

La Unión

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As a child and well into my teens, every couple of years or so my family would travel by car from our San Francisco Bay Area home to our ancestral village deep in the center of Mexico. The trip to our hometown of La Union de San Antonio, in the central state of Jalisco, would take three days and three nights, more or less, depending on the weather, the car's reliability, and our father's ability to go without sleep for days at a time.

I eagerly anticipated those trips to Mexico, although the departure date was always a mystery, cloaked in half assurances and resigned delays. Dad worked as a farm worker six days a week, ten hours a day in the gladiola fields surrounding Union City. Fieldwork consisted of harvesting flowers, packing the gladiolas for transport to market, weeding the rows upon rows of flowers, and picking and preserving the gladiola bulbs during the winter for next year's crop. And, because Dad was the unquestioned head of the household, and because his motives were kept to himself, he would keep the family in a state of constant anxiety about our unknown departure date to Mexico. Mom would especially find this frustrating because she did not want to pack the suitcases and prepare for the trip until we actually were ready to leave. And

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though we always departed in early September, the actual date of departure was always Dad's to command.

Due to reasons that remain mysterious, Dad would continually give varying dates for our departure, while also constantly and cryptically exhorting us not to say a word to anybody about our impending trip. Then, one day he would return home from work, his clothes and work hat dusty, his weary face burned red by the sun, his hands sometimes stained red by gladiola bulb preservative, and suddenly announce our immediate departure. In a flash, the entire household would go into the frenzied business of packing our small suitcases, especially our new clothes we had bought for the trip and our old clothes we would give to relatives. A box full of food capable of feeding us during the trip hastily put together from the family larder completed our provisions.

Before the trip, Mom would pack clothes she would be taking as gifts to her very large extended family, which included her mother, my grandmother, by then blinded by some disease, her many siblings, and the countless cousins. In addition, because both our parents were born and raised in the same town, we had literally hundreds of relatives between both the parents' many siblings. The gifts of clothes, our hand-me-downs still in good condition, were reserved for Mom's favorite siblings, her two younger sisters, who were also the most economically needy. I can still picture my cousins proudly wearing mine or my brother's gifted clothes, considered out of date or too worn out for us to wear, which is saying a lot since in our family clothes were worn just until fraying.

Once packed and on the road, the car trip to Jalisco would almost always commence at night (to beat the heat of the Southern California deserts we needed to cross) and in mid-September. The mid-September date would vary only by a few days, as the municipal *Fiestas Patrias* celebrating Mexican Independence Day began on September 15 and continued for over one week. Never mind that my five siblings and I had started school only a couple of weeks before our departure and which on one occasion resulted in my flunking a class I had to retake the following year. It never occurred to anyone to inform the school or our teachers we were leaving on a family vacation lasting two weeks. We simply disappeared for a couple of weeks.

The trip to Jalisco was a release for my father. Released from the drudgery and backbreaking toil of constant fieldwork and from the confines of his limited economic opportunities, he could now go back to the little town of his childhood, which he loved so dearly. The days Dad spent in La Union were the happiest I ever saw him.

During the three days on the road, we never stopped to stay in a hotel. Dad would simply pull over to the side of the road, get a couple of hours sleep, and once refreshed continue on our journey, the rest of us sleeping away the miles. Every day traveling brought new vistas and excitement for me. As we went from California's abundant and richly landscaped highways to the potholed, dusty, and dangerous Mexican byways, the land also changed. As we continued south to our destination, landmarks were cities large and small interspersed by long stretches of beautifully raw scenery. First were the northern Mexican cities of Mexicali, San Luis Rio Colorado, and the infamous military checkpoint of Sonoita, where the Mexican Federales would shake down everyone who was passing through and which we learned to fear. As you might imagine, we learned to stay silent in their presence. From Sonoita southward, we left the starkly beautiful landscape of the Northern Mexican Sonoran Desert and hit some of the semi-tropical coastal cities, a pungent and steamy procession: Guaymas, Los Mochis, and on through to Tepic, Nayarit. Once we had passed Tepic, we would head inland, passing through the intensely green countryside surrounding Mexico's second city, Guadalajara, knowing we were only hours from our final destination.

