

# ONE CITY ONE STORY

Home Movie

Jennifer De Leon

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## Introduction

The Boston Book Festival presents the sixth annual One City One Story program, a project that aims to promote literature among the teens and adults of our city and to create community around a shared reading experience.

Our goal is to make a short story available to all free of charge. By distributing 30,000 printed copies of Jennifer De Leon's "Home Movie" in both English and Spanish, and by providing audio files, downloads, and additional translations on our website, we aim to ignite discussions that reveal the many perspectives and viewpoints of Boston residents. This year we are pleased once again to have Dunkin' Donuts as a partner in our efforts; thanks to their support, copies of the story will be available at many Dunkin' locations in Greater Boston—please visit our website for a list of locations.

We hope you will read, enjoy, and discuss "Home Movie" at local meet-ups, library events, and on our website. If you are inspired by this story to discuss it or even write your own, check out the One City One Story discussion questions and writing contest on our website.

Visit [www.bostonbookfest.org/1c1s](http://www.bostonbookfest.org/1c1s) to learn more.

We hope you will join us at the Boston Book Festival on October 24th to meet Jennifer De Leon and take part in a Town Hall-style discussion of the story.

**ONE CITY ONE STORY: READ. THINK. SHARE.**

## *Home Movie*

It was winter. It was night. In the kitchen, Eduardo showed Linda the video camera he had bought at Sears that afternoon.

"How did you pay for it?" She gripped a spatula and pointed it at the black machine. "I had to buy it," he said. "So we can make a tape to send with Antonio." His brother, Antonio, was leaving for Guatemala later that evening.

Linda squinted at the green numbers on the microwave. "In four hours!"

"I know," he said, "that's why we have to film stuff now. So the whole family at home can see what it's like here."

"Stop saying *at home*. This is our home." She flipped the hamburger over and pressed the spatula down on the mound of flesh until tiny grease bubbles burst in all directions.

"Is there any more Kool-Aid?"

"On the top shelf."

"Where are the kids?" Eduardo referred to them as one unit. The kids: Karla, ten, Eric, seven, and the baby, Lucy.

Linda plopped a pink hamburger on the pan and the room filled with the sound and smell of raw fatty meat sizzling on a stove.

"They're watching T.V.," she said, before pivoting to face him. They had always been the same height, only nowadays she weighed thirty pounds more. He needs a haircut, she thought. Of course he forgot to put that on his damn to-do list.

Last Tuesday she had come home early after a dentist appointment, stretched out on the queen bed, and prepared for a luxurious nap. She cleaned houses all week so it was unusual to have a block of hours in the afternoon to herself. When she awoke, unconvinced she had actually slept, her head hurt. She searched for the bottle of aspirin in Eduardo's bedside table drawer. That's when she had found the list.

There were ten items in total—tasks he must finish before leaving. At least this is what she'd inferred from the distinctly drawn diagonal lines that carved through most of the items. *Talk to Antonio; Get ticket; Health insurance; Money, banks; Go to doctor, dentist, among others. The one that clutched at her the most: Write letter to Linda.* A couple of flight reservations and a travel agency toll free number were scribbled sideways in the right hand corner of the list. Linda's headache turned to a migraine and she considered everything from confronting him that night, to popping the entire bottle of pills, to calling her mother-in-law in Guatemala. Instead, she cried hard in a way she had not done since childhood. *Make home movie.* That was last on the list.

In the kitchen Eduardo told her, "I know what you are thinking."

"Do you?"

There was silence. And lots of blinking.

He exhaled with his eyes closed and hoisted the video camera onto his shoulder. This video was really for him, to remember his family. "Well, I'm going to film the kids, and the house, and all the stuff we have, even if we don't own it—the house I mean." Immediately he regretted the traffic of words.

"Oh, so you *do* want to buy a house?" Linda selected a large knife from the wooden block and sliced the edge off a well-done hamburger patty. She stabbed it with the stainless steel tip and lowered the meat into her mouth.

