

Daniel Acosta, Jr.

SHARDS OF MEMORY

Preface

Memories come to me in bits and pieces as if jagged edges of glass cut into my mind and flood me with images of my early life in El Paso and of my later experiences in life. These shards cut deep and have left scars that I cannot deny or explain away. But these memories also remind me of the times I felt warmth and security with my family while I was coping with the outside world that seemed to favor white people.

I was early for a history class that I was auditing at the University of Texas in the fall of 2024. Before the class started, I began to look at some of the research posters of history graduate students that were on the walls of the long hallway that led to the classroom. One poster caught my eye; it described some of the early years of Mexicans living in Texas during the first part of the 20th century. There was a table on the number of lynchings of Mexicans in Texas from the late 1800s to 1930: 27 hangings of Mexicans per 100,000 population.

These stark statistics reminded me of the hardships my father experienced as a construction worker toiling under the hot sun in El Paso. Although he never spoke of his feelings about his confrontations with whites about his Mexican heritage, I sensed as I grew older that there had been incidents in his life that influenced his interactions with whites as he progressed from carpenter to deputy sheriff to finally a bailiff in a state district court. I never heard him speak about discrimination and racism that he encountered in Texas.

I was a poor first-generation Mexican American who grew up during the 50s and 60s. My mother's parents (Nana Cuca and Papa Luís) wanted to create a new life for themselves by escaping the discord and troubled times in Mexico during its revolution in the early 1900s.

My paternal grandfather also came from Mexico, while his wife (Nana Carolina) was born in Texas. My father was born in Valentine, Texas (about 175 miles southeast of El Paso). He stopped going to school after the sixth grade so he could work with his father who was a hired hand on a ranch near Marfa. My parents never completed high school.

I was inundated with a multitude of memories as I reflected on that poster about Mexicans living in Texas. I present these shards of memory as small vignettes, which try to capture my feelings and thoughts about growing up in El Paso and my education and assimilation into white America. Many of my memories have given me a better understanding of what type of person I became later in life.

Where I Lived

Most of my early childhood revolved around a four square block area: our first two rental homes on Hamilton Avenue; Nana Cuca's home on Piedras Street; and Nana Carolina's home on Idalia Avenue. As a child I often stayed with Nana Cuca, Tía Babe, and her son, Louie, who lived in a much nicer house than our first rental house, a half block away from our rental house. Hamilton was unpaved with scattered small rocks which cars kicked up as they sped down the street; it served as a playground for the neighborhood kids. Piedras (ironically named rocks in Spanish) was fully paved with sidewalks on both sides of the street.

Cuca used to brag that our family tree had strong Portuguese ties and that the lighter skin colors of her ancestors were passed on to her daughters--my mother and her sister, Babe. I still remember fondly listening to Cuca, who never learned to speak English, telling stories in

Spanish of her life and family.

At a very young age I saw how white strangers in the street complimented my mother for my good looks—fair skin and light brown hair. They really wanted to know if I was white and not a Mexican. As a young boy I looked like a chubby white kid with fat cheeks. I saw how the white kids were favored by the teachers in the classroom. I wanted to be white like them; I desperately wanted to make it in America's predominantly white society.

Before I started first grade I refused to talk Spanish to my family. When I was spoken to in Spanish, I always responded in English and that continued throughout my childhood. I never became fluent in Spanish, something that I have always regretted.

Throughout grade school I was recognized by many of my teachers as that "smart Mexican boy" and was given special encouragement and support to excel in school. When one lives in El Paso, you can never hide your Mexican identity. I really thought as a little boy that I could. I remember being bullied often by older white boys as I walked home as a first grader. When I became older, I fought back and had numerous fights with white boys in the school playground and after school. By the time I finished grade school at Rusk I was one of the more popular kids, liked by Mexicans and whites.

But there was always that tension between my wanting to be considered white and not Mexican and the love of my Mexican family. I developed a close relationship with Cuca, Babe, and Louie; a good part of my early childhood was spent with them and not my real family. Although Cuca teased me about not speaking Spanish well, she had a great sense of humor and told me and Louie wonderful stories of her life in Mexico. From her I learned much of my mother's side of the family. I did not know much of my father's side of the family; I picked up pieces here and there as I was growing up as a boy in El Paso.

