. Give me the bag.”

Tiny beads of sweat appeared on Destina’s forehead as Tavio jerked the bag from her lap and handed it over.

Tavio’s jaw was twitching the way it did when he was really angry.

The man lowered his rifle for a split second. “Nothing.” He tossed the bag back.

Shreds of the cheese from their lunch spread over her skirt, some falling onto the floor. She made no move to clean herself.

The man moved on and the taller one followed.

One of the lookouts at the front of the bus cleared his throat. He mumbled something in a shaky voice—almost like he was afraid.

He didn’t sound that much older than she was.

A bigger man shoved him. “*Cayate tonto!* You hear me? Shut up stupid!”

She almost felt sorry for the boy.

Then as quickly as they had come, they were all gone—off the bus and away through the bushes.

No one moved. A bird chirped outside.

The bus driver shifted the transmission into gear. “Anybody who wants to get off, do it now.”

“I want off!”

The woman's voice shook so badly Destina wasn't sure if the driver had even heard her.

The driver nodded. "Anyone else?"

Silence.

The woman gathered her bags and ran from the bus.

The driver closed the door and pressed the gas. The bus lurched out of the riverbed.

A low buzz of voices began. A mother's soft voice could be heard comforting a frightened child.

A young man in his thirties, who looked like a family man, hit the seat in front of him. "They took 1900 *lempira* from me!" He buried his head in his hands. "Two weeks wages!"

As stiff as a wind-up doll, Destina brushed what was left of the grated cheese back into the bag and twisted it shut. She turned to her brother. "Why didn't they take money from everyone?"

"They must know who works at the cigar factory in Danli. It's payday. They wanted to catch the big fish."

Though the weather was balmy Destina shivered. She pulled a sweater from her bag and tried to wrap it around her shoulders. Her hands were shaking so badly that it kept falling to the floor. Yet any fear she had felt was gone—she couldn't feel anything.

The bus rumbled along another half an hour. Neither of them spoke. Destina opened the bag in her lap. *She felt like she was in a trance—going through the motions—acting like nothing had ever happened.*

"Do you want something to drink Tavio?"

He nodded.

She passed him a two liter coke bottle filled with water. He unscrewed the cap and took a long drink. He wiped his mouth, and passed the cap and open bottle back to her. She took a

drink, screwed the lid back on and put the bottle back into her bag and set it on the floor.

She leaned her head back against the seat and closed her eyes but the gunman was still there, in her mind. He was staring at her from behind his mask, his rifle pointed at her face.

#

Tavio and Destina trudged up the path to their *casa* on the hill. The wooden shutters on the glassless windows of the small four room adobe house were open wide to let in the air and sunlight.

*Mami* stepped outside and picked up the homemade broom propped beside the door. She grasped the whittled wooden handle and began to sweep away the twigs and leaves in front of the door with the wild brush bristles of the broom head. It needed to be done everyday to keep away the ants.

“Destina, Tavio!” Their little brother Chano scampered down the hill toward them, short black curls bobbing. His impish grin revealed a gap where his two front baby teeth had been. The five-year-old always managed to look like he had just done something mischievous.

Close behind him was Benita. Two years younger than Chano, her shoulder length waves were a mass of tangles. She had slipped out before her mother or one of her sisters could comb her hair.

*Mami* looked up and smiled. “*Corazones*, you’re home.” When she saw Destina’s face the smile faded. She dropped the broom and held out her arms.

Destina ran to *Mami*’s open arms. Everything she had kept bottled up inside since the robbery broke loose. Her shoulders shook uncontrollably and her chest heaved with sobs as she drenched her mother’s thin cotton blouse with her tears.

Tavio cleared his throat. “*Ladrones* Mami...they stopped us in the riverbed before Arjelia. But we’re alright.” He pulled a small stack of *lempira* bills from his pocket. His lips curled up in a half smile. “They were more interested in our lunch.”

Mami shook her head. “Such a dangerous place. Just last month there was shooting between the police and the *narco ladrones*.” She reached over and touched her oldest son’s cheek. “Come inside. Sierra is just making coffee. We’ll all feel better after a cup.”

Tavio stepped through the front door, the younger ones following him like a row of little ducks. Mami picked up the broom, set it against the wall and pulled Destina gently into the house.

