La Sobrina (The Niece)

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Tio Juan was a tall man, the eldest of my father's five siblings. My memories of him are clear and crisp. He always wore a fedora hat and smoked cigars. To this day the aroma of cigars evokes his laughter in my heart. For you see, Tio Juan was my favorite uncle.

Every time I saw him he would hug me tight. With a cerveza in one hand and a cigar in the other, he'd bounce me on his knee as he, my father and my grandfather solved the problems of the day underneath the Texas stars.

During his life time, Tio worked hard at a variety of jobs. The one I recall the most, however, was when he worked cutting meat at the meat market. The meat cutters had large, sharp blades on them, which caused him on two separate occasions, to lose parts of two fingers. I didn't care what his hands looked like. I was a little girl who adored the man who would dance with me at family weddings. He would twirl me around the floor to the sound of the cumbias and polkas, my homemade dresses with petticoats swishing as we danced.

Time moved onward. Tio had his share of problems in life. He favored drinking just a little too much. After several years of trying to make their marriage work, even though she still loved him, my aunt left. He tried to get on with his life. Tio moved around a lot and communication with him was erratic; but every phone call or letter brought elation. In the meantime, I was growing up, making plans. Those plans included marriage. As Tio floated in and out of my life, I don't think he realized how fast I had grown.

One day, shortly after I'd announced my engagement, he dropped by the house to visit. My father was home and he and I greeted Tio Juan with warmth and enthusiasm. My father was younger than Tio, but only by four years. Dad was older
I never heard his laughter again; I didn’t get to say goodbye. It has taken many years for the wound in my heart to scar.