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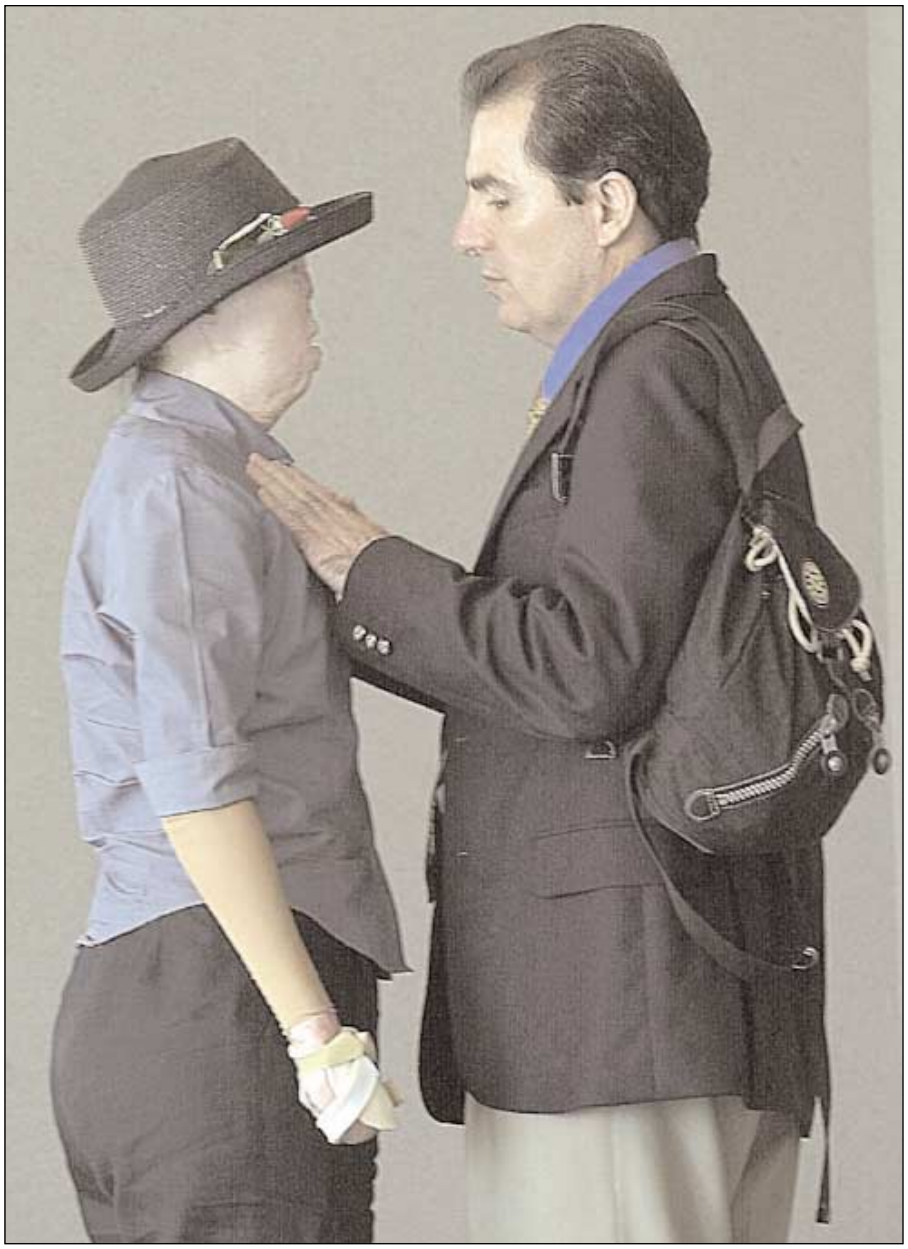


Jacqueline and Amadeo

CHASING HOPE

Her old life vanished in flames. Now, guided by a tenacious will and her father's devotion, Jacqui fights every day to recover

Story by David Hafetz ❖ Photography by Rodolfo Gonzalez

Children always look. They always turn around to look.

Some kids shout. Some ask their mothers what happened. Some follow. Some hide.

Once in a supermarket, a boy came near.

Monster, he said.

It's even worse when children cry.

"I feel like a normal person inside," Jacqueline Saburido says.

Some days, she stays at home, lying in bed, visiting the past. Her last hours in Austin. The islands where she swam with friends and family. Dancing flamenco. Racing her car through the chaotic streets of Caracas, Venezuela. Watching the stars from her father's boat.

For a while, she rests in the memories of her old life — the life that disappeared in the flames.

It would be so easy now, at 23 years old, to just fade away.

Questions haunt her.

Will I ever be independent?

Will I ever be normal?

Why me?

Each day, she can stay in bed, or she can keep going. "You choose," she says.

And every day, her father, Amadeo, is there, soothing, pushing, encouraging.

"He's an angel with me," she says.

Together, they face the questions and the stares.

She understands why people look. They're curious. She's curious, too.

She wants to see herself.

In the bathroom, at the mirror, she leans close, and she looks.

JACQUI'S FACE

At a distance Jacqui looks old. Up close, ageless.

She has a baggy neck and thin crumpled lips. Her cheeks are splotchy and rough in places, smooth in others.

Where her right ear should be, she has a slender crescent of cartilage around a pea-sized black hole. On the left side, she has only a hole.

Her nostrils are ragged, torn. A flap of skin hides her left eye. For more than two years, the eyeball floated naked in the socket, mostly blind but perpetually staring behind a clear plastic goggle. Her right eye sees behind a veil of scar.

Her burned skin can't sweat or protect her from heat and cold. It feels hot and tight, like having a sunburn.

Scars run down her body, halting at her knees and before her size 7½ feet, which the fire never touched. She has learned to use her feet like hands — her toes stroke a blanket's softness and test shower water.

Her fingers are amputated between the knuckle and the first joint. On her right hand, they are fused together like a mitten.

Nerve damage has left parts of her body numb. She can make out some texture with the bottom of her right palm. Her left hand feels only pinpricks — "like a thousand needles," she says. Her hands hurt every day, but Jacqui doesn't take painkillers.

She likes to touch, clasping strangers' hands with her palms. With friends, she steps forward.

"Hug me tightly," she whispers. "I won't break."

In Venezuela, where Jacqui grew up, friends remember a slender beauty, 5 feet 4 inches tall, with smooth brown hair and brown eyes, an only child who refused to take no for an answer.

When Jacqui speaks, old friends know it's really her. Her voice still bites.

She whines like a spoiled child, bosses like a foreman and teases like a schoolgirl.

There's joy in her voice.

When she listens to merengue and Spanish ballads, she still sings off-key. Love for songs, Jacqui believes, comes from inside.

"Life without music wouldn't be life," she says, "and the best way to live it is singing."

THE JOURNEY

Jacqui and Amadeo Saburido are on a quest. They're trying to salvage Jacqui's hands and eyes, restore her independence and, maybe, make her whole again after the accident.

On Sept. 19, 1999, Jacqui got a ride home from a party in Austin. On a dark road, a drunken driver veered over the yellow line.

Two passengers died on impact. Two were rescued from the spreading fire by frantic paramedics.

Jacqui, pinned in the front seat, burned.

She woke up in a hospital in Galveston, blind and hallucinating. Her parents, estranged from each other, waited by her bedside, watching parts of their daughter die.

But Jacqui lived. She emerged from the hospital unrecognizable and totally dependent.

She suffered third-degree burns over 60 percent of her body, according to her hospital discharge report. After 2 years, she's had more than 40 surgical procedures.

Her goals are basic but desperate. She wants her left eyelid rebuilt and her vision restored. She wants to regain use of her hands.

She also wants hair, a nose and lips. But no doctor has the magic answer, and no surgeon has much to work with. Jacqui's body is a mass of scars.

"I know I'm not going to be the same," Jacqui says, "but I want to recover what I can."

Amadeo shuttles his daughter from city to city, chasing referrals and fourth opinions. As long as Jacqui has options — and the will — her search continues.

"We're in a life of wandering," says Amadeo, who is 49.

They're roommates, together all day, all year. *Terco* — stubborn — they nag each other. They're both used to getting their way.

Together, far from home, they shop in malls, eat fast food and slog through *la routina* — their daily routine that for two years was dominated by massages, therapies and doctor appointments. Together, they continue to wage a tug of war against depression.

What's the point? Jacqui asks her father. Why should I keep fighting if I'm never going to be well?

There's hope, Amadeo tells her in his low, steady Spanish. You've come so far.

"We're in this together," he says. "We're here to fight together."

Jacqui always seeks more reassurance from her father. "You don't love me," she says, teasing yet testing him.

Before she left Caracas, it was Jacqui who cared for her father, washing his clothes by hand and packing his suitcase for trips. When she was 17, she left her mother to live with him. They had a

Jacqueline Saburido has no nose or ears, limited vision, stubs for fingers and constant pain. But she survived the fiery wreck in 1999 that killed two friends on Austin's RM 2222. She has come a long way since last summer, when she still struggled to do basic tasks such as wiping her face. In her home hangs a wooden crucifix carved by an aunt, one of many signs of faith she keeps near.

Jacqui laughs at her father after he dozed off while waiting for the doctor. Her life is a constant battle against anxiety and depression, but it is a battle in which she comes out on top more often than not. 'What good is it going to do to throw yourself into oblivion?' she asks.

penthouse, new cars, a plane and a boat to visit white-sand islands with turquoise water. One day, she planned to take over Amadeo's air-conditioning factory.

Now, she struggles to use the bathroom alone, to dress and feed herself. And she tries to be happy.

"My dream, the dream of my life, the most important thing since I was little, was to find someone who truly loves me, and who I love, and have a family with four or five children," Jacqui says.

Now, she wonders, who will want me?

She lights candles and prays. In her bedroom, she keeps a small shrine of saints and Virgin Mary statues. In the living room, she keeps framed snapshots of the way she used to look.

Wherever she goes, her photographs and her saints come along.

As does her father.

With Amadeo by her side, Jacqui has visited other hospital patients to boost their spirits, confronted the drunken driver and traveled home to her old life in Venezuela to face her friends and family.

Everyone — even Jacqui's father — wonders how she's survived.

Maybe it's because she's a born fighter. Maybe it's because of her perfectionism, her tireless drive to get things just right. Or maybe it's because she's not alone.

Jacqui believes in miracles. Her father believes in science.

Still, before a surgery, they stand together at the altar of Jacqui's saints, and together they pray.

"Hope," Amadeo says, "is the last thing to go."

GALVESTON – JULY 2001

Jacqui climbs the narrow stairway, feeling out edges and landings with her feet, counting each step until she hits 14. She walks to the door labeled in small type: "Jaus." To learn the language of his new home, Amadeo has tagged objects with the Spanish spelling of English words.

Almost two years after the accident, Amadeo speaks scant English. Jacqui speaks it better, though still imperfectly.

They live here, in a second-floor apartment in a warren of seagull-gray buildings four blocks from the burn unit at the University of Texas Medical Branch and four blocks from the beach. From the parking lot, they can smell the Gulf's salty air. Inside, their tidy apartment has the feel of a summer rental.

Jacqui spends most of her free time indoors, waiting for her next surgery, watching Latin American soap operas and e-mailing friends and relatives back home.

"I'm as bored as an oyster," she says.

THE MASK

The bathroom door pops open and she glides out, her blue-checked slippers with bows quietly swooshing over the carpet.

Jacqui sits on her bed and dangles her legs over the edge. She wears light gray pajamas with a big teddy bear on the chest and little bears on the legs. Her beige pressure garment, designed to reduce scarring, peeks out from under her pajamas. The suit is tight, she says, but it makes her feel safe.

It's almost midnight. Bedtime, Jacqui decides.

"Ti-to" she calls, using her nickname for her father. They're never far apart in their small apartment, but she belts out her summons like a stage actress.

"Tito," Jacqui calls. "*Gotas y crema. Y la máscara.*"

Drops and cream. And the mask.

Amadeo, wearing boxer shorts and a T-shirt, brings the tiny tubes and squeezes drops into her eyes. It's a precise gesture — like dripping oil on a hinge — yet tender.

Gently, he rubs moisturizer on her cheeks, his heavy eyebrows furrowed in concentration. A bald spot peeks through his dark hair.

At night, father and daughter often nit-pick and match wits.

"Children are a reflection of their parents," she says late one night as her father grumbles about her sleeping habits.

"Children," he replies, "are a reflection of their parents' mistakes."

When she's ready, Amadeo brings out Jacqui's sleep armor.

First, *la máscara*.

Gingerly, Amadeo lifts the white silicone rubber mask, which helps smooth her scars. It looks like a flat, floppy version of the mask of comedy and tragedy. He lowers it over Jacqui's face.

Next comes a gold Lycra hood, which keeps the mask still and keeps pressure on Jacqui's head.

He puts the goggle over her eye. If she doesn't protest too much, he wraps a hard collar they call "the watusi" around her neck and screws a lip-stretching clamp into her mouth.

Then, more *gotas y crema*.

Amadeo sets the alarm for 2 a.m., when he will shrug himself awake for another round of eyedrops. He will rise again at 4 a.m. and at 6 to repeat the process, keeping Jacqui's eyes moist.

Father and daughter hug good night. They pray together, or she prays alone.

Jacqui closes her right eye. Her uncovered left eye stares in the darkness.

She used to sleep on her stomach, but now she can't. She worries she could scratch her left eye against her pillow.

