to Jim, Annie, Matt, Tyler, Marcy, and Jason

thank you

Tracy Mack,

Leslie Budnick,

Marijka Kostiw,

and Joe Cepeda
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I always thought the biggest problem in my life was my name, Naomi Soledad León Outlaw, but little did I know that it was the least of my troubles, or that someday I would live up to it.

It had been a double month of Sundays since Gram, Owen, and I were knitted together snug as a new mitten. I can point a stick, though, at the exact evening we started to unravel, at the precise moment when I felt like that dog in an old Saturday morning cartoon. The one where the mutt wears a big wooly sweater and a fox runs up and pulls a hanging-down piece of yarn. Then the fox races off with it, undoing the tidy stitches one by one. Pretty soon the poor dog is bare to its skin, shivering, and all that had kept it warm is nothing more than a bedraggled string.
There we were, minding our lives with the same obedience as a clock ticking. A few weeks earlier the sun had switched to its winter bedtime, so even though it was early evening, the sky was dark as pine pitch. That meant that Gram, Owen, and I couldn’t sit outside on the white rock patio. Instead we had to crowd around the drop-down table in the living room/kitchen of Baby Beluga. That was what Gram called our Airstream trailer. She was the absolute expert at calling things what they resembled and thought it looked like a miniature whale next to all the double-wides at Avocado Acres Trailer Rancho.

The trailer park was called this because it was surrounded on three sides by the largest avocado ranch in Lemon Tree, California. The name Lemon Tree did not appeal to Gram’s sense of description because, as she pointed out, there wasn’t a stick of citrus in sight. A giant plastic lemon did sit on a pedestal at the Spray ’n Play, a combination car wash-deli-playground and one of our
favorite places. That lemon was a tribute to the fact that there used to be fruit orchards in San Diego County, before the builders came and put a house on every scratch of spare dirt. Except for the avocado grove, which was smack in the middle of town and the last countrified land in Lemon Tree.

We had already put away the dinner dishes from Wednesday chicken bake and Owen started racing through his second-grade homework like a horse on a tear. People were usually fooled by his looks and thought he was low in school due to being born with his head tilted to one side and scrunched down next to his shoulder. It had straightened a little after three surgeries at Children’s Hospital, but he still talked with a permanent frog voice because of something inside being pinched. One of his legs was shorter than the other so he walked like a rocking horse, but other than that, he was just fine. Contrary to people’s first opinions, he got the best grades in his class.

Gram, in her usual polyester pantsuit and running shoes, was doing her weekly hair set, rolling what little blue hair
she had on those new bristle curlers that require no hairpins. (I was not being mean about her hair. It really looked blue in the sunlight.) And I mulled over my sorry situation at school, which was three boys in my fifth-grade class who had decided that Outlaw was the funniest last name in the universe. They did not give me an ounce of peace.

“Have you robbed any banks lately?” was one of their favorite sayings, along with jumping out at me, throwing their arms in the air, and yelling, “Is this a stickup?”

My teacher, Ms. Morimoto, said to ignore them, but I had tried and it did no good. I was fed up, so I was making a list of what I could say back to them that might be embarrassing. I wrote across the top of my notebook page, “How to Get Boys to Stop Making Fun of My Name.”

I scooted my book in front of Gram to see if she had any ideas.

“Naomi, I have lived with that name since I married your great-grandpa, rest his soul, almost fifty years ago, and I am due proud. Besides, there are worse things in life.”
“But you don’t go to Buena Vista Elementary,” I said.

She laughed. “That’s true, but I can tell you that boys have not changed an iota and they are hard to humble. You know my true feelings on the subject. How about writing, ‘Those boys will not bother me’?”

Gram said that when you thought positive, you could make things happen, and when it did happen, it was called a self-prophecy. If you wanted to be the best speller in the class, you said to yourself over and over, “I am the best speller in the class,” and then before you knew it, you were practicing and becoming it. It was sort of like magic, and Gram believed it to her bones. But it didn’t always work the way I hoped. At one time Owen and I were the only children in the trailer park. I thought positive every day for a month for more kids at Avocado Acres but all that moved in was a family with a teenager and a brand-new baby. Gram insisted my positive thinking had succeeded, but I had been greatly disappointed.

