

# Inadvertent Sculptors: fragment of a memoir

By Alicia Grega

We are branded by our neighbors.  
Shaped by their sounds;  
carved by their colors...

## *chapter one*

Mario's philosophy was all about bass-  
It pumped beneath our feet at LaPaloma.  
Son of Gloria and Tony –  
an Italian sounding trio, but this was Arizona –  
She an Apache, he a Martinez,  
but they were still Catholics.

Saw the icons on the wall with Jésus portrait  
when handing over rent check,  
or complaining about the roaches.

Fat Albert on drugs and Budweiser lurked around the corner.  
Four kids and no job, he hit us up for groceries –  
the fruit of our food stamps and WIC checks –  
when he caught us coming home from the store.  
“Yo! Let me make a sandwich.”

His Uncle a Vietnam burnout known only by “Uncle”  
Was hot for the sister.  
Skinny except for gut,  
50+ bald black man,  
He brought her blue daisies,  
Plates of soul food,  
And pledged his devotion in sticky '70s jive

We wanted to understand,  
but we didn't.  
We learned later on he'd been shot in the head -  
a wound from the war -  
He was never quite the same.

Dan Savage wore butt-tight jeans,  
pastel polos with the collar turned up,  
feathered hair and plain old white Reeboks.  
Moved in that winter with French-Canadian height-impaired wife.  
Brought a blind cousin out from New England  
for a little score and a spell in the sun.  
The poor bloke got busted with a quarter pound of weed  
on his way back to Vermont.  
A misdemeanor in Tucson: street value of 125 bucks  
A felony in Vermont where it'd sell for 900.

And then there was Lisa—  
a haunting, dissonant chord.

Welfare mom, but too busy for her kid.  
She was born to draw attention,  
cultivated it with volume and promiscuous strut.  
A natural beauty when she wasn't strung out.  
We'd sit on the second floor patio  
pretending to read or have a smoke  
and soak up her poolside flirtations.  
Lisa never missed a party.  
Stayed up all night – no concern for mañana.  
Woke up while we cleared the dinner plates;  
her beauty faded, charms quieted.

We made the mistake of opening the door  
at midnight on New Year's Eve  
There was spillout from the festivities a few doors down.  
Lisa was decked out and coked up.  
She fluttered into our apartment  
chattering in rapid Spanish spattered blessings with a toast – salud!  
Shot us with kisses on both cheeks  
and too passionate hugs--

We were paralyzed.  
Our intoxicated comfort dissolved in fearful awe and apprehension.  
The buffer zone gone ... our rose-colored glasses bleached true.

Pablo wasn't Mexican ... his mother half Spanish – he was a little over weight  
with long clumps of dark blonde hair  
Not dreds, just dirty.  
Shacked up with a Colorado girl who never came outside.  
Piles of clothes, festering dishes and a mattress centered on living room floor.  
She was a radical sculptor;  
he tried to sell southwestern landscapes and glazed clay lizards

When Pablo showed interest in the book shelf, we loaned him the Olympia  
Reader Vol 2. even though we had barely sampled the pages.  
Then one day we noticed they were gone.  
Evicted?  
No goodbyes.  
They left a lot of shit behind, but not our book.

Derrick was a line cook, '80s cokehead balding mullet.  
Creeped us out on first impression but we wouldn't trust our instincts  
Afraid to be snobs,  
not wanting to be rude, let him in once for a glass of OJ  
and cigarette after a late night swim.  
Found wallet emptied in the morning  
Knew it was him but there was  
nothing we could do.  
Knew better than to start trouble  
We were out of our element in this barrio.

Sold some white freak a skateboard.  
He hadn't paid in full when he got tanked up one night  
and stumbled over to LaPaloma.  
When door pounding and thunderous threats  
didn't entice us to open sesame  
he smashed through the window  
climbed through jagged glass residue to get his ten bucks back.

We were eight months pregnant.  
Dialed 911 and knocked him cold with a baseball bat.

Later while scrubbing blood from the carpet,  
we found a souvenir -  
silver crucifix wrapped in wire.  
Would have been creepy to wear it, but we kept it in a drawer for years.

Wally lived on the complex far side  
with a pretty wife and two small boys.  
He worked part-time for the family business -  
Pottery imports from Mexico.  
Only sold drugs to stay off welfare.  
Moved pounds at a time – no small fries.  
A smart guy with quiet class, he'd come out to keep the peace  
And everyone would listen.

He was the only one we could trust.  
Shared our thoughts of life and future over  
pitchers of Miller Lite at Mario's Pizza.