Inside, Tavio greeted his sister, Sierra. “You missed all the excitement.”

Sierra set down the coffee pot and turned to her brother. At ten she was already assuming a lot of the household responsibilities.

She adjusted her long ponytail. “What excitement?”

He chuckled. “Somebody tried to steal Destina’s lunch.” He patted Sierra on the shoulder. “It’s a good thing you weren’t there. With your temper you might have gotten us in trouble.”

Sierra put one hand on her hip and her eyes narrowed into slits as she looked back at her brother. Of the four sisters her temperament was the fieriest.

Tavio looked around the living room. “Where’s Liana?”

Mami pointed toward the neighbor’s. “She went to the Serrano’s house with Papi. He’s going to help them butcher a pig.”

Tavio shook his head. “Always the tomboy.”

Destina was too drained to talk. She plopped onto the living room couch and looked up at the familiar pictures on the wall.

Directly over the back of the couch hung a photo of Tavio in military fatigues. His steely eyes and clinched jaw said, *Don't mess with me.*

Beside his photo was her sixth grade graduation picture. She looked very serious, dressed in her school uniform, and seated beside a globe of the world.

She leaned her head against the back of the couch and closed her eyes. *I'm so glad to be home.*

## 2

Destina's head throbbed as she got up from the mattress on the floor that she shared with Sierra. She walked into the living room. Tavio was asleep on the couch. Its blue flowered fabric glowed in the first rays of dawn that streamed through the open window. She smiled down at him. The tight blanket cocoon in which he had wrapped himself up to his nose did nothing to mute his snoring.

She rubbed her temples and groaned. *I don't feel like doing anything today.* Then she remembered. *Today is Raquel's graduation. She let me have one of her tickets. I have to go.*

She stumbled to the outdoor bathroom and then to the *pila*, the small cement water tank just outside their front door. She washed her hands and face and grabbed a towel.

She patted dry, draped the towel over the side of the *pila* and headed for the kitchen. It was time to help her mother make breakfast.

Mami was already in the kitchen. She bent over to lift a pot that had been cooking over the *fuego* and carried the pot to the door to drain the water onto the ground outside. She set down the heavy metal pot and pushed back a wisp of black hair that had escaped from the bun at the back of her neck.

She stood back for a moment and stared at Destina.

"What's wrong Mami? Is there dirt on my face?"

A tear appeared in the corner of Mami's eye. "We could have lost you two yesterday." Her hand shot up to wipe away the tear.

She shook her head, smiled and stepped back to put her hands on her hips. "I just realized how pretty you've gotten. It won't be long before we'll have to chase the boys away."

"Oh Mami, that's not true, I think you're the one who's beautiful." Destina looked at her mother. At 40 she was still slender and attractive. Her smooth complexion was marred only by the few patches of dark brown sun spots scattered across her cheekbones.

Mami laughed. "Enough of this. It's time for us two beautiful girls to get to work."

She picked up the drained pot and poured kernels of cooked corn into a plastic bowl. "The corn is ready to take to the *molino*."

Mami always rose before the sun to start the fire under the adobe *fuego*. The dried corn had been soaked in lime water all night to dissolve the tough outer layer of the kernels. Each day she skimmed off the skins that had floated to the surface of the water, and then boiled the niblets another half an hour. Now they sat ready to take to the *molino* for grinding.

Destina took the corn from her mother and walked down the gently sloping path from their *casa*. She glanced back as Mami opened the rest of the shutters, and then turned to step through the gate and onto the dirt road. She lifted the bowl of corn onto her head and steadied it before she dropped her hands to let them swing free as she walked. It was a quarter mile to the *molino*.

A dog brushed against her leg as it passed on the road. She secured the bowl with one hand as she bent over to slap the dust from her calf where its dull and matted hair had touched her.

The mangy animal stopped to inspect a discarded chicken bone in the road. The outline of his ribs was clear underneath his gaunt frame as his teeth bore down on the bone. He looked

like so many others in the neighborhood who barely survived on irregular offerings of table scraps. He snatched up the chicken bone and trotted off.