Before I could write down Gram’s suggestion, Owen
sneezed, and it was a big one, the kind that sprinkled spittle and left his eyes all teary.

“Owen, you got it on my page!” I said, smoothing my paper, which only smeared the wet spots.

“Sorry,” he said, and then he sneezed again.

“Company’s comin’ twice,” said Gram, matter-of-fact. It was another of her Oklahoma notions, and she had a million of them that she believed whole heart. This one being if a body sneezed, someone would pay a visit.

“We already know for sure that Fabiola’s coming over,” said Owen.

Fabiola Morales lived with her husband Bernardo, just a stone’s throw away in the middle of the avocado grove. Bernardo took care of the three hundred trees, and in return he didn’t have to pay rent on their tiny house. Fabiola and Gram were newly retired from Walker Gordon department store, where they had worked for thirty-five years as seamstresses, doing alterations with their sewing tables face-to-face. If that wasn’t enough familiarity,
Fabiola came over every night, Monday through Friday, to watch *Wheel of Fortune*. So far, Gram and Fabiola had watched 743 during-the-week episodes without missing once. It was their claim to fame.

“Well then, Fabiola counts for one,” said Gram, patting a curler in place. “I wonder who’ll be the other?”

I looked at Owen and rolled my eyes. A fly zooming in would fulfill Gram’s prediction.

“Maybe Mrs. Maloney?” said Owen.

Mrs. Maloney was eighty-eight and lived in the double-wide next door. She came out every afternoon to water her cactuses, rocks, and cement bunnies, and only then did she ever come over for a visit. Gram said we could count on Mrs. Maloney for two things in life: one was wearing the same pink-checked cotton robe every day (I suspected she had a dozen hanging in her closet), and the other was going to bed at six in the evening.

“Nope, it won’t be Mrs. Maloney,” I said. “It’s past six.”

Chewing on the end of my pencil, I got back to my list, which Gram said was one of the things I did best. I had all
kinds of lists in my notebook, the shortest being “Things I Am Good At” which consisted of 1) Soap carving, 2) Worrying, and 3) Making lists.

There was my “Regular and Everyday Worries” list, which included 1) Gram was going to die because she was old, 2) Owen would never be right, 3) I will forget something if I don’t make a list, 4) I will lose my lists, and 5) Abominations. I made lists of splendid words, types of rocks, books I read, and unusual names. Not to mention the lists I had copied, including “Baby Animal Names,” “Breeds of Horses,” and my current favorite, “Animal Groups from The Complete and Unabridged Animal Kingdom with over 200 Photographs.”

Mr. Marble, the librarian and the absolute best person at Buena Vista Elementary, gave me the book yesterday when I walked into the library at lunchtime. He said, “Naomi Outlaw (he always calls me both names), today is your lucky day. I have a treasure for you and I’ve already checked it out on your card. I give this to you with a flourish.” Then he scooped the book into his palms, knelt down
on one knee, and held it out to me as if it was a box of jewels. (I added *flourish* to my “Splendid Words” list.)

Mr. Marble allowed me and two other students to eat lunch at one of the oval library tables every day. It was breaking school rules to eat there, but Mr. Marble didn’t mind. He just smiled at us, straightened his bow tie, and said, “Welcome to the sanctuary.” (*Sanctuary* also went straight to “Splendid Words.”) John Lee was one of the library lunch students. His parents owned Lemon Tree Donuts. He was the roundest boy at Buena Vista Elementary, and one of the nicest. The other was Mimi Messmaker. (Her name was on my “Unusual Names” list, along with Delaney Pickle, Brian Bearbrother, and Phoebe Lively.) Mimi didn’t hang out with all the other girls in our grade either, the ones who were always comparing makeup and going to sleepovers. She was nobody special at school, just like me, but she didn’t know it. She had no use for me and once whispered, “trailer trash” when I walked by. After that I never said a word to her, and that suited us both.
“Naomi,” said Gram, “is there a page in your notebook titled ‘Ways to Annoy My Gram’? Because if there is, I’d appreciate it if you’d add your unruly bangs to that list.”

