**A House Isn't a Home with a Vacant Lot as a Front Yard—Memories of a Mexican Boy Growing up in El Paso in Five Rental Houses: Parts 1 & 2**

Daniel Acosta, Jr.

**Part 1**

I grew up in a mixed neighborhood of Anglos and Mexican kids in the 2900 block of Hamilton Street, which by the time I began first grade was still an unpaved and rocky street. Ironically, Nana Cuca's home was on Piedras Street (rocks in Spanish), which was a fully paved main thoroughfare for getting to downtown El Paso and the bridge between El Paso and Juarez, Mexico. Most of the homes on Hamilton were rented by Mexican families, with the exception of two homes: one owned by a local white businessman and the second by a builder/developer. By the time we moved from Hamilton Street, two homes were built on empty lots by more affluent Mexican families. One empty lot behind the Texaco station on Piedras was not developed for years, and it served as a playground for us kids to play baseball and other games. It was on that lot that I became skilled enough to play first string as a short stop and center fielder for Little League and Pony League teams.

Our rental house did not extend to the street like the rest of the homes on our block, which had front yards with lawns, trees and small green plants. Our house had as its front yard a desert-like vacant lot with many small, jagged rocks, prickly-pear cacti, and small mesquite and creosote shrubs. One unique feature of our so-called front yard was the presence of a large Texas Madrone tree (of which I later learned its name). Our backyard was the alley that jutted right against the back windows of the living room and my sisters' bedroom. The two homes on either side of our house had decent-sized front yards and backyards and all of the homes had driveways that led to their front doors, some with garages in the rear. The vacant lot in front of our house prevented the possibility of having a driveway. To get to our house by car we had to drive down the alley that started on Piedras Street and navigate our way to a rocky driveway that ended near the porch steps of our house. The alley, like Hamilton Street, was rocky and dusty and was dotted with dented silver-colored trash cans behind the houses on each side. Several of the trash cans were missing their lids and feral cats would often scatter trash in the alley.

My mother and father slept in a blonde-colored mahogany bed tucked tightly into the far corner of the living room, near the large window that looked out into the alley behind our house. I was scared to be in the alley at night because it became pitch black with only some light coming from windows of houses on the other side of the alley. My two sisters slept in a small bedroom directly opposite my parents’ huge bed but had the privacy of a door. I slept on a battered green couch in the front of the house (which was originally the front porch that had been enclosed to make more room for the family). During the hot weather in El Paso, which is most of the year, I slept in the front room; I moved to the living room for the winter months and early spring, where there was a large metal gas heater to keep the rest of the house warm.

Our house was elevated on stilts with no cement foundation. There were a few gaps between the wooden slats of the flooring. where I could see below (especially near the toilet in the bathroom) the dirt floor of the basement, which had no useful purpose except for homes for roaches, spiders, black vinegarroons, and other nasty insects. I was not allowed to go into the basement, which could only be entered through a rickety half-door on the east exterior side of the house. Near that half-door was a gradual slope from the alley which was lined with many rocks to prevent erosion when it rained. I would identify special-colored rocks and secretly hide coins under the rocks.

I have several vivid memories of this alley which often come to mind when I think of my early childhood. One is the image of sweaty, unsmiling chain-gang prisoners in the summer months cleaning the alley of weeds and small shrubs, guarded by fierce-looking men in khaki uniforms, who would shoo us children away from the prisoners. Another memory is seeing one night the dead body of a neighborhood old woman lying in the waning few minutes of sunlight in the alley. All of us children thought she was a bruja who was evil and mean; I did not walk down the alley for several weeks. Although Nana Cuca was a widow when I was growing up, she did have some suitors. One night she was staying at our home and slept in the same bed with our parents. My sisters and I would hear whispers between our parents and Nana Cuca, suggesting that it was best to stay away from her home for a few days. That first night I was awoken by screams of Cuca! Cuca! by someone in the back alley; my parents and Nana Cuca pretended to be asleep and did not stir from bed. The screams faded away in a few minutes.

The next several years were a blur to me. I remember having to take a bath several times a week at Nana Cuca’s house, which was up the street from our home. Our home did not have a tub or shower in the bathroom until after I began first grade. I excitedly remember going to her house Sunday night to get ready for my first day of school. My grandmother would repeatedly tease me in Spanish, knowing that I would refuse to answer back in Spanish. I was not going to let her irritate me before my first day of school in the fall of 1951.