"Don't start, Linda." He wouldn't look at her. He pushed the zoom button. In. Out. In.

Linda chewed with intent. After she swallowed, she said, "Families stay together in a house."

"You mean live together. Live?"

"That's what I said." She picked up the newspaper on the table and tossed it at his stomach. His reflexes were strong. He caught the paper in his right hand while balancing the camera in his left. "Hey, careful."

"Even when times are tough, Eduardo." She gave the camera lens a dirty look.

There was a popping sound on the stove and Linda returned to the pan. With her back to him, she said, "I circled some ads in the paper, open houses, for Saturday." She wanted to see what he would do, if he would break.

Eduardo pressed the pause button. "You're never satisfied. We moved to a bigger place, bought a Camry, what else do you want?"

She laughed. "What kind of a man are you?" She wasn't sure whether to grab him by the collar or give him the silent treatment. The latter had worked in the early years of their

marriage when he would have done anything to get on her good side.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

She had eaten halfway through the hamburger; the knife lingered in her hand.

"Linda," was the only word he managed to push out. Linda, whose meaning in Spanish throbbed in his mind.

He called to the kids down the hall. "Karla, Eric, Lucy!" None of them responded. He was competing with the television. He asked Linda to say something into the camera. She hesitated, brushed her hands on her sweatshirt that had neon-colored puffy paint all over it. The dried plastic gobs resembled stars, planets, and comets on the solar system of her chest and stomach. Her sneakers, untied.

"No. Shut it off, Eduardo." She pulled the scrunchie from her hair and rewrapped it in a bun.

He'd remember her younger self, the woman he fell in love with in the seventies. Tonight, he simply asked her to smile into the camera.

"No. You're not going to put me in your video."

He ignored the possessive wording: *your video*. "It's okay," he said. "You can record over it later. See?" With his thick brown finger, he tapped the delicate buttons on the side of the camera and showed her as he hit *stop* and *rewind*. His finger shivered at the sound of little wheels turning inside the machine. The two of them hovered over the camera, puckered their lips, and leaned forward.

"I'm going to change my clothes," he said.

"Why?"

"I mean, my shirt, at least my shirt."

"But you're not in the video?"

Instead of answering, he recorded the mess of the kitchen

table: a hairbrush, coupons, cockroach repellent.

"Here." She shut off the burner. "Let me film you. You said you want the family to see our home, our kids, to see us. So let me record you."

He looked at her suspiciously.

She looked at him suspiciously.

"Bueno, I'll be right back." On his way to the bedroom, he glanced at the clock.

After he had changed into his favorite pants and a clean shirt, Eduardo urged the older kids to clean their rooms, change their outfits, brush their hair, and say something into the camera. They did none of the above.

"Who is gonna see this, anyways?" Karla asked him without taking her eyes off the television screen. Tonight she and Eric were watching *Double Dare* on Nickelodeon.

"The entire family in Guatemala. You have to be good. Come on."

"Wait," she said, without blinking.

"No. There's no time."

A commercial played so Karla gave him her full attention. "Can I be the host of the show?"

Before he could answer, she tumbled off the couch and returned in seconds, announcing into a wooden spoon that she would give a tour of the house. He filmed his first daughter, his only son, zooming in and out, capturing their big cheeks, healthy faces.

"Give it!" Eric yanked the wooden spoon from her.

Eduardo pressed stop on the camera. "Listen. You are all good, I mean it."

Linda picked up a bill that had arrived earlier that week and asked Eduardo about it. He skimmed the letter and with

a sense of relief in his voice, explained that it was not a bill, that it was simply a letter stating a change in management. He pinned it on the corkboard that was already decorated with glossy coupons, overdue library notices, school lunch menus, and a "5 lbs! You did it!" Weight Watchers bronze medal.

"So, we don't have to worry about this?"