I quickly reached up and corralled a triangle of hair hanging in my eyes. I was trying to let my hair grow all one length, but in order to keep my bangs pinned back I needed three clips on each side. Gram had taken to calling me “brown shaggy dog” because of my wild mop and my predisposition to brown-ness (eyes, hair, and skin). I took after the Mexican side of the family, or so I’d been told, and even though Owen was my full-blooded brother, he took after the Oklahoma lot. He did have brown eyes like me, but with fair skin and blond hair in a bowl haircut that Gram called a Dutch boy. Due to my coloring, Owen called me the center of a peanut butter sandwich between two pieces of white bread, meaning him and Gram.

“Thank you for making your old granny happy,” said Gram, tucking a stray lock of hair behind my ear.

“You’re not that old,” I said.
She laughed. “Naomi, I am your great-grandma and according to most folks, I had no business raising you and Owen. Those who carried gossip said I had one foot in the grave and should’ve known better, but I took you on like spring cleaning anyhow. The joke was on everyone else because I got the prizes. That was my lucky day when I got you two.”

Owen looked up from his binder. “Today’s *my* lucky day. Guess what’s one of my spelling words? *Bicycle!*”

Any coincidence in Owen’s life, such as wanting a new bicycle and having the word show up on his spelling list, made him feel lucky. Whistling, he started writing *bicycle* over and over on a piece of paper.

Gram finished rolling her hair, leaving lines of white scalp staring at us.

“My clown head is on,” she announced.

Owen and I never argued with that description because the yellow and purple curlers did give that effect. Gram clicked the television remote to find the tail end of
the nightly news. I closed my notebook, giving up for now on my list and knowing full well I wouldn’t be able to say boo to those boys anyway. I reached into the built-in cabinet above my head and pulled out the plastic salad bowl holding my latest soap carving.

When Owen and I first came to live with Gram, I had slipped into being silent and my hands shook all the time. I was too young to remember what caused it all, but Gram’s practical solution was to keep my mind and hands busy. Soap carving had been Bernardo’s idea, and he said I was born to it. He would work in his shed doing his hobby, making wood boxes and little miniature bookshelves, then painting them every bright color with scenes of little towns and sunsets. It was art from his city, Oaxaca, far away in Mexico. And I would sit next to him with a bar of soap and a carving tool. Gram was nervous to death about me using a knife, so Bernardo started me out with a bent paper clip. As I proved my worth, I graduated to a plastic knife, a butter knife, and finally, a paring knife.
I picked up the partially carved duck and my knife from the pile of slippery shavings in the bottom of the bowl. I had already finished two other ducks, each a little smaller than the other, but I wanted a third for the shelf above the kitchen sink. I was never content to carve one of anything, preferring at least two or three for a companionship of lions or a circle of bears. I pulled the knife across the bar of Nature’s Pure White. The soap sloughed off easy into the bowl, looking like shredded white cheese. I scraped in an arc, finishing off the curve of the back and up to the tail. The dry film on my hands felt like a thin glove, and every few minutes I put my palms up to my nose to take a whiff of a smell that reminded me of being a baby.

“Done with spelling!” said Owen, closing his books. He came over and stood next to me, watching. “Naomi, how do you know what to carve?”

“I imagine what’s inside and take away what I don’t need,” I said, not looking up. Slowly, I added the finishing touches on the duckling, scratching out the appearance of feathers with the pointy end of the knife. I loved this
part of carving, the etching and the grooves that made the figure look true to life. I was getting ready to level the bottom, so it would sit flat and not wobble on the shelf, but I didn’t get one more pull of the blade before someone knocked on our door.