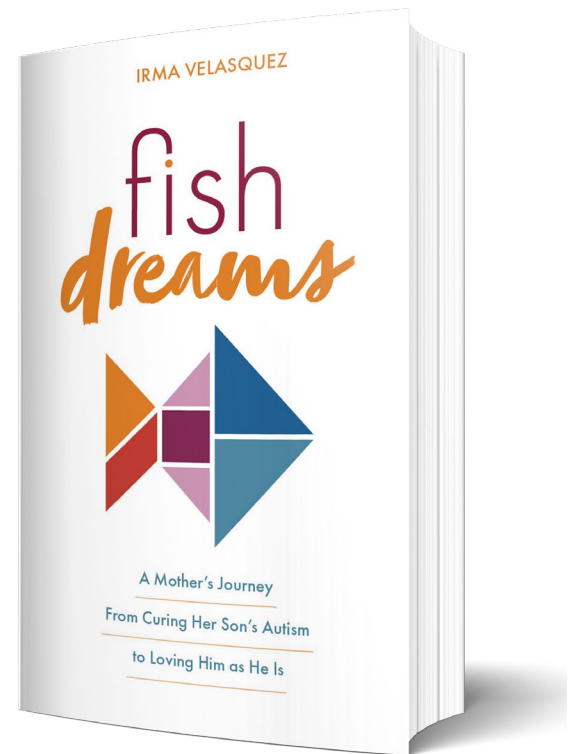


IRMA VELASQUEZ

# fish dreams

When her son was diagnosed with autism at the age of three, Irma Velasquez was devastated. It was the pre-internet era of the early 1990s, and both information and experts were hard to find. Desperate for answers, she sought out therapists and educational programs designed to teach Aaron how to become successful in school and in life. But those early years ended up teaching Irma more than they taught Aaron. Irma realized her desire to “fix” her son had been a masquerade to fulfill her own needs, and she began to love him just as he was: perfect.

In her new book, *Fish Dreams*, Irma writes poignantly about how she channeled her fear and frustration into love and acceptance. Told through detailed memories and raw inner truths, she recounts how her personal growth led her to a very special bond with her son; one that taught her a new way of looking at the world, and at herself.



## About the Author

Irma Velasquez was born and raised in El Salvador and immigrated to the San Francisco Bay area in the early 60s. Her son's unexpected diagnosis of autism moved her to address a gap in the education system and social services for underserved youth. She launched a school for children with autism and designed creative programs for young adults of different abilities. Her memoir is inspired by her love for her son, her dedication to her community, and her passion for art.

Irma is a social entrepreneur and an artist and advocate, inspiring social change through the power of self-expression, social engagement, and inner awareness.

## A Fish Out of Water

As an immigrant from El Salvador, Irma often felt like a fish out of water within American society. She soon realized that her son's experience was, in many ways, similar to hers: born into an over-stimulating environment and being forced to swim.



Raising any child is a challenge. Raising a child with autism — a syndrome that is both complex and varied across individuals — is simply a challenge of a different kind.

Over time, Irma discovered that she could step into Aaron's world and let him lead, and through that shift, he began to open up and share his inner world with her. She became his safe space, and as he became more comfortable in his own skin, he became her window to a more spiritual way of living in harmony with herself.

## Nothing to Fix

*Fish Dreams* is the story of a deep bond between mother and son. It is the story of a radical shift that can happen when a parent steps into their child's world. It's a memoir on holistic parenting, on autism, and what it means to love somebody truly as they are.

You'll find yourself reflecting on your own relationships as you read about the following:

- ~ The early signs of autism
- ~ A history of autism from the 1990s to today
- ~ The importance of trained individuals in your child's development
- ~ The methods Irma discovered and implemented with her son
- ~ How to love your child as the whole human they already are
- ~ Practices that will help you connect with yourself in a more intimate way and help you find your own inner guidance.



## Chapter One

### *Aboard Pan Am Flight 1206*

Doors slammed one after the other, and soon a caravan of cars moved in synchronicity towards the Guatemala border. Father was leaving.

“I’ll be back soon,” he said, and kissed the top of my head. I was nine years old when he left.

Jorge, my brother, dangled out the window, looking back at the line of cars behind ours. It seemed like our entire family was joining the caravan—aunts, abuelas, uncles, cousins—all were going to say goodbye to my father and his fellow travelers on the 3,100-mile trip to California.