She also worries her father might forget the drops.

"I'm scared all night," she says.

Sometimes she dreams she's looking in the mirror at her old face. In other dreams, she's at the beach, looking down nervously at her healthy hands and skin, afraid the sun will burn her.

Oh my goodness, she sighs, waking up. It's just a dream.

CARACAS – JULY 1999

Two months before the accident, Jacqui felt her life coming apart.

She seemed to have everything: beauty, intelligence, money, friends. But she was anxious.

In college, where she studied industrial engineering to prepare for running Amadeo's factory, Jacqui had fallen behind. She panicked during tests. She fixated on her failures and debated whether to continue.

Outside class, she fantasized about having her own home, a husband and children, but she hadn't dated anyone seriously since Marcos, the boy her parents introduced her to years before at the beach.

Marcos Martínez had seemed perfect. He was sweet and deter-

Children follow Jacqui's every movement as she heads toward her psychologist's office in Galveston before their mother notices and pulls them away. It's a common occurrence, one that Jacqui understands. Back in Venezuela she used to look, too. If she saw someone missing an arm, she looked, even when she knew it made the person uncomfortable. 'I am so curious,' she says.

It takes multiple hands to position *la máscara,* the silicone mask that Jacqui wore for almost two years to keep scarring down while she slept. In July 2001, Jacqui holds it in place as Amadeo secures it. She is determined to be as normal as possible and works hard to tend to her skin and muscles. 'I know I'm not going to be the same,' she says, 'but I want to recover what I can.'

mined. Like her own father and mother, his parents were from Spain. One day, as a prank, she slipped a note on his car: "I love you forever."

They began dating just as Jacqui's parents separated. When Marcos broke up with her, Jacqui was devastated. Her schoolgirl crush spiraled into obsession. She saw a psychologist, hoping to erase Marcos' memory, but two years later she still thought only of him.

Jacqui always seemed to be missing something, Marcos said — love, perhaps.

Growing up, she always felt a little lonely.

"She had everything, but she wasn't happy, either," said Jacqui's mother, Rosalia Garcia. "She was lacking a family."

Jacqui always considered her mother the volatile one, but now Jacqui found herself arguing with everyone, even her father. She judged people against her high standards, and they often didn't measure up.

"Every day I got worse," Jacqui said. "I cried. I got depressed. I didn't study. I wanted to close the door and forget everything."

When she needed to escape, she hopped in her car, a green Toyota Corolla that Amadeo had given her — over Rosalia's objections — for her high school graduation.

She loved the adrenaline rush of driving fast, blaring salsa and hugging curves. She felt in control.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Jacqui tossed her black skirt and black dance shoes — the pair with metal taps — into her car.

She had begun studying flamenco when she was 18. She thought the Spanish dance, sensual and forceful, revealed a woman's character.

"I could feel it in my blood," Jacqui said.

She had trouble concentrating in class, but sometimes after returning home she got the urge to practice. In the parking lot, she tapped and sang to herself — *uno, dos, tres . . . cuatro, cinco, seis.* Or she went upstairs, blasted music on the balcony and watched herself twirl in the glass, dancing until she lost the rhythm.

LEAVING CARACAS – AUGUST 1999

Jacqui decided to take a break from college and study English abroad. She settled on Austin, where a family friend who lived in Texas could help with arrangements.

Amadeo thought Jacqui deserved a rest. Rosalia pleaded with her daughter to stay.

"I don't believe in this, but I had a premonition deep in my heart," Rosalia said. "Something that told me no, no, no."

Jacqui had her own foreboding.

"I know something is going to happen to me," she told Yelitza Villar, the beloved older cousin with whom she had attended a private Catholic school.

Don't go if you don't want to, Yeli told Jacqui. But the arrangements already were made.

A week before leaving, Jacqui went to their beach club, where she rode her Jet Ski up and down the channels, slicing through the still, murky water. It was overcast and cool. She breathed deeply, savoring the breeze.

"Well, enjoy this," she remembers telling herself, "because you don't know if you're going to have another chance."

At Caracas' main airport on Aug. 20, 1999, Jacqui and her parents took pictures in the cafeteria.

"Use the time well," Amadeo told her.

Rosalia and Jacqui hugged and kissed. "See you soon," her mother said.

From the plane, Jacqui spotted her parents on the observation deck. They were standing apart. She started to cry.

AUSTIN – SEPT. 18, 1999

Jacqui called Amadeo from Austin. She wanted to go to a birthday party that Saturday night outside the city on Lake Travis. The birthday boy, who was Venezuelan, would pick her up.

Her father didn't like the idea and told her to take cab fare with her in case she got stranded.

Jacqui had been in Austin for almost a month, studying English at a private language school near the University of Texas. She was happy on her own and was thinking about staying another semester.

At first she lived with a Spanish-speaking host family, then moved into her own apartment in a dormitory. Her neighbor was Johanna Gil, a 20-year-old Venezuelan student she had met in English class. Jacqui and Johanna did everything together.

Johanna wasn't interested in the party that Saturday, but Jacqui insisted.

"Let's go, let's go," she said, until Johanna gave in.

REGGIE

That morning, Reggie Stephey's mother picked him up from football practice at Lake Travis High School. The 18-year-old was a popular wide receiver with a narrow build and wavy light brown hair.

Earlier that summer, Reggie had moved into his own apartment. His father had died when he was a child, leaving him $70,000 from an insurance policy. Reggie supported himself with that money and a paycheck from folding clothes at a mall store.

Reggie's mother drove him to pick up his prized blue 1996 GMC Yukon, which was getting a new bumper. He had bought the sport-utility vehicle with his inheritance and had it customized and raised.

That night, Reggie met some high school friends at a dock on Lake Travis, where they drank beer from an ice chest. Reggie said later in a court deposition that he had had two or three beers.

About midnight, when his friends started leaving, Reggie drove alone to a college party downtown.

When he arrived, a witness later testified at his trial, Reggie's eyes were bloodshot.

TWO PARTIES

At the party, Jacqui and her friends watched the Oscar De La Hoya-Felix Trinidad boxing match on television, then danced salsa and merengue. It felt like a party back home.

She and Johanna gossiped with Laura Guerrero, a 20-year-old student from Colombia. Laura was with her boyfriend, Johan Daal, a 22-year-old Venezuelan. The couple had met the previous year after coming to study in Austin.

As the hours passed, Jacqui grew bored. The birthday boy, who had picked her and Johanna up, was drinking and couldn't drive

Jacqui's mother, Rosalia, came to visit in Galveston for a month in June 2001. Jacqui, who jokes that she is more like a child now than she ever was before, has had a sometimes difficult relationship with her mother. After her parents' separation, 17-year-old Jacqui moved in with her father and ran their penthouse in Caracas.

them home. They waited around for a ride.

In Austin, Reggie walked to his car.

He seemed unsure of his words and footing, a witness later said. Describing that night to a jury, Reggie said he couldn't remember how many beers he drank at the party.

A few minutes after turning west on RM 2222, Reggie's Yukon began climbing a steep incline firefighters call Tumbleweed Hill.

A RIDE HOME

A Russian girl offered Jacqui and her friends a ride home. Natalia Chpytchak Bennett was an 18-year-old student at Austin Community College.

Jacqui, who rarely drank, said she had been watching Natalia. She seemed sober.

Laura and Johan climbed in the back of Natalia's 1990 Oldsmobile Ninety-Eight Regency. Jacqui and Johanna remember arguing over who would ride shotgun.

You sit in front, Jacqui said. No, you, Johanna said. Finally, Jacqui gave in.

Jacqui doesn't remember whether she fastened her seat belt. The autopsy report would say that Laura did not.

Natalia put on her seat belt and turned on the radio. Laura fell asleep in the arms of Johan, who also dozed off.

Johanna complained that Natalia wasn't driving fast enough.

"We're never going to get there at this turtle's pace," Jacqui remembers Johanna whining.

As Johanna spoke, Jacqui remembers turning around and thinking:

We're going to crash.

SEPT. 19, 1999

About a mile down the road, paramedic John McIntosh said goodbye to the rescue helicopter crew and the firefighters, then pointed the ambulance toward Austin. His partner rode in back, helping their patient, a woman who had crashed her car into a telephone pole.

It was 4:22 a.m., already a warm morning. This should have been the drowsy paramedics' last run of the night.

McIntosh, a 34-year-old former U.S. Army medic, drove for about a mile on RM 2222, passing the 3M research center on a dark stretch of road lined with cedar trees and few streetlights.

As he rounded a gentle curve, McIntosh jammed on the brakes. Up ahead, a burst of yellowish-orange flame shot into the dark sky. Two wrecked cars were splayed across the eastbound lanes, facing each other like the sides of a "V."

As he slowed down, McIntosh spotted a teen-ager in the road, standing in the ambulance's path, holding a cell phone and waving his arms frantically.

Reggie Stephey looked wide-eyed and lost. He had just called 911.

The front of Reggie's Yukon was smashed, but the vehicle had suffered little other damage. Thanks to the air bag, Reggie walked away with only a red seat-belt mark across his chest.

"Hey, I've got an emergency," Reggie told the 911 operator, but he couldn't remember what road he was on. He had walked to the other car, where he saw a small flame and heard gurgling from the front seat.

The front of Natalia's Oldsmobile was twisted and crumpled like an accordion. Broken glass covered the road.

In the front seat, Jacqui struggled to free herself. She was pinned between the dashboard and the seat.

Flames from the engine were starting to creep toward her face.

Next to her, Natalia was dead, crushed against the steering wheel.

In back, on the floorboard behind the driver's seat, Laura lay curled in a ball, also dead. The two other back-seat passengers, Venezuelans Johanna and Johan, were dazed and injured.

McIntosh stopped the ambulance and rolled down the window.

"Is there anybody in the vehicle?"

"Not in the Yukon," Reggie said. "In the little car. There's a fire."

Wait across the road, McIntosh told him. The paramedic pulled past the wreck.

"This is Rescue 16; I just drove up on a car fire," he barked into the radio. "I think there are people inside."

McIntosh snapped on the emergency lights and ran to open the ambulance's rear doors.

"I think there's people in there," McIntosh yelled to his partner, yanking the red fire extinguisher off the wall.

From inside the ambulance, Bryan Fitzpatrick, a 29-year-old career paramedic, looked out at the flames.

Fitzpatrick trains other paramedics in water rescue — plucking people from lakes and rivers. He had never been in a situation like this. He and his partner had been trained to treat people, not pull them from burning cars.

Fitzpatrick went for the radio. McIntosh, extinguisher in hand, dashed to the Yukon. He checked that the car was empty, then ran to the Oldsmobile.

The flames, rising from the engine compartment, were creeping across the dashboard.

He aimed the extinguisher's nozzle at the fire and squeezed a steady blast of white fog. In seconds, the tall flames fell. McIntosh kept squeezing until the car went dark. He set down the extinguisher and peered into the engine compartment.

Deep in the white cloud, a small flame glowed brightly.

McIntosh quickly surveyed the car. Johanna sat by the back right door, her forehead covered in blood. Johan was on the center hump. Silent and stunned, both watched the paramedic.

McIntosh had seen grisly crashes before. Once, in the Army, he had watched helplessly as a trapped pilot tried to escape a burning helicopter. Wounded soldiers lay dying on the ground; no one had the medical gear to save them.

He grasped the rear driver's-side door handle. The door popped open without a squeak.

He clasped Johan and tugged the 200-pound Venezuelan backward out of the car. Panting, McIntosh glanced at the engine.

The flames were back, inching just above the dash.

I've got to hurry, he thought.

Back at the ambulance, his partner, Fitzpatrick, worked the radio. He called the firefighters from the first accident, hoping they were still nearby. He reached them as they were pulling away.

Overhead, the STAR Flight helicopter already was circling. The crew had spotted the fire and radioed Fitzpatrick.

We may need you, the paramedic said. Find a place to land.

FAMILY PHOTO

On Sept. 19, 1999, Jacqui badgered her friend Johanna into coming with her to a birthday party on Lake Travis. The party felt like one back home, with Jacqui, second from left, and her friends — from left, Luis Crespo; Julio Daal; Johanna Gil; Luis Cardozo; Laura Guerrero; and Johan Daal, front — dancing to salsa and merengue. A few hours later a car wreck would leave Laura and another party-goer, Natalia Chpytchak Bennett, dead and Jacqui, Johanna and Johan injured.

Rescue crews had to use the Jaws of Life to rip apart the Oldsmobile, above, driven by Natalia Chpytchak Bennett, who was killed. Jacqui was in the passenger seat. Laura Guerrero, who also died, was in the back with Johanna Gil and Johan Daal, who were injured.

Fitzpatrick grabbed his fire protection coat and ran.

He saw McIntosh dragging Johan across the road.

Oh, my God, Fitzpatrick thought, there are people in this car.

Fitzpatrick ran for his medical gear.

McIntosh finished dragging Johan — "Ouch," the Venezuelan said as his foot scraped the road — then sprinted back to the Oldsmobile. The girl, Johanna, was still staring at him. He pulled her across the seat and began dragging her across the road.

The flames were climbing.

There's not much time left, he thought.

As McIntosh dragged Johanna, his partner caught up. Together they carried her across the road.

"There's more people," McIntosh yelled, running.

The flames reached higher, licking over the dash.