"No." He zoomed in on Linda's face but he had pressed the button too hard. The shot was of her earring-less ear. In Guatemala she would have seemed older than her thirty-six years. Even some grandmothers, the ones in the rich parts of the capital, looked younger than his wife tonight.

Lucy crawled into the kitchen. Her plastic pink barrette hung on by a small wisp of hair. She stood up and held on to a leg of a wooden chair. When her pacifier plummeted to the floor, she pointed her pudgy hand in the direction of the refrigerator. Linda grabbed a slice of Wonder Bread and smeared a spoonful of refried black beans on it before folding it in half and handing it to her.

He continued to film his kids, his wife, his home in America. The pink canopy bed, the Cabbage Patch Kid dolls, G.I. Joe action figures, the encyclopedia set on the living room bookshelf. He did not film the ugly bathroom or the water stains on the ceiling, nor did he explain that they did not own the full set of encyclopedias. Linda purchased a new one every time she went to the grocery store because there was a deal between Britannica and the Star Market. Every time a family spent over fifty dollars, they got one volume. They were up to "L-M."

He shifted the camera toward Lucy, who was now wearing her sister's heart-shaped sunglasses. Karla chewed bubblegum beside her. Lucy stared at the camera and began to cry.

"What is it?" Eduardo knelt down to her.

"Dad, I think she's scared of you talking to her from behind the machine. She doesn't know it's a video camera and that we're gonna see it on TV later." She lifted her baby sister onto her hip. Eduardo wondered how Karla got to be so confident. When had this happened? Had it been as simple as a new tooth growing in?

He followed the kids into the living room. Eduardo videotaped the framed photographs on the walls, holding the shot on the three kids wearing similar plaid-prints—dresses for the girls and a button-down shirt for Eric. Karla and Lucy even wore matching patent-leather Mary Jane shoes. Beside it, hung a painting of Lake Atitlán. They'd taken a family vacation to Guatemala before Lucy was born. At the market in Panajachel, Linda had negotiated the price while Eduardo watched over the kids. It was that sun-drenched day that something shifted in him. For months afterward, he had suggested to Linda that the family move back to Guatemala—permanently—and each time, she had refused. Next, he taped the entertainment system that he and Linda had bought on a no-interest payment plan two years ago. Like many things in their home, it was the result of slow and careful decisions. Nothing was spontaneous; nothing was an afterthought.

"Dad, it's my turn," Eric tugged at Eduardo's pant leg.

"Okay," Eduardo whispered to his son. "What do you have here? Tell me, tell the family that is, about a typical day."

Eric showed off his Lego castle as Karla kept stealing the wooden spoon from him in order to describe her daily routine, ending with the nightly ritual of brushing her teeth with bubblegum-flavored toothpaste, something Eduardo had always found strange.

Linda called to him, announced that Antonio was in the driveway. Normally, it would have been strange that Antonio had not come in the house. He was crazy about Linda's cooking, even her hamburgers. But for now, she went along with the plan and said nothing.

Downstairs, Eduardo held on a little too long as he gave each of his kids a hug goodbye. They skipped down the hall. Eric made karate moves with his hands and feet, chopping at the air. Lucy waddled behind, struggling to catch up to her brother. Karla zigzagged between them, almost knocking over Lucy. She was a flash of a thick ponytail in the dim hallway light. Eduardo recorded a final image: the empty hallway with its plastic runner covering the yam-colored carpet. He ejected the videotape, before leaving the empty camera on a table.

Eduardo had carefully carved out this exit, however cowardly it would look to others. If Linda knew he was preparing to leave, she'd find a way to disrupt his plan, convince him to stay—again. Outside, Antonio honked the horn. Eduardo reached for his heavy jacket and Linda blocked the doorway.

"It's not that cold," she said.

He glanced at her feet, noticing her sneakers were tied tight. "Well, you never know."

"Never know what?"

"Not now, Linda."

