

All Chaos on the Home Front

Luis and Frances get a big break, and begin the rebuilding. Then things fall apart

CELESTE FREMON

Published in the *L.A. Weekly*

November 12 - 18, 2004

*It is a question of strength,
of unshed tears,
of being trampled under,
and always, always,
remembering you are human.*

—**Jimmy Santiago Baca, "Oppression"**

In the first days after Luis bails himself out, no one wants to think about what will happen if criminal charges are re-filed in three weeks when Officer Rudy Chavez, the prosecution's primary witness, returns to town. Frances and the children are mostly awash with relief at having the adult male of the family back in the house. After six and a half months without him, they are reluctant to let Luis stray far from their sight. Estephanie piles into the car unasked each time he runs an errand. The three littlest boys — Frankie, Elijah and foster child Mando — follow Luis into the bathroom, duckling-like, if he tries to grab a solitary shower. Even Gennisis the baby can now identify her father's voice and has taken to emitting a series of insistent little yelps when he enters a room she occupies.

Frances is less demonstrative than the kids. She and Luis tiptoe around each other emotionally, neither wanting to damage this honeymoon period with a quarrel. Yet, during random and distracted moments, seemingly without conscious notice, Frances leans in his direction, as if giving in to the deeper part of herself that has longed to have someone else to lean against these past months, rather than always being the person on whom everyone else depends for absolutely everything.

Luis' own moods tend to whiplash between euphoria and fluctuating waves of free-floating anxiety of the sort that often accompanies release from incarceration. On top of this undifferentiated angst, Luis also copes with the very real fear that his freedom is merely a chimera that will soon vanish if and when he has to go back to trial.

In addition to all the obvious reasons Luis prays the D.A. won't re-file, there is the messy matter of his bail. It turns out that his \$8,000 bail fee applies only to the original case — not any future re-filing. If prosecutor Lou Parise again charges Luis with drug dealing, as he has said he will upon Officer Chavez's return from vacation, Luis must come up with new bail. But there's one loophole. If the charges are filed within 15 days, then the original bail fee will remain in effect.

At the last court date, the prosecutor finally says that he'll do his best to make the decision within 15 days. "I don't want to do something that will cost Mr. Aguilar any more than necessary," Parise says. Luis' attorney, Mark Overland, also gets the prosecutor to agree to a meeting at which Overland will argue that there are major problems with the prosecution's case.

To help prepare for the meeting, Overland has asked Luis to make a videotape showing the vantage point that Officer Chavez would have likely had from his surveillance post. But there's a problem: The cops have been resolutely unwilling to reveal the location of the surveillance post to anyone but the prosecution.

Officer Chavez dropped a few clues during the preliminary hearing. For instance, Chavez described his angle of observation and estimated his distance from the Aguilar's back door. Most importantly, he said that he had an unobstructed view of the Aguilar's upper rear entrance and could clearly see Luis accepting paper money and handing the drug customer a small unknown item. All this, according to Chavez, without the aid of binoculars or the like.

Luis has read the transcript of Chavez's testimony so many times he can recite most of it from memory. After scouting around the neighborhood, he narrows the options down to a single area in the northwestern corner of the yard belonging to the neighbor living directly behind the Aguilar's.

The spot in question is part of the grounds of a small, impeccably maintained cluster of free-standing apartments managed by a 40-something schoolteacher named Pat Glas, whose mother actually owns the place. Although their respective properties abut each other, Luis has never formally met Glas, so the next time he spots her in the yard, he lopes over to introduce himself, explaining his case and the proposed video. To his relief, Glas is cordial — even friendly. She tells Luis she has no objection at all to his filming from her property, and says she's positive that Officer Chavez used the yard for surveillance. "He called my mother to ask for permission," she says. Glas says that she was never actually present when the police showed up, due to her work schedule. But other tenants likely saw the cops, she says.

Indeed, a Mr. Delgado who lives in the apartment closest to the fence bordering the Aguilar property says that he and his wife both observed Officer Chavez doing surveillance on several occasions. "At first, my wife thought he was a prowler," says Delgado as he shows Luis the exact spot above a retaining wall near the edge of the property where the police set up shop.

