

The Long Way Home
by Ava Linda Feliz-Sutter

Esmeralda woke with a shiver. Still half asleep, she reached for her mother's hand and found only the cold sheet, whatever warmth had been there already gone. The thin glow of dawn had begun to spill into the empty shadow beside her. For a moment, she kept her hand there anyway, hoping, in the soft confusion of waking, to feel her mother's fingers close around her own. But after a few seconds, she understood: her mother had been gone for a long while.

She pulled the blanket up to her cheeks and curled deeper into herself. The clock read 5:48 a.m.—almost an hour before she had to leave for school. Esmeralda squeezed her eyes shut, trying to force herself back into sleep, but her thoughts had already begun to race, and the cold had stiffened her body too tightly for rest. As November wore on, the desert nights had hardened into a dense, unmoving stillness. The dry cold sank low through the apartment, gathering along the walls, the floors, the thin seams of the windows. Yet despite all her daughter's pleading, Dolores Estrada insisted it was "still not cold enough" to turn on the heat at night.

The first shimmer of sunlight brightened against the window above the foot of the bed. Esmeralda forced herself upright and watched her breath fog the glass, then dissolve into the golden light beyond, where the distant mountains dusted the horizon with rose. At times like these, she imagined herself as a small caterpillar, the worn cotton blanket her cocoon, inching toward the day she would finally emerge. She closed her eyes and imagined her wings unfurling, deep emerald glittering with iridescent gold beneath the sun. Then, with a sudden burst of energy, she sprang from bed and fluttered into the kitchen.

The fantasy vanished the moment she saw the crumpled foil on the counter and recognized the shape at once: the same bland ham-and-cheese sandwich for the fourth day in a row. She sighed, remembering the lunches her mother used to pack—scorched chorizo-and-cheese quesadillas, thick slices of mango dusted red with Tajín, sometimes even a wedge of homemade pan dulce or soft cinnamon cookies that left buttery crumbs at the bottom of her backpack. Only then did she notice the small sheet of paper taped to the limp little bundle.

Mija—I left your lunch on the counter. If I'm not back when you get home, lock the door right away. Don't open it for anyone—nadie más que yo. Cuidate mucho. Te quiero.

Esmeralda read the note once, then again, before finally setting it back down and getting ready for school. As she brushed her teeth, she kept thinking about the sandwich. It wasn't only lunch that had changed. Almost everything felt different now: fewer fresh groceries, fewer rides to school, fewer laughs. They used to wake together each morning, bundled beneath the same blanket, whispering themselves awake and sometimes giggling over who had snored louder through the night. Then came the SUV.

They first noticed it one morning as they walked toward Dolores's car, its fresh white paint glaring against the familiar faded sedans and dented trucks crowding the lot. At first, Esmeralda thought nothing of it. But by the fourth day, they were leaving through the back door and walking to Dolores's car more than a block away. Each morning, Dolores peeked through the blinds to see if it was still there, and each morning, there it was—never in quite the same spot, yet somehow always out of place. After a week, they began parking even farther away, then leaving earlier, until finally Esmeralda was told she would have to take the bus while her mother picked up earlier shifts.

Esmeralda hated the changes, especially the bus—the nearest stop was more than a thirty-minute walk from the apartment. It became bearable only after she realized Lucia walked and rode the same route. Lucia's mother, Marisol Moreno, had once been Dolores's closest friend in Tucson. Both women were from Tlacolula, both worked long shifts in a city where most Mexicans seemed to come from somewhere else, and for years the two families had lived almost braided together. Lucia and Esmeralda were born only a year apart, and though Lucia never seemed particularly fond of her when they were small, the girls eventually became friends in the same quiet, inevitable way their mothers had. That is, until the previous Christmas.

Neither girl ever learned what transpired that night. By the time those months of slight jabs and buried resentments finally erupted, the women knew to keep their voices low enough not to be overheard.

But when Esmeralda woke on Christmas morning to the sound of her mother quietly sobbing, she understood there was only one woman in the world who could have wounded her that way.

Afterward, the weekend dinners grew rare. The calls became sporadic, then stopped altogether. Months passed without either name being spoken in either household. Yet neither woman could undo what had already taken root between their daughters. The girls still ate lunch together every day at school, and when Esmeralda saw Lucia leaving alone after class one afternoon, she called out before she could stop herself.

