

# THE LAST PHILOSOPHER IN TEXAS

FICTIONS AND  
SUPERSTITIONS



DANIEL CHACÓN

"A clever collection of stories exploring fantasy, superstition and Chicano identity."

—Kirkus Reviews

## PRAISE FOR THE WORK OF DANIEL CHACÓN

“In seemingly effortless fashion, Chacón’s talent goes into play, his collection unfolding with sketches of life . . . sketches that [he] draws for us in unpretentious prose—all on the border between the US and Mexico, all on the border between life and art.”

—Alan Cheuse, NPR’s *All Things Considered* on *Hotel Juárez*

“A master of narrative brevity, Chacón collects several short fictions, from stand-alone koans to connected vignettes . . . [his] prose moves swiftly, doubles back and echoes itself with tessellated, Alhambra-like layering.”

—*Booklist* on *Hotel Juárez*

“Linked but never repetitive, these beautiful stories are fresh, with just enough Borges-ian magic to make them feel extraordinary.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *Hotel Juárez* (starred review)

“Chacón’s insightful novel portrays the trials of Victor Reyes, a death metal-loving, artistic teen who’s seemingly ill-fated in life.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* on *The Cholo Tree*

“Chacón has written a classic and powerful underdog story about a brown teen building the self-efficacy to see his worth and achieve his dream.”

—*School Library Journal* on *The Cholo Tree*

“Although a collection of stories, this book is *A Portrait of the Chicano Artist as a Young Man*, with the author becoming more literary as the pieces accumulate.”

—*The New York Times Book Review* on *Chicano Chicanery*



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Arte Público Press  
Houston, Texas

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Recovering the past, creating the future

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*For Jolene*  
*The answer will always be, yes!*



## The Order of Things

My Crazy Tía .....	1
The Chicano Time Traveler .....	7
Sara's Chest of Drawers .....	12
If Tonantzin Worked at Cracker Barrel .....	17
Finding Home .....	21
Santa Muerte .....	25
Superstition: The Day of the Dead .....	27
Borges and the Chicana .....	29
Authentic Mexican Food .....	46
Magick Spider .....	51
If Jesus Worked at Starbucks .....	54
Vinegar Flowing Under the Chairs .....	57
As Above, So Below .....	62
Calabi Yau .....	64



Wednesday Night .....	72
Let the Angels Talk .....	76
The Flickering Quasar .....	79
<i>Not</i> a Pandemic Love Story .....	96
Santa Claus Is Dead .....	102
Superstition: Love at First Sight .....	105
Superstition: Photos of People Who Hated Each Other .....	107
Superstition: Dropping Silverware .....	109
Wild Apple Trees .....	111
Weird Dream .....	119
Wonder Bread .....	122
The Last Pilot .....	125
Superstition: Ice .....	127
Velocity of Mass .....	128
Chinga-Hickey .....	137
Superstition: Getting Near the End of the Book .....	140
The Last Philosopher in Texas .....	141

## MY CRAZY TÍA

*Tía* came from Fresno to visit us for Christmas, and one morning as I was having hot chocolate and *pan dulce* in my grandmother's kitchen, she was sitting across the table from me. I was reading a book on the Kindle app of my phone, but I could feel her looking at me. Everyone else was still asleep: the cousins, the uncles and aunts, the cats and dogs. Crazy *tía* smelled like patchouli oil and sweet fabric, as if her clothes had been hanging in a closet for two generations.

"Do you want to know how to time travel?" she asked me.

"What?"

"I can show you how to time travel, *m'ija*. You could go anywhere in time that you want."

"Sure, you can," I said.

"I swear. I'm being serious. But . . ."

"But what?"

My aunt wore a colorful dress, a long flowing robe and all kinds of gaudy jewelry: bracelets, necklaces, a big bright ring on every finger. She looked like a high priestess of some woo woo religion.

"There is one thing," she said.

I know she wanted me to say, "What?" But I didn't want to, so I shrugged my shoulders and went back to reading the book I had downloaded to my phone. It was good.

“Okay,” she said. “If you don’t want to time travel, that’s fine with me.”

“*Tía*,” I said, “time travel is impossible. Science proves it.”

“Okay, Miss Intellectual. Tell me why it’s impossible.”

I was only sixteen at the time and just remembered in a science class our teacher telling us that it’s impossible according to the laws of physics, but I didn’t remember why.

“It just is,” I said. “It’s a scientific fact.”

“*Qué* scientific fax! I can do it. Any place in time that I want, and I can show you how. *M’ija*, haven’t you ever wanted to visit the past to see how things used to be? Or jump into the future to see how you’re doing?”

“Okay, fine,” I said, like I was indulging her craziness, but really, I wanted it to be true. I wanted to go into the past. I wanted to see what my mother was like. She was twenty-two when she died.

“Let’s do it,” I said, trying not to sound too much like I believed her. “Teach me how to time travel, then.”

“There’s only one rule,” she said.

“What?”

“You can only go as far as your lifetime. From the time you were born until the time you die. You can’t go back 100 years. You can’t go hang out with Frida Kahlo in Coyoacán. Not going to happen. You weren’t alive then. Only your lifespan. Do you want to try this?”

“Sure. Whatever.”

My heart was pounding so loud I think my aunt heard it. I wanted to see my mother. I was four when she passed. All I have are blurry images of her face and the smell of lotion or soap and how her arm felt on the back of my head, soft and warm. She was young. Did she like having a baby? Was she still young enough to want to have fun? Did she like to party? Did she laugh with her friends?