With Glas' permission, Luis returns a few days later and videotapes a re-enactment of the alleged drug sale. As he does so, two things quickly become evident. Number one, there's no question that the spot provides the best possible vantage point of the Aguilar's back door. Number two, Officer Chavez could not possibly have seen the crucial actions he testified to having observed at the preliminary hearing from this position.

Of course, this in no way proves that Luis is innocent of the drug-sales charge. What it does do, however, is to strongly suggest to Overland that Officer Chavez lied under oath. Since, according to three separate witnesses, Chavez also falsified elements of Luis' arrest warrant, the addition of the video leads Overland to believe he can convince a jury of reasonable doubt regarding the rest of Chavez's testimony.

A few days later, Overland explains all this to Parise, who listens, then watches the video mostly without comment. Finally the prosecutor tells Overland that, although he can make no guarantees, he will "do the right thing." "Hey, it'd be one less case," he says.

"Parise's a decent guy," Overland says later, "and if it were up to him alone, I would be more optimistic." But the final decision is up to Parise's immediate supervisor, who is out the rest of the week and is rumored to be a hard-ass.

What Overland does *not* tell Parise is that he has one more bomb to detonate that he will pull out only if and when this case goes to trial. The bomb in question is a "Declaration of Probable Cause" written out by hand and signed by Officer Chavez as another supporting

document to justify Luis' arrest warrant. In it, Chavez declares that on the afternoon of January 23, 2004 (two days after Luis was charged with selling drugs), he was at his surveillance post and saw Luis appear at his back door and make a cocaine deal with another man by the name of Campos. Chavez states that he saw Luis leave the house a short time later "in a vehicle." Shortly after that, officers searched Luis' house. Still later, Luis was arrested "for sales of cocaine."

One major problem with this declaration is that on January 23, when Chavez has written "under penalty of perjury" that he was observing Luis make this second drug deal, Luis was across town at his worksite, a fact that the seven men on his construction crew can easily verify.

When word gets around that Luis has bailed out of jail, many neighbors express support and sympathy. Yet, members of the local Neighborhood Watch Committee — the contingent that had circulated a petition to force the Aguilers to move — are extremely displeased. They make repeated calls to Hollenbeck police station, to prosecutor Parise's office and to anyone at Parker Center who will come to the phone, complaining that they are deathly frightened by Luis' return, apparently seeing even the most innocuous actions as menacing. When Luis goes to talk to Glas about the videotape, or knocks on another neighbor's door to borrow power tools for household repairs, or — quite literally — when Luis walks around the block, it is all noted by the Watch Committee and dutifully called in to Hollenbeck station as evidence of possible witness intimidation.

"You have a community who is very upset," says Senior Lead Officer John Pedroza. "Very upset."

Apart from the intimidation allegation, which seems to have no discernable factual basis, the Watch Committee does have a legitimate concern, namely that Luis' presence back in the house will draw homeboys, a possibility that also distresses Frances. During Luis' six-month incarceration, she made two non-negotiable ultimatums. Number one, Luis has to go to counseling, and number two, he has to keep any and all Tiny Boys away from the house. Although there is some foot-dragging on the counseling issue, Luis' resistance is mostly token. Within the second week of his return, he sets up Thursday afternoon sessions with Dr. Howard Kamler, a lanky philosophy professor turned shrink who works on a volunteer basis at Homeboy Industries several afternoons a month.

Banning the homeboys proves to be far more difficult. When he was in jail, Luis swore that, this time, he was going to keep the homeboys away. Yet, as many are childhood friends, he admitted it wouldn't be easy. "And if we don't move, it's going to be a lot harder," he said.

That the Aguilers should move is a no-brainer. Yet actually accomplishing the move is another matter altogether. They must come up with first and last month's rent plus a security deposit — and that's after they find an affordable house that can accommodate seven kids. Until Luis gets a job and has been working a while, the Aguilers can barely cover their mortgage, much less anything additional. Plus Luis still owes on the bail fee, and the bondsman has recently put a lien against their current house.