It was late March 1963. The day was overcast; dark clouds announced the usual afternoon thunder showers. A quiet stillness settled in our car. Father and Mother sat in the front seat, Jorge and I in the back with Abuela Mirtala, Father’s mother, between us, clasping a wet handkerchief in one hand and holding mine with the other. Father’s knapsacks were already on top of Romeo’s Plymouth station wagon. This was our last trip as a family before we said goodbye.

“When are you coming back?” I asked. I don’t know if Father heard my question but I did not ask it again.

Romeo, his wife, and three daughters lived in California where many of Mother’s relatives

settled in the 1940s. They were heading home to Sebastopol, a farming town in Northern California. Their vacation was over, and they may have been short of cash.

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“We have room for one more,” Romeo said, somewhat kidding, to my father who jumped at the chance to travel to Los Estados.

“Por supuesto,” he said reassuringly, and within a few days gave notice to his boss and packed his bags for an adventure he could not imagine.

“Are you going to stay with Romeo?” I asked as we drove to his destination.

“I’m not sure where I’ll be—maybe with your Aunt Consuelo or Uncle Edgar in San Francisco,” he said, comfortable with not knowing.

“Will you be back for Mom’s birthday?” I asked.

“That’s two months away,” was all he said. Her birthday was in September, six months away. Father was not known to pay attention to details. I stopped asking. There were too many unanswered questions I couldn’t hold.

A dense, green jungle lined the international highway that took us to the border between Guatemala and El Salvador. Jorge knelt on the back seat, counting the cars behind us as I opened the window and stuck my hand out;

somehow, maybe I could slow the car down. We drove for hours, but it seemed as if we had just left the city. I leaned my head against the front seat and glanced at my father's slim face and pencil mustache. We sat without saying a word, each of us looking at the road ahead.

The car ahead of us slowed down; we had reached the border. As we came to a stop, two men in green uniforms with machine guns strapped to their backs appeared on each side of the car.

Father turned around and looked at my brother. "Take care of your mother and sister," he said, and ran his fingers through my mother's thick, black hair. Abuela Mirtala dried tears from her eyes and reached for my father's hand, the last time she would touch her son. Cataracts had taken her sight years before.

"Cuidate hijo," she said as she looked straight ahead.

"I'm not leaving until they check the papers," he said, and touched her hand.

We stood outside the car, the four of us, while the soldier walked back to a small office with Father's passport and papers in hand. Abuela waited in the car.

When I saw the soldier walk towards us, I hid my face in my father's bony chest. He smelled like he did when he came home from work—sweaty, with hints of cigarette smoke.

The man in the uniform signaled my father over and pointed to a piece of paper. My father shrugged his shoulders, then walked back to the car. Something was not right.

"¿Que pasa?" Mother asked.

"I don't have the right visa to go into Guatemala," Father said. I noticed a drop of sweat coming down his temple, felt relieved, and could now take a breath.

"Do they want a mordida?" Mother asked. Father was not going to spend his last dollars on a bribe.

"They won't let me go through," Father yelled

over to Romeo, who was walking towards us to see what had happened.

Romeo's pale face turned red as he threw his hand in the air and sputtered unintelligible words in English.

On our drive back to San Salvador, I was happy Father was still driving the car and not Uncle Sergio, who had been going to drive us back home. Romeo followed our car but before we entered the city the caravan took a detour to a roadside shack, where we stopped for tamales, pupusas, and quesadillas. I quietly celebrated the mishap.

A few weeks later the scene was repeated, but this time only two cars followed the station wagon to the border. The man in the green uniform seemed to recognize my father and after a few minutes nodded in approval.

We got out of the car and hugged Father goodbye one last time. Then he and his fellow travelers drove away. Jorge and I stood in the middle of the highway, waving to the hands that protruded from both sides of the car like octopus tentacles waving in the wind. I placed my arm around Mother's waist, Jorge held tightly onto her hand. She cried in her quiet manner until the wagon disappeared in the distance.

Two months had passed when we received a telegram from Father: SELL THE HOUSE. SELL THE CAR. BRING THE KIDS.

Mother was a loyal wife who didn't question Father's decisions. She sold everything we owned, including the new bike that had been my birthday present earlier that year. With the proceeds of the sale, she bought plane tickets for the three of us. She left for Los Estados in September of the same year with one thousand dollars in her purse—barely enough to set up a home for the four of us in a new country. Jorge and I waited for our turn.