**Part 2**

One of the earliest memories of my childhood is looking up to the crib where my mother had placed my younger sister after she had been brought home from the hospital. I tried to poke her through the railings of the crib. The crib was in the small kitchen next to dull white and chipped cabinets and a nondescript metal sink. An old gas stove was on the opposite side of the sink. Next to the stove was an ice box; we did not get a refrigerator that ran on electricity until I started the first grade. There was no kitchen table for us to eat our meals. Unbeknownst to me, my mother had had twin girls but one of the twins died a few days after birth. The twin who survived, Celia, had been born about a month after my second birthday, and I was now jealous of the attention that she was receiving from my mother and older sister, Tina. With now five of us living in a small house, space was at a premium. Although I did not have a bedroom of my own, I felt lucky to have the large front room to myself without having to look out into the dark alley behind our house.

I never thought much of our first house and its non-existent yards until I started grade school. As I continued to excel academically in my elementary school years, I became very aware of my family’s financial situation through my observations on how well dressed my Anglo classmates were, and how after school many of them were picked up by their mothers in shiny new cars. Because my father was a carpenter, he had an old pick-up truck to carry his tools and building supplies. At a young age, I began to be ashamed of the stark differences in my family’s financial condition and those of my Anglo classmates’ parents. I refused to speak Spanish at home and at school, believing that it would somehow ingratiate me more with my white classmates and teachers.

In the third grade, our teacher, Mrs. Welles, asked the class to describe the rooms in each of their homes. I was very embarrassed to tell the class that my home had only five rooms—the enclosed porch, which I exaggerated to be a den; the living room; the small bedroom for my sisters; a kitchen with a non-existent breakfast area; and a bathroom which now had a shower. As noted earlier, before I began first grade, we would take our baths at Nana Cuca’s house which was two houses from our house or at my paternal grandmother’s house (Nana Carolina) which was located a block farther away. My older sister would mainly go to Nana Carolina’s home.

When Mrs. Welles asked each student the name of our mothers, I Americanized her Spanish name of Maria Luisa to Mary Louise. When my mother found out, she scolded me and told me that she was very proud of the name that Nana Cuca had given her. It was a lesson that I never forgot. Although I was conflicted by my Mexican heritage, I knew that there were many good things about being a Mexican. Nana Cuca would tell my cousin Louie and me many stories of her life in Mexico. One particular story that I remember was her family connection with a distant relative—David Siquieros—one of the three most famous muralists in Mexico, along with Diego Rivera and Jose Orozco. She secretly told us with a wicked smile that he was a Communist!

I was very close with my mother’s side of the family and spent many days and nights with Nana Cuca, Aunt Babe, and her son, Louie, who was four years older than me. As a child I never felt deprived or poor; there was always a sense of family solidarity in my home and at Nana Cuca’s place. However, I knew what it meant to have money, especially when I saw many of my Anglo classmates with gifts and spending money for after-school treats at the store across the street from the school. By the fourth grade, I was working in the school cafeteria to earn a free lunch or to receive a small amount of spending money, usually one quarter. With that money, I could walk over to the small grocery store after school and buy my favorite treat—a small bag of Fritos with hot sauce poured into the bag and shaken to soak the chips. The owner of the store would charge an extra nickel for the sauce, which I knew even at my young age was a major rip-off.

When I think back 73 years to the arrival of my younger sister into our family, I am flooded with memories of my first home in El Paso. I lived in that house until I was nine years old; I lived in five rental homes before I left El Paso permanently to enter the US Army as a draftee in 1968. I returned briefly after my honorable discharge in 1970 to my parents' fifth and last rental home. I was given an early educational discharge from the Army so I could begin my Ph.D. training that fall in pharmacology and toxicology at the University of Kansas School of Pharmacy. I used that time to retrieve my clothes and possessions and to buy a new Camaro for my drive from El Paso to Lawrence, Kansas. I would return to that rental house several times over the years to see my parents and sisters for the holidays and to introduce my fiancée, Patti, whom I met in Lawrence during my graduate school years. My wife and I had three daughters, and, as the newest Acosta family, we were able to introduce our daughters to their grandparents and their modest rental home in El Paso—which had a well-kept front yard with a small lawn and trees.