To the east, the two tiers of mountains that bordered the valley of Jamastran stood in green silhouette against the sky. A red sun rose behind them. Sunlight glinted off the curved coral tiles of the roof tops. Destina loved this time of day.

A rooster crowed at her from atop a fence post. The little village of Zamarano, Honduras, was coming to life.

The small adobe houses of the four hundred families who lived there were clustered along a network of intersecting dirt roads. Some had once been cow paths which had been beaten down into roads by the daily trek of cattle to the river which marked the southern boundary of the little town. Throughout the town and to the north were small farms. The only commercial buildings in the village were *pulperias*—tiny convenience markets that people operated out of their homes, the *molino* where corn was ground, a small corrugated tin coffee bean warehouse, and a large barn where leaves from the nearby tobacco farm were hung to dry.

Beside the river ran the large heavily traveled dirt road which connected Zamarano to other villages and larger towns. Beside this road lived the poorest people in Honduras, squatters on public land. Their one or two room homes were constructed of adobe or scrap wood. Daily they swallowed great clouds of dust as the trucks and busses thundered by.

On the east toward the mountains stood the *Colonia*, uniform rows of tiny two- room, government built, grey brick homes. Their monotony was broken only by a few new trees and bright colored flower beds.

“*Buenos días*,” Destina called out to her neighbor Señora Muñoz who was standing at her fence.

The plump middle aged woman smiled. “*Buenos*. You must be happy to have to have your brother home for a visit.”

Destina nodded. “It’s been good having him here. He has to go back today though.”

“Well, tell him I said hello.”

“I will.”

Destina continued on to the small building that held the *molino*. Three or four people were in line ahead, each waiting to give a bucket of corn to Concha, the middle aged woman who operated the mill where the community brought their corn to be ground each day.

At four in the morning, every day of the year, Concha rose from the cot she slept on inside the *molino* and opened her doors to a steady stream of customers until about noon when it was safe to leave her equipment unguarded behind a locked door. She then returned to her own home about a mile up the road to join her husband and children for the day. Destina, or one of her brothers or sisters, had been coming here each morning for many years.

Concha paused to dab at the sweat on her forehead with her apron. She smiled as she took the corn from Destina and dumped it into the large grinder. Destina held the bucket under the blades to catch the cornmeal paste as it squeezed out. When all the kernels had run through, she reached in to scrape out the last bit.

She dug into her pocket and pulled out a few *lempiras* to pay the amount showed by the scale, and headed for home.

Destina stepped back into the kitchen and breathed in the aroma of fresh roasting coffee beans. Sierra shook the coffee beans in the skillet atop the *fuego*. She waved at her sister, gave the pan a final shake and lifted it off the heat.

Mami stepped in to take her place. She set another skillet over the fire and dropped in a generous dollop of *manteca*. As the lard began to sizzle she poured cooked red beans into the hot grease and mashed them as she stirred.

Papi was awake by now and sitting at the table with Tavio.

Destina leaned over to kiss her father on the cheek.

“*Buenos Días, Papi.*”

“*Buenos Días.*”

There was something different in Papi’s eyes this morning. Maybe yesterday had scared him too.

Tavio ran a hand over his close cropped head where the thick, black waves used to be.

“I’m hungry *hermanita*. When are those tortillas going to be ready?”

“Soon.”

It was nine months now since Tavio had lived with them. Destina had hardly recognized him the first time he came home after joining the Army at 18. His thin frame had hardened and filled out and he was quieter, more serious.

Mami was standing in the doorway of the kitchen. She sighed as she returned to her work. “Looking at Tavio is almost like seeing your Papi when I first met him. There’s a little grey in Papi’s curls now and working all these years as a *campesino* in the fields has turned his skin to leather. But your father is still a handsome man don’t you think?”

*What had gotten into Mami today?*

“Of course Mami.” She put on an apron. “I’ll go wash my hands and start the tortillas.”

As Destina walked back through the living room Liana trudged in looking as if she would rather still be asleep. Half of her dark brown braid had come loose and hung over her face. She slid down the wall and leaned against it as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

Destina brushed the *tierra blanca*, clay whitewash, from Liana's clothes. "Niña, be careful of that wall. You're too big to be so messy." She tousled her hair. "You'll be eight next year. It's time for you to start learning to make the tortillas."