In a moment of creative optimism, Luis briefly explores refinancing their mortgage, thinking he can pull a few thousand in cash out of a new loan to pay for the move. He meets with a loan broker who outlines a low-interest rate, plus nominal fees and closing costs. But, when Luis goes to sign the papers, a bait and switch has occurred. The broker now insists he requires a \$40,000 fee to refinance the Aguilers' existing \$219,000 mortgage. Moreover the new loan carries a fixed rate of 8 percent — nearly a full percentage point higher than what

they are paying. Bottom line: The Aguilers will stay where they are, at least for the moment.

And so the predictable drama unfolds: Within days of Luis' arrival, Tiny Boys start showing up like homing pigeons. At first it is only a few friends coming by to say "hi." But, in the manner of an ever worsening faucet leak, the flow of well-wishers begins inexorably to increase. They come, in part, out of regard for Luis, whose past status in the gang still gives him a unique eminence. They also come because the Aguilar household is a warm and vital hive of family activity that particularly magnetizes some of the younger Tiny Boys with less than stable home lives of their own.

Since Luis is no longer on parole, there's nothing illegal per se about having the occasional homeboy on the Aguilar property. "But I don't *want* them here," says Frances. "They're the reason my husband got locked up, and they're just going to draw heat on us now. I won't put my kids through that again," she says. "I won't do it."

Frances repeatedly tells the homeboys that she's sorry but they aren't welcome anymore, that if they need her they can come see her at the Homeboy office. But although Luis locks them out on a few occasions, he feels funny about turning friends — some of whom he's known for 20 years — away altogether. One afternoon in a fury, Frances changes the family's home phone number, hoping to eliminate any more homeboy calls. Down deep, Luis wants the homeboys gone too, yet he is also conflicted and becomes irritated by his wife's unilateral decision. "I don't have any say-so in that house anymore," he says morosely.

Luis' work situation is another source of tension. Until his case is settled, his employment coordinator, Cheryl Mitchell, can't put him on a long-term job. In the meantime, Luis does everything possible to pick up short-term work. He shows up at the Local 300 union hall each morning from 6 to 8:30, and again between 3 and 4 p.m., the main times when jobs are parceled out. In between, he cruises around L.A. County in search of construction sites, leaving his name and number with the foreman when he finds one that looks likely. After two weeks of applications, he finally picks up a two-day and a three-day gig, plus a weekend job when a friend's father needs some help with cement work. The days he is not employed, Luis signs up for every certification course the union has to offer. "Now I'm certified as a forklift operator and for traffic control," he says. "I can already do that stuff, but the certification opens a lot more doors for me."

The ongoing lack of a dependable paycheck is emotionally wearing for both Aguilers and, lacking another outlet, they begin to take out their frustration on each other in the form of constant bickering.

On one particularly embattled day, a message comes in from attorney Overland asking Luis to call him. Luis is taking another class at the union hall and doesn't get the voice mail until late in the afternoon. Luis makes the call with trepidation. It's all going to go bad now.

Miraculously, it doesn't. When Overland gets on the line, he cuts to the chase. "They're not going to re-file," he says. "It's over. This is your lucky day. Now go out there and have a good life. And behave!"

Like captive rabbits suddenly freed but too spooked to leave the cage, when Luis tells Frances the news, both are more stunned than relieved. "That's cool," Frances says uncertainly.

"I hope it's not a trick," replies Luis. "I hope it's true."

According to Overland, the reason why the D.A.'s Office is not pursuing the case is due mainly to the fact that the testimony of the prosecution's primary witness, Officer Chavez, has been compromised. Yet he also praises Parise. "He's a reasonable prosecutor. He deserves credit."

The police have a different story. They maintain that charges were dropped because the community is too afraid for their safety for the case to continue.

"That's nonsense," says Overland. "They can say what they want, but I don't think they'd have won this case."