"You'll just be in the car, no? Just dropping off Antonio, right?"

Antonio honked again, a bit louder.

"Why don't I go with you?" Linda suggested. "Karla and Eric can stay home alone, and we'll just take Lucy." She walked toward the kitchen, dug her hand inside the cupboard

and pulled out a plastic bottle.

"It's not a good idea to drive on the road this time of night with the baby." Eduardo zipped his jacket as if to say, *And that's final.*

"Why not? We drive at night with the kids all the time." Linda poured cherry Kool-Aid into the bottle and secured its cover. She didn't wait for his approval, only yelled to the older kids to say they were leaving and to behave or else. Then she bundled up Lucy in her one-piece mint-colored pajamas with white plastic feet.

"Because, Linda." In the small of his back, a drop of sweat fell in an S shape.

She wasn't listening. She was zipping, securing, fastening, as if bracing herself for the final battle. If Eduardo was really going to do this, she was not going to make it easy for him.

At first, simply writing the list had been enough to propel him to another land, another life, another way of being in the world. Then, it was too late. Somehow, seeing the words on paper had made his plan real.

Antonio honked the car horn longer, louder.

"I'm coming," Eduardo said in a whisper. He could hear Linda outside by the car.

He didn't look back at the row of shoes by the front door, a pile really, and he ignored the squeaking of the screen door. Outside, he faced the humming car, the silhouettes of his brother, his wife, and his baby daughter. He slithered into the driver's seat, as he was the one supposedly driving Antonio to the airport.

In the car, no one spoke. He rolled down his driver's side window. Steering wasn't enough to dull the edges of



his actions. Antonio played with the window knob. Lucy eventually punctured the silence when she said, "Bubba."

The red lights couldn't turn green fast enough. Soon they were on the highway, heading east toward Logan Airport. Linda's stare in the slice of the rearview mirror stiffened him. He surfed the radio stations for something upbeat, even if it was in English.

"Hold on a minute," Linda said.

Eduardo turned the volume knob to the right. He wanted any and all distraction, even radio advertisements like the Jiffy Lube jingle that would likely play in his ear for the next two days.

"Turn off the radio," Linda said to Antonio, who was seated like a corpse in the front passenger seat. "I have a question." She loosened her seatbelt and leaned forward.

"Hm?" Antonio tapped the dashboard.

"Why did you pick us up so we could drop *you* off at the airport?" The jumble of words was enough to prove her point.

Eduardo swerved into the left lane, just missing the metal guardrail.

Linda wondered how Antonio could just go with the motions after all she'd done for him. She'd welcomed him to this country like he was her own brother. Early on, when he lived with them in the apartment on Leonard Street in Jamaica Plain, she used to do his laundry, even his underwear. She had always defended Antonio whenever Eduardo would complain about his adolescent ways. It's an adjustment moving here, she would argue. Give him time, she would say. Whenever Antonio's girlfriends had come to the house, Linda had received each one like a new sister-in-law. She'd guide each *señorita* into the kitchen and assess how well they

did or didn't offer to help, how fast they whipped up onion dip or artfully displayed the chiles rellenos on a bed of lettuce leaves. Then, Linda would report back to Antonio. This one would make a great wife, that one a good mother. This one is lazy. That one is trouble. Antonio had always listened to her. Linda had felt protective of him.

Several seconds passed. Antonio didn't answer. The only sound was the whistling of Lucy drinking juice from her bottle. Linda wondered how they could be so stupid to think she was so stupid. They drove past the green sign that read, *Logan Airport, 1 1/2 miles*. They slipped through the Ted Williams Tunnel, a concrete vessel one hundred feet beneath the Boston Harbor. When they emerged, a layer of steam coated the windows. Soon, another sign directed them toward Departures.