I know what her brothers and sister told me growing up, that she didn't like my father. She met him at a club, did it, and then moved on. They may not have even exchanged numbers, which may mean—I know now that I'm older—that they might have done it in the parking lot or in a dark corner of the club while the music pumped. When she found out she was pregnant, she didn't bother to tell him. Why have that *pendejo* in her daughter's life? Maybe he was a loser with no job and still living with his parents. She could do without the state garnishing his wages for child support, just so she could have that extra fifty bucks a month.

Besides, she had just graduated college and had a decent job as a third-grade teacher with her own health insurance. I was better off without him.

So, it was just her and me, the two of us, my grandma watching me while my mother worked. I'm still not clear on how she died, as all my life when I was growing up the *tíos* were vague about her death. A bad medical condition, they said, until I was old enough to question them. Then they told me it was a brain aneurism.

Now, I don't know what to believe.

Did she kill herself? I have pictures of her uploaded on my phone. She was pretty: dark hair, dark eyes. She didn't look like someone who would kill herself. No, my mother was a wolf, a gorgeous beast with fearful symmetry: perfect lithe body, perfect little face and eyes as wide as wonder.

"*M'ija*," *Tía* said, bringing me out of myself. "Do you want to see your mother?" She was leaning over the table toward me, all her jewelry clacking like dancing skeletons.

"Yeah, I do, but . . ."

"But what?" she asked as if offended.

"Science," I said.

"Okay." She leaned back. "Go back to your *science* of swiping left and right."

“I’m reading a book!” I snapped, and I even might have said, like the teenager I was, “Ga!”

“Okay, go back to your book. I hope it’s real good.”

She was silent for a while, but not her jewelry. It kept clanking like those tiny skeletons were dancing on the table, having a big party. It was irritating, so I looked up at her, hoping my expression would say, “Please be quiet.”

She winked at me. “You see that pot on the stove? *¿La olla?*”

“Yeah,” I said.

It was a huge pot Grandma used for Christmas tamales.

Grandma’s kitchen was colorful and smelled like corn and *limón verde*. It always seemed magical, right out of a Patssi Valdez painting: bright clay pots, sunflower paintings, portraits of dead forebears.

“Do you see *la olla* on the stove, *m’ija?*”

“Yeah, I see it. What about it?”

“*¡Ay, m’ija!*” she said, sitting back in her chair and shaking her head. “You have such an attitude! Your mother—my baby sister!—she was like that when she was a teenager. I wanted to slap her so many times.”

“I see the pot,” I said, kind of irritated.

“Okay, you see that pot? In a very short time, it’s going to fall.”

“How?”

“And it’ll fall and the tamales will fly out like fish out of water. And some of your *abuela*’s plates and cups will fall with it, and it’s going to make a lot of noise. The glass will shatter and shards will fly all over the place!”

“Ohhh-kay,” I said, like she was getting even crazier.

“Now, here’s what you do: The moment the glass and *la olla* hit the floor, as the glass is shattering, I want you to dive into it.”

“Into what?”

“Into the shattering.”

“What??”

“Okay, Scientist. You must know that whenever there’s an ‘accident,’ it creates a burst of energy. Tiny tiny tiny, *pero* tiny pieces of matter move around all crazy.”

As she said this, she moved her fists around like planets around the sun, and her bracelets clanked.

“When you combine that with other forces and energy fields like soundwaves, that’s a lot of energy.”

“What? I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“It’s basic physics, *m’ija*. Things move and subatomic particles move around inside of them, so when soundwaves come into the cauldron, that’s quite a swirl of energy! When it all comes together, when it’s at its peak, it creates a worm-hole. Jump into the center of it, and you’ll find yourself in another time.”

I remembered that, yes, she was crazy. My uncles had always told me that. But she was also an independent woman who didn’t care what her brothers thought. She had left my grandmother’s house when she was fifteen to travel with a theater group in Mexico, and she lived most of her life as a single woman. For the last thirty years, she lived in a house that she owned in Fresno. I used to love walking into her house when I was girl. Everywhere, there were books, old prints of maps and planets, and sculptures of metal globes with arrows sticking through them.

Maybe in her craziness she had discovered something. I wanted it to be true. I wanted to see my mom.

“Remember,” said my crazy *tía*, when *la olla* hits the ground, dive into the sound. You’ll go wherever you want to go. Even to see your mother. She was so beautiful, your mother. So fucking smart! I really miss her, *m’ija!*”

That was when Grandma walked into the kitchen, white haired and hunched over with age. She moved so slowly in her white house dress. She was ninety-one.

“Good morning, *mis hijas*,” she said.

She picked up some dirty dishes from the counter, plates and a cup on top, and she walked to the sink, put the pot on the stove, nudged her elbow, and the dishes slid from her grip. It all fell and shattered and clattered on the tile floor.

The noise filled the room.

My grandmother let out a scream.

I turned around to say something to my *tía*, but she was gone.

“¡Ay!” Grandma uttered.

*Tía* wasn't anywhere in the kitchen, but then the door swung open, and my *tía* came in, as if she hadn't been with us all along.

She saw the mess on the floor and said, “Don't worry, Mamá. I'll get it. You sit down.”

Then she looked at me and winked.

“Where were you just now?” I asked.

She crouched down to pick up the pot. On the way down, she whispered in my ear, “Your mother says, hi.”