Destina stepped into the kitchen and lifted a bowl from the hook on the wall. Into the bowl she spooned some of the freshly ground *masa*. She scooped out a handful and rolled it into a ball.

Destina dropped the ball of the cornmeal dough onto a circle of bright yellow plastic that Mami had cut from a grocery store bag. With quick, practiced movements she patted the ball of *masa* flat, smoothing the edges to make a uniform shaped tortilla. Just as she had finished the first tortilla Mami took the beans off and set them aside. She took the tortilla from Destina and tossed it onto the *comal*, the hot metal plate that covered the front half of the rounded surface of the *fuego*.

With nothing but the tips of her fingers, Mami flipped and pressed down the tortilla twice, cooking it about a minute on each side until air bubbles formed. The finished tortillas were wrapped in a towel to keep warm. Destina continued passing her mother the shaped tortillas until a tall pile was cooked and ready to serve.

On the back half of the *fuego* were two round holes in the adobe. A pot of water sat on one, coming to a boil over the fire below. A small metal chimney rose from the back of the *fuego* to carry the smoke out a hole in the roof.

After it had boiled Sierra lifted the hot water and poured it into a coffee pot then switched one pot for the other on top of the *fuego*. After a few minutes she pulled a sock shaped coffee strainer from the pot and stirred in a generous handful of sugar. She poured Papi and Tavio full cups of the strong, sweet brew, then little watered down cups for Liana, Chano and Benita. Last she served Mami, Destina and herself.

Mami dished scoops of beans onto two plates. On the side of each she set a chunk of *queso blanco* cheese. She carried the plates to Papi and Tavio. Papi bowed his head to pray. Papi was a quiet man; he had little to say, except when he was talking to God.

He prayed for the family and their relatives, for their crops, for rain in its season, that they would have good health and that the children would do well in school. He thanked the Lord for the food on their table. He closed his prayer with the words, “*Gracias Señor*, that you brought my family home to me safely. Keep us safe today.”

He lifted his head and turned to Tavio. “So, *mi hijo*—” He smiled as he crumbled the white, salty cheese on top of his beans. “Have they taught you to shoot a gun yet?” He tore off a piece of tortilla to scoop up a bite.

“Si, Papi.”

Papi nodded. “*Bueno*.”

Mami’s back stiffened. “I don’t like talking about guns.”

Papi’s eyes bore into hers. “Don’t baby him; he’s got to be tough to be in the army.”

Mami’s lips stretched into a thin tight line. She didn’t say anything else as she dished up plates of food for the little ones.

After everyone else had finished, Destina, Sierra and their mother sat down to eat.

The women chattered and laughed together as they quickly ate their meal.

Mami put the last bite of a tortilla in her mouth and brushed the crumbs from her skirt.

She patted Destina as she stood up to carry the dishes to the pila for washing. “You have done enough this morning. Liana and Sierra can help finish up the chores. You need to get ready. You have a bus to catch.”

“*Gracias Mami*.”

She stood from the table. “I do need to get cleaned up.” She followed her mother outside and filled a bucket of water from the *pila*.

Destina carried the full bucket into the small bathing shed behind the house. She slipped in and closed the flap of blue plastic that served as a door. She quickly sponged off, deciding not to wash her hair because it was so late. Destina wrapped herself in a towel and hurried back inside to her bedroom. She slipped on her prettiest skirt and best blouse, combed her long, wavy hair and pinned it back with silver flower-shaped barrettes.

She double checked her appearance in the small mirror tacked to the wall. Her hair pulled behind her ears accentuated the high cheekbones of her round face and showed off her smooth, brown skin. The large dark eyes that looked back at her asked, *Is Mami right? Am I pretty?*

She straightened her skirt. It was time to go. She could not miss this day.

In the living room Tavio sat on the couch stuffing his clothes into his backpack for the trip back to the army base. One of the chickens wandered in the open front door. “Chhhh!” He hissed as he kicked at the bird. The young hen squawked and fluttered out the door.

Tavio looked up and saw Destina. “You leaving now?”

Destina nodded.

“I’ll take you to the bus stop.”