## *chapter two*

It was Bobaloo when we moved to the bungalow on Edison Street.

Lou, the spitting image of Olive Oyl.

Bob was a mechanical systems engineer for the Marriott Corp.

Big arms – a stocky man.

Brooklyn born, a former cop, ex-military too.

Moved first to Nebraska, where he picked out Lou,

then to Tucson in pursuit of his own American dream.

We house sat during their trip to Alaska.

Tended to their two huge mutts and the little beagle mix.

The teenage brother was in our care that year -

pretending to attend Catalina High School.

We let him sleep next door that week.

He'd squat all day watching cable and get stoned;

Snoop around then report on what he found -

The motherload of prescription drugs,

and a 2 x 3 box of porn paraphernalia.

Printed smut, leather, chains and devices he'd never seen.

Bob returned early with injured arm.

Got but by something and developed gang grene on the cruise

He never fully healed: grew bitter.

Said the brother stole his jar of pennies.

It's trying too hard to be normal – to conform—that makes some people strange.

Our landlord, a former high school principal or superintendent?

divorced his wife late that spring.

We had to move out so she could move in.

Left behind custom-painted kitchen in deep Sonora shades,

cool Sallito tile,

fire pit we dug and masoned,

the pumpkin patch from fall.

The dance instructor we rarely saw took our daughter's dog –

a greyhound mutt we named Carmen –

to her boyfriend's ranch,

where she'd train him to rustle cattle.

The new place said no pets.

We released sweet Syd cat to the prickly pear lined alley,  
gave the neighbor all his food –

She promised to leave a plate for him as long as he kept coming back.

Sunrise Ridge was in The Foothills, where the upper crust dwelled.

Small apartments tucked in white stucco units like those caves on the sides of mountains that hold hundreds of nesting birds.

Units stacked and separated by artificial streams in the desert.

Landscaped gulches. Took a foot bridge to check the mail or use the pool.

(You gotta love swimming in January!)

A pudgy kid next door with hyper scrawny little brother, obese mom and dad.

He worked for FedEx and she did as little as possible until they opened up that diner in West Tucson.

We tried it once – greasy breakfast, but didn't have the nerve to tell them it was nasty.

An empty place next to them until the Lees moved in.

A visiting professor from Korea with Americanized teens,  
they were stricken with our children.

Cooked pungent kim chee then supped at a card table.

Only thing on the wall, a huge US map – roads highlighted where they had traveled.

Like us, a bookend, was Jean-Phillipe,

fresh out of France with blue, brilliant eyes and thick dark hair. He hardly spoke English, but we smiled a lot.

He cooked at Ventana Canyon – posh resort – but wanted to wait tables for tips.

The pale skinned Penny Lane, a glowing strawberry lidded waif, tended to their son

and attended community college on Arizona's dime.

Her father on the border patrol down in Douglas –

she brainwashed Jean-Phillipe into striving for the same.

After the kids, we had little to share but hiking.

Picnicked at Sabino Canyon, let our naked toddlers splash in the stream,  
photographed each other and saguaros.

Four years, three homes, but we never got attached.  
We missed the natural water,  
Everything green in deciduous hues.  
Sounds of family crowded rooms over phone lines on holidays left us lonely.  
There were no sad goodbyes when we left.  
Those we liked best gone already.

Packed nostalgic treasures in the car,  
sold what we could,  
and gave the furniture freely to the family  
of a Sunrise Ridge lackey whose home had just burned down.

There was no heartwarming homecoming back in PA.  
Found a place near the sister after two months' torture at Mom's.  
Faced with no work and few connections,  
the family we left behind, now, were strangers

Welcome to Scranton, we told ourselves.

### *chapter three*

Where ever we've lived, we've pledged to be kind;  
to strive toward compassion.  
But the disillusioned mistake  
kindness for stupidity.  
They try to take advantage for personal gain,  
and sometimes to teach you a lesson.

Dirk offered us a move-in deal –  
clean the place and re-paint, get the first month's rent free.  
We had nothing: we were broke  
How bad could it be?

Worse than words can convey.  
Dirty filth, bugs and disrepair,  
rotting brownies on the wall,  
broken eggs oozing in the sink,  
tampons in the tub.

Too late to move elsewhere.  
Had to deal with 30 bags of garbage and trashed possessions left behind.  
Scrubbed stair columns with a toothbrush,  
baseboards on hands and knees.  
One hundred twenty hours of labor later there was no doubt we'd been had.  
No help from next door and more gossip than pity.