It was from Babe and Louie that I learned about what it meant to be proud of our Mexican heritage and best of all to have fun growing up.

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From first to fourth grade I spent a majority of my time with Babe and Louie. From Louie I learned how to play sports and became so good in baseball I was the starting centerfielder for my Little League team and the starting shortstop for my Pony League team.

Babe was the one who really made me laugh and have fun. We'd watch TV together in the summer; she liked the soap operas and explained to me in simple terms what the adults in the various series were doing with their tangled lives of affairs, divorces, and scandals. We'd also go to drive-in movies where I first encountered her favorite movie star, Frank Sinatra, who we saw in such movies as *The Man with the Golden Arm* and *The Pride and the Passion*. I do not remember if my mother knew that I was seeing films about drug addiction and wars and torrid romances between men and women.

I saw how Louie navigated his way around the Mexican gangs near our neighborhood and how he often had to escape their attempts to beat him up. Unlike my fights with white boys at grade school using our fists only, these Mexican gangs used knives and clubs to intimidate others, whites and Mexicans alike.

One night Louie had a close call and had to leave his car up the street from our second rental house as the gang was following him. He knocked on our door and we let him into our house a block away from his car. He caught his breath and then made it safely back to Babe and Cuca by circling around through the neighborhood and jumped over Cuca's back fence, where Babe let him in. But his car's front windshield was completely smashed in with large rocks that were seen in the front seat. The neighbor near his car called the police because of the racket and noise made by the gang members.

When the police arrived, my mother and I walked to the car and saw Babe talking to the police. The police suggested that Louie was at fault; she firmly told them that he was not a gang member and if he had been in the car he might have been killed. I was so proud how Babe stood up to the police and how she convinced the police to act and do something about gang violence.

By the time I started high school, we had moved into Nana Carolina's home on Idalia, exactly one block north of our first two rentals on Hamilton. Carolina had a small apartment in the backyard, which was separated by a rock fence from a grocery store on Piedras. I saw that it was uncomfortable for my mother to live in Carolina's house; late at night I heard arguments between my parents about this living situation. My father was at times unemployed as a carpenter; living at Carolina's house helped with family expenses. A few years later my parents moved to the family's fourth rental house, exactly next door to our first rental home.

Trying to Make It in White America

As a young boy I thought it was better to be considered white, rather than being labeled as a Mexican. The color of my skin was more white than brown, but as I became older my true Mexican identity became evident. It was not until I was in my teens that I accepted fully and proudly my Mexican identity. As part of my attempt to pass as white, I refused to speak Spanish at home and never learned to speak Spanish fluently. I am haunted to this day of my decision to not speak Spanish as a young boy.

After graduating from high school I now had the chance to see if I could compete academically with the best students from the state at the University of Texas at Austin. I undertook as a small boy all the way through high school and college to acquire at all costs those American traits or characteristics of whites who were most successful in the classroom and their careers. Although I understood Spanish fairly well and was able to “fake it” as I was growing up and interacting with my Mexican and Anglo friends, I could never truly hide my Mexican heritage in the presence of whites.

I did well in my studies to receive a pharmacy degree; I graduated first in my class in 1968. I went on to receive a doctorate in pharmacology and toxicology at the University of Kansas and was offered a prestigious post-doctoral fellowship to continue my studies at the elite Karolinska Institute in Stockholm. Instead I turned down the offer and began my professional and research career at my alma mater. I later became dean of pharmacy at the University of Cincinnati Medical Center for 15 years, finishing my career as a senior administrator at the Food and Drug Administration.

The movie, *The Americanization of Emily*, describes the process by which a sweet English woman becomes corrupted by an American military man and loses her English identity to American mores. There are several examples of how some Jews became successful by playing the American success game, such as the memoir by Norman Podhoretz, *Making It*, and the movie, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*.

These early phases of my life have haunted me for years: my attempt to become “Americanized” led me to be ashamed of my background and to not stand up for my Mexican identity. I incorrectly believed that competing successfully as a “non-Mexican” at educational and professional levels was more significant than accepting one’s own cultural background. A person of color should never corrupt one’s own identity to make it in white America.