Along the way, our meals were impromptu buffets. We would stop in lonely little villages along the road to pick up some meat, fresh tortillas, fruit, drinks, and vegetables for our sustenance. Although Dad maintained a pretty rigid timeframe for the allotted three days of travel, we would relax and enjoy our midday roadside repasts under the cooling shade of trees, welcoming the rest from the bumpy roads. Usually, Dad, a master at starting a fire with the most insignificant of materials, would start a wooden fire from felled mesquite tree branches, which were abundant, make a quick stone fire ring, and throw a quick barbecue meal on the grill. Thin beef steaks would be quickly seared to a crisp doneness, the soft and still warm corn tortillas filled with the meat and a quick chop of *chiles*, onions, tomato *salsa fresca*, salty *queso fresco*, and avocados, a staple and family favorite. Depending on the locale, our view during these open air meals could be soaring distant mountains, a cool river, or some other rural pastoral scene picked by Dad for the homecoming he was relishing as much as he relished the quickly devoured roadside tacos.

As we passed the small towns that precipitated arrival to our village, we came upon cities renowned as religious pilgrimage sites, whose names rang with our parents' stories of their childhood. San Juan de los Lagos in particular was one such city. We usually stopped in for a quick visit to the church and its patron *virgen*, ensconced in her richly filigreed golden throne up high on the altar, solemn persecuted saints her courtly

companions and protectors. After a quick and pious session of prayers, if we were lucky, a restaurant meal in the local outdoor *mercado* was a welcome treat. Aproned women would shout out the day's specialties in an attempt to get us to venture into their food stalls. Once sated with food, I would use my hoarded vacation pocket money to purchase some particularly appealing candies in the *mercado*, lined up like little stacked colored flags--red, yellow, and green candies made of goats milk, squash, or coconut. These candies were worlds apart from the American candies I heartily consumed back home, but they were more satisfying in a more immediate and soulful way; they were historical treats that my parents approved of and also enjoyed--cultural and familial history in pieces of sweetened treats.

As we came closer to our destination I began to think of the wonderful days ahead, the reunions with our cousins, dozens around my age, set free in a world of different rules than the ones I had to abide by back home--riding burros in the meadows, hunting with homemade slingshots, and impromptu swimming holes to name just a few. And the fiestas! Along with the official fiestas put on by the town, and renowned throughout the region as particularly *auténticas*, there were the fiestas with our many relatives. And those fiestas, day long trips to the outlying ranchos, were the events that made Dad appear to be the most generous of men. He was transformed from his usual self as a constantly working, tight-fisted and scolding authoritarian into a free-spending, jovial, and kind man. The transformation was nothing short of miraculous. He many times single-handedly financed the provisions for the *paseos*, as the trips to the ranchos were called. The provisions included cases of beer and soft drinks, great pots full of rice, turkey *moles*, and stacks of fresh tortillas. The scent of fresh ground maize tortillas would waft from the towel-lined wicker baskets, which held the tortillas by the hundreds. The rancho lands were dry cultivated in great green and brown swaths of maize, which allowed us to feast on the fresh corn bulging from the stalks, that is, if the rains had been generous that year. The corn was not the sweet type, but large kernelled, almost meaty *maize* grilled over hot coals and eaten smeared with lime juice, salt, and chile powder. This was a corn of historic sustenance that during hard times kept families alive when there was little else to eat. Although all these foods were special, the one dish of particular interest to us, and especially to Dad, was *birria de chivito*, young goat cooked Jalisco style.

Dad's love of meat was legendary, but his favorite (and he never met a meat dish he did not like), was *chivito*, prepared in the regional style. It was the only meal his brother Tio Jose, the chef de jour, ever cooked. Tio Jose looked very much Dad's

younger brother: short of stature and barrel-chested with steely blue grey eyes framed by a sun burned face, their balding patterns almost identical. Although they saw each other infrequently, they truly enjoyed each other's company. In comparison to Dad's humble and somewhat reserved self, Tio Jose was an earthy man with a touch of the *picaro*. Tio Jose was a master at two things: building homes and preparing *birria de chivito*. He was an *albañil* by profession, which in the local parlance amounted to both architect and builder, able to design and construct a house from the ground up. These were sturdy, simple row homes with an almost storybook look to them. They were built of mortared brown adobe bricks that were plastered, whitewashed, and then painted the typical colors of Mexican homes: deep rust reds, grassy greens, sky blues, and earthen browns. The homes were typically painted two contrasting yet complementary colors with a horizontal foot-wide line of white neatly bisecting the two colors. Red-tiled roofs topped the little houses of La Union de San Antonio, giving it a well-deserved reputation as a *pueblo típico colonial*, as it had been founded in the early 1700s and still retained an air of the colonial towns, with cobblestone streets, a large formal plaza fronting the grey gothic church, and a public *jardín* with a large gazebo prominently situated in the middle of the plaza.

