

## ***On Faith: With thanks to the Romero Family***

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After seven long summers in the Adirondack Mountains of Upstate New York, I announced to my parents I wasn't going back. The youngest of three girls from a social justice oriented, Jew-by-bagel family, I was done with all-girls Jewish summer camp. I loved feeling agile and strong in my lanky, sun-soaked body. I was proud of becoming a sturdy, skilled swimmer in the rough, cold waters of Raquette Lake. I came to expect a bullseye every time at archery. Wearing dress greens for Friday night Services, I loved how snippets of prayer and music became a comfort. But I was 13, and done. Done being part of the all-summer sibling discount package, the tag-along baby sister shipped out since first grade. Done with being cast as the lead flower Babes in Toyland. Done feeling 'less than' the cliquy, snobbish Long Island girls in Villager sweaters and circle pins.

But then what? I still believed their convenient narrative, that kids who stay home in the summer have to go to Summer School because they aren't smart enough; clearly not an option. With unspoken privilege, I was instructed me to select another teen camp experience from the back of the Sunday New York Times Magazine Section. With parental power, they chose for me: a Spanish language summer camp, including a month-long homestay with 'a typical Mexican family.'

The summer of 1968, I spent the first four weeks in Sedona, Arizona in language and cultural immersion, with about 30 other teens from across the U.S. Then I was placed for a month in a town of about 5000 people outside Mexico City, off the main highway toward Queretaro. My local hosts in Polotitlan were the Romero Family: Guadalupe and Gonzalo, and their eleven children, ranging from about 17 to a nursing baby just under a year. Don Gonzalo owned one of the butcher stores in town.

The day I stepped off the crowded public bus from Mexico City the whole family was waiting at the side of the road, kids piled into the back of a flatbed truck. One of the daughters shyly stepped forward to present me with a huge bundle of pink gladiolas. They gave me my own bed to sleep in under a wall-mounted statue of the Virgin Mary. I was so scared and lonely when I arrived, I forgot almost all the Spanish I learned, except 'gracias.' I cried myself to sleep at first, burrowing into the thin pillow to muffle sobs, not wanting to offend my generous hosts. Over time, food and tears stayed down. Soon enough, there were horseback rides and new friends and even a late-night serenade from a cute boy named Eloy. Only when the bus pulled out of town at the end of Summer did I cry again, not wanting to leave. Transformational.

My progressive mother later told me why she chose the Mexico program: given a changing world, they wanted at least one of their kids to be bilingual. I've been a 'Latina wannabe' ever since, working and living at various times on the U.S.-Mexico Border, in Mexico, Central and South America. Which brought me back to Polotitlan about 10 years later. A boyfriend and I were in Mexico City during Christmas week staying with friends, and we wanted to take a side trip out of the D.F. I pitched the idea of driving up to find my "Mexican Family." After I

returning home to the suburbs of Philadelphia, I got busy growing up and lost touch with the Romeros. How hard could it be to find his *carniceria*? We made our way north in a borrowed Peugeot sedan, on the crowded main highway toward Queretaro. Polotitlan was now marked by a '*caseta de cobro*' – a toll booth, and had grown to over 15,000. We took the exit into town and parked at the *Zocalo*, the main square.

Going on faded memory, we walked a few blocks to what might be the Romero's home. I knocked on the big blue metal gate. *Aqui vive la Familia Romero?* I asked the aproned young woman who answered if the Romero family still lived there. *Lo siento per ya no.* Not anymore. *They all moved into town in the house behind the new shop.* Off we went on foot, back to the Zocalo. Two teens either side of 16 were behind the butcher counter. I asked again: *Aqui vive la Familia Romero?* *Surely you would not remember me,* I said, *but many years ago I came to live with your family one Summer, to learn Spanish and about Mexico.* Without a moment's hesitation, they shouted: *You've come for the fiesta!* And how great it was that I had arrived just in time for the big outdoor celebration of their parent's 33<sup>rd</sup> wedding anniversary that afternoon.

They knew my story. How I came from a big city in the United States. How I was younger then than they both are now. They laughed and said I looked different than family photos hanging in the house: Wavy long black hair with bangs cut straight across, glasses and braces, smiling at the camera. Wearing a mini skirt and matching Villager sweater. We waited in the house and checked out pictures while they closed up the shop, then followed their old Ford truck out of town. Rutted dirt roads threatened the underbelly of the Peugeot at every hard bounce.

Afternoon light flooded the open fields where the party was set up. Rows of long folding tables end to end with over 100 chairs. Streamers and strung lights. Bottles of Tequila and more on the tables, and big metal cans brimming with beer. Open flame *barbacoa* spiting BBQ smoke. Accordion music filled the air with *ranchero* tunes. We pulled up next to the truck and got out of the car. I spotted my Mexican 'mother' immediately – unchanged, as old as ever, and not a day over 50.

*Buenas tardes, Dona Guadalupe,* I said, extending my hand. Happy Anniversary! *Usted se recuerda de mi? Do you remember me?* She stood very still, looked into my eyes and took a deep breath. Then she smiled, cocking her head to one side, tears brimming and gently rolling down her weathered cheeks. She looked up at the sky, at me, then at the sky again, and said, ever so softly: *Gracias a Dios, por traerme mi otra hija.* Thank you, God, for bringing my other daughter back to me. She kissed me on both cheeks. *Gonzalo! Gonzalo! Look who finally came back to us! Just like I said.* We all started laughing, and spent the next few hours toasting and eating, singing and dancing, telling stories. I re-met all the grown up 'brothers and sisters' and their new spouses and young children. After a while, I lost track of who was with whom.

When it came time to head back to the City, I gave Dona Guadalupe and Don Romero each one last *abrazote*. I apologized for not returning sooner, for not speaking Spanish well enough back then to fully express my gratitude. And I thanked them for welcoming me into their home so

long ago, for teaching me well, and for changing my life. *Ay, Mijita*, she said. *No hay de que. Don't worry. May God bless you and keep you safe.* She kissed me again on both cheeks, and added: *I never lost faith.... did you?*

I turned around to wave one more time as we started back at dusk, the Peugeot bouncing roughly on the rutted road. Everyone was shouting and waving back. *Adios! Adios! Que se vayan con Dios! Go well with God.* And they disappeared from my life, again, into the dust.

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