Smoke was everywhere, whipped by the helicopter blades and lit by its powerful searchlight. The acrid smell of melting plastic burned in the paramedics' nostrils. McIntosh, out of breath, started coughing out smoke.

In the car, he tried pulling Laura off the floorboards, but her feet were wedged under the front seat. Fitzpatrick moved in closer to untangle her. As he worked, the image of his wife and baby flashed through his mind.

His son was about to take his first steps.

Am I going to leave my boy fatherless? he thought.

Laura's legs came loose. The paramedics pulled out her limp body.

Jacqui moaned. The flames were lapping into the passenger compartment. As they hauled Laura across the road, Fitzpatrick saw the Oldsmobile's cloth overhead interior catch fire.

On the side of the road, Fitzpatrick examined Laura as McIntosh raced back to Jacqui.

Jacqui looked straight at the approaching fire, screaming, crying, squirming to free herself.

McIntosh pressed the door handle. The door wouldn't budge.

He grabbed the red extinguisher off the ground, aimed and squeezed.

Nothing. He slammed the extinguisher down.

Jacqui screamed through the shattered window. McIntosh couldn't make out her words.

"I'm a paramedic. My name is John," he told her, panting. "I'm going to get you out; I'm not going to leave you here. I'm not going to leave you."

McIntosh pulled on the door with his bare hands, but it was stuck. He tried yanking the seat back from the flames, but it was jammed.

The flames edged closer to Jacqui's face. She pushed back, thrashing with her broken right arm for leverage.

McIntosh tore at the door, bending the metal window frame a few inches — enough to get his fingers in. The door still wouldn't move.

Jacqui rotated her face away from the flames. She couldn't twist far enough.

McIntosh looked down at her ear, her dark hair.

He felt like he was stuck in place, watching a tidal wave approach.

The flames licked at Jacqui's head. Sparks caught her hair. The fire rolled into the passenger compartment.

"John, let go," Fitzpatrick shouted. "You need to back up."

Flames shot from the windows, pushing McIntosh back, singeing his arm hair and leaving scorch marks on his shirt. He retreated, watching.

Jacqui flailed. Flames wrapped around her. Her nose and her ears were on fire. Clumps of burning hair fell away.

She started to wail.

The paramedics had never heard anything like it. It was so many sounds at once — suffering and despair, terror and hopelessness.

Absolute agony, Fitzpatrick thought. Then he started screaming, too.

"Oh my God, she's burning!"

Jacqui's wails seemed to go on forever.

A tow truck pulled up. Fitzpatrick sprinted over.

"I need your extinguisher now!" he yelled. He grabbed the tall, silver cylinder. Running back, he pulled out the pin, aimed and smashed down the handle.

Nothing. He looked at the dial. Empty.

The metal clanked as the extinguisher skated across the road.

The fire engine crested the hill. Fitzpatrick ran over, waving frantically.

A firefighter heard Jacqui's shrieks above the fire. He jumped out and pulled off a hose. Another started the water pumping. Fitzpatrick yanked a second hose loose and helped unwind it.

McIntosh snatched a pry bar off the truck. He tore at the seam of the burning door, bent the window frame and broke the door handle. Finally, in desperation, he swung the metal bar against the car.

Jacqui's wails stopped. She slumped over in the flames, her head drooping on her right arm.

The paramedics listened, not to the fire, but to her silence.

"Thank God she's dead," Fitzpatrick said.

A firefighter began flooding the car with water. Another firefighter trained a second hose on the car. In a few seconds, the flames died out.

Bright red spots still glowed on Jacqui's body. Gently, a firefighter doused her. Her body steamed.

Black, sooty water splashed McIntosh, still standing by the car.

I've got to take care of the living, he told himself, then sprinted past his partner.

"Fitz," he said, "she's dead."

Fitzpatrick needed to know for sure. He went to the Olds.

On the shoulder of the road, Johanna and Johan looked up at McIntosh. The paramedic placed his hands on Laura's lifeless body.

"She's DOS," McIntosh shouted to his partner. Dead on scene.

Fitzpatrick peered into the car. Every square inch looked burned. The seats were melted goop. He reached for Jacqui's wrist, then froze.

Across the road, McIntosh heard him yell.

"Oh my God, she's still alive."

Jacqui moved her head and whimpered.

Remnants of her hair, crisp and curled, clung to her skull. Her scalp was seared, her face indistinguishable. One eye looked burned open, the other burned shut. Her shirt was melted, and her skin was crusty, cracked.

She looked like a black silhouette.

Firetrucks, rescue workers and police arrived in a flood of

The skin on Jacqui's head is stretched taut across her skull and breaks very easily, requiring frequent treatment and bandaging. She feels as if she is growing up again, she says, except she doesn't know whether she ever will. 'In reality, I've been born again, and so it's like I died. I've lived all the stages of a baby,' she says.

Bryan Fitzpatrick and John McIntosh were two of the paramedics who helped rescue Jacqui from the burning car in September 1999. Despite years of experience as rescuers, the two men were haunted by the crash and their inability to save Jacqui before she burned.

lights and sirens. Firefighters tugged on the front seat, pulling Jacqui off the dash. A park ranger, Al Reyes, shone a light on Jacqui.

Do you want to speak in Spanish? he asked her.

"I want to die speaking English," Jacqui answered.

She asked about the other girls. Then she said:

"Am I going to die?"

"Honey, you're hurt pretty bad, but we're going to do the best we can," Reyes said. She'll never live, he told himself.

Firefighters pried the door open with the Jaws of Life, a hydraulic claw that works like a reverse set of pliers. The men wrapped gauze bandages on Jacqui's burns and tried to lift her, but she stuck to the seat. Gently, they peeled her off.

A firefighter held her hand, where the skin hung loose, sliding off.

Jacqui was crying. She appeared to slip in and out of consciousness.

The men wrapped Jacqui in a paper burn sheet, strapped her to a backboard and, in the dark, ran the board over to the waiting helicopter.

Nearby, Reggie was still talking to the 911 operator, Linda Garza. Sitting in the Austin police station, Garza watched information on the victims being posted on her computer screen: Two dead. One person trapped in a burning car. Her co-workers surrounded her, listening.

"Linda, am I going to be OK?" Reggie asked at one point.

"You're going to be fine," she said.

"I hope I haven't hurt anyone," he said moments later. During the conversation, Reggie mentioned his Yukon: "I loved that car," he said.

Throughout the call — Garza estimated it lasted 80 minutes, the longest of the 911 operator's career — Reggie blamed the wreck on the other driver, who he said crossed the median.

Almost three hours after the accident, Reggie's blood alcohol level tested at 0.13, well above the 0.08 legal limit for driving.

A patrol officer put him in the back of a police car. Reggie kept talking to the 911 operator.

"I need to go home," he said. "When can I go home?"

He asked Garza for permission to lie down, then closed his eyes and fell asleep.

At 4:51 a.m. STAR Flight lifted off.

Jacqui screamed during the short flight. The sound of the whooshing metal blades would stay with her. Later, dreaming morphine dreams in the hospital, she imagined her father flying to her rescue.

Neither McIntosh nor Fitzpatrick thought Jacqui would live.

Days later, the partners met for beers and tried to piece together what happened. Together, they reckoned the rescue — from first seeing the fire to when it was put out — took about eight minutes.

Jacqui, they agreed, burned intensely for about 45 seconds.

CARACAS – SUNDAY, SEPT. 19, 1999

The morning of the accident, Rosalia awoke before dawn in her apartment with a sharp, pressing pain in her chest.

She lay in bed, anxious and unable to fall back to sleep. Later, she remembers calling her sister-in-law and saying: Something has happened to Jacqui.

Amadeo spent that Sunday morning walking near his apartment on the Avila, the lush mountainside that looms over Caracas. In the early afternoon, he returned to find frantic messages on his answering machine. The family friend who had helped arrange Jacqui's trip had been calling all morning.

Something terrible has happened, she told Amadeo when he reached her.

Amadeo dialed Rosalia. Jacqui's been in an accident, Amadeo told her, but she's going to be OK.

They arranged a flight for that afternoon.

AMADEO AND ROSALIA

Jacqui, their only child, was the lone thread left holding Amadeo and Rosalia together. They had married young and soon realized they were mismatched. The couple separated in 1996, long after their 21-year marriage had died.

On the surface, they had much in common. Both were born in Galicia, a poor, rural province of Spain. Both were brought to Venezuela as teen-agers by their parents, who sought a better life in the promising, oil-rich South American country.

Amadeo's father spent the first decade of his son's life in Venezuela working construction. When he returned to Galicia, he taught his son carpentry, but Amadeo didn't want to labor with his hands. He daydreamed of flying a warplane and ruling Spain, like Gen. Francisco Franco.

"I was a rebellious boy," Amadeo said.

After the Saburidos settled in Caracas, Amadeo went to work. He was still a teen-ager when he started an electrical installation company with a friend — the first of a series of businesses. Years later, he and his older brother bought Climar, the air-conditioning factory the family still runs.

"For me, it always was important to feel industrious," Amadeo said. "How bad is it to say, 'I'm not good for anything'? This filled me with fear."

He met Rosalia in 1974 at the beach, where their families introduced them.

Rosalia was an 18-year-old beauty with clear blue eyes and long, brownish-blond hair. She lived with her mother, who had gone to Caracas to work as a housekeeper after the death of Rosalia's father. Rosalia, who chafed under her mother's strictness, was working at a hair salon when she met Amadeo.

The 21-year-old carpenter's son was driving a flashy new white Mercedes, but Rosalia remembers a shy young man in a frumpy bathing suit.

She liked Amadeo's perfect manners: He always opened the car door and said sweet things. Amadeo admired Rosalia's looks. He thought she had a difficult personality, but he always liked difficulty.

He said he got cold feet just before the wedding, but, as his father had taught him, he kept his word.

The fights started soon after they married in 1975.

"I was explosive," Rosalia said, "and he wouldn't talk."

She said Amadeo never respected her. She began missing the polite man who had courted her. Amadeo said he wanted a hard-scrabble wife — a woman like his mother, who worked the land as she raised her five children — but Rosalia wanted to stay at home.

FAMILY PHOTOS

Rosalia and Amadeo doted on Jacqui. Dressed all in white for her first Communion, 'she looked like a princess,' Rosalia remembers. Mother and daughter were and still are perfectionists, arranging themselves, their clothes and their surroundings just so.

Jacqui, front left, poses with her cousin Yelitza Villar, front center, and friends, from left, Jenny Kahoity, Marila Marquez, Maryory Romero and Sharon Rengel at a party before Jacqui left Caracas in 1999.

Jacqui and her family lived well in Caracas. One of Jacqui's favorite vacation spots was Venezuela's Isla de la Tortuga — Turtle Island. Here, she was 15 or 16.

"I managed every situation I faced in life," Amadeo said, "but not her. I don't know if she's unmanageable, or I'm incapable."

Amadeo said he was thinking about divorce when Rosalia became pregnant

Jacqueline Saburido Garcia was born Dec. 20, 1978.

GROWING UP

The young mother delighted in having a little girl. Years later, she still remembers how Jacqui looked in her first Communion outfit: a white dress, white gloves and a large white hairband.

"I didn't want even a fly to touch her," Rosalia said.

Mother and daughter were inseparable. Rosalia took Jacqui with her on errands and taught her to read in the car by pointing at signs. At home, Jacqui watched her mother clean the apartment until it was spotless.

In the living room, Rosalia arranged figurines of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs on a round glass table, spacing the dwarves evenly along the table's edge and placing Snow White at its center.

The decorations, Rosalia taught Jacqui, were not for touching. Soon, Jacqui was measuring the dwarves, too.

"It must be genetic," Jacqui recalls with a sigh.

As a child, Jacqui saw much less of her father, who put in 14- and 16-hour days at his factory. She called him "Amadeo." They spent more time together on weekends, when Amadeo would take the family to Venezuela's Caribbean coast.

On their boat, Amadeo showed Jacqui how to fish and maintain the engine. He wanted to teach her to fend for herself, just as his parents had taught him.

"I think my father wanted a boy," Jacqui said. "I always had oil on my hands."

When she was little, Amadeo sat Jacqui on his lap in the car and showed her how to steer. When her legs reached the accelerator, Jacqui ordered Amadeo to scoot over. As Amadeo clutched the emergency brake, she drove.

He gave Jacqui everything she asked for — a new car, a Jet Ski. When he resisted her wishes, she badgered him into submission. Jacqui was mastering the art of bending the world to her will.

Everyone who knows her — cousins, friends, their parents — has a phrase or adjective to describe her: the Queen of the Power to Convince. A pineapple under your arm. A tongue that could raise the dead — just so they won't have to listen anymore.

"Say no to Jacqui? Impossible," one friend said. "It always costs you less to say yes."

When she was a teen-ager and her parents' relationship was deteriorating, Jacqui and her mother began clashing, too. Both had the same strong will — a *carácter fuerte*, as Venezuelans say.

Jacqui said she wanted to live like her friends — have guests over, throw birthday parties in the apartment and put on lipstick — but her mother wouldn't let her.

After her father moved out, Jacqui stayed with Rosalia, but she said it soon reached the point where her mother didn't want her touching anything.

Finally, at 17, Jacqui packed her car with her clothes, her stuffed animals and the family's picture albums. She made the move to her father's in five trips. She did it all alone.

Across town, in Amadeo's new penthouse, Jacqui assumed command. She got angry at the help and often did the cleaning, shopping and ironing herself.