My brother and I boarded Pan American flight

1206; the flight to San Francisco left at four o'clock on a balmy December afternoon in 1963. Disoriented by the last-minute hugs and tears of the only family I knew, I smelled my abuela's ancient scent one last time as she cradled me tightly against her breast. Her fingertips held onto my sleeve just one more second before she slowly released the tip of my blouse, then reluctantly let go. Then a tall, slim woman wearing a pillbox hat and a dark-blue uniform extended her hand, inviting us to follow her across the tarmac and up the aluminum stairs that led us inside the double-engine plane. Fifty years later, the last-minute calls at airports take me back to that day, when I experienced the first of many unknowns. A pat on the knee and the sound of the seatbelt locking into place invited me into a new reality.

"It's going to be fine, honey. Soon you'll be with your mom and dad," she said, and glanced over with a kind smile.

Of course it was fine; it had always been fine. In my nine-year-old self there was nothing but fine. I held the smile on the lady's face as long as I could and wondered what it was I didn't know.

I put both hands over my ears as the plane began to move down the runway. Engines rumbled, the cabin shook, wheels retracted, and then there was a brief silence. Jorge leaned over close to me as we looked out the tiny window. Down below were faded spots that had once been homes, office buildings, and white churches. They began to transform from rectangles to dots and then to splattered, lightened shades of brown. I imagined my abuelas, tias, and primos, down on the ground crying and comforting each other, telling themselves it was all for a better life in Los Estados.

Did our lives really need to be better? How could they be? Each breath of ocean air deepened the memories; each bite of pine-apple sweetened the

faces of those who shared it with me. I already missed the leftover scent of burnt firecrackers on New Year's Day and my grandmother's touch each time I came to see her in her one-bedroom home.

The sun faded on the horizon, and I began to feel uneasy. I adjusted my taffeta skirt, trying to ease the rough edges that prickled against my thighs. I really didn't like the serious-looking outfit Abuela Esther had made for me: a dark-blue blouse and skirt to match. Until then, I hadn't been too particular about what I wore, but this time I felt myself fighting against the grown-up outfit. I wanted to go back to my light, cotton sleeveless dresses with floral prints. But this flight was a special occasion. It was time for a somber wardrobe.

Suddenly a voice came over the speaker. We were now flying over Guatemala. Ahead was the Gulf of Mexico. The sky was turning a deep indigo blue. The ocean was dark and ominous, but in the distance, lights began to twinkle—signs of boats or maybe homes. A terrain I had only seen in textbooks appeared, except that this scene didn't have any borders. All I could see on the horizon was an endless ocean. Suddenly the world seemed immense and limitless.

Darkness covered the terrain for hours until the enchanted city appeared below. Mother had told us about her experience when she flew over the City of Angels. That meant we were almost home, but home had a different meaning now. Free from walls, a roof, or floors, now it was a place that had no place on the map of my consciousness, but a home, nevertheless, anchored only by my parents. As we walked through the skybridge I saw Mother, tears in her eyes, standing next to Father, whose mustache now covered most of his broad smile. We embraced and welcomed each other home to the cold winter days that were

ahead of us.

The next morning, I opened the door to a new world and temperatures I had never experienced before, close to freezing. The streets were empty and gray, with rooftops whitened by frozen dew of the early morning. At the park, people looked at my brother and me as if we were aliens from another planet. San Mateo, a suburb south of San Francisco, was homogeneously white. I now had a new identity; I was different. Years later, the civil rights movement brought home the violent realities of our new homeland. Riots and an assassination in the City of Angels made me wonder if this was the best decision Father could have made.

Those first years in the new country were lonely. The ground beneath me had been moved, and I was trying to establish my foothold on the familiar. A box of photographs kept me company when I felt alone. Blurred black-and-white images taken with my father's 35-mm camera were thrown together in a pink box with more recent color photographs.

In black and white: snap—me, a toddler with my face covered with black volcanic sand. I remembered joyfully rolling around in this fine, soft powder until I could not stand the fine particles in my most intimate crevices. When I ran into the warm ocean, Abuela screamed, “¡Cuidado!”

Next shot, in color: standing next to my new blue bike in front of our home in California—one foot resting on a pedal, the other ready to push myself off to school. That bike cost my mother a day's work of scrubbing toilets and cleaning houses. I never forgot that.