“Okay.” She dipped an empty coke bottle into the bucket of clean water beside the kitchen wall and dropped it into a plastic grocery bag. She kissed Mami good bye, clutched the bag along with her purse and followed Tavio out the door.

As Tavio swung open the gate to the road Destina turned and waved goodbye to Mami.

“*Cuidado*,” Mami called out.

“I’ll be careful.”

Tavio pulled his bike onto the road, swung his leg over and mounted the seat. Destina hung her bag from the handle bars. She wore a straight skirt that fell to her calves. She smoothed it down and settled her slender frame—one of the few things she was really comfortable with about herself—onto the crossbar. They dodged cattle as they bounced along the dirt road on the short ride to the bus stop.

They slowed to wave at Papi chopping weeds in the field that bordered the rutted path. Papi wiped sweat from his face and waved his *machete* in the air.

When they reached the main road, Destina jumped from the bike and joined the small group waiting under a tall Eucalyptus tree.

Tavio leaned against the handlebars of his bicycle. “I’ll be gone by the time you get back.”

She wanted to say, “Thank you for being there for me yesterday.” But all she could do was touch his arm.

“Goodbye Tavio.”

He patted her on the head. “See you next month *hermanita*.” He turned his bicycle toward home. Destina bunched in closer with the others under the tree just as the bus arrived.

Their transport was an old yellow school bus from the United States. Across the rear door was painted a mural of a Honduran mountain. Underneath the mountain scene in ornate letters were the words *Jesús es el buen pastor*, Jesus is the good shepherd.

The doors swung open. She stepped onto the crowded bus and spotted a few seats toward the rear. She made her way down the aisle almost to the back of the bus and dropped into a seat. The doors closed and the bus headed for the first stop, the town of San Diego.

As the bus turned onto the main highway the driver's teenage helper inched down the aisle. "Jutiapa," Destina said when he came to her seat. She handed him some *lempiras* and he dug into his pocket to make her change.

In almost no time the bus was making its first stop. Outside her window people swarmed around Pulperia Karlita—the small neighborhood market that also served as the San Diego bus stop. A Coca-Cola truck was parked in front of the store. One man carried cases of soda into the building. His partner stood guard with a rifle while money for the delivery of the product changed hands.

The sight of the truck made her thirsty. She got off the bus and went to the front window of the *pulperia*. Inside, a middle aged woman leaned on a counter behind a glassless opening covered by a metal grate.

"Give me a *Coca*," she said to the woman behind the grate. Destina slid her money through the iron bars.

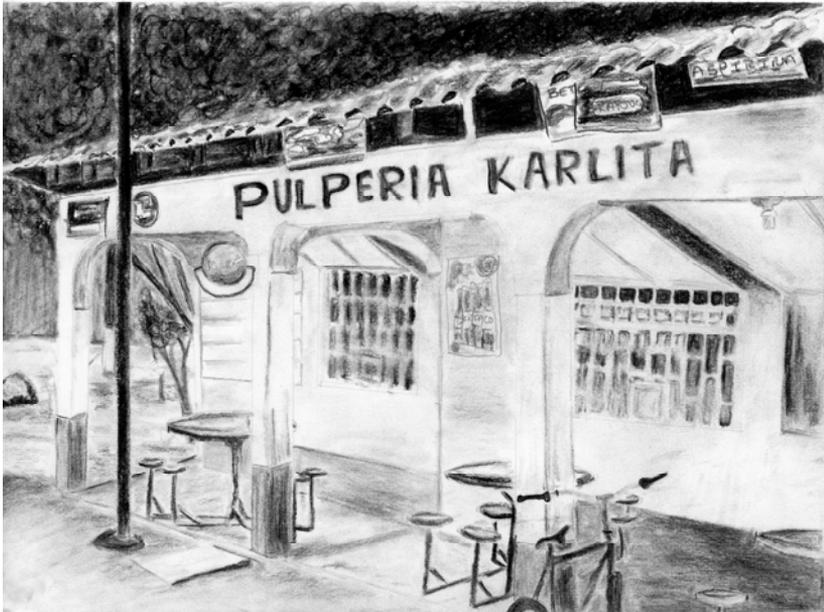
The woman poured some coke from a two liter bottle into a small baggy and held out another bag full of straws. Destina chose one and stuck it into her drink.

