After dinner my older brother liked to play the guitar. He preferred the music he heard on the radio, but he played the traditional songs for Mama. She enjoyed things that reminded her of home. Her eyes hurt and her fingers would get sore from long hours of work as a seamstress. I remember washing dishes while Pedrito sang: “And seeing myself so lonely and sad like a leaf in the wind, I want to cry . . . from this feeling.”

He sang in Spanish, which is how the lyrics were written. That song is more than 100 years old now. Mama learned it when she was a girl.

Papa tried to nudge Mama out of her nostalgia sometimes. He would answer her in English when she spoke to him in Spanish. His English was not very good at first, but he worked at it until it got better.

Mama usually answered him in Spanish. They would go back and forth in either language, talking about work or homesickness or family. Pedrito or I would occasionally correct them or help them finish their sentences in English. Papa would thank us. Mama would just smile and shake her head. But she always repeated the words we
had helped her with. In time her English got better too, but she was far more at ease in her native tongue.

I was seven years old when we came to the United States. Pedrito was 11. Papa was a carpenter who also knew a little about plumbing and electricity. From an early age, my brother and I learned how to take care of ourselves in our new home. Our parents worked long hours, and they counted on us to be independent.

At first we were almost like guides for Mama and Papa. In big busy places, like the mall or the registry of motor vehicles, they felt uncomfortable, if not overwhelmed. It was easier for us to adjust to environments that were fast-paced and not always friendly. I felt protective of my parents and also proud of how quickly I learned my way around.

It would hurt my feelings to see the way some people looked at us. For a while, on Sundays and holidays we would wear our best clothes from home. Before long, we learned to wear casual clothes almost all the time, like most people in this country do. And after a while, our parents became more at ease in stores or government offices. They relaxed a little, I suppose, and we attracted less attention.

Mama and Papa live with Pedrito now, in a two-family home outside of Houston. Pedrito is now known as Peter. He runs a construction business that employs 14 men and women.

Papa is in his seventies now. Pedrito would like for him to slow down a little and enjoy retirement, but Papa says that Mama wouldn’t want him sitting around the house getting in her way. He rises at dawn almost every day and goes to work with Pedrito, building houses.

I am a teacher. This summer I will be taking my son, Michael, to visit his grandparents. He is twelve. He wants to learn to play the guitar. I want Mama and his Uncle Peter to teach him a few of the good old songs.