

## **“A Train Trip to Mexico”**

**Written by Tera Avila**

The smell of diesel takes me back to those summers my brother and I would travel with our parents to Mexico by train. We would visit my mother's family every summer in Los Mochis, Sinaloa, Mexico. It was not a tourist destination and at the time it was cheaper to take the train from Del Rio to El Paso then into Mexico and across the Copper Canyon. The entire trip would take 4-5 days. The smell of diesel a constant and I found it quite cozy when paired with the tiny compartment we would live in for 4 days. My paternal grandmother had packed a few thoughtful rations for my brother and I: Spam sandwiches, Vienna sausages and instant oatmeal. These foods taste horrid now but back then we preferred to eat what “Grandmo” packed to the Amtrak menu.

Visiting my mother's parents was always exciting for my brother and I. Abuelita's house was a place where we were able to feel somewhat free. My grandmother's house in Del Rio was the complete opposite. We'd enter her home and ask permission to watch television, ask if we could have water, go play outside, there was never free roam. At Abuelita's house we could go into the kitchen and make ourselves something to eat, go digging in the closets for photographs or games, go in and out of the house. When it would rain, huge rolling thunder would come in and shake the panes, gigantic plops and drops would start and we'd go play outside. It was jungle rain, I would say, the kind that hurts when you put yourself under it. It is a genuine force that after awhile had a numbing effect on our backs and made our heads feel weird. After being drenched we'd feel cold to the bone then dry off inside and run back outside to do it again. All the while my Abuelito would be playing one of his operas or concertos, lunch or dinner would be cooking and the smells of limes and spices made the place seem so warm. My grandmother in Del Rio would never let us go out in the rain.

We had a few friends in Los Mochis. Next door to my Abuelitos lived a family with kids around our age. They called us “los gringos” because we were from Texas. Their dad was a taxidermist and their home was filled with his work. Owls, deer, and other animals were displayed like a museum exhibit behind glass in their faux habitat. We thought it was cool to have a backlit display like this in a home and it would often change from year to year, more rabbits, a skunk, no more deer etc... The

afternoons were spent hanging out with the neighbors sometimes once we sat in my Abuelito's cirhuella tree for hours talking and eating the fruit. The next day was spent very ill from having consumed too many. Most of the time was spent walking down the street for Fantas or candy made from leche quemado.

The most fun was a walk to the park down the street. This made my brother and I feel independent and adventurous because it was a foreign country and the smells were foreign, the sites were foreign, like the truck load of Mexican federales with their guns and bad guy sunglasses. Mexico in the 1970's was another world not an American corporation in sight, no English spoken anywhere, nothing we saw in everyday USA could be found there. Los Mochis was a small quiet town that only existed because a Socialist Mormon wanted his own commune back in the late 1800's. Left behind, aside from a few blonde, blue eyed Mexicans with surnames like Jones and Harris, was a sugar cane factory and the Socialist Mormon's homes: American style, two story ,grand plantation looking houses but with thatched roofs and made of adobe or something like that. Looking at them with smell of molasses, coming from the sugar cane factory, made it all very eerie even though people were still living there. What made the town even more of an anomaly was the sounds of Chinese, Greek, Italian, Portuguese and Russian being spoken by the men who had docked at Topolobampo Bay.

We knew not to mess around with my Abuelito's paints or his paintings and we knew that at a certain time, things had to settle down but even the adults were having fun into the wee hours of the night. There was always a night or two when my mother's entire family would show and a keg or huge Mexican ice chest filled with beer would arrive with another huge chest filled with soft drinks. There was whiskey, cognac, bourbon, gin, scotch and wines all over the place. The neighbors and all sorts of relatives would show up and music would play and I fall asleep on a cot in my Abuelito's room to the drone of an AC unit only to awaken to my uncles singing and goofing around. They all smoked and they all drank and told jokes, danced and there was good food and interesting conversation even for me at that young age. To this day the smell of cigarettes and alcohol brings back nice memories. Hearing my great-uncle tell his stories was the best. He grew up a rich aristocrat then became so poor after the revolution he was starving in the streets, then rescued by American Masons, sent to California for school, returned to

Mexico without a cent and from scratch eventually bought a printing press and started 3 newspapers. After that he turned to politics, then this, then that...his "youcandoitoo" attitude would send me home to Del Rio with so many ideas but I wasn't an orphan and my parents weren't keen on letting me do all I wanted to do and I couldn't procure the things I needed alone so these plans succeeded in theory only. That was okay, I thought I had the ability to make the trees dance and could speak to animals telepathically and other such magic surrounded my every day world.

Leaving Los Mochis by train was sad and it was always at 5:30 in the morning. The trip back had a different mood. We didn't go back over the places we saw on the way down. It was actually prettier. I remember being on a bridge so high I looked below and saw clouds. We were at eye level with a beautiful, narrow waterfall and I could hear my mother praying under her breath because you could feel the bridge sway side to side as the train slowed to cross it. Once we crossed it and went around a bend I saw that bridge from far away and it looked as if it were made from toothpicks.

When the train stopped at a village, some got off but more got on. On one trip I remember as the train gained momentum we went around a small hill and two Mexican Indian boys were playing around with what seemed to be a ball. As we got closer it became apparent that it was not a ball they were tossing but a small boulder. One threw the boulder at the other and he caught it then threw it back. My parents were calling my brother and I back to the room but we couldn't leave the window for some reason, maybe it was because we were relating to the boys as they seemed our age, 6 and 8 at the time. They were wearing white pants and shirts and hats running around and smiling. Something about them intrigued us and we were laughing, they were laughing too. Some people started to stand next to us and look out the window. The older boy threw the boulder back but the younger kid wasn't looking and it knocked his brains out. At least we thought it knocked his brains out. He fell on the dirt and blood came gushing out of his head. It hit us too, my little brother screamed and I heard the "ohmygawds" from the people beside me. Then there was a clamor of voices of concern as they spoke of trying to figure out what to do and they tried to make the train stop to help but as it pulled away I cried for the boy and saw his blood flowing all over his white clothes. He was alone while his mate when off

to find help or hide. My parents came to remove me from the situation at that point but it was too late. That night I had nightmares and a few days later I was home.

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