Next shot: Aunt Rose and Christos at church, ready to recite their wedding vows. Behind them, a priest, his hands stretched over their heads. They married a year after we left. I missed being

their flower girl.

A black-and-white shot: at the airport. Mother wiping her tears with a white handkerchief, standing at the boarding gate.

Faded color: Jorge and I on the sofa with Cousin Esther, our arms around each other as if we were old friends, sitting in her home overlooking the Pacific Ocean. I was now part of a family I had only experienced in black-and-white photographs. The day we took that picture we had finished watching The Beatles on The Ed Sullivan Show. Screaming girls on the television screen made no sense to me. Nor did my cousin's behavior as she jumped up and down in the living room, shaking her Ringo-style hairdo from side to side. I felt as if I was watching two movies playing, overlapping each other on the screen: one where I was a character in the story and the other where I was sitting in the theater, watching the screen.

Black and white: Father, alone, his tall, thin body bending over, elbow on his knee, his foot on the fender of the Plymouth station wagon, holding his ticket to California. Was he a gambler or an explorer? Did he know he would not return to his homeland for another thirty-five years? Did he portend the political stability that followed in El Salvador in the '80s or fear the spread of communism Castro and Che started in Cuba in 1959? Father never gave me an explanation for his decision. And Mother didn't have the answer. I was the only one in our family who continued to return to visit the country we left behind, year after year, until all my closest relatives had died and my childhood friends had moved to other countries. Maybe I was waiting or searching for the answers to the question I asked Father the day he left. In my sixties, the questions remain, and I wonder how my life would have been different if my father had not tried to cross the border a second time.





## Chapter Two

### *Wooden Angels*

My first premonition of motherhood came in the dark, humble home of a prestigious palm reader on the outskirts of San Salvador. My cousin was a believer in these forms of knowledge and far more curious than I was about my future.

“Will I have children?” I asked, not knowing what else to say—a common question in a culture where family is at the center. Something inside me rebelled against the norms—at least for the first thirty-six years.

“I see two, maybe three,” the shriveled old man said as he examined my palm with his dark, bony index finger as if analyzing a rare manuscript. Many years later, after several attempts at motherhood, I remembered the palm reader’s prediction.

In my teens, I spent my summer vacations in El Salvador, deepening my relationships with the family I had left behind. I longed for my childhood friends—cousins with whom I’d shared my formative years and adults who held me tenderly during my childhood. My life in California was passionless, and since I had no close friendships except for my parents and brother, I fled back to the place where I was born.

Soon after I landed at the Salvadorean airport, I would rush to Abuela Esther’s home, anticipating her warm hug. I’d drive up to her house on top of

the same dusty street where I grew up and find her leaning out her front window, chatting with the passersby, waiting for me to appear.

“There she is!” she’d say to her companion and abruptly drop the conversation, open the door, and run to meet me. How could I not be close to her? She raised me during the first five years of my life, while my parents both worked to make ends meet. A handsome woman with bronze skin, hazel eyes, and thick, silver hair, she drew me into her arms the moment I saw her. She was not one to sit for long. I followed her around the house as we caught up with the news about family back in Los Estados, then to the patio where she tossed morsels of dried tortilla to the turtles that came out from under the rocks when they heard the clicking sound of her leather heels on the tile floor. Her life fascinated me.

I’m still in awe of her ability to birth nine and raise seven children as a single mother. Even though Abuelo Miguel was in the house, he was bed-ridden after a massive stroke and also needed her care. I wanted to know how she did it and would listen to the stories of schemes she contrived to bring food to the table: sewing for the local military billet, inventing new dishes to sell at the local market. As the church artisan, she fashioned garments on wooden angels for the

parades through the barrio during Holy Week. A favorite artistic creation was the multicolor sawdust carpet that covered the dusty street in front of her house and blended back into the dust after the procession passed over it.

When Abuela Esther passed at the age of seventy-six, she had buried four of her children. Two had died as toddlers to an unknown childhood disease, a son to a bullet fired by a jealous lover, and her oldest daughter gave in to a sudden heart attack at the age of forty. The first few years of my life with Abuela Esther made me see the cruel realities of life and the beauty and resilience that exists within us, as well as the drive to brave the lessons of time.

