

Mi Familia

I KNOW when I began—or at least when I was born, on July 29th, 1951, at 8:41 P.M.—but that isn't really the whole story. My beginnings were somehow rooted in memories passed on to me through my grandmother's sayings and my father's songs, and my mother's stories, and in some mountains that I saw once from the highway, and in the thread of a dream below the voice and between the words of someone whose name I don't know but whose voice and dream I still carry.

The way I defined family was much like the old funerals I remember. In the front rows were the next of kin, the most greatly affected by the loss, behind them those close, behind them the friends, then the acquaintances, and always, somewhere, the people of whom no one knew the exact relationship to the departed, but that didn't matter—those people knew, and that was enough reason to be there. In fact, one's own internal reasons were the guiding law for anyone's presence, and no one had to make explanations at a time like that. Modern "family sections" later served to cut off, to make people separate off, who was family from who wasn't, who was "immediate family" from who was "distant." None of this was necessary in the old Mexicano funerals I remembered. The cousin (*prima hermana*, to emphasize how close the relationship really was) who'd spent eighty years of her life with the deceased didn't have to be turned away from the three skimpy rows of "Family

Section" just in order to allow room for younger siblings and spouse, nieces and nephews, who'd only spent twenty to sixty-some-odd years with the deceased. There was no having to judge "degree" of relationship, in competition with the others present. One merely found one's place according to one's own intuition.

About Families

In Hispanic families, many relationships are defined differently than in Anglo American culture. A first cousin is called a "sister cousin" (*prima hermana*). Godparents are called "co-parents," and many adults refer to children affectionately as *m'ijo* or *m'ija* ("my son" or "my daughter").

Family was like that. There was the little boy in second grade that I was proud to claim as my "third step cousin-in-law" and there were the friends for whom no blood connection existed, but who counted in every way as cousins, to whom there was a life-long commitment and a life-long connection.

It was a big family. It seemed I had several dozen aunts and uncles, and at least fifty of the immediate

cousins. It was a context that provided variety and contrast. "Somos como los frijoles pintos," my grandmother would say, "algunos güeros, algunos morenos, y algunos con pecas." (We're like pinto beans in this family — some light, some dark, and some with freckles.) I knew my grandmother so well, through all her sayings, but these had been told to me by my father, years after her death. I knew her through my father, even the details of her death, a death that happened shortly after my first birthday. Still, she guides me through many days, telling me "No hay sábado sin sol ni domingo sin misa." (There's no Saturday that doesn't have some sunshine, no Sunday that doesn't have a Mass.) Still, she warns me "Díme con quien andas y te diré quien eres." (Tell me who you hang around with, and I'll tell you who you are.)

She was from Mexico, a proud, quiet woman, who spoke little and said much, whose skirts always touched the ground, who never raised her voice or lowered her sense of dignity. Her high cheekbones were echoed in my father's face and in my own. I find it hard to imagine her as a noisy child, as a noisy anything.

My grandfather, on the other hand, lived by words, words were his tools, and he was a man who valued tools. "Cómprate un fierro con cada día de pago" (Buy yourself one tool every payday), he gave my father as *consejo*, and he taught his sons carpentry, plumbing, construction, and a hunger to build things. My father would later teach me, perhaps more randomly than he would have constructed the lessons for a boy, but still I knew how to use a hammer and a drill, how to putty the nail holes and clean a carburetor, and most importantly, how to hunger to build things. Had the training been less random, less riddled with gaps, I would have known *how* to build things. As it is, I sit with pen and paper today, and try to plan and guess how I could put together a table or a house, how to do it right, for it would not do to make one not solid, not "*macizo*."

Yet my grandfather's main occupation in life was using words as tools. The preacher, teacher, leader, he was the first in the family (possibly in the whole barrio) to own a typewriter. I don't know how old he was when he got it, but it was still his, marked with his work and his determination, used solidly and squarely as any of his tools, the fountain of many letters, that somehow always looked as individual as if he'd marked them by fountain pen and fingerprint.

*H*IS NAME WAS MARIANO TAFOLLA.

It was his grandfather's name, my father's name, and my father's oldest brother's name. Searching through the Santa Fe archives a few years ago, I found his grandfather's signature. It was almost a duplicate of my father's. I keep the name Tafolla, although my signature, perhaps even my personality, is far different. Perhaps it has something to do with words. With finding your place in the old Mexicano funerals, by internal guide, by intuition. This is who I am.

I have always considered my life one of great fortune, and the barrio

Culture Note



Mariano Tafolla

was one of these points of fortune. It was a place rich in story and magic, warmth and wisdom. So magic it was that even the police would not come there, despite calls or complaints, unless they came in twos, with their car doors locked. We played baseball in the streets, shot off firecrackers on the Fourth of July, and raised our Easter chicks to fully grown (and temporarily spoiled) chickens.

When I was, years later, to hear about slums and ghettos, cultural deprivation, and poverty-warped childhoods—there was no identification in my mind with these. In our own view, we were wealthy—we had no deprivation of cultural experiences, but rather a double dose of *cultura*. Yes, my cousins from “up north” would come to visit, and they had so many more “facts” at hand, seemed to know so much and do so much in their schools. Our school had no interscholastic activities, no spelling bees or science fairs, no playground equipment, nor even a fence.