“Lucia!”

Lucia kept walking.

“Wait—it’s me!”

At last Lucia turned, squinting through the afternoon light. “Esmeralda? Since when do you take the bus?”

“I don’t. Well—I didn’t.” Esmeralda hitched her backpack higher on her shoulder. “My mom started leaving earlier for work.”

“So now you’re on my route?”

Esmeralda tried not to smile too much. “Okay, that actually makes this way better.”

It got better still when Esmeralda started to turn left, just as her mother had told her to, and Lucia caught her lightly by the arm.

“Not that way,” Lucia said, already smiling. “I take the long way home. It’s much better. You’ll see.”

Lucia led her far behind the complex, through back roads and half-abandoned lots, until the concrete sidewalk broke apart into dusty footpaths stretching wide toward the mountains. Despite her first flicker of fear, Esmeralda let herself be persuaded over the chain-link fence, and before long her courage was rewarded by a vast sea of desert shrubs and pale sand opening endlessly before her.

Their mothers were livid. Both girls were forbidden to take the long way home ever again.

Nearly two months had passed since then, and Esmeralda had been too afraid of being caught and scolded to risk it. But something that morning felt different—perhaps some anger had risen out of the loneliness of her new routine, or perhaps the butterfly within her had awakened, carrying with it the restless instinct of something born to fly. Whatever the reason, when Esmeralda stepped out the front door at 6:43 that morning, she did not turn toward the sidewalk. The nearer she came to the fence, the faster her heart beat, and the instant it appeared at the edge of her vision, she broke into a sprint.

The changes in her life had not stayed inside the apartment. Dolores had become obsessed with routines—more than that, with never breaking them. No more stopping for snacks at corner stores on the way home, no more riding her bike around the complex, and above all, absolutely no going anywhere near the desert roads where the green-and-white trucks sometimes passed through. Dolores could never understand why Esmeralda loved the desert so much. She rarely spoke of it directly, but whenever those roads appeared beside the city, her whole body seemed to tighten. She gripped the steering wheel harder and drove faster.

“Nothing good ever happens behind those roads,” she would say, shaking her head, before warning Esmeralda never to stare too long at whatever lay beyond the fence.

And yet, to Esmeralda, the desert beyond the fence felt infinite. No rattlesnake or coyote had ever filled her with the same dread as a siren tearing through the complex at night. Even at daybreak in late November, with the heat gone and the air turned cold and dry, she loved everything about it—the crisp wind hissing through the low shrubs, the little spirals of dust curling beneath her shoes, the immense wonder opening deep inside her chest. She nearly skipped as she made her way through the thorned brush and prickly cacti, slipping past every spine without catching once. In that moment, she was no longer the Esmeralda who woke to cold sheets and empty shadows. She was Esmeralda—light and effervescent, bright and quick, emerald and gold, a desert mariposa riding high on the wind.

The thrill humming through her chest carried her onward until a blurred silhouette began to gather in the distant haze. She remembered the way Lucia had laughed when they crossed the fence.

“There’s never anybody out here,” she’d said. “Seriously. It’s like our own little kingdom.”

Suddenly, all her mother's fears came rushing back at once: strange men hiding in parked trucks, children wandering too far and never coming home. A knot twisted in Esmeralda's stomach when the figure finally looked up, then tightened as she realized it had already begun moving toward her.

Little by little, the silhouette resolved into the shape of a woman dressed in a loose embroidered tunic, its red-and-gold geometric stitching luminous against the pale desert fog. Her long black hair moved almost exactly like her mother's, catching the first sun in the same dark, rippling sheen.

"I'm sorry," Esmeralda blurted. "I didn't mean to stare. I just... I didn't think anyone else would be out here."

The woman smiled. "It's all right. I was only washing fabric." She gestured toward the shallow wash beside her. "I come here in the mornings. It's peaceful."

"What's your name?"

"Esmeralda."

"And what brings you out here alone, Esmeralda?"

"I'm going to school," she said quickly. "Well—not exactly. I mean, I am." She glanced back toward the fence. "I just wanted to take the prettier way."

"The prettier way," the woman repeated, amused. "And you aren't afraid?"

Esmeralda frowned. "Of what?"

"Of the desert."

"No," she said, almost too quickly.

"The snakes?"