All the colonial cute but authentic landmarks were secondary, at least architecturally, to the massively soaring stone church dominating the town's layout, standing somewhat ominously in the heart of the town. The church was built piecemeal and in stages, because the financing of such a grand structure was almost all the result of the mostly poor parishioners hard-earned *pesos*, which the town priest continually harangued the congregation to part with. So pervasive and far-reaching was the priest's obsession with building the grand church that even my parents were not immune in the far off San Francisco Bay Area, receiving monetary pleas by way of personal letters from the priest, accompanied by an inserted photographic reproduction of the bloody crucified Christ, the church altar's focal point, reminding them, as if they needed reminding, of their sacred duty to God, the Catholic Church, and their beloved town to give the paltry sums they could afford.

Preparing *birria de chivito* is not a leisurely endeavor, and in order to prepare for our *paseo* feast, Dad would send money to Tio Jose well before we arrived, thereby assuring that Jose had been scouting about for some tender young goats. Goats were a mainstay in the Jalisco countryside, and to this day, small herds of semi-wild skinny goats typically shepherded by a young boy or an older man, can be seen gnawing at bare earth and thorny mesquite trees during the dry season and slightly fatter goats can be

seen greedily munching on lush grasses during the rainy season. The most important ingredient for a great not merely good *chivito* is that the goat be young. As goats in Jalisco are not kept in feeding lots but instead roam about the semi-arid countryside eating just about anything remotely edible, the meat can be tough, even if properly cooked. A young goat's tender meat was therefore a necessary component of tasty *birria*.

After the rigors of the trip to Jalisco, and there were many when the means of transportation was a 10-year-old station wagon loaded with six kids, Mom and Dad, and usually a relative or two, we would arrive and settle into Tio Jose and Tia Maria's house, where we usually stayed. Tio Jose was married to Tia Maria, Mom's younger sister, and we called ourselves double cousins, so it always seemed logical for us to stay with them, and their large family of 11 children. On a typically sunny morning, after Tio Jose's mid-morning breakfast of eggs (three or four), chunks of meat braised in a chile sauce, beans and some type of cheese, shoveled workmanlike but with unmistakable glee given Tia Maria's well-deserved reputation as the best cook in the family, Dad would playfully ask Tio Jose if he had chosen the young goats for the *birria*, his face breaking into an uncontrollable expression of happiness, eyes twinkling with the prospect of untold quantities of his favorite dish. Tio Jose assured his brother that he had purchased a goat or two from so and so, usually a distant relative who lived out in one of the outlying ranchos, a holdout of the *campesinos* migration to town.

Tio Jose was a mason and his older sons, who were addressed as *peones* or peons, since Tio was the *maestro*, the master *albañil*, and they his assistants, had built the house where we stayed. It was a typical home of the region, where homes are built up against one another in narrow and deep lots, with a large door leading into an entryway festooned with large bright ceramic tile-clad plant containers shaped sort of like a large mushroom that almost any household that could afford them proudly displayed. As one entered the home, leading to the left was a small living area with a couch and chair, proudly slip-covered in hard plastic, and much later a television, which surely killed off the nightly ritual of the plaza promenade, and the layout then continued onto sleeping areas. Straight through the entryway was the center of the household, the *patio* or courtyard. Years later, while traveling in Spain, I learned about the history of this style of home and its continuous evolution from similar Moorish designs. The *patio* was an open air courtyard, which was surrounded by the other bedrooms and kitchen in an elongated horseshoe pattern. Further into the lot past the living quarters was the outhouse, later replaced with a much awaited flush toilet and shower, and further still,

at the rear of the house, the *corral* where the animals were kept, the pigs fattening in their pens on hefty rations of kitchen scraps and leftover whey from the cow's milk, the chickens scratching for insects and seeds in the *patio* and *corral*, and the lonely cow, giving the household a much needed supply of dairy products. The inevitable beast of burden, the *burro*, was kept tethered, his sad eyes and shy demeanor belying his tough as nails abilities as a ridiculously overburdened carrier of massive packages or firewood or as a means of bumpy human transport.

The *patio* garden consisted of roses, geraniums, and semi-tropical potted plants scattered about. In the morning, before the inevitable late summer afternoon rains started, the area was a sunny sitting spot to chat and digest the huge mid-day breakfast, and where Dad and Tio would chat away before Tio would return to work. The sex roles were quite differentiated, so that as Tio and Dad enjoyed their post breakfast repast, Tia and my female cousins would be furiously doing the day's cleaning, sweeping the *patio*, washing the tile flooring throughout the house, hand-scrubbing the endless piles of wash, and preparing for the meals on the wood-fired stove, which later was replaced by a tiny gas stove, the fittings not very tight, which caused a prevalent, albeit slight gas scent in Tia's busy kitchen. Since Mom was a visitor, she was not expected to fully participate in the household chores, but she would help nonetheless, happy to be spending time with her younger sister, before leaving for her mid-day visits to her other eight siblings and their equally large and busy households.