*T*HE MAIN THING the schools tried to teach us was not to speak Spanish. The main thing we learned was not to speak Spanish in front of the teachers, and not to lose Spanish within ourselves. Perhaps that is why so many good independent and critical minds came out of that time period. Or perhaps that is why so many good independent and critical minds dropped out of school. We learned—oh, did we learn, but it was not what the school district had planned for us to learn. It was much bigger than that.

We became filled with a hunger—I call it now, sometimes, Latino Hunger. A hunger to see ourselves, our families and friends, our values and lives and realities reflected in something other than our own minds. We wanted proof that we really existed—a proof documented in those many schoolbooks filled with Toms and Susans, and Dicks and Janes, but no Chuys or Guadalupe or Juanas, no Adelitas or Santos or Esperanzas. And we definitely needed Esperanzas, if we were to dream of anything at all beyond the sirens, the friskings, and the punishments for the sin of

having spoken Spanish at school. There was a hunger and a place in our lives that needed to be filled with Esperanzas and Milagros.

So what we didn't see, we invented. Even the national anthem became our cultural playground: "Jo—o—sé, can you see—ee?" And we filled TV with our own *raza*, hidden between the lines and in the shadows of people's pasts.

My roots in New Mexico go back for centuries—*españoles* arriving in the 17th century to *indios parientes* already there. The move to Texas happened between 1848 and 1865 (a few wars got in the way, causing strange demographic reshuffles). My great-great-grandmother was already there, and had a seamstress shop in "downtown" San Antonio; my great-grandmother washed clothes in the San Antonio River; her *tío* had brought word in 1836 to Juan Segúin and the *tejanos* at the Alamo that Santa Ana's army was coming in great force. (They didn't listen.) She later married two (one at a time) Confederate veterans. Growing up, I teased that I had relatives on all sides of all wars.

The Tafollas' roots were in New Mexico, the Salinas' in San Antonio, the Sánchez' in Montemorelos, the Duartes' and Morenos' in Spain, but somehow it was San Antonio that won out. San Antonio is in my blood. Maybe that's because its earth was worn smooth by so many first-step baby feet kissed by mothers before my mother. Maybe because its air was charged by the anger and tension and passion of fights between family members and then warmed by the *abrazos* between them, healing their hearts. Maybe it's that the sunshine captured the laughter, or the river collected the tears from my own eyes and a thousand crying family eyes before me, and then returned the same life-moisture in rain to celebrate, and in honest sweat from good work done. Maybe it's the softness of the grass, the softness of the earth, that holds the softness

Spanish Words

consejo advice, p. 271

macizo sturdy, solid, p. 271

indios parientes relatives, p. 273

tío uncle, p. 273

tejanos Texans, p. 273

abrazos embraces, p. 273

vaqueros, rancheros, soldados cowboys, ranchers, soldiers, p. 274

Spanish Words

vacas . . . libros Tafolla lists things such as *vacas* (cows), *ríos* (rivers), *molcajetes* (mortar and pestle), *gatos* (cats), and *libros* (books) that are part of her life and spirit. p. 274

of all those buried there by blood or heart related: my grandparents, my aunts, my father, my first-born child, and a thousand cousins and cousins of cousins for centuries held together by the warmth of *familia*.

From the *vaqueros*, *rancheros*, *soldados*, preachers, teachers and storytellers on my father's side and the metalworkers, maids, nursemaids, and servant people on my mother's side come the family members that sit by my side as I write today. So do the mesquite trees and *vacas*, coyotes and *ríos* of their lives, and the *molcajetes* and *gatos*, *libros* and computers, friends and strangers, races, telephones and headlines — of mine. They are all a part of my *familia*, that huge network of creatures in coexistence, sharing places and times and feelings, sharing commitment, sharing care about each other . . .

But that only tells part of the story. Because we don't have photographs or even mental images of most of the people that form our *familia* — we don't even know who they were, or who they will be. And everything and everyone I see out there, and the even more numerous ones I don't see, are all the *real* members of my *familia*. And when we speak of family, who can we really leave out?

RESPONDING

- 1. Personal Response** Tafolla says that her father taught her to use a hammer and drill and clean a carburetor — just as her grandfather taught his sons. What tasks can you do that were once reserved for the opposite sex? How did you learn to do them?
- 2. Literary Analysis** Tafolla once referred to her family and culture as a *caldo*, or soup, of many ingredients, all contributing to a special flavor. Judging from this selection, why do you think she chose this *metaphor*? Can you

think of another comparison that suggests things that are complementary yet diverse?

3. **Multicultural Connection** What does Tafolla mean by "Latino Hunger"? Do you think that students of diverse cultural groups see themselves reflected in schoolbooks today? Explain.

LANGUAGE WORKSHOP

Word Roots Knowing word roots can help you figure out meanings of related words. For example, the word *Familia* in the title has the same root as the word *family*. If you associate these words with others such as *familiar* and *familial*, you can probably figure out their meanings.

Think of one other word related to each of the following italicized words; then try to arrive at the italicized word's meaning.

1. "The cousin . . . spent eighty years of her life with the *deceased* . . ."
2. ". . . its air was charged by the anger and the *tension* and passion of fights. . . ."
3. ". . . many good and *critical* minds came out of that time period."

WRITER'S PORTFOLIO

In three paragraphs, Tafolla tells about her "roots" by mentioning important places, dates, occupations, and objects. Study her example, which begins "My roots in New Mexico . . ." (page 273). Then write a short version of your own roots.