My Father's Ranch | Susana Hernandez

It Was A Battle

Nestled nicely and openly on the side of the road surrounded by luscious wild grass lies my fathers' childhood home. It's now painted a dull but still appealing brick-orange. The front yard consists of white and beige colored rocks that make a satisfying crunch as you walk towards the front door.

Many renovations have been made to the house since my father's upbringing; I'm sure it has little semblance to the one he grew up in. For one, it looks like a proper one-story home, similar to the other houses in the little village of Santiago, Aguascalientes. Two, there is now running water, electricity, and a working sewage system; utilities my father says he didn't grow up with at all. Back then, he would tell me, his house consisted of only one room, one bed, and one opening. That room just so happened to be the one he and his older sisters were also born in. Whatever his home looked like when he was growing up is now a distant memory, one only he and his siblings could see in their minds' eyes.

My father, like most every other family in Mexico during the sixties, had a large family and was one of nine siblings; seven sisters and his younger brother. All eleven members, including their parents, lived in that one room. The only bed was reserved for his mom and two younger siblings since they were still small enough to fit on the bed. The rest of the family would sleep on grass-woven bedrolls called "petates" which were spread out evenly around the house. There wasn't a kitchen or even a sink, much less a bathroom, but there was technically an entrance; only, it didn't have a door. One summer afternoon, I asked my father if they used a curtain for privacy.

"What curtain? We had an old, dingy blanket that no one used as our door," my father told us in Spanish.

"What would you do about the intruders?" My younger sister asked. She'd stopped doing her homework on the

family desktop, intrigued by my father's origins, and walked on over to the kitchen island where my dad sat.

"Or the animals?" I asked since they seemed more likely to enter the house.

"There were no intruders," my father said, tearing off a piece of tortilla. He was looking down at his dinner, beans and a pork chile my mom had prepared for him earlier that day, but I could tell he was hundreds of miles away in a different country and a different time. "We'd kick the animals out," he started again, "throw rocks at them."

"Grab them by their tail," I turned and repeated to my sister who said, "No," and pouted at me. Our dad had joked before about how he dealt with stray cats who would tumble into his house when he was younger the exact same way. Maybe he wasn't joking? My younger sister loves animals and every time our eldest sister visits she brings her two cats Meeko and Lola along, much to my father's dislike.

He never allowed my older sister and me to have any animals inside the house when we were younger. Dogs and cats were strictly kept outside as the home was meant for humans. "The only animals allowed inside the house are the roaches and the ants!" He very seriously told my older sister once. I couldn't stop laughing when she repeated this to me. I knew how strict my dad was with animals in our house but to hear him say only pests could enter was hilarious. Of course, my father didn't want roaches and ants or even spiders in the house, but they were the only ones allowed before he caught sight of them and exterminated them with a bug poison he'd purchased from Home Depot.

I used to think it was cruel to leave pets outside to fend for themselves in the natural elements. My once naively-generous and kind heart just couldn't fathom it and I would often get into heated arguments with my father about letting our first family dog, Scruffy— a mixed lab and Australian cattle dog— roam inside the house. "Wait until you have your own house, then you can do whatever you want!" I couldn't understand then why my father wouldn't just let Scruffy in for a few seconds just to let him know what

our house looked like, where the humans lived. It was a one-story house: three rooms, a master bedroom, an office room (which we later converted into a guest room), two bathrooms, two living rooms, a kitchen-dining room, a wide garage equipped with two cars, a front and backyard (one my dad tended to almost daily), and even an attic! One day, I did allow our then-puppy to enter the house. In mere seconds, however, I understood why my father never wanted any animals inside; Scruffy began marking his territory all over the living room carpet. I remember my nine-year-old self panic-grabbing Scruffy mid-pee and shoving him out through the sliding glass doors, a trail of pee leading outside. That was the last time Scruffy ever stepped paw inside the house. Traumatized by the events, he never dared to pass the sliding glass doors again, even when we opened them. Hopefully, one day, Scruffy can forgive me for that incident– wherever he is in doggie heaven.

When my father mentions growing up on "el rancho" he often talks about the animals he and his siblings were tasked to look after: fifteen cows, two mules, one horse, twenty chickens and turkeys, and two – sometimes three – pigs. "I never want to do that again," he would tell me. "Era una batalla," it was a battle. My father often recounts stories from that time. He would traverse vast green pastures with mesquite trees, nopales, streams, rivers, and water dams on foot to retrieve his family's cattle. They would let the cows graze in "ejidos", or community lands distributed by the government after the Mexican Revolution to quell civil unrest, so long as someone came to collect the cattle at the end of the week.

"One time we let a cow that we knew was pregnant out to graze in el cerro (the hills) in the morning. When me, Antonio," his brother-in-law, "and my brother went to bring back the cattle, we couldn't find the cow. We searched for her up hills, down hills, upstream and downstream until our feet were so sore they burned. We walked all day, knowing that she had strayed away from the herd to give birth. We started getting worried. What if a puma or a mountain lion got to her and the newborn calf? Packs of coyotes? The sun was starting to set and we were panicking." It gets pitch black in el cerro and light pollution back then wasn't a thing. Santiago was a small Mexican village in the seventies where electricity in every household was unheard

of. Even just owning flashlights was rare. "We had to wait till the following weekend because we just couldn't find her and it got too dark too quick."