On one of our trips to Jalisco when I was 15, there was to be a *paseo*, a picnic in the countryside, planned to be held in the *rancho* known as *Los Susarez*, which was a favorite local venue. The previous afternoon, Dad and Tio Jose had come back to the house with a smallish, tawny colored goat with the smallest of protruding horns sticking up from his head. The goat was not a baby goat, but was an adolescent, just months away from becoming a full grown *chivo*. The goat was tied up with a thin rope loosely around his neck in the corral that took up the back part of Tio and Tia's house. That night Dad told me in a low conspiratorial whisper that only he and I heard, "*Mijo*, tomorrow early in the morning you are going to help me kill the *chivito*." I was surprised by my father's command, but elated to be a part of this almost ritualistic killing, and reveling at that moment the few father son intimacies I could remember. Although initially I was nervous, I slept well that night.

The next morning Dad woke me early, before anyone in the house had awakened, the air cool with misty dampness. I was excited and unsure, but Dad's calm and even instructions directed me as we brought out the *chivito* by his rope from the

corral in the back into the central *patio* of the house. The *chivito* was calm and he looked quite pretty in the low morning light, dew still present on the house plants and the slightest of chills in the late summer air. Dad gave me instructions: "Hold the goat by the horns, *mijo*, and make sure he does not move." Dad took out one of his many knives, which he collected and felt very attached to, a remnant of his rural past which clung to him like the ever present sepulcher around his neck. The knife was about 5 inches long closed, black handled, and had a nickel finish blade. As he opened the blade, he unhesitatingly, but in the gentlest of ways, made a small incision on the goat's neck, just below and to the left of its furry chin. As I hung onto the goat's stubby horns, I expected it to buck or kick, but the goat let out only a small bleat, "Baaaa...", as a bright crimson stream of blood quickly puddled around his hooves. Earlier, Dad had brought out a large metal bowl, and as the *chivito's* legs buckled and slowly lay down, and his bleats of "Baaaa..." became weaker, Dad placed the goat's head gently over the bowl to catch the blood. Quicker than I had imagined was possible, but without really knowing how much time had passed, the little goat had closed its eyes, and there were no more "baaaaa's". The *chivito* was dead.

The butchering of the goat was quick and unsentimental. With a knowledgeable thrust of the knife into the goat's underbelly, from the rear to the front, a large opening exposed the goat's innards, Dad explaining to me the importance of not rupturing the viscera that contained the goat's organs. The many colored organs were fascinating to me. There were light greens, beet purples, and putty-colored ones too, all enclosed in the thin membrane of the viscera. The organs went into the metal bowl with the goat's blood, "to make *chanfaina*," Dad declared, referring to the loose sausage composed of the washed organs stuffed into the goat's stomach along with the blood, herbs and spices, and cooked along with the meat. It was an acquired taste that I remember not too fondly. After the goat's organs had been removed and the body cavity washed, Dad made a small incision with the knife in the lower part of the goat's hind leg, above the hoof, pursed his lips on the cut, and blew short puffs of air into the incision. The air formed a small pocket and from there Dad proceeded to skin the little animal, his knife cutting surely and easily, and in a matter of minutes the now naked pink goat lay on the brick floor, its hide a ghostlike imprint of its former self. The remainder of the butchering was just as quick and efficient, and amazingly, where a few minutes earlier there was a breathing, bleating, cute little *chivito*, now stood a mound composed of haunches, ribs, and head, the whole animal ready to be made into *birria* by Tio Jose.

It was still early morning and the day was slowly warming up, the household was waking, and Dad was showing an amazing sense of satisfaction and contentment,

as he beamed a smile of pure joy. Our job was complete. I had a mixture of feelings coursing through me, including pride in having assisted my father in a chore in which he did not criticize me or point out my shortcomings, and a shared experience with him that was rare, just the two of us engaged in an undertaking, ripe with symbolism. In addition, compounding my emotions was the acknowledgement that we had just taken the life of the little goat. Those were almost overwhelming emotions for a 15-year-old boy, but of course I kept them to myself, smiling with my father and content in the moment.

The rest of the day was devoted to walking out to the *ranchito* where we were to spend the day, feasting on the *birria* Tio Jose would make on site, in an old metal container over an open fire, the rest of the feast having been prepared at home and ferried out to the ranch. Amidst the eating, drinking, and inevitable singing with our untold number of relatives, it seemed that all was right with the world. And although it was not clear to me then, it is now years later, that while I was merely visiting La Union, my father had come home.