"It was an adoration, Jacqueline and her father, her father and Jacqueline," a friend said.

Amadeo said those years with Jacqui were the happiest of his life.

LEAVING CARACAS

On the day of Jacqui's accident, Rosalia hastily threw clothes in a bag and told her brother to take out the garbage.

"My mind didn't accept that this (accident) was true," she remembers.

Amadeo wasn't sure what to think as he packed. Maybe the accident wasn't so serious. With his younger brother, he raced to the airport.

GALVESTON – THE BURN UNIT, SEPT. 19, 1999

When the helicopter from Austin touched down at the University of Texas Medical Branch, Jacqui was rushed through the electric doors of the Blocker Burn Unit. Doctors and nurses scrambled around her.

In Austin, at Brackenridge Hospital, Jacqui had been treated briefly and put on a ventilator. She arrived in Galveston immobilized and sedated, hanging between life and death.

The majority of her burns were third degree — the severest kind. The flames burrowed through her skin and, in places, down to her bone. The worst damage was to her face and hands. Her buttocks, one thigh, parts of her back and the area below her knees were spared serious damage.

Jacqui also had broken bones, including a fractured arm, leg and hand.

The burn unit, a nationally recognized intensive-care ward, sits on the second floor of a tall, earth-colored hospital on UTMB's sprawling campus. A set of wide automatic doors sections off the small unit's white and peach corridors, which nurses keep at a balmy 84 degrees for patients, whose damaged skin no longer retains heat.

Once Jacqui entered the eight-bed unit, nurses and doctors began an around-the-clock battle to save her.

Healthy skin, the body's largest organ, keeps fluid in and bacteria out. But Jacqui's skin could do neither.

Nurses rushed to pump Jacqui full of intravenous fluids and antibiotics. They cleaned her wounds and changed dressings constantly. It was gritty work. Jacqui's body fluids kept soaking her bed. Nurses, who kept Jacqui's room near 100 degrees, walked out drenched in sweat.

One threat followed another. She was in shock and in danger of organ failure. Swelling was choking her blood circulation. Her overwhelmed body had begun consuming itself for fuel. Hospital staff pushed a feeding tube through her nose and gave her a high-calorie, high-protein solution.

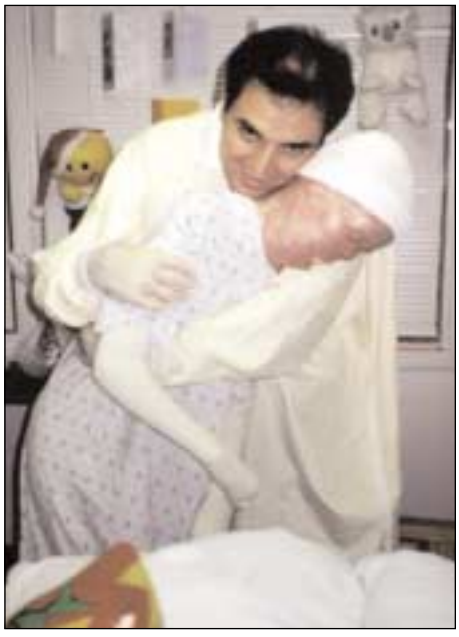
With a steady diet of sedatives and morphine, they medicated her "to the gills," as one nurse put it.

Jacqui drifted in and out of consciousness. Later, she wouldn't remember anything.

Nurse Rachel Goodheart, a 10-year veteran of the burn unit, had never seen anyone survive such severe head burns. She

As she recovered, doctors wanted Jacqui to stretch her elbow and hands five times a day. When she was tired, her father complained, she wouldn't do it. 'It's because it hurts,' Jacqui retorted. But Amadeo kept pushing. Father and daughter know that increasing Jacqui's flexibility and mobility is crucial to giving her at least a taste of independence.

By December 1999, three months after the accident, Jacqui was still drugged and blind and had only a loose grasp on reality. She had little control of her body, either. Her muscles had atrophied after months of disuse. She needed constant support, from Amadeo and others. Jacqui celebrated her 21st birthday in the Galveston burn unit that month.



FAMILY PHOTO

FAMILY PHOTO

Jacqui displays this photo of her with her father as a memento from her old life. Taken just before she left Venezuela for Austin in 1999, it's a reminder of what she lost, but also of what she still has: her memories and her father.

prayed.

"God in heaven, have mercy."

'I'M HERE'

Amadeo and Rosalia reached the burn unit about noon the next day.

You're not going to recognize your daughter, a doctor told Amadeo.

"I'm ready," Amadeo said.

He put on a yellow gown, a surgical mask and gloves and entered Jacqui's room.

Tubes and wires ran in and around her. She was wrapped in gauze like a mummy, with only her face and her toes exposed. Her arms had swollen to the size of her legs, and her head was the size of a soccer ball, blurring her features. Burned hair stuck to her head like bits of charcoal. Her skin looked leathery, charred.

"Her face didn't exist," Amadeo remembered. "There wasn't a single part of her where I could say, 'That's Jacqui.' No. Nothing except her feet."

He listened to Jacqui breathing on the ventilator.

I'm here, he told her. You had an accident. Don't worry. You're going to be OK. . . . I know you're listening.

Amadeo stayed until he couldn't hold on any longer.

"Never in my life had I known what it was to cry like I did on that day," Amadeo said. "From then on, I cried in silence. I cried sleeping; I cried awake. I believe I was crying all the time."

Outside, Rosalia wanted to see Jacqui. Amadeo tried to calm her.

"Rosalia, prepare yourself," Amadeo finally told her. "Our daughter is like a monster."

Goodheart escorted Rosalia, trembling and wide-eyed, into Jacqui's room.

The 45-year-old nurse talks bluntly with burn patients and their families, her voice revealing traces of her Buffalo, N.Y., accent. She tries to never show her emotions, but Jacqui's case got to her. Goodheart has a daughter about the same age. The nurse doubted she could bear what Rosalia was about to see.

In the room, Rosalia hovered over Jacqui's bed, staring at her daughter's face and hair, frozen, barely breathing.

"Chiquita," Rosalia finally said. "I'm here. It's your *Mamita*, here at your side. Everything's OK. You're going to be OK. You're going to heal. And I know you're listening."

While her mother spoke, Jacqui moved her foot.

Outside in the hall, Rosalia collapsed and wept.

Goodheart moved out of sight and cried, too.

HARVESTING SKIN

That day, doctors set Jacqui's fractured bones, drilling in pins, metal rods and plates. They cut open her hand to wash out dead tissue and dirt with a hard water spray.

On Wednesday, surgeons began the process known as debridement. They went to work with scissors and a long blade, slicing through Jacqui's dead skin until they reached flesh that bled.

Surgeons covered her burns with autografts — thin strips of healthy skin shaved off unburned parts of her body. They passed the skin through a machine that punched small holes in the grafts, allowing doctors to stretch them and cover a wider area.

The grafts left aching wounds. Doctors waited until the wounds healed to harvest more skin.

Meanwhile, doctors used homografts — stored sheets of cadaver skin, which work like a temporary dressing, buying time until the body rejects it.

Surgeons delayed debriding Jacqui's head, hoping to salvage as much of her face as possible. Her eyelids were destroyed, but her eyeballs survived. Days later, her eyes were sewn shut. If left uncovered, they would have dried out, and she could have lost all vision.

Dr. Dwayne Roberts, a 30-year-old ophthalmology resident, watched one of Jacqui's early surgeries. The young doctor had never seen such a severe case.

Around the operating table, doctors worked quickly and quietly.

"We're not going to save this girl," Roberts thought.

HANGING ON

Amadeo and Rosalia watched Jacqui wheeled off to surgery after surgery. Doctors took turns working on different body parts.

Rosalia didn't think Jacqui could survive. She took sedatives and prayed.

"I asked so much of God. I begged him," she said.

Amadeo said he didn't have any doubt his daughter would live. He slept in a chair by her bed.

He and Rosalia spoke little. They sat apart in the waiting room and eventually rented separate apartments, but each parent kept up a one-sided dialogue with Jacqui.

After a few days, Jacqui sometimes responded to questions. To say yes, she moved a foot up and down; to say no, she swayed her foot from side to side.

Amadeo and Rosalia wanted to touch their daughter, but they didn't know where — her body was an unending wound. Patients need contact, Goodheart said. It's like a shot of morphine.

One day, nurses told Rosalia and Amadeo to remove their gloves and massage Jacqui's feet. Rosalia wanted to kiss her daughter.

"Go ahead and kiss her toes," Goodheart told her.

Rosalia, the nurse said, bent her lips to Jacqui's feet and held them, not letting go.

FACE AND FINGERS

Amadeo and Rosalia watched Jacqui's ears disappearing and her fingers growing thinner.

Goodheart remembers Jacqui's lips getting looser as she cleaned her patient's face with wet gauze pads.

"Then one day," Goodheart said, "they're in my hands."

After her lips, Jacqui's right ear came off, Goodheart said. Her left ear and her nose fell off, too.

Jacqui battled infections and high fevers. Surgeons chipped at dead skull bone with a drill and harvested more skin.

On Oct. 10, three weeks after the accident, there was good news: Jacqui's doctors decided she could breathe on her own. She could barely speak.

"Hola, Mamita," Jacqui whispered hoarsely to her mother.

With a little help from a Velcro splint on her hand, Jacqui could serve herself fettuccine alfredo in the summer of 2001. Whenever she does something new, her father cheers. 'Look, you're eating by yourself,' Amadeo exclaimed one day as he dabbed mayonnaise from around her mouth. 'But you have to wipe my face like a little girl,' she complained.

For more than two years, Jacqui's eyes, including her lidless left eye, needed moisturizing drops and cream to keep them from drying out. During her visit to Galveston, Rosalia helped with the task, required every half hour in the daytime and every two hours at night. Now, Jacqui's eyes still need drops but not as frequently.

Early on, doctors had amputated parts of her fingers. They left as much as they could, hoping some bone would survive.

Amadeo kept signing the medical releases. He said he didn't know how much doctors planned to amputate.

In the operating room, surgeons used scissors to snip the soft, dead bone to between the knuckle and the first joint.

EYES

The sutures holding Jacqui's eyes closed kept popping open as the skin on her face scarred and contracted.

In early October, Jacqui's right cornea — the clear window on the front of the eye — dried out and tore.

Roberts and the ophthalmology staff performed emergency surgery.

Then, in early November, Jacqui's left cornea deteriorated. Doctors rushed to do a transplant. To cover the eye, they used a procedure that involved sewing the conjunctiva — the clear covering over the white of the eye — over her cornea. They did the same for her right eye.

The operations bought time.

"We threw everything we had at her," Roberts said.

Roberts had grown attached to Jacqui. He juggled his shifts around her operations. The young doctor, who had no children, cared for Jacqui like a daughter, Goodheart remembers.

He had studied Spanish in high school and tried translating for Amadeo and Rosalia as they struggled to understand Jacqui's condition. Both seemed grateful.

One day, Rosalia gave him a hug and latched on for a minute.

"She wouldn't let go and started to cry," he said, "and so did I."

HALLUCINATIONS

Slowly, Jacqui drifted back into the world — blind, in agony despite the drugs and unable to move.

Sometimes Jacqui imagined horses were riding over her, ripping off her skin. In other dreams, she was trapped in a burning house. Sometimes, lying in bed, she tried to blow out invisible flames.

In her medical records, hospital staff recorded her words: Where are the other girls? . . . Look at that car driving crazily. . . . Sir, help me get my seat belt off.

Jacqui doesn't remember much of her burn unit stay, but she vividly recalls her hallucinations. She imagined the hospital staff was trying to kill her parents. In her mind, she saw Amadeo being stabbed to death, then revived, then stabbed again.

Whenever he left her room, she wanted the door locked.

JACQUI'S QUESTIONS

What do I look like? How is my skin? My hair? My hands?

Jacqui asked everyone — her parents, doctors, nurses, visitors. She asked all day.

Amadeo and Rosalia dreaded traumatizing her further. They put off telling her the truth and asked visitors to deflect her questions.

"You look better than the last time," people said.

Jacqui kept asking.

THE TUB ROOM

The tub room is one of the burn patient's daily stops on the pilgrimage to recovery. Many remember it as a kind of torture chamber.

The room draws its name from a large stainless steel tub. After nurses cut off bandages, patients are lowered into a bath of warm water spiked with weak Clorox, or they're placed on a stainless steel bed and hosed down as nurses scrub their wounds with soap. The daily baths can last three hours.

Patients get a fresh dose of morphine before bathing and listen to loud, distracting music while in the tub. Still, their families sometimes hear their screams down the hall.

Jacqui begged to skip her baths.

Leave me alone, get me out of here, Jacqui remembers yelling.

Her only consolation was the music. Nurses remember Jacqui singing along in English to "Pretty Woman" — she knew all the words.

All she wanted to do was lie in bed. Just as nurses were cutting down on the morphine, therapists were pushing her to get up and walk.

After months of lying still, her body couldn't support itself. Her muscles were wasted and her balance was off. Sitting up made her sick. Everything hurt.

Therapists belted Jacqui to a board and, little by little, raised her. Without support, she toppled like a doll. Still blind, she slowly took small steps, lumbering like a mummy. After walking five feet, she felt exhausted.

Therapists labored to bend her joints and stretch her skin, which contracted as her confused body tried to shrink its wounds. Her left elbow locked in place. When her contracting skin pulled her chin toward her chest, doctors operated to free her neck.

