the nativity scene—to the simple household task of preparing pinto beans. “I loved sitting and cleaning beans with Papa,” Sofia tells the reader. “He told me secrets about beans, how they were better than meat, how they were like us, mestizo—the pale part Spanish, the brown spots pure Indian.” For Canales, who did the same thing as a girl, the ritual still raises memories of her late father. “It is very powerful,” she says. “When Catholics are asked what attracts them to Mass, they say the chimes, the flickering candles, the incense. It is conjuring up the other—the spiritual or supernatural or the holy—and bringing the spiritual into the physical. We need more rituals.”

Such traditions can offer a path of survival in the face of hardship—and racism. A girl taunts Sofia as a “taco head” because her lunch lacks American sandwiches. At boarding school, another student challenges her: “Don’t you think Mexicans are obsessed with death?” and pieces of her dorm-room altar are stolen only to appear, embarrassingly, as people enter the school chapel for an Episcopal service.

“Texas is a place of haves and have-nots,” Canales says. Her mother grew up in a family of migrant farm workers and told stories of sleeping in rat-infested warehouses, of not being served in a restaurant because she was Mexican, of a boy’s head being crushed under a truck’s wheel because nobody knew he was there. Alongside the richness and love in her culture, Canales also absorbed these bleaker messages. Prep school represented “what else was out there,” she explains. “I wanted to help my community, to help my family, by kicking things in my way. There were four of us on scholarship and we were the hope of our families. My grandmother, whom I shared a room with growing up, made me feel, through her stories and her care, that I was very much loved, that I was wonderful. And the economy and politics were all saying something else: that as Mexicans we were poor and inferior. I wanted to bust through that.”

Canales says her father was thrilled when she went to Harvard because John F. Kennedy had gone there; it was the only thing he knew about the university. Yet

“The economy and politics were all saying that as Mexicans we were poor and inferior. I wanted to bust through that.”

she was restless as an undergraduate and left twice in search of “adventures.” (During one summer she worked as an organizer with the United Farm Workers union.) The second time she left Harvard was to complete officers’ training at Fort Benning; she was later stationed on the border of what was then West Germany and also worked on the Hawk and Patriot missile systems. Returning to Harvard, she concentrated in government and graduated in 1986. Her next step, the law degree, would help her improve “equality and opportunity for everybody, whatever their culture or race or gender,” she explains. “I feel peoples’ lives are about evolving and finding their don—a supernatural gift that everybody has that’s used for the good of a whole community—and being given a chance to give their gift.”

After graduation, she joined O’Melveny & Myers in Los Angeles, where she worked for the commission that investigated the Los Angeles police department after the beating of Rodney King. In 1994 the Clinton administration appointed her a regional administrator for the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA); she helped guarantee $3 billion in loans annually in California, Nevada, Arizona, Hawaii, and Guam.

“It was a thrilling job because I believe what Jesse Jackson said about the last leg of civil rights being equity,” she says. “It was returning to the communities and trying to help women and minorities start and grow businesses.” It was also frustrating. “The legal profession, the business profession, the military: they all reflect what the dominant society says about power—i.e., it favors white men,” she explains. “I saw this at the SBA. Every year the government buys with taxpayers’ money about $200 billion in products or services from tanks to pencils, and over and over again these contracts go mostly to the same people, even though we have a program to help women and minorities learn how to get federal contracts. I would go and talk with all of these people and many of them could not get a contract.”

Some of them, especially those of the younger generation, became demoralized and dropped out of the process. “I feel that for there to be [societal] change, we have to go back to step one and ask, ‘How do we build self-esteem? How do we feel we are equal, too? How do you face the world with a strong vision and a sense of entitlement?’” she says. “I feel that through writing I work on a different level with people, work on a subconscious level, to help them transcend limitations, scripts, stereotypes...Changing consciousness is done.