Esmeralda let out a small, nervous laugh. "No. I like snakes." Then, with sudden firmness, "They don't scare me."

"Do your parents know you came this way?"

Esmeralda lowered her eyes. "No." After a pause, she added, "My dad isn't around."

The woman's expression softened, though only slightly. "And your mother?"

"She hates it out here. She thinks it's dangerous."

"And what do you think?"

Esmeralda looked across the open land, where the desert shimmered violet and amber beneath the rising sun, sprawling so far it seemed to fall into another world. "I think it's beautiful."

The woman held her gaze a moment too long. "Would you like to know my name?" Esmeralda nodded.

"Coatlicue."

Esmeralda blinked. For a second, she wondered if she had heard correctly. The woman seemed entertained by her confusion.

"You've never heard it before?" she asked. "I thought you would have by now."

Esmeralda shook her head. "No... but it's pretty."

A clever smile crossed the woman's face. "Thank you. Not many people would say that."

"Where's it from? What does it mean?"

The question seemed to catch the woman off guard. She studied Esmeralda with new interest.

"You're sharper than most children."

Esmeralda straightened. "I'm almost thirteen."

The woman gave a small nod, though her gaze did not soften. "It comes from somewhere very close," she said at last, "and somewhere very far away."

Esmeralda looked puzzled. "How can it be both?"

"Some things take a long time to explain."

"Can you still tell me?"

"The short version begins many centuries ago, in ancient Mexico." She tilted her head. "You know Mexico, don't you?"

Esmeralda's stomach tightened. "Not really," she said quickly.

"You're not Mexican?"

"No."

The woman hummed, almost disappointed. “That’s too bad. I can only finish the story for someone who is.” She turned slightly, as though preparing to leave.

“Wait—” The word escaped before Esmeralda could stop it. “Okay, fine,” she muttered. “My mom’s from there.” She looked up, suddenly suspicious. “How did you know?”

“I’m from there too,” the woman said. A smile spread across Esmeralda’s face.

“And I’m not from there at all.”

The smile vanished. “What? That doesn’t even make sense.”

The woman laughed softly. “No. I suppose it doesn’t. Not yet.”

“You’re really from Mexico?” Esmeralda asked, brightening again. Only then did she realize how long it had been since she had spoken to anyone besides her mother about Mexico. Her mother’s rules left no room for anyone else—school and straight home, every single day, without stopping anywhere in between.

The woman seemed to notice the sudden sadness passing over her face.

“Do you like stories?” she asked gently.

Esmeralda looked up. “How’d you know?”

“I thought you might.” The woman smiled. “I’d imagine you like history too.”

“It’s my favorite subject,” Esmeralda said, almost beaming now.

“And what about stories hidden inside history?” Esmeralda’s face brightened even more.

“Then you’re in luck,” the woman said. “I happen to know a very old one.” She glanced toward the brightening horizon. “But you should go. You’re going to be late. Your mother will worry herself sick.”

Esmeralda grimaced. “How do you know anything about my mom?”

The woman looked back at her calmly. “I’m a mother too.”

“You are?”

A strange expression crossed her face. “I was,” she corrected quietly, as though the words had slipped out before she meant them to. Then she smiled again, though not quite in the same way. “Go on now, querida. Morning won’t wait forever.”

“Wait.” Esmeralda stepped forward. “Can I come back later?”

“After dark?”

“Well... it gets dark earlier now.”

The woman shook her head at once. “No. Not after dark.”

The certainty in her voice unsettled Esmeralda. After a pause, she asked, “What about tomorrow?”

For a moment, the woman only studied her. Then she smiled. “Tomorrow, then.”

Esmeralda still stood there, caught between the urge to run and the need to know everything.

“I’ll be here,” the woman said. “But go before your teachers notice. We wouldn’t want tomorrow ruined already.”

Reluctantly, Esmeralda turned toward the path.

“Oh—and Esmeralda?”

She looked back.

“You still wanted to know what my name means, didn’t you?” Esmeralda nodded at once.

The woman smiled softly. “She of the serpent skirt.” Then she gestured lightly toward her tunic.