I admired her resilience and resourcefulness. For a woman with little education, she had insisted her children have some form of skill or occupation. She lived in the silence of her experiences, not wanting to talk much about her past. I wonder if this was a way of distancing herself from the pain of the losses she experienced in her life. I later asked myself if I wasn't doing the same.

While in my mid-thirties, unmarried and childless, I had given up the idea of having a family in any form. My life path would be different from that of my mother or grandmother. I was determined to avoid Abuela's steps of single-handedly raising even one child without a partner, and marriage seemed more like an obligation than a future. Privileged to be brought up in a two-parent home, I was determined to do the same or not have children at all.

Then I met Sherman.

On our first date, as we walked down to the Rodin sculpture garden on the Stanford campus, a young woman jogger passed us by, pushing a stroller. Sherman suddenly stopped, looked back at her, and gave me a gentle smile. I had just met him—how could he so blatantly stop our conversation to check out a pair of bare legs? I quickly realized he was looking inside the stroller,

not at the woman.

"There's a humanoid in there," he said with a smile and looked for my reaction. I relaxed and was charmed by his curiosity and spontaneous response.

Later in our courtship, one morning, still in bed and looking

out at the clear sky through the attic window, I became curious.

"Do you want to have children?" I asked, wanting to hear his plans.

"I don't think we should have them until we're married," he responded and proposed at the same time. So, I said yes to motherhood and marriage without saying a word.

In November 1991, we celebrated Sherman's thirty-eighth birthday, our first wedding anniversary, and our future child in Santa Fe, New Mexico; the City of Holy Faith, The Loretto Chapel and adobe homes on cobbled streets reminded me of El Salvador and drew me back years later. Just like my new life as a wife and mother-to-be, the dry desert of the Southwest was new terrain. I left enchanted with the open skies, the reflecting colors of the sunsets against the stone-peaked mountains, and the vulnerable landscape, which bore the harshness of nature. Thin sheets of snow covered the sagebrush on the khaki-colored fields as we took in the dry, open desert.





## Chapter Three

### *Gates of Hell*

Aftershocks of the Loma Prieta earthquake shook my world on a warm November day in 1989. Security as I knew it was about to change near the rubble of uncertainty that had befallen the San Francisco Bay a few weeks before. A discomfort I had felt all my life when my feet left the ground was now a conscious companion.

Stillness followed the 6.8 jolt on October 17. Muffled news reports came from car radios. A span of the Bay Bridge had fallen, and the thoroughfare to the East Bay was closed. For several months the Bay Area was gridlocked. For me, a new life was about to begin.

I first saw him standing, arms behind his back, at the front entrance to the California Cafe, holding his aviator jacket in one hand as if waiting for a ride. He had an unassuming, casual look. His straight, black hair was slowly disappearing behind short strands of white. His skin was dark except for a few blotches of pink I later learned was eczema. His brown eyes were barely visible amongst his Asian features.

I tried not to be overly apologetic, but was pressed to explain why I was a half-hour late for our first date.

“As I was walking out, the phone rang. Something told me I had to get the call. It was my brother, excited about his newborn daughter,” I said, fully

aware of doing one-last-thing before leaving the house.

“What’s her name?” he asked. He was calm and showed

a genuine interest in knowing more about my niece. As we resumed our conversation in the sparse restaurant, our thoughts flowed smoothly from one question to the next.

Over black coffee we began to untangle the web of strangers that had brought us together. Two sisters orchestrated our meeting. Each one knew bits and pieces about each of us. Sherman’s college friends chimed in and thought we would make a good match.

“What is he like?” I asked the sister who called me unexpectedly.

“I’ve actually never met him. But I know his friend,” she said,

and she began to talk to me about Sherman’s college classmate.

“I met Harriet last week for the first time when I picked up my birthday cake,” he said as he gulped down a whole egg yolk in one bite.

“Well, happy belated birthday! How many?” I asked. “Thirty-six, and you?” he said.

“Not far behind you. I’ll catch up in January,” I replied.

Two strangers introduced me to the man I later

married. Hildy and Harriet were proud of their matchmaking skills, having successfully “married off” several friends.

When I think back to that moment, thoughts of my mother return. Oftentimes when she and I were in the throes of a visceral discussion, she knew just what to say to shut me up.

“I know you,” she’d say, with a certainty that only a mother could own. Those words infuriated me and made me feel alone and misunderstood. Of course she didn’t know me, I thought, as a teenager and as an adult woman. How could she? How could strangers who don’t know us be so sure about us? I felt naked with a certainty that they did and I didn’t.