With the legal threat removed, the Aguilars tentatively resume rebuilding their lives. But they are far from confident. "I keep thinking they're going to arrest me," says Luis. "I think it every day, even though I don't really have a reason."

Frances acts out her own internal cyclones of worry by losing her temper in an unusually acrid scene with a coworker at the Homeboy office. Unnerved by her outburst, she decides that she could use counseling too, and makes a visit to a therapist named Marc Saddoff, who has agreed to see her a few times on a pro bono basis. During the first session, after he hears the details of her past family history and her more recent sources of stress — like her finances and Luis' legal troubles — the therapist asks Frances to estimate how many people close to her have died over the course of her life. Frances is silent for a minute while she does a rough count in her head. "About 20?" she says.

Aside from the lingering emotional imprint of Luis' recent police troubles, there is still the ongoing problem of the weekly cash flow. Although Luis was promised a job the minute his case was resolved, it turns out he can't be hired right away due to a maddening quirk of his union's rules. "There *are* jobs," says Cheryl Mitchell, "but Luis can't be dispatched, because he hasn't worked 300 hours this past quarter." Of course, the reason Luis has not worked the requisite 300 hours is that he was locked up.

"Luis is a great worker," explains union field representative Fred de Palm. "He's eager and he gets along with the other guys. But because of the rule, he has to go to the back of the line."

Of course, Luis could look for a job outside the union, yet if he does he'll be fined. "But I'm really persistent," says Luis. "So I know eventually it'll work out."

For the next two weeks, it *doesn't* work out. At the same time, the Watch Committee has learned that Luis' case has been dropped, and steps up the pressure on the police, who state they have their own reasons to apply pressure.

"Luis has our full focus, our full attention," says one of the Hollenbeck officers. They may not have gotten Luis on the old case, he says, "So we're going to take another avenue. We know he's dirty and we know he's calling shots for the Tiny Boys, so if we don't get him this time, we'll get him next time, or the time after that."

Luis smiles bitterly when he hears this. "If I'm selling drugs, like they say, where's all the money? If I'm selling drugs, why are we having trouble paying our bills?"

"I'm not calling shots," he says. "I'm just trying to rescue my life."

While the police focus on Luis, Frances focuses on the kids. This year, Estephanie is in the ninth grade, Bola in the seventh and Julian in the fourth. Estephanie's natural feeder school is Roosevelt High School, a 5,200-student monstrosity where only 33 percent of all ninth graders are expected to graduate four years later.

Frances is sure her daughter will be lost at Roosevelt, so for the past 12 months she has looked for a reasonable alternative. She settles on a newly opened nonprofit charter school called Oscar De La Hoya Animo, funded by a multimillion-dollar pledge from the boxer himself. De La Hoya limits its enrollment to 560 kids and requires heavy parental involvement. There is a waiting list to get in, but Frances has met the school's principal, Robert Barksdale, through Homeboy Industries, and refuses to let up on the man until Estephanie is accepted.

Estephanie is decidedly unexcited about the new school. "You have to wear uniforms," she complains. "And all my friends are going to Roosevelt." But Frances is adamant: "It's the best thing. You'll thank me later."

Bola has returned to Hollenbeck where he displays more than his usual enthusiasm, although his zeal is likely socially based rather than academic. "I think there's a girl involved," says Frances. "He's taking a bath every night without me asking, and gets his clothes all ironed. He even goes to bed at 9 at night, so he can get up on time."

When she probes him gently for information, he brushes her off. "You're my mother," he says. Frances hopes he will confide in Luis instead. "He talks to Luis, but not like before. I think he's still too worried Luis will disappear."

Although the homeboy situation waxes and wanes, it never completely goes away, a fact that is more and more upsetting to Frances. Yet, when her unhappiness finally boils over into action, it happens over something trivial. She comes home from work and finds five Tiny Boys congregating in one of the back bedrooms staring at the television like bored children in a clubhouse.