The movement was so sudden that Esmeralda stumbled back, her shoes skidding in the sand. The embroidered cloth had vanished. In its place, serpents writhed around the woman’s waist and legs, their thick bodies twisting over one another in endless coils—slithering upward, collapsing back down, looping and tightening into a skirt of slick scales and hissing tongues. Around the woman’s neck hung a heavy cord strung not with beads, but with severed hands, human hearts, and small skulls bound together. Esmeralda screamed.

That evening, Esmeralda opened the door to find her mother in the kitchen, hunched over a disordered stack of papers, her face strained as though she had spent all afternoon listening for the lock.

Esmeralda stepped forward automatically for their usual kiss hello, but when Dolores did not move, something heavy dropped inside her chest.

"You know," Dolores began slowly, lowering her glasses, "the school called today." Esmeralda swallowed.

"They said you missed the bus. Then they said you showed up covered in dust." Her eyes moved over the dirt staining Esmeralda's shirt and sleeves. "The nurse said you were out of breath, dehydrated... and when they asked where you'd been, you wouldn't tell them."

Dolores sighed, more exhausted than angry. "What happened, mija?"

"I got lost." Esmeralda tried to sound certain, but both of them knew she had never been any good at lying.

"You got lost?" Dolores repeated. "On the same route you've taken every morning for weeks?"

Esmeralda gave a small shrug, pretending not to understand why that sounded suspicious.

"Mija, please." A desperate spark flashed in her mother's eyes. "I can't help you if you lie to me. I can't protect us if—"

Her phone vibrated against the table.

At first Dolores ignored it, her gaze still fixed on Esmeralda. But when it rang again, sharper and more insistent, she snatched it up.

"Hello?" Dolores straightened. "Yes, this is Dolores speaking," she said carefully, her English slower now, more deliberate, slipping into the strained American accent Esmeralda only ever heard around doctors, teachers, and landlords.

After a moment, Dolores stood abruptly and hurried toward the bathroom, motioning Esmeralda toward the bedroom with the phone pressed tight against her ear.

Exhausted, Esmeralda fell asleep almost as soon as she collapsed onto the bed. Dolores never woke her when she looked that peaceful, and the night passed without another word between them, though they slept holding each other tightly. The next words from her mother came scribbled on a note taped to the foil of yet another ham-and-cheese sandwich:

Mija, we'll talk tonight. I might be late—there's something I need to take care of after work. Lock the doors. Don't answer for anyone. Please, I'm begging you, at least for today: school and straight home. Cuidate. Te quiero demasiado.

Neither the note nor the memory of the serpents kept Esmeralda from the desert the next morning. By the time she reached the wash, guilt had tightened so sharply in her stomach that she almost turned back. Then she saw Coatlicue waiting on the same rock, with the same patient stillness as her mother at the kitchen table.

"You came back," Coatlicue said with a smile.

For some reason, the sight of her made Esmeralda want to confess everything at once.

"My mother's really upset with me," she burst out. "She begged me not to come today. Especially today."

The tears came before she could stop them. She tried to speak again, but the words caught in her throat and broke into small, helpless sobs that seemed to vanish into the open expanse. Coatlicue drew her into her arms.

"What is it, mija?"

Esmeralda buried her face against her shoulder. "She was so worried last night. I could tell. And she said she had somewhere to go after work." Her voice broke again. "She never stays out late." Coatlicue's hand tightened against the back of her head. "Did she say where?"

Esmeralda looked up, startled by the change in her voice. "No. Just that she might be late." A chill moved through her. "How did you know?"

For the first time, even Coatlicue seemed shaken. A faint tremor passed through her body as she held Esmeralda closer.

"Shh," she murmured. "Todo estará bien. Te lo prometo."

Esmeralda heard the tremor in her voice, but something in it remained soft and maternal, calming her even as fear gathered between them. After a long silence, Coatlicue drew back just enough to look at her.

“How about that story?” she asked. “It might help for a little while.”

The smile returned to her face, though not quite as brightly as before.

“Do you trust me?”

Esmeralda wasn’t sure she did. Still, after a moment, she gave a small, hesitant nod.

“Good,” Coatlicue said. “Then listen carefully.”

She turned toward the pale seam of the horizon. “Do you know why the Aztecs are called the Aztecs?”

Esmeralda shook her head.