As we sat in the Cafe, Sherman continued to talk and I continued to listen, intrigued by the story of how his family immigrated from China to Hong Kong before settling in Portland, Oregon. We exchanged similar experiences of our lives in a new country and shared memories of early school days that were very similar. Kids pushed each other out of the way to get a closer look at the new kid in school. Curious eyes stared at us on the playground. I recalled the laughter that erupted around me when I could not pronounce a word. Sherman nodded; he, too, had been there.

He remembered bussing tables in Uncle Ding’s restaurant, earning a dollar an hour, and picking strawberries for three cents a pound, until his fingers turned red. For moments we were living in each other’s lives. Our fathers had worked as gardeners and bussed tables, earning minimum wage. Our mothers had had different aspirations. Silvia, Sherman’s mom, stayed home to take care of her three sons. He lowered his glance when he began to talk about his mother.

“She died two months ago. She suffered for years from scleroderma,” he said in a somber voice. “It’s not hereditary,” he quickly added.

As we talked, he danced his fingers across the top of the table as if it was the keyboard of a piano, a

habit that continues to this day. Music had colored his life as art had mine. He gave me a brief history of his favorite romantic composer, Chopin, and listed his favorite etudes. Embarrassed to admit I knew little about his music, I launched into my love for impressionist artists. We began to talk one language, alternating between music and art. “I have plans to study art in Florence,” I blurted out.

“Aren’t you too old for that?” he said. I liked his straight, matter-of-fact response, which left little room to guess what he was thinking. There was a familiarity underneath the worlds where both of our passions rested.

Somehow our experiences in a new country had given us a familiar place from which to start our conversation. Art and music led us towards a deeper exploration of our relationship.

Neither one of us wanted the afternoon to end. I wanted to know more about this mysterious stranger. In some curious and odd way, he seemed very incisive and honest.

“Do you want to see The Gates of Hell?” he asked as he interrupted our walk towards our cars.

“Ummmm, sure,” I said, surprised by the sudden question and embarrassed I didn’t know what he was talking about.

“The new Rodin sculpture,” he said as he acknowledged my hesitation.

In full display amidst the Stanford campus was the Rodin sculpture garden that had been completed just a few years before, in 1985. I felt like an impostor; how did I not know about this? How could I be thinking about Florence and know nothing of Dante, his famous work, The Divine Comedy, or even this treasure of a garden a few minutes from my home?

We walked into a magical garden where massive bronze sculptures rested peacefully outside the Rodin Museum. Two female figures, stooped by the weight on their shoulders, took their place among several standing pieces. I moved towards one and Sherman to the other.

I glanced at Sherman, standing several yards away from me in front of The Fallen Caryatid Carrying Her Stone. The afternoon sun glazed the sculpture with light. He circled it slowly and moved his hand around the voluptuous hips, then over the curved back of the feminine figure. The sensuality of his caress made me move towards him.

"Is this your favorite piece?" I asked.

"Not necessarily. Sculptures like to be felt," he answered, without taking his eyes off the sculpture.

On the other end of the garden was The Gates of Hell, the famous, unfinished work by Rodin. Full figures of Adam and Eve guarded the gate. We walked together towards the masterpiece, which resembled the unfinished façade of a door.

I looked up and pointed at the small sculpture above the entrance.

"The Thinker," I said.

"It's actually called The Poet. It's supposed to be Dante looking down on the bloody mess," Sherman said, and looked at me. For a moment our eyes met as we shared a mutual delight in the depictions of hell before us and the drama within

the fold of each figure on the side of the gate: the desperate sinners, Paolo and Francesca—two lovers collapsing into each other's arms, the pain of unfulfilled love earning its place amid other fallen figures. A masterpiece inspired by Dante's journey through hell, purgatory, and finally, heaven.

Sherman explained the story in detail and without any pretense. I moved close to him as we walked around the garden, both of us silently engaged in the drama of each sculpture. It was a private tour through a garden of melted bronze and unknown dreams.

Over the past thirty years, I've replayed that November day over and over in my head. It's been the story I tell those who ask how I met my husband and the father of my child.

I didn't know how our story would unfold or that under the afternoon sun we were recapping our lives together. Somehow, we stepped into a story that was already written, like the autumn leaves on the sycamore trees, which did not have a destination as they fell to the ground that met them below.

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