Jacqui cried when she woke up, and she cried at night, too.

"She would make statements like, 'I don't want to do this,' meaning 'Just let me die,' " Roberts said. "The nice things about those times is they didn't last very long."

Jacqui screamed and cried, Goodheart remembers, but she kept pushing through.

"She was the most positive little girl I ever met," Goodheart said.

AM I UGLY?

Amadeo began broaching the truth. Rosalia said she couldn't.

"He told her piece by piece," she said. "First, that her eyes were sewn shut."

And my ears, Papa? Jacqui would ask.

My love, they're like this . . .

It went step by step.

"She would forget the answer because she was on morphine," Amadeo said.

A few days later, Jacqui would ask again. A week later, again.

For one question, Jacqui turned to her mother: Am I pretty or ugly?

Chiquita, of course you're not like before, Rosalia told her. But little by little they'll fix you.

"I thought I must not be so bad," Jacqui said, "because, knowing my mother, she would tell me."

Month after painstaking month, Jacqui works toward becoming more independent. Early on, one of the things Jacqui could do without help was to clean her face with a cleansing cloth. She's hoping to get back more of her sight. Before the operation this year that covered her left eye with a flap of skin, she saw only shadows with it; her right eye can make out more detail.

Jacqui's vision has improved, but last summer, she had to be inches away from the computer screen to read messages. It took her 20 minutes to write a three-paragraph e-mail. She selected each letter using a mouse and an on-screen keyboard, and Jacqui can't stand typos. 'It takes a lot of patience,' she says, sighing. 'I don't have a lot of patience.'

She said she thought her father was better at concealing.

And my hands? Jacqui kept asking him.

We still don't know, Amadeo told her.

BOO

Jacqui turned 21 in the burn unit. She felt like she was living through a second childhood.

"I was a little girl again. I played with my father," Jacqui said.

One night while putting Jacqui to bed, Amadeo called her *mi patito lindo* — my pretty little duckling. She called him *Patito* back, then shortened it to "*Tito.*"

By December, Jacqui was playing pranks. She jerked in mock pain when touched and tripped the oxygen level monitor on her toe, bringing nurses running.

Another favorite was calling out in a hoarse whisper: Please come here. I have a secret. Come close to me . . .

Are you close? she asked doctors and nurses as they leaned in.

Then:

BOO.

The first time, Goodheart left the room shaking.

"Stinker," Goodheart said, remembering the moment.

Jacqui's spirit, and her parents' dedication, made the family burn-unit favorites. Goodheart said she and the other nurses needed breaks from caring for Jacqui.

"I felt her pain so badly," Goodheart said.

Before heading home, Roberts always stopped by to chat.

"We were all just so in awe," Roberts said. "You couldn't help but fall for her."

When Jacqui did lose steam, the nurses helped coax her forward. One day, when she felt too tired to walk to the tub room, the nurses began humming *"La Cucaracha."* Along with Amadeo and Rosalia, they made a conga line around Jacqui, who joined in.

"La cucaracha, la cucaracha, ya no puede caminar," they sang, snaking their way down the hospital hall.

LEECHES

At night, Amadeo slept in 15- and 30-minute spurts, staying awake to see whether she needed anything and catching naps later.

Throughout her recovery, Jacqui leaned more on her father. She feared that Rosalia wasn't strong enough to hold her up. She didn't think her mother could make decisions, either.

During the day, Amadeo toiled by his daughter's side. He fed her, cleaned her eyes, brushed her teeth and helped in the bathroom. He kept track of her medicines and treatments, worrying that a nurse would forget something.

"I've never seen such a devoted father in my whole life," Goodheart said.

When Roberts arrived for his daily check on Jacqui's eyes, Amadeo had whatever he needed — bandages, utensils, eyedrops — already laid out.

"He didn't shy away from any of it," Roberts said.

Not even the leeches.

In January, plastic surgeons rotated a temple muscle over her left eye to cover it. But blood started pooling over the muscle flap — Jacqui's damaged veins couldn't drain it. Her doctors resorted to an ancient technique: leeches, which sucked up the blood and, they hoped, would give her veins time to grow.

"It was gross," Roberts said.

Someone had to tend them.

Amadeo volunteered. For five days, he sat up, plucking off the leeches with pincers when they swelled with blood.

"It was unthinkable," Amadeo remembers.

Then, after five days, the eye flap died.

THE TRUTH

"*Papi*, my fingers. I don't feel them," Rosalia remembers Jacqui crying. "I don't feel my fingers. *Papito, Mamá*, my fingers."

Sometimes she dreamed she had them. Other times, she dreamed they were gone.

"I don't want to live, Tito," Jacqui sobbed when she woke up.

Please don't say that, Amadeo cried as he hugged her.

Finally, at the end of January, doctors, nurses and staff psychologists met with Amadeo and Rosalia to plan how to tell Jacqui about her hands. She was going to be released soon, and soon she would see.

Amadeo asked his cousin — a doctor from Venezuela — to come to Galveston to speak with Jacqui's doctors. Afterward, the cousin broke the news to Jacqui.

You were burned a lot, the cousin explained. You lost a large part of your fingers.

"I'm not going to cry; I'm not going to cry," Jacqui told herself. "I'm going to be strong."

Later, she said that if she had started crying, she might have just given up.

Sometimes, she could feel her missing fingers. She could feel them open and close.

Phantom movements, she was told.

JACQUI

Once the question came, it never ceased.

Why me?

"But why? Why? Why? Why?" Jacqui said. "It's like an infinity that never stops."

Am I being punished? Was I bad? Was I was bad with my mother? And what about Laura and Natalia? Were they bad, too?

It's our destiny, Jacqui has thought sometimes. Or she has thought: It's the devil.

I must have a mission, she told herself.

But why be born to suffer?

Her psychologist told her that bad things happen to innocent people. Babies are born without fingers.

Maybe there is no answer. Jacqui searched, and keeps searching.

"Life must have some meaning," she said.

THE MIRROR

Only at the end of her five months in the hospital did Jacqui begin to make out shadows.

"I thank God," she said. "If I had seen myself as I was, I couldn't have continued."

Jacqui examines a photo of her left eye, covered with notes from her eye specialist, as she waits to see reconstructive surgeon Dr. Luis Scheker at Jewish Hospital in Louisville, Ky. Her priority: finding a way to create a lid for the eye. Once she has that, work to restore some of her vision can begin.

Jacqui lets her father fix her hat before they head out for a full day of errands and doctor's appointments in Louisville. She has scores of colorful hats to choose from, most of which were gifts from her family and friends.

Her first real glimpse in the mirror was blurry. Then, in March 2000, a month after her release from the burn unit, she visited Roberts, who gave her drops that dilated her right pupil. For a few hours, she could make out details.

Back at the apartment in Galveston, Jacqui grabbed two framed photographs. She sat on the edge of her bed and studied them. One showed her with long hair in Caracas; in the other, she is smiling beside the fountain on UT's South Mall.

She set the pictures together on the night table, then walked to the bathroom mirror.

She leaned close, inspecting herself inch by inch. She touched her face.

"Lo que yo era," her uncle Antonio Saburido remembers her saying, *"y lo que soy ahora."*

Who I was, and who I am now.

She began weeping. Antonio, who was taking care of Jacqui while Amadeo was away, remembers sitting with her on her bed, hugging her. She cried for hours.

Then, suddenly, Jacqui jerked her arm, like she was throwing something away.

"Ya," she said. That's enough.

She turned on her small stereo, picked out a pop mambo song and grabbed her uncle. In the living room, they started dancing in their socks to song after song. Antonio, a beefy 49-year-old, struggled to keep up.

Finally, panting, Antonio had to sit down.

"Uncle, more," Jacqui pleaded, hiding her own exhaustion. "Uncle. Ay, uncle."

She kept dancing by herself.

FELIX AND SONDRA

When he first saw her dance, Felix Rodriguez thought Jacqui was crazy. They were at physical therapy, after their release from the burn unit. Her therapists had been singing, and Jacqui got up to cha-cha.

Felix, whose hospital stay had coincided with Jacqui's months in the burn unit, never thought someone in their condition could do that — or would try. By dancing, Jacqui seemed to be saying: Look, I can move. Don't feel too bad for me.

Felix, then 40, was having the opposite experience. Forty-five percent of his body was covered in third-degree burns after a car wreck. He lost one eye, his ears, his nose and parts of his fingers. He felt like letting go.

Jacqui rattled him. While he was still getting pushed around in a wheelchair, she pedaled an exercise bike, her legs drenched in sweat.

"Just watching her is what got me to go forward," he said.

Jacqui's old nurses began asking her to return to visit patients. Jacqui agreed. She talked candidly about her treatments. The visits made her feel useful; at least she wasn't wasting time.

Sondra Silva still remembers the afternoon Jacqui walked into her hospital room.

Silva, a real estate agent in her mid-30s, came to Galveston for skin grafts after developing a flesh-eating infection on her leg. She was in agony, her business had fallen apart and she didn't know when she would walk again. She had stopped eating.

Jacqui came and explained her recovery. She showed Sondra her skin.

"I was so humbled I started to cry," Sondra said.

She started eating again. She can still recite bits of her new friend's advice: Every day, plan to cry five minutes, then move on.

"She blessed me," Sondra said.

THE LONG YEAR

The months passed.

At the Galveston apartment, Jacqui slept late, waking to days of physical therapy, psychologist's and doctor's appointments, more surgeries. In the burn unit, surgeons had created an eyelid for her right eye, but never succeeded in covering her left eye.

She lived through other people's hands — hands to bathe her, feed her, clean her, apply hot wax to her neck, stretch and massage the scars all over her body.

"It was like caring for a porcelain doll," her uncle remembers.

La routina never ended. Progress was maddeningly slow.

Little by little, Jacqui began to see more out of her right eye and began to walk more. By July, 10 months after the crash, she finally felt fully conscious again.

She still struggled to accept what had happened to her. In the apartment, distractions were few and sadness constant.

I don't do anything, Jacqui told friends at home. I can't stand it.

HOMECOMING – VENEZUELA, DEC. 2000

They waited in the hall near baggage claim, holding happy-face balloons and straining to see through the glass. Jacqui's friends and cousins watched crowds of passengers come and go through Caracas' Simón Bolívar International Airport. Finally, her plane arrived.

Jacqui had decided to make the trip home when she couldn't bear *la routina* anymore.

"I told myself if I stay here, I'm going to die — not of sickness, but of depression," Jacqui said.

Returning to Caracas was terrifying. She had been living in a cocoon. "The closer you are to the hospital, the less people stare," as her friend Felix said.

Now her friends would see her. The thought quickened her pulse.

Will they reject me? she wondered.

As she walked off the plane with her father in mid-December, she wore a wig, prosthetic ears and a prosthetic nose. She also had picked out a special hat: a bright red Santa Claus cap.

In the airport, Rosalia, who had returned days before, spotted her daughter.

Her friends didn't recognize her. The wig, ears and nose looked plastic, like a mask. To her closest girlfriend from high school, Marvin Arevalo, only Jacqui's outline seemed familiar. Jacqui had always stood up for Marvin in school. Now Marvin looked at her friend's eye, at her hands. She gasped.

"At last I see you," Jacqui said, hugging her.

"I love you a lot," Marvin replied.

Marvin felt tears welling up. Seeing them, Jacqui's aunt clapped: Come, Jacqui, aren't you going to say hello?

Everyone circled around. Jacqui couldn't see the shock or the struggles to hold back tears.

Jacqui loves to have fun, and she's made many friends along the way. One friend from the burn unit in Galveston, Felix Rodriguez, remembers thinking Jacqui was crazy for dancing during therapy. But she inspired him to go forward at a time when he felt like giving up. As they say goodbye after a therapy session in Galveston, Jacqui teases him for putting on weight but admires the dexterity he's achieved with his hands. 'She's got a hellacious attitude,' Felix says. 'She don't let herself give up.'

At physical therapy in Galveston, receptionists and therapists fussed over Jacqui. Angela Poulter works with Jacqui to stretch her fingers and thumb so she can make a pincer movement.

During her three-week trip, some friends became physically ill when they first saw Jacqui. A few fainted. Her little cousin cried and ran away. Sharon Rengel, another close high school friend studying medicine, vomited and lay in bed for a day. At the airport, Amadeo's nephew walked away, repeating: "This isn't my cousin; this isn't my cousin."

Jacqui recognized people by voice. When one friend cried openly, she cried, too.

"It's OK — don't worry," Jacqui said.

We brought you a surprise, her cousin Yeli said at the airport — something green. They led Jacqui to her old Toyota Corolla.

"*Mi carrito,*" Jacqui said, sighing. My little car. But she decided to ride home in Marvin's boyfriend's car, a tall Jeep. She refused assistance, climbed up herself and, as her friends protested, tumbled into the seat alone.

"That's when I knew it was Jacqui," one friend said.

The penthouse apartment was decorated with lights and a large banner in English and Spanish that read: "Bienvenido a Your Home." But it felt strange.

That night, Jacqui sat in her old room with her suitcase. She couldn't unpack alone. After years of running the household, she couldn't do anything without help.

"It felt like this wasn't my house," she remembers. "I felt like I was a different person."

WHO WILL LOVE HER?

Marvin went home to cry.

"Why didn't Jacqui die? Why has God left her to live like this?" Marvin asked her mother.

