



The Tapestry of *Mi Familia*

Growing up in a family headed by a strict Adventist mother who quoted Spanish poets.

by *Ruben Escalante*

THE THREE-BEDROOM, ONE-LEVEL DUPLEX ON Peggy Lane seemed like paradise. After years of moving from one less-than-ideal house to another, this residence was the proverbial answer to prayer. First of all, it was clean. The walls were not peeling, and the linoleum tile on the floor was intact. True, it probably wasn't as much fun as the houses we lived in before. We couldn't "redecorate" by stripping large slivers of oily, dark paint from the walls, and there weren't any of the dark, humid places where one could usually find a black widow or two. But we were willing to adjust to these inconveniences. After all, the shower worked, and the kitchen was an ultramodern marvel, with Formica counters, a refrigerator made in the 20th century, and a large, stainless steel faucet that arched up like a snake ready to strike. It was great seeing your own warped reflection as you looked

into the shiny sink. The living room even had high ceilings—or at least they seemed high; I was only eight years old at the time. The best thing, though, was the large picture window that rose impressively to cover almost the entire front living room wall, three feet from the floor to the ceiling. Through it I could see the world go by. I loved looking out and seeing the San Bernardino Mountains on those brisk and sunny winter mornings, after the hills had been dusted with the season's first snow.

Life in the "projects" (I realized much later that this is what these places were called) was a new experience. All the duplexes looked the same. As I recall, most of the people looked pretty much the same, too—like me. Lugonia Elementary was just a block away. It would be the second school for me—the fourth for my oldest brother, who was not quite 13 years old. But for this one brief moment in my life, our finances seemed stable, and my mother did not worry about money—at least not out loud.

I still don't know how my mom made ends

Ruben Escalante, a graduate of La Sierra University, received his M.Div. from the SDA Theological Seminary. He teaches religion, drama and Spanish at La Sierra Academy. His writing has appeared in Insight and other Adventist publications.

meet, but the battle for financial security was one she was accustomed to. She had married my father to escape abject poverty in Mexico, only to find herself equally unhappy. She soon divorced, after six years and four boys. A second marriage to a gentle, golden-hearted man—who also happened to be an alcoholic—only made the family more unstable.

We never went hungry, though—or maybe we just didn't know that hunger does not simply mean going without food. Sometimes we ate the same staple foods for days on end. Our meals were square only because they were always served on an antique, stained yellow, rectangular iron table. *Frijoles, tortillas, arroz y huevos* . . . lots of eggs. Never mind the maximum daily recommended allowance of cholesterol. Eggs were "cheap eats" for a group of growing boys ranging in age from eight to 12.

At the time, I didn't understand why so many people came to our apartment. It didn't seem fair that they should take over the rooms in our house, while the four of us boys had to crowd into one room. Not only would they visit, but they would stay—sometimes for months on end. Many of them were nameless faces, although I do remember *Felipito*. He was a nice, gray-haired, gruff old man who lived in the front room of our house for many months, bringing a heavy dose of humor and entertainment to our home. I still remember his gripping stories about traveling from town to town in Mexico during Zapata's and Villa's revolution, dodging gunfights and managing escapes.

I don't know what ever became of him. One day he just disappeared—not an uncommon

occurrence for the people we knew, as I recall. Life was not easy. Some died; others, no doubt, were deported.

Looking back, I realize my mom had to rent out the extra rooms in our house because public assistance just didn't cover the four-fold, male-related expenses. She taught herself English and how to become an assistant to a legal counsel. She didn't just discipline herself; she was an equally stern taskmaster with her four sons. She had a fiery temperament, and we knew better than to question her judgment or authority. We also caught

My mother had a fiery temperament, but we caught glimpses of a softer side. She would recite from memory long passages by classical Spanish authors—Cervantes, Ruben Dario, Amato Nervo.

We also caught glimpses of a softer side. She loved to laugh when her brothers came to visit, and she would sometimes recite from memory long passages by classic Spanish authors—Cervantes, Ruben Dario, Amato Nervo. She took the time to teach me how to recite poetry in public, taught my brother to play the guitar, and taught all four

brothers how to sing in a male quartet that performed at church functions. Our world revolved around our demanding dynamo of a mother.

And, of course, around *tata* (grandpa). My grandpa was one of our regular visitors, and his raspy voice could be heard long before his equally rough hands would rest on my "two-lines light" haircut.* He was the closest thing to a male hero I had as a young boy. He spoke at length of his experiences as a pioneer missionary in northern Mexico. He would paint mental pictures of the hardship and trials that accompanied him as he traveled on horseback from town to town, planting the gospel seed in a country buried in superstition, religious bigotry, and suspicion. He would

quote long passages of the *Cipriano de Valera* Bible, and sing his favorite songs from the *Melodías de Victoria*. He didn't sing well at all, but that didn't matter. I can still hear him singing, "*la mañana reina ya en mi corazón. . .*"

He was the patriarch, the sage, the historical anchor that gave a displaced young boy a sense of belonging to something greater, something more permanent than the sterile, off-white walls of government housing. He was the tie to a "real" history that made my present one meaningful, and even important.

My mother, grandfather, brothers, and sister—even the boarders who joined our family for weeks or even months—all formed the threads in the tapestry of my childhood. *La familia* was my greatest asset—for better or for worse. I might never be wealthy, or own large tracts of land, but *mi familia*—that was my wealth; wherever they lived—that was my land.

* A low-maintenance classic for growing boys—shaved to an inch above the ears, and trimmed close above that.