When she first sees them, Frances says nothing. Luis has gone to pick up the younger boys at day care, and she decides she'll confront everybody when he gets back. But she doesn't. Instead, she seethes at the fact that Luis hasn't thrown the guys out. "He doesn't like conflict," she says.

The final straw occurs just before dinnertime, and it has to do with a frozen burrito. Like many working moms, Frances likes the convenience of cheap prepared food that a hungry child may grab as needed. Her kids' current favorites are Tina's frozen burritos, bought four for \$1 at Food 4 Less. Each time she grocery shops, Frances gets at least 20 of the things. On this particular Thursday afternoon, when Frankie complains that he's hungry, she directs him to the freezer for a nice burrito snack. He comes back seconds later and says that there are none left, that the largest of the tattooed homeboys lounging in front of the TV has eaten the last of them.

That's absolutely it for Frances. She flies into the bedroom screaming for them to get out. "You are not welcome in my house," she yells "You aren't welcome. You don't care about all the heat you bring on us." The homeboys cringe and duck uncomfortably, but they don't leave. One mutters, "Bitch."

"You think I'm a bitch because I don't want you endangering my kids?" yells Frances as they retreat. "Yeah, that's right. I'm a bitch. But you can't be here. In two years my son will be 14. Do you think the guys from . . ." — and she reels off a list of enemy gangs . . . — "are going to know that he's not one of you? No. If you hang out anywhere around here, they could blast at Bola. So get the fuck out and stay the fuck out."

But it takes Luis to get the group to scuttle down the back stairs. When they have finally disappeared, Frances and Luis start inevitably to quarrel. Not wishing to fight in front of the kids, Luis asks her to take a drive. In the car Frances warns him that if he doesn't keep the homeboys away, she'll leave him. He swears he will do it.

The next two days are quiet and blessedly homeboy free. On Sunday, Luis sleeps late, then says he wants go get his hair cut. He doesn't come back for five hours. Frances doesn't think much of it. But then on Monday her downstairs neighbor remarks that her own husband, Oscar, went somewhere with Luis and the homeboys the day before. Frances is stunned. "I don't know what to do anymore," she says.

By Monday afternoon, Frances has decided she has to leave her Luis for real, no more threats. Yet when she goes to confront him, he is bewildered. He had been nowhere near either Oscar or the homeboys, Luis says. After the haircut he'd gone to visit his mother and sister. Distrustful, Frances calls Maria with Luis in the room, then rechecks with the neighbor and finds that, indeed, he is telling the truth.

Still roiling with emotion, she asks Luis to take another drive with her. "I want to show you something."

After around 20 minutes of cruising blindly, Frances spots a house sporting a large "for rent" sign.

"You see that place?" she says to Luis with a gesture at the house. "It's do or die. Either you make up your mind tonight that the homies are out of our house forever, or I'm taking the kids and I'm moving there, into that house. And if I move out, it'll be for good, babe. I'm not putting my kids through this bullshit ever again. Not even for you."

The house is a bluff. Frances has never laid eyes on the thing before this moment. But the threat is not. Frances is entirely at the end of her rope. "I don't ever want any homeboys visiting Oscar and them downstairs either," she says. "You make up your mind right now. Either you're Sniper" — Luis' old street name — "or you're Luis. You can't be both."

Luis sits very still, his eyes filling. He understands, he says, he loves her and the kids more than anything, he says, he swears he will do what she asks. "Yeah, well, we'll see," says Frances. "The doing and the saying are two different things."

Predictably, a homeboy shows up at the front gate the very next afternoon to test the boundary. "Get the fuck out of here," Frances shouts. "I don't want you on my property." The homeboy glances at Luis, but it appears his wife's ultimatum has given him the excuse he needed.

"From now on," says Luis with a nod at Frances, "her word is law." It's a refrain that he repeats over and over in the next weeks as he makes good on his promise.

The banning of the homeboys presages good luck in other quarters. Frances finally manages to get Mando's mother to sign a notarized statement giving the Aguilars temporary legal

custody of the 2-year-old. At the beginning of October, Luis gets a job, a temporary gig doing cement construction, only guaranteed day to day. But he is making union wages — \$20 an hour. “Hey, I’m happy,” he says. Evidently the construction company is pleased as well since, at the end of the first week, they ask him to stay on full time.