As teen-agers, the two friends had daydreamed together, inventing rich and poor husbands, counting imaginary children. Jacqui teased that Marvin would marry first.

"Who's going to fall in love with her?" Marvin now asked her mother. "How is she going to have a family?"

The next day, she visited Jacqui. More friends came over. Some cried. Jacqui consoled them.

"If she wants to live, then it's for something," Marvin remembers thinking. "I'm going to be with her until the end."

A few people never visited. Marvin's parents said they didn't have the courage. They wanted to remember Jacqui as she was.

THE STRIPTEASE

At first, Jacqui tried cushioning the blow by wearing the wig and the false ears and nose, even around close friends. But the plastic parts felt heavy and stuffy.

You're among friends, everyone told her; make yourself at home.

When Yeli removed Jacqui's wig, Marvin's jaw dropped, but Marvin kept talking.

"I'm going to take off the ear," Jacqui said, and she shook her head, singing the music to a striptease.

She shook off one ear, then the other. Everyone laughed. "You're a clown," Marvin said.

Jacqui kept on the nose.

"This expensive nose, it costs so much, and it's so ugly," she complained.

You look like Pinocchio, Marvin joked.

The next day, when Marvin walked into the apartment, Jacqui had removed the nose. Marvin looked at her torn nostrils.

My God, she thought, give me strength.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY

Jacqui wanted to see her old boyfriend.

She had called Marcos after the accident. She still had hopes.

"I wanted him to love me for the way I am," she said. "I loved him, or I still love him, I don't know."

Marcos came over for Jacqui's 22nd birthday party on Dec. 20. Yeli had planned a happy-face theme party. They put candles on a smiling birthday cake and hung yellow balloons. Jacqui's close friends — including Yeli, Marvin and Sharon — all wore yellow shirts. For one night, they would all be the same.

When Marcos first saw her, he remembers almost fainting. He took a deep breath and pictured her old face.

Jacqui wanted to talk, but there were too many people in the room. Everyone knew the history, and Jacqui could feel them watching.

Before leaving, Marcos came over.

"He told me that he admired me a lot for the strength I had," Jacqui said.

Afterward, she learned that Marcos had cried in the kitchen. It hurt to hear.

"I don't want him to have pity for me," Jacqui told a friend.

The whole trip home was tinged with melancholy. When everyone sang "Happy Birthday," Jacqui and Amadeo cried. Later, Jacqui's friends saw Amadeo sitting alone on the balcony.

Jacqui wanted to stay in Venezuela, but she despaired at seeing her friends do all the things she no longer could.

Everyone's going to have careers, then marry and have families, Jacqui told a college friend one night. My life is ruined.

"You have to keep fighting," her friend said, "and you'll get what you want, the same as us."

A SECOND CHANCE

Much about Jacqui seemed the same. She talked nonstop and made jokes, even if some saw her humor as a shield. She remained the center of attention.

But now her friends saw in her a new maturity and perspective.

"She's learned how to live with what she has, to live as she is. And she does it," Marvin said. "She doesn't have hands, but she has this piece of a finger . . . and she says, 'Life gave me this.' "

One night, Marvin brought over a statue of the Rosa Mística, a Virgin Mary saint popular in Venezuela who was said to have first appeared in Italy in 1947.

Jacqui asked everyone present — friends, cousins, uncles, aunts — to gather at a round table in the living room. They placed the statue in the center, lit candles and began praying a rosary. Her friends and relatives took turns offering a prayer for Jacqui. No one knew exactly what to say. Some thanked God for bringing them all together and for saving Jacqui. When Jacqui's turn came, the room fell silent.

"Rosa Mística," she began. She thanked God for allowing her

The phone is Jacqui's lifeline to her friends and family back home. The Saburidos' long-distance bills are hundreds of dollars every month. Some things don't change: Growing up, she always loved talking on the phone. Close friend Sharon Rengel says that now, she senses that Jacqui is 'on the other side of the phone . . . waiting for it to ring.'

Jacqui favored jeans and light makeup when growing up in Venezuela, a country that turns out vast numbers of beauty queens. She never looked fancy 'but always perfect,' her ex-boyfriend recalls. Jacqui, who's still meticulous about her clothes, checks out a People magazine best- and worst-dressed issue in Louisville in August 2001. It was the first magazine she read by herself, using a magnifying device over her right eye.

FAMILY PHOTO

Going home to Caracas in December 2000 was bittersweet. The excitement of being home and seeing people was tempered by concerns over what they thought and over what they could do that she could not. On New Year's Eve, Jacqui was surrounded by friends, including Marvin Arevalo, left; Marvin's boyfriend, Adolfo Portilla, standing; Maria Eugenia; and Sharon Rengel.

to come home and find everyone well. She prayed for burn victims, for abandoned children and for other people suffering. She asked for strength for her and her family.

And she thanked God for the second chance.

I won't waste this, she said.

TRAVIS COUNTY COURTHOUSE – JUNE 2001

Reggie Stephey entered the silent room and looked at each of the faces gathered around the conference table. Mauricio Guerrero and Johan Daal, the father and boyfriend of Laura Guerrero. Jacqui and Amadeo.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Reggie's trial was in its second week. Jacqui and Amadeo, who had returned from Venezuela five months before, had driven to Austin so Jacqui could testify. Reggie had wept when Jacqui took the witness stand — it was the first time he had seen her. Then, on his 20th birthday, the jury found him guilty of two counts of intoxication manslaughter for Laura's and Natalia's deaths. He faced up to 40 years in prison.

Reggie had taken the witness stand to ask the jury for probation — he said he wanted to educate teen-agers about drunken driving and "give them something to think about." Then he apologized to the victims and offered to meet with them in person.

Jacqui had long been curious about Reggie — what he looked like, what kind of person he was. When she walked from the witness stand back to her seat, she couldn't help herself. She paused and peeked.

"Oh, he's handsome," she thought.

She found herself feeling sorry for Reggie, worrying that he wouldn't be able to attend college. Still, she felt he should be held responsible for the lives he destroyed.

"I wish there was something between guilt and innocence," she said afterward.

As jurors weighed Reggie's punishment, Jacqui and the others agreed to meet him in a conference room.

FORGIVENESS

Jacqui spoke at the end of the meeting. She told Reggie how her life had changed.

"I don't hate you," she remembers saying, "but you need to understand that you committed a grave mistake."

The room was silent.

"I forgive you," she said.

Reggie, Jacqui remembers, said he wished he could give her back the past. I admire you, Reggie said. I'll do anything I can to help you — I'm at your service.

Jacqui looked at him.

"Well," she answered, "I do need a housekeeper."

As they finished talking, the jury reached a verdict on Reggie's sentence.

Johan shook Reggie's hand. Amadeo and Mauricio embraced him, and Reggie gave Mauricio the crucifix he had rubbed throughout the trial.

Reggie, Jacqui remembers, hugged her gently.

"I think he thought probably I would break."

THE NEWS CONFERENCE

Reporters surrounded Jacqui as she tried to absorb her feelings.

The jury had sentenced Reggie to seven years in prison and fined him $10,000 for each death. The judge ran the sentences together, so Reggie would be eligible for parole in four years.

He still faced assault charges for the wounds he caused to the three survivors. Johanna's injuries included dislocated bones, a fractured nose and two lost teeth. Johan's wounds included torn tendons in his knee and hand.

"Even if it means sitting here in front of a camera with no ears, no nose, no eyebrows, no hair, I'll do this a thousand times if it will help someone make a wise decision," Jacqui told reporters. "I also think some of us who are strong have to go through things that help us make choices for those who are weaker."

ANGELS OF SALVATION

Before returning to Galveston, Jacqui arranged a meeting at her hotel with the paramedics and firefighters who responded to the accident. She had missed their testimony and wanted to thank them and find out what they had seen.

Bryan Fitzpatrick, who discovered Jacqui was alive, and John McIntosh, who had stayed by the car window, walked uneasily into the hotel restaurant.

The accident had disturbed them deeply. The day after the fire, Fitzpatrick had frozen while stowing away his fire protection coat. Why didn't I throw it over her? he thought. Why didn't I spit on the fire?

Many nights, Fitzpatrick's wife listened to him moan during nightmares in which he relived the accident like a movie playing over and over.

McIntosh had dreams, too. In one, the former Army medic stared down at a pry bar in his hands. He kept calling the burn unit, asking the nurses about Jacqui. Finally, he broke his own unwritten rule and and drove to see her in Galveston.

He wasn't sure why, but he felt compelled to go.

"Sometimes you need a refresher course in your life," McIntosh said. "She's the strongest person I've ever met."

In the hotel, Jacqui came bopping down the hall. Both men were amazed at her progress.

Jacqui, who nicknamed McIntosh "Kojak" because of his shaved head, began asking questions.

How much was I already burned when you first saw me? she asked.

No, McIntosh corrected her, you weren't on fire when we arrived.

Jacqui stopped.

My God, she thought, why didn't this man pull me out?

She wanted to throttle the paramedic. She breathed deeply and kept asking questions: Why didn't you break the seat? Why didn't you pull me from the car?

I couldn't move the door, McIntosh explained. We did everything we could.

Jacqui choked back her anger.

You can't do anything, Jacqueline, she told herself. And if you're here, it's because of them.

While back in Austin for the trial of Reggie Stephey in June 2001, Jacqui says goodbye to Jo-Allison Bennett of the Victim Witness Division of the Travis County district attorney's office. Before returning to Galveston, Jacqui showed her parents her old dorm and her school. They also visited Brackenridge Hospital, where she was treated before being flown to Galveston.

Reggie Stephey, convicted on his 20th birthday of intoxication manslaughter in the deaths of Laura Guerrero and Natalia Chpytchak Bennett, will be eligible for parole in 2005. He and Jacqui appeared in an Austin police anti-drunken-driving video. The damage he did, he says, is 'a pain that will never go away.'

"And I thanked them, and we made jokes," she said.

They took pictures and hugged goodbye. "My angels of salvation," Jacqui called the gathered rescue workers. Before leaving, she rubbed McIntosh's bald head.

GALVESTON, JULY 2001 – STRETCHING

"Tito, Tito, my elbow," Jacqui moans. "It hurts me a lot."

Jacqui's sitting on the couch, her leg draped over her father's blue jeans, as she and Amadeo stretch her left arm.

They've just returned from Austin. After Reggie headed to prison, Jacqui and Amadeo returned to their Galveston apartment, back to *la routina*.

On the couch, Amadeo grips her elbow and wrist. Gently, he bends her left arm down to his lap, then up toward her chest.

The arm, which lost muscle and nerve, is withered. Together, Jacqui and Amadeo are trying to stretch and strengthen it.

"When you're burned," Jacqui says, "everything is difficult."

They huddle, their heads almost touching. Sometimes, as he pushes and lifts, she lays her head on his shoulder.

"Slowly, gently," Jacqui tells him.

They switch to her hands, twisting the wrist and trying to flex her finger stubs, which had fused together as she healed in the burn unit.

"Every day it's a little bit," Amadeo says. "In a month, it's only a millimeter. But in six months, that's 6 millimeters."

"Relax," he tells her.

Jacqui pulls her hand free and squeezes her father's nose.

JACQUI

She looks down at her pajamas and wants to fasten a button. Or she looks up at a kitchen cabinet and wants something inside.

There are two ways: Ask for help, or figure out how to do it alone.

She faces dependency everywhere — showering, using the bathroom, eating, dressing.

It feels like growing up again, she says, except you don't know if you ever will.

Sometimes she worries that she relies too much on her father. The path to independence is unclear and full of anxiety.

If she tries to do something and fails, she can fall into depression. If she succeeds, she worries that she will run out of goals.

She swallows her fears and pushes on.

"I'm very stubborn," she says.

With a sponge wrapped around her forearm, Jacqui washes, herself, then dries herself. She dangles a toothbrush from her mouth and, manipulating it with her palms, cleans her teeth. She places her palm on the computer mouse and painstakingly types e-mails, selecting letters from an on-screen keyboard. Even now, she won't allow a typo.

Perfectionists, she's fond of saying, suffer a lot.

She works on the pajama button with her hands and teeth, biting, squeezing and pulling. After 30 minutes, she finally gets one button through its hole.

"I could, I could, I could," she says.

AMADEO

All his life, Amadeo has trusted in himself and his ability to solve problems.

"I've always been able to face any situation," Amadeo says. "I've always been a fighter."

Now, nothing is certain.

His days revolve around Jacqui. He doesn't know when he'll work again, and he has given up all hope for his own life.

They live off his savings, his investments and the money his brothers send from Climar. While he's been away, his business has stagnated, and the factory is losing money. In his absence, Climar's staff has shrunk dramatically. To save on expenses, he sold Jacqui's car.

Jacqui has no health insurance. She owed UTMB about $1.3 million. The State of Texas, which administers the hospital, later agreed to slash her bill to $450,000, her lawyer said.

By the summer of 2001, Amadeo estimates he has spent nearly $500,000 on living and travel expenses, therapies and other medical care.

After the wreck, Jacqui filed a lawsuit against General Motors, the maker of the Oldsmobile, claiming a fuel line design flaw caused the fire.

The Saburidos' lawyer, Craig Sico of Corpus Christi, said Jacqui would have escaped with only broken bones if the fuel line had been properly protected.