"Once the weekend rolled around, we kept up our search. We kept looking until we came upon a cliff. Suddenly, we heard what we thought were small moos. 'Look! Listen, do you hear that?' I asked them. We decided to scale the cliff and climb to the bottom where we found the week-old calf. We could tell he was about a week old because he was fast. Every time we tried to catch him he would dart past us. After cornering him against the wall of the cliff, we grabbed him. Me and Antonio would take turns carrying the calf up the cliff with the cow following patiently behind. We didn't own any horses at the time so we had to do everything ourselves."

"And the cow wouldn't get violent with you?" My mom asked.

"No," my father shook his head, "they knew we were helping."

Looking after the animals wasn't the only thing he would do. He also made sure to plow the land, plant the seeds, and water the crops. He said it was tough work that was never-ending.

Although they had an abundance of animals that could feed their family, they didn't have many luxuries. Much that is common in today's America was unheard of in my father's' world in Santiago. I still remember when he told my mom over dinner about a conversation he had at work with his coworkers about cereal.

"En el rancho," he would start, "When? When would you ever hear about Frosted Flakes or Cap'n Crunch?" My dad's diet consisted of more humble ingredients: tortillas, milk, beans, eggs, rabbits, and wild birds that he and his father would hunt in el cerro. They never ate beef although they had an abundance of cattle.

"Would you ever butcher the cows?" I asked him. "And eat their meat?"

"No," he'd shake his head.

"Not even the bulls?"

"It was too expensive." It made more sense to keep them not only for their milk but for their dung, which would fertilize the crops. Every resource was recycled; the dung for fertilizer, leftover maize for chicken feed, corn husks for the pigs, milk to make cheese and various other dairy products.

"How would you store the cheese if you didn't have any refrigerators?" I asked.

"Cheese wasn't something that was kept for a long time." He shoveled a small scoop of frijoles from one tortilla piece to the other then ate it, chewing it slowly and carefully.

"So you would eat it all that day?"

"No, it would be put into little rings that would give it its shape." He made a little circular shape with his thumbs and index fingers.

My dad told me that there was an inexpensive pill that people would buy to put in the milk for it to curdle. After the curdling process was finished, they would grab a cheesecloth and squeeze all the liquid out. But the process still wasn't done. Since the milk was still chunky and coarse, they would knead it like dough and mold it into circular balls, then place the little cheese balls into metal rings called aros, or hoops. These rings varied in size, he'd tell me, but more often than not they were about the size of your palm.

American Jobs

When my dad's sisters were old enough, they went to the city of Aguascalientes— about an hour away— in search of jobs to support the family. His two older sisters, my Tía Lupe and my Tía Maria, were the first to move out of their one-roomed-house and into the city in their early twenties. They were soon followed by the other girls, my

Tía Andrea and my Tía Marta. They all worked in various occupations: picking fruit in the fields, working in factories in the city, and cleaning houses, where they would then meet and marry their respective husbands. Later, in their mid-thirties, my Tía Lupe and my Tía Maria, left the country altogether for a better life in what they call 'El Norte,' otherwise known as the United States. My father would also soon follow in his sisters' footsteps and leave the world he knew behind.

My father went from good ol' country boy to certified city boy… Sort of. He was around eighteen when he made it to America and although he had successfully made it to the country, he was stuck working agricultural jobs that only paid him pennies. His first job in the States was none other than in California, specifically Lancaster, the city where he would go on to buy his first house, that he got his first job picking onions.

"Purple onions, white onions, garlic too!" He recounts. I've heard this story several times growing up. He'd tell it often when we would drive around the dry desert where acres of onions or garlic plants were growing. He would mention that it was tiring and that he, and several other of his co-worker/roommates, would get home so dirty.

"One time, after work, we had a cop car follow us," he sat telling us on the kitchen island over lunch. My dad didn't have his papers during this time and just the sight of a police car was enough to send everyone into a frozen state.

"Ampelio," his brother-in-law, "drove the truck. We didn't know whether to speed off or not, since none of us had our papers and the cop seemed to be following us. We really thought he was, but Amepelio slowed down and stopped at a stop sign. The cop passed us and kept going. The sigh of relief we all let out!" he sighed exaggeratingly. "Man, we were scared. We thought we were done."

There were other even scarier encounters with cops during my dad's time as a young undocumented worker in the States. Often, they would stop him only to ask for identification as my dad is very clearly indigenous-looking with russet-brown skin and a high nose and was easily

targeted as a result. For the most part they would let him go. He always would retell these stories whenever issues concerning other family members and their paperwork would come up during breakfast, lunch, or dinner. He'd sit comfortably in his designated seat on the sofa, or on the left side of the kitchen island where he would always sit closest to the kitchen stove to eat, and lay into his story.

We all still live in this house, except for my older sister who inherited our father's hustler mentality. I don't think he purposely purchased the house with the idea of it being in the same city where he got his first job, it just so happened to be the one he found affordable. Fortunately, we lucked out. The house was originally going to another family, they even designed where each room and bathroom would go, but they called it off at the last minute and we were next in line. And so for the past twenty years, it's been the place my family has resided. My siblings and I have had countless memories of our house, now grateful for all of my dad's sacrifices. I'm sure he too has countless memories of his second home.