Dirk shared the double and gave us the creeps.  
The vibes of a pedophile though we had no reason to suspect.  
The results of paranoia?

He challenged our IQ at backyard BBQs  
after a few glasses of wine  
it was time to redefine existentialism.  
We had read Sartre, Camus but he memorized the dictionary.

The corner framed back yards of West Scranton laid out like  
old Mediterranean courtyards –  
grape vines stretching along the fence.  
We see into each others' homes through back doors and kitchen windows.

The lonely Lebanese widow pattered about in the mornings,  
Clipped mint from a patch between houses.  
Gave us mismatched dishes and faded chairs.

Beyond Dirk lived a highly-social '80s-stuck couple, their two quiet kids, and  
demolition man tenant.  
Paul was rumored to be illiterate;  
his only vehicle a dump truck.  
Spoke like an ex-boxer and spent free time with Ma.

That makes three porn collectors,  
Dirk being one too,  
Dirty magazines and Vaseline, tottering stacks of videos.

The sister stopped looking up after she saw full frontal nude Paul in his window  
one night.

Was porn the common thread of America?

Dirk was a traveling salesman and the proud aficionado of S&M clubs and parties  
around the country.  
Power tripping with our free spirits;  
he got bitchy when the rent was late.  
No excuse that our car was stolen.  
No excuse that paychecks got held during our quest for better jobs.  
NO EXCUSES he demanded.  
And we left, even though the eviction threat was lifted.

Moved a block away –  
not far enough.  
The place was huge and freshly remodeled.  
We thought things were looking up.  
Harley Davidson Way across the street:  
the driveway a meeting place for a little known West Side bike clique.  
No trouble though, they were good people.  
Nothing compared to Lizzy.

We suspected she was wacked, but gave her a chance.  
She'd violently threaten her kids, notice us watching, then laugh.

She would never really hurt them, she swore.  
It was her ex that was abusive!

We shook our heads with compassion,  
ate out of her hand.  
The new husband kind, but dumb.  
He didn't stand a chance  
A compact blond Irish-American,  
He slaved away for the man all day and then answered to Lizzie at night.  
She started cheating right after child no. 4 was baptized.  
He left as soon as the proof began to stink under his nose.

Their half of the double sank quickly without him into a swamp of filth.  
She harbored teenage runaways;  
served alcohol to minors  
and neglected her children for parties.

Found a card from child welfare slipped under our door one day.  
A concerned someone up the street had called when the toddler was found  
naked and alone in the middle of the street.  
We told them what we'd seen, but she lied.  
Put on a pretty face and kept the kids.  
Still on welfare, they were her income.

Lizzie's stereo was the dominant influence on our consciousness.  
In the rare moments it ceased, we would stay home even if we had plans.  
"It's only on 16," she'd snarl. Banging wars began on shared walls with hysterical  
insults for punctuation.  
Cops out front once, twice a week.  
We only called once.  
Usually it was the crime watch folk down the street.

Lizzie's cronies found their way into our half of the house through a basement  
passage way connecting old coal closets  
Took ever American cent they could find – goodbye to coin collection, kids piggy  
banks.  
They had to be tweaking – up all night for days.  
We had all we could take.  
Took an offer from a wannabe artist who did Kermit the Frog impressions  
& moved into an apartment too sad to be true.

You could pretty much touch the ceilings.  
Called it the Midget house, cried at the lack of choice,  
but at least we'd save money, catch up.  
Ended up in court instead when Kermit jacked the rent 30 plus percent after only  
two months.  
We moved, never saw the summons to appear in court, lost the case when we  
failed to appear.  
(Paycheck garnished for years – even after our divorce.)

So tired of moving – it has to end soon.  
Fingers crossed.  
The new place, still fresh, feels safe, but we'll see.  
The blue house across the street a freak show  
There's 20 in there, sounded like guerilla warfare the week of July 4<sup>th</sup>.  
Could they seep in through the windows?

The children flood into the street, like Lord of the Flies.  
No one watching or guiding,  
No warnings, no scolding.  
Out on the back porch it's more peaceful –  
Goth computer techs from the gorgeous green Victorian walk their dogs in the  
alley.

New landlord the silent type.  
Never tried to impress us with smiles or charm,  
but takes the garbage out Sundays if we're not there first.  
A senior woman next door stares in envy cause he's funding our repairs.  
Four gay Latinos on the bottom left of the house - friendly so long as we don't  
park in their way.  
Their animated Spanish floats in on cool evening air.  
Familiar and comfortable when you give up on translation.  
The music of a dovecote broken by shrieks from the Blue House.

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