The Saburidos also sued Reggie Stephey, accusing him of causing the collision. Both lawsuits were settled in 2001 for an undisclosed amount. A spokesman for General Motors declined to discuss the lawsuit.

The cause of the car fire was never resolved in court.

Sico said he doesn't think the settlements will cover Jacqui's future expenses, which an expert he hired estimated will top $9 million. That estimate includes the cost of a caretaker — a role Amadeo now fills.

"What's going to happen when I die?" Amadeo wonders.

He can feel himself growing older. When midnight strikes on his 49th birthday, he's in the bathroom in Galveston, bathing his grown daughter.

He can't say whether he loves her more now. She needs him more, and you don't know how much you love someone until they need you.

"Love," he says, "is infinite, or it's not love."

GALVESTON, JULY 2001 – THE CROSSROAD

Amadeo waits until the soap opera ends to talk. After almost two years in Galveston, he and Jacqui are debating moving to Louisville, Ky., to be near Dr. Luis Scheker, a Dominican-born reconstructive hand surgeon, and his colleague, an eye specialist.

They trust Scheker, who speaks Spanish and seems attached to Jacqui's case. He's already operated to begin separating the stubs of her right hand and is set to operate on her eyelid in August. If they're moving, they need to decide soon.

Jacqui hesitates. Galveston is comfortable — she has friends and therapists here. Earlier in the year, when she went to Kentucky for a hand operation, she felt isolated and depressed. Her psychologist doubled her Zoloft dosage.

Jacqui no longer has to wear the full-length beige pressure suits that for so long shared her closet with her regular clothes — all neatly arranged. Now she wears only the bottom part of the suits under her clothing.

Jacqui and her father, Amadeo, have fought hard for little victories that have produced some dramatic gains. In July 2001, their lives were dominated by an exhausting routine of therapies and treatments. She slept with a mask to reduce scarring — something she no longer needs — and her father helped her with stretching exercises for her arm before she went to bed.

"Ay, yay yay," Jacqui says. *"Sí o no? Sí o no?"*

It takes Jacqui two weeks to decide to move.

DEPARTURE

The Saburidos are up before dawn, carrying a few last loads to the U-Haul, checking in cabinets and underneath beds. They leave behind only their rented furniture and Amadeo's little markers — "tei-bol" on the dining room table, "jaus" on the front door.

For the last time, Jacqui counts the 14 steps from the second floor, then climbs into the rented car with Angelica Castro, the housekeeper they had flown up from Venezuela.

"Ciao. Adiós, Galveston, and in the name of God we go," Amadeo pronounces at 6:10 a.m. "Note the time."

Rain begins falling as they cross the causeway to the mainland. Jacqui dozes off.

"Así es la vida" — that's life — Amadeo says. "Good. Bad. I don't know if it's bad or good."

THE ROAD TO KENTUCKY

Kin-tukay. Ken-tooky. Ken-twocky. They bicker over how to pronounce the state that will be their new home.

They're nearing the Arkansas border. Behind the steering wheel, Amadeo listens impassively to salsa, merengue and Jacqui's other CDs.

"This is music?" he asks.

Later, Amadeo warms up his flat voice and sings softly in Spanish:

Sí, sí, sí, this love is so deep

You're my adored, spoiled one

And I want the whole world to know.

GRACELAND

The Memphis skyline passes by in a slow, hazy glimpse on the late July evening. Jacqui decides she wants to see Graceland.

It's late, Amadeo says. Graceland is probably closed.

"I would like to see it," Jacqui says in a sweet, little girl's voice.

The white mansion is shut when they arrive.

"Tito, we could see it tomorrow," she says.

Amadeo says he doesn't want to spend another night on the road.

Silence.

"Are you understanding?" he asks as they drive away.

"Ya, it's all right, Tito," Jacqui says, and sings along with the radio. "We're never going to come back."

Amadeo pulls into a chain motel. In the lobby, Jacqui beelines for a rack of tourist brochures, picking out the ones with pictures of Graceland. She presents them to her father.

"She's unbearable when she's impertinent," he says with a sighs later as he drives to get dinner.

Jacqui's watching television when Amadeo returns with the fast food. She hops to her feet, her voice pierced with excitement.

"And?" she asks.

THE KING'S GRAVE

It's a bright, muggy morning. Jacqui scrambles over the asphalt, dodging patches of sunlight for the shadows cast by Elvis' planes and museum walls.

She plunges into the crowd. Wearing her white beach hat and flanked by her father and Angelica, she almost fits in.

Then she waves to a boy. When the boy waves back, his mother slaps him, apparently thinking that he's staring. Jacqui gets angry.

Inside Graceland, Amadeo describes what Jacqui can't see — like the wedding dress worn by Elvis' wife.

"White or beige?" Jacqui asks. She hates beige.

In the yard, Jacqui stands in the shade by the King's grave.

"It makes me sad," she says. "He was still young when he died."

Amadeo stands nearby. "I like the place, not the guy," he says.

17 STEPS

After spending two days on the road and driving nearly 1,000 miles, they arrive at their new apartment in Louisville, Ky., about a 15-minute drive east of downtown. The apartment complex looks like a leafy suburb.

Jacqui hops out of the car, counts the wooden staircase's 17 steps and walks into their second-floor apartment.

"Hello, hello, hello," she calls, moving from room to room over the plush beige carpeting. The bright white walls and doors smell of new paint. Jacqui inspects the rental furniture and, with her feet, nudges a recliner into a different place.

"It's prettier than Galveston. Wonderful," she says. "Tito, the television goes there."

In the bedroom, she thinks about the people in Galveston she'll miss: her friends from the burn unit, the nurses, the doctors.

She wonders if she'll make friends here. Only God knows, she says.

SHOES IN THE CLOSET

Jacqui drops to her hands and knees in the walk-in closet. Each pair of shoes, she decides, goes heel to the wall and toe to the center evenly spaced.

The framed pictures of Jacqui reappear by the sofa. In the bedroom, Jacqui sets a photo of her mother next to her computer. Amadeo nails Jacqui's wooden cross above the bed.

Jacqui wants her Virgins and saints on shelves facing her bed. Amadeo grouses that he's going to lose his $100 deposit because of the nails. Jacqui watches him mark the wall and drill in the shelves.

"Tito, do you know if I marry someday, I won't leave you alone?" she says.

"Of course, so I can take care of your things," he replies.

Jacqui holds her stomach and giggles.

"It's true," she says.

JACQUI TRIES TO DRIVE

Their new car arrives — a Honda Odyssey minivan. Jacqui

Departure time from Galveston was 6:10 a.m. Jacqui fusses at Amadeo: 'Ay, you didn't take a picture of me in my apartment, my little apartment.' She tells him the trailer seems too heavy. He retorts: 'You can get out to lighten it.' After two days on the road and nearly 1,000 miles, Jacqui, Amadeo and their housekeeper, Angelica, will arrive in Louisville, Ky., to begin the next phase of their lives.

The decision to move from Galveston to Louisville, Ky., took two weeks to make. Before starting to pack, Jacqui chatted with a friend back in Venezuela. 'Kentucky is the chicken of KFC,' she explained. 'It's very different from here.' After two days of watching Amadeo work, Jacqui joins in, taking light loads downstairs to the U-Haul.

wants to park it.

It's drizzly and almost dark. Jacqui struggles to see the space and labors to turn the wheel with her palms. The rain falls harder.

She can't park without help.

As she gets out, upset, she slips on the slick grass, nearly falling into a bush, then regains her balance.

Later, in the apartment, Amadeo clasps Jacqui to his chest and presses her head to his cheek.

He follows her into their room and comes out alone.

"It's not her fault," he says. "It's life's fault."

Jacqui lies in bed with the lights off. In the dark, where there are no missing fingers, no scars and no blindness, she cries, gulping down air.

"Two years ago," she says, "I could do many things."

DR. SCHEKER'S OFFICE

Jacqui spies a baby girl across the waiting room rolling around on the carpet. She blows kisses. "Ay, how pretty," Jacqui says.

On her lap, she cradles a blown-up photograph of her left eye. She's come to see Scheker, the reconstructive surgeon and hand specialist. The next day, Scheker and a reconstructive eye surgeon plan to operate to rebuild her left eyelid. They still haven't decided how.

Jacqui doesn't want to add scars to her face or take tissue from her feet, which are tempting sources of spare parts. Her feet are the only parts of her body that still have full sensation.

"You have to tell me what we're going to do," Scheker tells Jacqui in his gravelly Dominican accent. The doctor has a hands-on bedside manner and exudes relaxed cheer.

Jacqui got Scheker's name from a cousin. One day she cold-called him. He told her to come to Louisville for a look.

Scheker examines Jacqui's face and goes over options. One involves cutting tissue and a blood vessel from her foot to cover her eye.

"What do you want to do?" Scheker asks. They sit inches apart, their knees almost touching.

"I want an eyelid," she says softly.

The doctor leaves Jacqui and Amadeo to think. Minutes pass in heavy silence. Jacqui sighs and taps her foot. Amadeo massages her back.

"Each one has their own idea, and I don't want them to mess with my feet," she says.

When Scheker returns, Jacqui grills him, searching for another choice.

"I have a lot of affection for you," Scheker says, grinning, "but you set the bar very high."

They decide to postpone the operation while Jacqui thinks.

Before she leaves, Scheker examines her left arm. The arm has little sensation and she can't bend her fingers. A nerve must be blocked. They'll have to operate.

"You need so many things," he says.

SURGERY, AUG. 24

The Saburidos are due in the hospital in 45 minutes for surgery on Jacqui's left arm and hand. Jacqui lies in bed as Amadeo tugs off the mask and hood.

"I want to sleep another minute," Jacqui mumbles into her pillow.

"It's 7:30 a.m.," Amadeo says impatiently. "Get up. What are you going to wear?"

"Ay, Tito, let go of the stress," she says.

Jacqui sits on her bed, daydreaming as Amadeo hastily puts in drops and pulls on her eye goggle. He prods her to move quicker.

"It's always the same with you, your whole life," he says.

"That's how I am, I am like that," Jacqui sings like a nursery rhyme. "And no one is going to change me."

Amadeo pulls her lime green shirt from the closet. "My white hat, please," she says.

Before leaving, Jacqui adjusts her hat and pauses before the wall of saints and teddy bears. She and her father pray in silence.

"*Vamos,*" she says and plunges down the stairs, counting until she reaches 17, then waits for her father to catch up.

THE WAITING ROOM

Amadeo sits alone in the waiting room. When Jacqui went back to prep for surgery, she didn't ask him to come. She wants to do more on her own, he says.

They have faith in this doctor. Maybe she can regain some independence, he thinks. Maybe she'll be able to use her hands.

They've talked about other possibilities, like cutting off toes and attaching them to her hands like fingers. She's not ready for a sacrifice like that. Maybe in a few years.

Amadeo goes into the prep room to kiss her goodbye. She's lying on a gurney under white blankets, wearing a blue surgery cap.

He tells her what he always tells her: "You're going to be better after this. I'll be waiting for you at the door."

As she's wheeled away, he smiles.

THE OPERATION

Jacqui wants more anesthesia.

"You don't want to hear me sing?" Scheker asks as she goes under. Her clamped left arm rests atop deep blue mesh. Lit by two large, saucer-shaped lights, it looks ghostly white, like packaged frozen chicken.

As Jacqui sleeps, seven doctors and nurses take their places around the table. Soft rock music plays quietly over beeping monitors. Scheker perches on a stool, peers through long black eye scopes and draws a blue incision line along her elbow.

With a scalpel, he slices through her skin. With tweezers, scissors and an instrument shaped like a tuning fork, he makes slow, small cuts into the white scar tissue.

Jacqui's muscle looks pale. It should be pink.

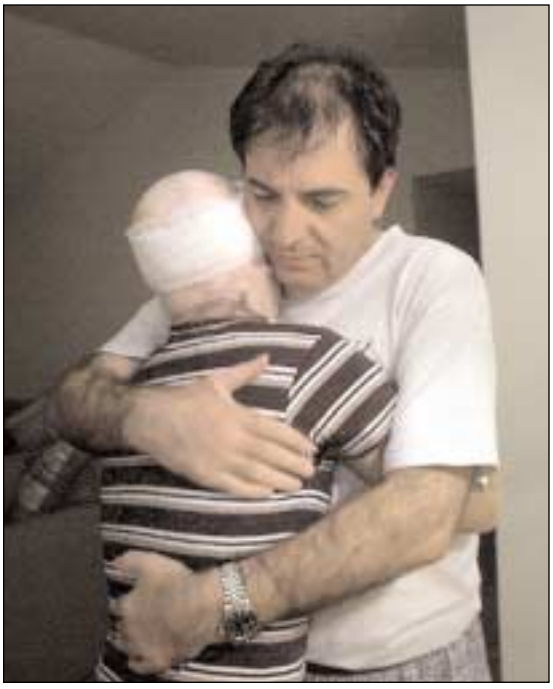
Down below, embedded in the scar tissue, Scheker finds her nerve. He traces its path, pulling on it as he looks for the blockage. The line of nerve disappears into a clump of scar.

"Where does it go?" he says.

He works back from the other side, cutting gingerly, then stops.

The nerve isn't blocked. It's not there. Five centimeters are missing, replaced by scar tissue.

"Not good," he says.



One night in Louisville, Jacqui decides to park the minivan, at left. She can't do it without help — a devastating realization. Afterward, Amadeo comforts his daughter, left. 'It's not her fault,' he says. 'It's life's fault.'