Eduardo felt like everything in his body was slowly gravitating south. His mind in his eyes. His eyes in his heart. His heart in his stomach, and his *cojones* down by his ankles. He wondered what was wrong with him. Then he thought about how all the hours and dollars and layaway items had never added up to any version of happiness for him. Why wasn't it ever enough? He imagined Linda's face when she found the letter he had left for her in an envelope underneath her pillow. In it, he had also left money and an apology, aware that neither would ever be enough.

He pushed the red triangle button for the hazard lights and stepped out of the car. He stood beside it. Leaned one way, then another. Passengers pulled their luggage up concrete ramps. Slim travelers smoked their slim cigarettes, and a pair of lovers anxiously soaked up the time before the inevitable boarding of flights. Antonio didn't move from the passenger seat. Neither had Linda. Lucy slept.



"Hey, pal," a female airport security officer called to Eduardo. "If you're not dropping off a passenger, you'll have to move."

He nodded. Linda rolled down her window just enough to slide a white envelope toward him.

"Keep your letter," she said.

His body tensed. His thoughts stacked. "Linda..."

"I know," she said. Her face was a wet smear of mascara.

"Look," he said. "I just can't anymore."

"Take it." The envelope dropped to the ground in a swoosh, like an oversized piece of confetti on New Year's Eve. "Linda, I want you to read it."

"How could you even think of doing this? What is wrong with you? What is in your head?"

He had no answers for her.

"You don't think I want to leave some days too, Eduardo?"

"Where would you go?"

"That's not the point!"

Her voice startled Lucy, who gazed at her papa through the window, confused. Her face sent his mind spinning. What was he doing?

The officer snapped her fingers. An old couple in matching trench coats turned in their direction.

"Ya!" Eduardo said louder than expected. He pounded the windowpane. The heat of his hand left a silhouette, a palm print engraved until the next rain or snowfall washed it away.

"You'll be sorry."

"Linda..."

The airport security officer marched closer, gripping a pad and pen.

"Know this," she cried. "From this moment on, we don't know you." She pushed the lock button down with her

thumb. "Let's go, Antonio."

Eduardo watched the car leave the curb. Soon, the taillights blended in with the others and they were gone. He secured his bag onto his shoulder and stepped through the automatic double doors.

On the ride back home, Linda tried to ignore the lingering smell of her husband's Old Spice aftershave. She did not let her mind wander to new definitions: ex-husband, separated, divorced. Antonio drove at a too-safe pace, slowing down at yellow lights. The roads were empty. He turned on the radio. A cheerful broadcaster announced the weather forecast: cold tonight, cold tomorrow.

"I tried to talk him out of it," Antonio said.

Linda closed her eyes. She began to make a list of her own.

"I was going to say something. But you know Eduardo."

*Go to bank tomorrow morning.*

"You know how he is."

*Buy sewing machine. Start tailor business.*

"Once he had made up his mind..."

*Cancel credit cards.*

"Linda?"

*Call Richard?*

When they arrived at the house, Antonio shut off the engine and walked around to open the door for Linda. As he reached for the handle, she shooed him away. "I'm not handicapped." She unbuckled the car seat and carried it inside with Lucy still in it.

“Let me help.”

“Get out of here.”

She locked the door behind her and shut off the outside lights.

Inside, she put Lucy down in her crib, the one that all three kids had used, and she found her pink fuzzy slippers from the Christmas Tree Shop underneath her side of the bed. *Her side of the bed* passed like a puffy cloud in her mind. She turned up the heat and welcomed the buzz of the radiator, with its surprising comfort.

### About the Author

Jennifer De Leon is an author, an educator at the Boston Teachers Union School in Jamaica Plain, and an instructor at GrubStreet. De Leon is the editor of the International Latino Book Award–winning *Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education*, published by the University of Nebraska Press in 2014. Her stories and essays have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Fourth Genre*, *Ms.*, and numerous other publications. De Leon, who was born in Jamaica Plain, earned her MFA in fiction from UMass Boston. She is currently working on a novel.

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