“They are named for the place said to be their first homeland. A place called Aztlán.” Her eyes drifted toward a handful of slender white herons stepping through the shallow marsh nearby. “Aztlán was a land of abundance, hidden beyond deserts and caves, somewhere far north of the valleys we know today. Some say the Aztecs were born there beside six other tribes, all emerging from the same deep cave. They lived among reeds and lakes, where herons stepped through the shallows at dawn and children fell asleep to the singing of insects and the soft tapping of water against canoes.

“Then, one day, a few of them began to hear a voice speaking from the darkness. At first, they did not understand what it was. But soon they knew: it was Huitzilopochtli, the great god of sun, war, and sacrifice, commanding them to leave at once, for their true homeland waited somewhere far, far away.” Coatlicue turned and found Esmeralda hanging on every word.

“Some laughed. Some thought the voice was only a dream born from hunger or heat. Others were too afraid to leave. But a few listened. They gathered what little they owned and followed the call southward. They crossed deserts where the heat split their lips, slept beside dry riverbeds, woke with dust in their mouths. Children were born along the way knowing only movement—one camp after another, one horizon replacing the last.”

“What were they trying to find?” Coatlicue looked at her, almost surprised.

“A sign,” she said. “An eagle perched on a cactus, a serpent gripped tight in its beak.”

Esmeralda stared at her, then had to fight back a laugh. “Seriously?”

“It’s true.”

“But that doesn’t sound real.”

“Very little does when you hear it too quickly.”

Esmeralda opened her mouth to argue, then stopped. In all the thrill of the story, she hadn’t noticed the eagle circling above them, suspended in the white heat. Each time it tilted against the sun, light flashed beneath its wings, bright and brief as glare off a windshield.

“Those who left Aztlán soon began to lose hope,” Coatlicue said. “Year after year wore them down until, far to the south, they came upon a lake covered in a thin film of dull green light. Reeds crowded the edges so densely they seemed to wall the water in. The water was shallow, the mud unstable, the place all wrong for a city.”

Esmeralda’s hand closed tightly around itself.

“And yet, there in the middle of the lake stood a single cactus. And on that cactus perched an eagle, its wings spread wide, a serpent gripped tight in its beak.” Esmeralda’s eyes widened.

“It was a terrible place for a city,” Coatlicue continued. “Marshland. Shallow water. Reeds thick along the shore. Nothing firm enough to trust. And yet, they stopped there anyway.”

“How did they survive?”

“They did not wait for the land to become merciful,” Coatlicue said. “When life upon the lake seemed impossible, they did not abandon it. They remade it. They packed mud and reeds into the shallows, raised causeways over the water, and drove stakes so deep into the lakebed that the earth itself was forced to bear the weight of a city.”

She looked over at Esmeralda. “You know, Esmeralda, in that city, you might have worn feathers, tasted chocolate, slept beneath cotton and rabbit fur. You might have known, without anyone telling you, that you came from something vast.”

And just like that, Esmeralda’s imagination burst open. For a moment, the lake city rose around her: turquoise stitched into the hems of her coat, quetzal plumes flashing green-blue prisms in the sun, feather mosaics shimmering at her wrists. She tasted bitter dark cacao melting on her tongue. She saw canoes slipping through the canals, heard drums rolling across the water at night while incense curled through torchlit temples. The vision came so vividly that she could almost see it swirling there in the hot mist.

“Do you have any idea where that place might have been?”

Coatlicue’s voice cut through the reverie. The lake vanished at once, its dark water pulling back into the shriveled desert as though some immense hand had drained it beyond reach. Esmeralda said nothing, but Coatlicue answered anyway.

“Tenochtitlan,” she said. “The city your ancestors built.”

Esmeralda stared at her.

“And Aztlán?” Coatlicue asked. “Their first home. Any guess where that was?”

Esmeralda shook her head.

Coatlicue looked out across the desert. “You’re standing on it, *mija*. This very desert. This very land. Not only Mexico. Not only some faraway story, but here too—from Aztlán to Tenochtitlan, from Mexico to Tucson.”

Her voice softened. “Do you understand now?”

But before Esmeralda could answer, figures began to emerge through the wavering morning light. At first she thought they were boats—long, hard-edged shapes glazed green-white beneath the sun’s glare. Then the heat shifted, and they cohered one by one, not into boats but trucks, crawling over the gravel with black-tinted windows sealed tight against the desert. Men climbed down in a rush. Their boots struck the sandstone with sharp, metallic scrapes. Esmeralda flinched, heat rising in her chest so fast she nearly fainted.