Ignoring Jacqui is difficult, but her surgeon, Dr. Luis Scheker, tries. During a visit in January, Jacqui puts on the surgeon's glasses, to the amusement of her cousin Yeli. The Saburidos find humor in life when they can. Jacqui says she tries to live day to day, enjoying the moment. 'I make jokes,' she says, 'to do what's possible.'

Jacqui snores. Scheker takes off his green gown and gloves and walks out.

"When it rains, it pours," he says.

He meets Amadeo in the hallway. The two men lean against the wall, speaking quietly in Spanish as nurses chatter by.

"She has a little piece that's missing," Scheker explains. "Nerves can only be replaced with nerves. If we're going to replace a nerve, quite possibly it has to be from the foot."

"Do you want to make the decision?" he asks Amadeo.

Amadeo frowns, arms folded.

"I don't want to decide for her," he says in his low, calm voice.

Scheker rubs his hands and claps. We'll forget about the nerve for now, he says. Instead, he plans to lengthen her left fingers by widening their web space.

"See you in two hours," he says. Returning to the operating room, Scheker blows through closed lips: Pphhh.

He pulls down his mask and begins cutting the yellowish skin between Jacqui's pinkie and second finger. He cuts as far as he can go.

"She doesn't pity herself," one doctor says as he watches Scheker. "That doesn't happen much."

Scheker moves to the space between the thumb and index finger.

The incisions are only 2 centimeters wide and 2 centimeters deep, but Scheker hopes the cuts will give her fingers more maneuvering room. He sews skin grafts cut from Jacqui's side over the wounds, then pulls up his mask and walks out.

THE WAITING ROOM, PART II

In the waiting room, Amadeo sits with his head cradled between his thumb and index finger, thinking.

It's never going to end. With each operation, Jacqui's situation gets a little more complicated. With each small improvement, hope for a dramatic change recedes a little further.

Hope is dying.

It never ends.

JACQUI

Jacqui lies in the recovery room.

"Are you sleeping or awake?" Scheker asks.

"Sleeping," Jacqui answers in a weak voice. She asks what happened. Scheker explains.

"Ay, yay yay," she sighs.

Amadeo arrives. He gives her small kisses. "You're brave. You're doing things other people couldn't do."

"I love you very much," he whispers. "I love you very much."

My tooth aches, Jacqui whispers back. Touch it.

Where? Amadeo says, poking her cheek, playing the game but avoiding the trap. Lightly, he taps along her cheek.

That one? he asks. No. That one? No. Closer.

Finally, he touches her front tooth. She bites down, then pulls his head under her chin with her arm and holds him.

YELLOW ROSES

Two days later, Amadeo goes for a walk.

Before, he says, he used to try picturing what road to take with Jacqui, but there were too many roads, and they all crisscrossed. His mind would follow the twists until it went blank. Now, he says, he prefers not to think.

One day, Amadeo says, he fears Jacqui could explode in anger and give up.

"She's brave," he says. "I don't know how long she can bear it, how much she can take. I'll be with her until then, as long as she wants me."

That afternoon, when he returns home, he takes Jacqui a bouquet of yellow roses.

"And my kiss?" she asks.

THE SECOND ANNIVERSARY – SEPT. 19, 2001

Amadeo pushes candles into a piece of leftover cake.

"Ah, what a precious night," he sings, fumbling with a camera flash, which keeps going off.

Jacqui laughs. The second anniversary of the wreck has been gloomy.

Happy birthday to you, Amadeo sings. Happy birthday to you.

Jacqui, as she puts it, has just turned 2 years old.

She still can't answer her questions: What will my future be? Why me?

Life must have some meaning, she still believes.

"I don't know if the meaning is to suffer," she has said, "or to live, not like you'd like to, but where life takes you to."

Amid the setbacks and slowness, Jacqui keeps celebrating her small victories. In the months before the anniversary, she gripped a pen and wrote. She vacuumed their apartment. With new glasses, she leafed through her first magazine in two years — a best- and worst-dressed issue — and watched her first movie, "Planet of the Apes." One day, she squeezed *gotas y crema* into her own eye.

She thirsts for more independence. She itches to drive.

One day in October, Jacqui tells her father to stop the car.

Put it in park, she says. Get out. Switch places.

Amadeo looks at her warily.

Once in Galveston, he nervously clutched the emergency brake while Jacqui struggled for two blocks, unable to see the cars around them. In Kentucky, just two months before, she cried after she failed to park.

Amadeo watches her get behind the steering wheel. There's nothing for him to grab; the Odyssey has no emergency hand brake.

Jacqui adjusts her seat and puts the car in drive.

"It's been a long time since I've touched an accelerator," she says, pushing her foot down.

"No, *hija*, slowly," he says. "No, just a little bit. Ohh, not so fast."

The Odyssey glides forward. With her father's help, Jacqui follows the apartment complex's snaking roads, completing one lap, then a second. She parks outside their home.

With her erratic vision, Jacqui doesn't know when she will drive again. Going out in traffic remains a dream, driving alone a prayer.

But, after two years of waiting, she has tasted driving again.

"It was perfect," she says. "Perfect. Perfect."

After a long day at the hospital for Jacqui's hand surgery, Amadeo jokingly slides into her hospital bed for a rest. 'Who's the patient here, Tito?' she demands. Amadeo worries about Jacqui all the time. If she were independent, he says, at least he could relax a little. He fears that he'll die while she still needs him.

As another surgeon holds Jacqui's hand, Dr. Luis Scheker threads a needle to attach a skin graft between her fingers. The procedure, one of more than 40 she's had since the crash, was to explore her left elbow for nerve damage and make space between the fingers on her left hand to add dexterity.

LOOK AT ME

In Austin, high school students and their parents have a reminder and a testament from Jacqui, who agreed to be interviewed by an Austin Police Department film crew. The crew flew to Louisville, to Jacqui's living room, to shoot her half of an anti-drunken-driving video. The other half features Reggie Stephey in jail.

Reggie, in a blue prison jumpsuit, says in the video that the word "sorry" can't capture how he feels about the damage he caused.

"It's a pain that will never go away," he says. "It's never going to go away, no matter what I do."

When the crew arrives in Louisville the day before the shoot, Jacqui asks about Reggie: What are his days like? Is he alone in a cell? Is he sad?

That night, Jacqui says she feels an obligation to make the video. She wants to repay people for their help, and to show that God left her here for some reason.

"Whether I'm happy or not, it's my duty. Something tells me this," she says. "It's a voice. I don't know if it's my spirit, or something more."

The next morning, Amadeo carefully paints red lipstick on Jacqui's mouth. For the video Jacqui chooses a blue shirt, a black jacket, black pants and a black straw hat. She looks elegant as she emerges from her bedroom.

At first, Jacqui sounds nervous and unsure as she labors to answer each question perfectly. But as the filming continues, she grows more confident and natural. Her voice fills with passion.

Drunken drivers don't just hurt the people they hit, she says. They bring suffering on everyone that person knows.

"Look at me," she challenges viewers, "and then ask yourself: 'Is it good to drink?' "

I loved my old life, Jacqui says at one point. I felt capable of doing anything.

Now, she says, "my soul feels trapped . . . like my soul is strong and wants to get out."

But this is my life, she says, and I try to enjoy it.

"I'm here," she explains. "I can hear my father. I can smile, you know. I can laugh."

Where do you get your strength from? the interviewer asks.

"It's very simple," Jacqui says. "You find the strength in love."

Burns take toll on body, mind and wallet

By David Hafetz
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Hundreds of thousands of people suffer burn injuries each year in the United States — estimates range from 750,000 to more than 2 million — and burns kill 8,000 to 12,000 people annually, making them the nation's second-leading accidental cause of death behind motor vehicle accidents, according to the Burn Survivor Resource Center.

Most survivors are burned over less than 10 percent of their bodies, and only a fraction require hospitalization.

Burns that cover 60 percent of the body or more — such as Jacqui's — account for only 4 percent of hospital admissions, according to the American Burn Association.

Burn treatment has advanced dramatically in recent years, helping more people survive major burns and reducing disfiguring scars through procedures such as skin grafting and dermabrasion — which smooths scars by shaving or scraping the skin.

The United States has about 140 burn centers. In Texas, major burn centers include the Blocker Burn Unit at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, where Jacqui was treated, the Galveston Shriners Hospital — a pediatric burn center at UTMB — and the U.S. Army Institute of Surgical Research Burn Unit near San Antonio.

The Burn Survivor Resource Center estimates that a burn covering 30 percent of the body can cost up to $200,000 in hospitalization and physician fees.

The other long-term toll on burn survivors is emotional.

"In our experience, the emotional recovery is many years from the injury," said Amy Acton, executive director of the Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors, a nonprofit organization.

The society helps organize an annual World Burn Congress, which brings together burn survivors, their families and caregivers. At last year's conference, Acton met Jacqui.

"She's an incredible woman with a lot of courage," Acton said.

To learn more

For information about burn injuries:

- www.phoenix-society.org
- www.burnsurvivor.com
- www.burnsurvivorsonline.com

The nation's leading cause of accidental deaths is traffic accidents — many of which involve alcohol. In 2000, alcohol was a factor in nearly 40 percent of the country's 41,821 auto fatalities. In Texas, 50 percent of the state's 3,769 traffic fatalities that year involved alcohol, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

For information about drunken driving:
www.madd.org/home

To help Jacqui navigate her new surroundings, she and Amadeo count the steps at their Louisville apartment complex: 17. They do it together. Although hope sometimes seems to fade amid the grinding daily routine, Amadeo and Jacqui still have hope that Jacqui will recover and be able to care for herself completely.

In fall 2001, Jacqui had more operations on her left hand to finish separating her fingers. That summer, she was able to grip a pen with her right hand and write for the first time, a small but meaningful victory. Dr. Luis Schecker examines her left hand during a checkup in January.

EPILOGUE

Jacqui's life has changed for the better since the second anniversary of the accident.

In March, as Scheker described it, Jacqui had her "do or die" surgery: yet another operation to rebuild her eyelid. After more than two years of failures, an eye surgeon succeeded in covering her eye with a flap of skin. And the doctor didn't have to touch Jacqui's feet.

After six months, doctors plan to cut a slit so she can see through the flap and perhaps blink. In the future, Jacqui hopes to have cornea operations on both eyes to regain vision. She has more surgeries planned on her right finger stubs. And one day, she still hopes to have reconstructive surgery on her face.

With her eye covered, Jacqui and Amadeo can sleep without worrying about *gotas y crema*. Her father, Jacqui jokes, is out of a job. At night Jacqui no longer puts on *la máscara*. Day and night, she wears the pressure suit only from the waist down. And now, she says, she sleeps like a queen.

By late March, she could write e-mails quickly by typing on a keyboard with a pen and could read messages without a magnifier. That month, she and Yeli began an intensive English program at the University of Louisville. Jacqui was a student again, picking up where she left off in Austin before the crash. Always seeking perfection, she scored 100 on a mid-term exam.

In class, Amadeo sits by Jacqui's side, taking notes for her when she can't read the blackboard and turning the pages of her books.

Back in Caracas, Amadeo's company continues to struggle through the nation's political turmoil. But this month he left Jacqui alone with Yeli for almost two weeks to visit his new girlfriend in Guatemala — his first vacation since the accident. Amadeo met her through Jacqui; her son was a patient Jacqui visited in the burn unit.

Have a good trip, Jacqui told him when he left.

"Bring me back an ocean breeze."

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How to help

Jacqui Saburido has a private bank account for donations to help pay her living and medical expenses. Donations can be made at any Bank of America and should be made to 'Jacqueline G. Saburido, account 005779967916.' Donations also can be mailed to:

Jacqueline G. Saburido
Bank of America
2200 Market St.
Galveston, TX 77550
attn: Contribution account 005779967916

Jacqui on statesman.com

Statesman.com has more on the Jacqueline Saburido story.

Features includes:

- An interactive timeline of Jacqui's life
- Excerpts from Reggie Stephey's 911 call
- Excerpts from 'Jacqueline,' an Austin Police Department public service video that includes interviews with Jacqui and Reggie
- Excerpts from a video deposition by Dr. Luis Scheker, Jacqui's doctor in Kentucky
- Excerpts from video depositions by a paramedic at the wreck scene.

statesman.com/specialreports/jacqui

About this story

David Hafetz and Rodolfo Gonzalez began reporting this story in June 2001.

Over the next several months, they documented the Saburidos' lives in Galveston and Louisville, Ky. Gonzalez shot more than 3,200 images, and Hafetz conducted hundreds of interviews in Spanish and English.

Hafetz, 30, joined the American- Statesman in 1998 after working at the Philadelphia Inquirer. Gonzalez, 32, joined the staff in 2000 after working at the Rocky Mountain News in Denver, where he shared thea 2000 Pulitzer Prize for his photos of the Columbine High School shooting.

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Now at the University of Louisville, Jacqui listens to an Ella Fitzgerald song and fills in the lyrics as part of an exercise in her intensive English as a second language class. She works from an enlarged copy of the textbook May 7 as instructor Leila Wells puts notes on the board. Jacqui no longer has to have Amadeo with her at every moment, which allowed him to take a short trip.

In a last-ditch effort, a surgeon successfully covered Jacqui's lidless left eye in March. Later this year, doctors plan to cut a slit so she can see, which will pave the way for more surgeries on her eyes and better vision.