Energized by the prospect of a steady paycheck, Luis says he may take on a second job, just until the family gets caught up financially. One of his best friends, another former homeboy, long away from the gang, has a great position at Auto Zone and thinks he can get Luis in on a part-time basis. Like 65 percent of America’s employers, Auto Zone won’t normally hire anyone with a felony record. “But my friend says he can get me past the interview,” says Luis. “He carries a lot of weight there.”

One unexpected bump in the road occurs on an afternoon in mid-October, a few days after Luis’ job becomes permanent. A gang-unit officer stops Bola on the street. “I know you’re from Tiny Boys,” he says to the boy. “What’s your gang nickname?”

“Bola didn’t want to tell me about this,” says Frances. “He was too upset. His friend who he was with told me.” Bola protested to the cop that he was not from Tiny Boys. “But the officer wrote his name and address on a little card anyway,” says Frances.

The “little card” is what is known as a Field Interview Card, and it is how homeboys and homegirls are entered in Cal Gang, California law enforcement’s private gang database. If indeed the cop entered Bola’s name in the database, the 12-year-old will now be officially listed as a gang member or gang “associate.” His name will stay in the database for the next five years, at which time, as long as he has no further contact with police, even the most innocent, the listing is supposed to be purged — but even that is not reliable. Yet once on the list, there is no other method whatsoever for getting his name removed.

By the last week of October, things are slowly improving on most fronts. Money is still tight, but the big expenses are pretty much covered — all but the water bill and the last \$1,500 they owe the bail-bond company. “We’ll get it all paid,” says Luis. “It won’t be long.”

Bola is struggling with his classes, and Frances has a conference with the teacher. “I know I need to get him out of Hollenbeck,” she says. “I’m going to see if I can find a charter school like De La Hoya for him and for Julian.” Estephanie is thriving. She’s tried out for the school cheerleading squad and has just learned she’s been selected. “And because of all her drill-team experience, they put her on the varsity squad,” says Frances, “even though she’s only in the ninth grade. All the teachers really know her. It’s exactly what she needed.”

The family has finally settled into a routine, and the days start early. At 6:25 a.m., Thursday, October 28, Frances has made Luis’ lunch, and he has already left for work. Estephanie is monopolizing the bathroom, and normally cheerful Julian is brooding because it’s picture day at his school and his favorite shirt is dirty. For the past few weeks, Frances’ out-of-work niece, Darlene, has been staying in the back bedroom with her own two kids. She leaves Darlene with the little ones, grabs Bola, and the two speed-walk to the laundromat on Cesar Chavez to do an emergency wash so that Julian can have his beloved two-toned blue shirt.

Frances returns to the house around 7:15 a.m., leaving Bola to wait for the two loads of clothes to come out of the dryer. What Frances does not know is that, in her absence, two homeboys have slipped into the house, ostensibly to make a phone call. They hide when she re-enters through the back door and begins to make breakfast.

Estephanie has already left for school. Frankie is out of bed, and the littlest boys — Elijah and Mando — are starting to stir. Cheered by the imminent arrival of his shirt, Julian trots to the bathroom to work on his hair. “I want to look *fine*,” he says, unfolding his roguish and dazzling 10-year-old’s grin.

Frances and the kids are occupied with the noisy business of school preparation, so no one hears the police coming up the back stairs until the catastrophe is already upon them. With an enormous crash and splintering of wood, the back door blows off its hinges, and eight or nine officers gush into the kitchen. Some are in uniform, most in plainclothes. All wear Kevlar vests. The first four have service revolvers drawn, which they swing in rapid arcs, their knees bent in a classic law-enforcement crouch as if expecting armies of demons. Detective Saul Diaz hands Frances a search warrant as other officers — plus a tan Labrador retriever drug-sniffing dog — spread through the rest of the house. Just then, in the middle bedroom, there is a stirring in one of the boys’ bunk beds. A very tense cop instantly swerves his gun barrel in the direction of the movement. “No!” yells Frances, her face contorted by dread. “No! *No!* It’s my little boy! It’s just a little boy!” The gun remains pointed as a small and very frightened Mando emerges from the rumpled bed covers, his eyes big as dinner plates.