She sat down at one of the picnic tables in front of the store. As she sipped her coke she looked wistfully at the other empty picnic tables.

When the new school term began in February, the tables would be filled with *estudiantes colegio*—middle school students—laughing and talking as they waited for the bus.

She closed her eyes and imagined herself in a uniform just like the ones on the girls that would be sitting at the table. Her white shirt was perfectly pressed and the blue pleated skirt hung just right.

She pried herself from her daydream and looked over at the bus. It was almost full. She tossed her empty drink bag onto the ground among the other bags and gum wrappers scattered



in the dirt around the picnic tables and got back on the bus.

As they pulled onto the road Destina stared back at the *pulperia* until she had completely lost sight of it.

She was 12 now. Just a few weeks ago in early November, she had graduated from sixth grade. Mami had proudly hung her graduation certificate on the living room wall.

Destina leaned back against the seat and rested her head against the worn upholstery. She closed her eyes. She did not want school to end, but after *Primera*, students had to pay for their own textbooks. There was no money to pay for books, or school uniforms. Her family couldn't even afford the daily bus fare to attend the nearest colegio, which was in San Diego.

Destina's spirits perked up when she spotted the turnoff for Jutiapa approaching. Raquel, her cousin and best friend in the world, was graduating from *colegio* today. Raquel had chosen

Destina over one of her brothers for one of the limited number of seats allotted to the families of the graduates.

The bus pulled into Jutiapa just in time for the ceremony. Honduran folk music was playing softly over the loud speaker in the rented banquet room as Destina edged quietly into the room.

She spotted *Tia* Sofia in one of the middle rows of folding chairs that had been set up in the center of the room. Her Aunt pointed to an empty seat between her and *Tio* Lucero. "Sit here," she mouthed silently. Destina made her way down the row of chairs and leaned down to kiss them both.

Just as she sat down the crowd quieted. The music faded as the teachers took their place on the platform. Chairs scraped against the floor as people shoved their seats closer together and late comers hurried to their places. A straggle of capped and gowned figures said goodbye to friends and family members in the crowd and took the front rows which had been reserved for them.

Destina scanned the front of the room to catch a glimpse of Raquel among the wave of dark blue gowns. *There she was.* Raquel turned around and gave a little flutter of her fingers. The two of them had always been close. Growing up in a houseful of boys, Raquel had made Destina the sister she never had.

Raquel tucked her wavy, brunette hair behind her ears and grinned at Destina as she adjusted her cap.

Destina smiled back. Raquel gave a quick thumbs up, then shifted her petite frame in her chair and settled to look toward the platform where the ceremony would soon begin.

Destina's throat constricted as without warning, an overwhelming discouragement swept over her. She felt like she was suffocating.

*It will never be me. I'll never wear the cap and gown.*

She smiled at all the right times during the ceremony and the festivities afterward, but the hurt never went away.

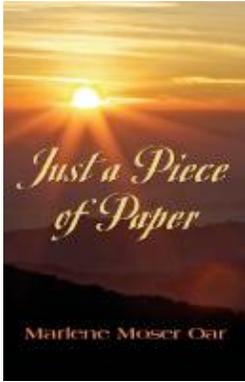
When all the celebrations were over and it was time to go, Raquel threw her arms around her cousin. “I wanted you to share this day with me.” She cupped her hand around Destina’s ear and whispered, “You’re my *prima favorita*.”

“I wouldn’t have missed it,” said Destina. And she meant it.

After the goodbyes Destina caught the last bus home. Mami met her at the bus stop.

By the time they walked home everyone was already in bed. Destina tiptoed through the living room. From the room off the kitchen she heard Papi groan in his sleep. Mami eased through the kitchen towards him.

Destina slipped into the tiny bedroom that she shared with the four other brothers and sisters still living at home. She could hear Sierra’s soft snore. Exhausted, she laid down beside her, but sleep was a long time coming—and troubled.



*Destina's long, hot bus ride is almost over when an ordinary day turns into one of terror. As Destina looks at the rifle pointed at her, she promises God that if He gets her through the day alive, she will fight for a dream that she had given up as hopeless. Just when her goal seems within reach, everything crashes. Destina must choose between her dream and the young man who loves her.*

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