“¡Escóndete!” Coatlicue snapped, her voice sharpened by a fear Esmeralda knew too well.

Esmeralda dropped behind a creosote bush, curling inward as the dry branches cut across her cheek. Above her, the eagle cried out again—a thin, piercing whistle slicing through the morning stillness like metal dragged across stone. She covered her ears and squeezed her eyes shut. When she opened them a second later, Coatlicue was gone.

The trucks rolled on, grinding through the wash without seeming to notice her. Esmeralda watched the eagle wheel overhead, its shadow sweeping across the hood of the first truck, the pale shape still wavering like a vessel in the heat. For a moment, she kept her eyes fixed on it, as if looking hard enough could push it farther away. Then a hand clamped around her wrist.

“No te muevas,” someone breathed against her ear. “Ni una palabra.”

She turned to find Dolores crouched behind her, her hair fallen loose from its bun and spilling around them like a dark veil. For one stunned second, Dolores only stared at Esmeralda, her face hollow with terror. Then she broke into tears—first a few strangled sounds, then sobs she could not hold back, fear and relief tangling with anger too quickly for her to swallow.

“I told you not to come today,” Dolores cried, pulling Esmeralda as close to her chest as she could.

“I’m sorry, Mamá,” Esmeralda choked. “I’m so sorry... I didn’t—”

Dolores drew back just far enough to see her face. “Shh. It’s okay, *mija*,” she said, though she was still sobbing. “Just tell me—quickly. Who else knows about this place? Please. You have to tell me the truth.”

Esmeralda shook her head, crying harder. “No one.”

“Mija.” Dolores gripped her shoulders. “Mírame. Don’t hide anything from me. Not now.”

“No one, Mamá. Only Lucia. I swear.”

“Lucia?” Dolores went completely still, her expression frozen in disbelief and a fear too deep for scolding. “Lucia knows?” Esmeralda cried harder.

“I’m sorry, Mamá... Lucia showed it to me. I just wanted to explore. I didn’t think any of this would happen.” Her breath broke, and she said it again through her sobs. “I’m so sorry.”

The wind gathered with sudden force, throwing a violent swirl of sand around them as they curled closer together. For a moment, the dust nearly swallowed them.

“Can we go home? Please?” Esmeralda whispered through her tears, though her mother’s eyes had already given her the answer.

Dolores turned toward the road. The trucks were circling back, their white sides flashing between the shrubs like vessels searching for shore.

“No, mija,” she said. “Not home.”

Esmeralda looked up at her. “Then where?”

Dolores gathered her close again. “Away from here.”

“Where, Mamá?”

For a moment, Dolores did not answer. She kept her eyes fixed on the road, watching the trucks pass in and out of sight between the brush.

“Somewhere safe,” she said at last.

She held Esmeralda against her chest and waited for nightfall, listening until she was certain no tires would return, no doors would open, no voices would cross the desert but their own. By the time the night deepened, Esmeralda had fallen asleep in her mother’s lap for the first time in weeks. Dolores did not sleep. She watched the road and the long tire marks darkening in the cooling dust, her body held so still she seemed emptied of everything except the need to keep her daughter close.

“Shh, mija. I’m here,” Dolores whispered, pressing a kiss into Esmeralda’s hair when she tossed against her chest. “I’m here now.”

By the time Esmeralda woke, the desert had nearly gone dark. For one confused instant, she mistook the last violet haze gathering above her for the first light of dawn. Out of habit, she reached for the cold sheet—but this time her mother’s fingers closed tightly around hers.

Only when the black desert night had fully overtaken the sky did Esmeralda and her mother rise from the sand. The day’s heat had drained away, but neither of them shivered. Hand in hand, they stepped into the dark expanse. Behind them, the road still bore the last scars of the trucks. Before them, the desert opened without promise or mercy. And yet Esmeralda moved through it like a desert mariposa, guiding her mother along the only path left.

Years later, in an apartment on the far edge of Tucson, Dolores would keep a miniature Mexican flag tucked behind the Virgen de Guadalupe shrine above the stove, high enough that no one outside could see it. Only Esmeralda seemed to notice how the kitchen light caught its white center and illuminated the eagle perched upon its cactus, the serpent held tight in its beak—as if even there, after all those years, it still refused to let go.