For the next 20 minutes the police toss belongings out of closets, cupboards and drawers, and pull sheets and blankets off of beds. They find nothing of interest, no drugs, no paraphernalia, no suspicious items of any kind. What they *do* find is the two homeboys hiding in the back bedroom. A search of one homeboy yields a single joint’s worth of marijuana and 0.3 grams of speed; the other homeboy, a 15-year-old, is clean. As officers lead the handcuffed young men down the back stairs, two social workers from the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) enter the house, clearly called by the police. Frances watches fearfully while they stalk from one newly chaotic room to another. One social worker pronounces the house “filthy” and “hazardous” and informs Frances that they will be removing all the kids into DCFS custody.

Up until now, Frances has been cooperative with both the police and the social workers. Now, whatever composure she has possessed snaps clean through.

“You are *not* taking my kids!” she screams. “You are *fucking not* taking my kids!” It’s at this point that Bola arrives, his arms full of laundry. With frantic illogic, Frances shouts to her eldest son. “Go out the front door! Run!” Instead, the 12-year-old stands stock still. The littlest boys look confused by the commotion, but Julian and Bola understand what is happening, and both begin crying wildly as the police and social workers attempt to herd them together.

It’s then that Frances crumples to the kitchen linoleum in a dead faint. “She’s faking,” says one of the DCFS women. But an officer calls for paramedics. Frances is taken by ambulance to White Memorial Hospital, her blood pressure through the roof. Alarmed by the police and the ambulance, an across-the-street neighbor calls Luis’ brother, Junior, who in turn calls Luis at work. Luis blurts to his supervisor something about a family emergency and races to the house, then on to the hospital. Meanwhile the two social workers drive to De La Hoya Animo, where they collect a very distressed Estephanie from class.

An hour later, when she is released from White Memorial, Luis drives his shaken wife to Hollenbeck Police Station, where she attempts to get some information about their children. The desk officer says he can tell her nothing and directs her to a detective’s office down the street. There she is given the phone number for one of the social workers.

Borrowing a cell phone, Frances calls the social worker, who tells her not to expect to get her kids back for at least six months. Looking gut-punched, Frances works for calm, but her voice quavers. "No one gave me any paperwork about my kids, about who to call and what I'm supposed to do. I want to know what I need to do." A pause. "Be quiet? Why would you talk to me like that? I'm asking you nicely for the numbers . . ." Another pause. "Okay, then would you give me your supervisor's name? . . . Hello?"

Amazingly, the DCFS woman has hung up on her. Luis calls the woman back and at least manages to get a list of suggested tasks. Desperate to do anything that might help, for the rest of the day, Frances and Luis, plus Darlene the niece, drive from location to location: a drug-testing facility in the city of Commerce — although Frances takes nothing stronger than Tylenol, Luis his allergy medicine — Roosevelt Adult School to sign up for parenting classes, then on again to locate the closest Narcotics Anonymous meetings. En route, Luis is preternaturally calm and focused, while Frances crumples in the passenger seat, her expression shattered. "Go after Luis, go after me. But don't go after my kids," she says quietly. "My kids are my life. Why hurt them? Why would anyone do that?"

By nightfall, having done all they can, husband and wife return home. Shocked by the abnormal silence of the house, they at first retreat to the back steps, Frances clutching the boys' little dog, Twoo, for comfort. Eventually, Luis gets up and, after borrowing a power drill from a neighbor, sets about re-hanging the splintered back door.

It's only much later, when his eye happens to light on the tangled pile of children's Halloween costumes, that Luis' knees buckle, he sits down hard on his and Frances' big bed, and begins to sob as if he will never be able to stop.