

August 17, 2008

SUMMERSCAPES

Beach Blanket Baja

By HELENA MARÍA VIRAMONTES

IN our East Los Angeles working-class neighborhoods of the '50s and '60s, no one thought of summer vacations or sleep-away camps as a possibility.

Right after the school year was over and before we were driven to the Central Valley to pick raisin grapes for the summer, we'd hunt down discarded bottles to redeem for the deposits, roll up our swimsuits in a towel taquito, locate our one Esther Williams bathing cap (mandatory in the public pool, and which we had to take turns wearing) for our sojourn to the Belvedere Park plunge located a quarter-mile from our home. One dime paid for our admittance, while a precious nickel bought a Big Hunk candy bar, which, later on when we were sun-toasted, sugar-starved and spent by hours of water play, delivered the energy for us to walk back home.

My parents grew up in one of the largest and oldest Mexican-American communities in the nation. Immigrant belief prevailed, despite the fact that both Mom and Dad were born in the United States. We were poor, but it was a poverty that we were unaware of since everyone around us was the same. The fact that our family was Catholic and large once made the headlines of The East Los Angeles Tribune, where a photo of my smiling mother announced the birth of her 11th child at Beverly Hospital.

Work was a given, and labor of any kind was highly valued. My father was a hod carrier who bore the weight of 60 pounds of wet cement on his back while expertly climbing scaffolds braced against buildings under construction.

My mother was our cook, consoler, healer, launderer and caregiver. I became a dutiful daughter, like most of my sisters. We all felt strong empathy for her. We howled whenever we'd watch Donna Reed on television vacuuming in stilettos and full petticoat dresses. If we were lucky enough to catch an Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon "Beach Party" movie, my older sisters would remark to one another in frustration and with a hint of jealousy: "Where do they get all that free time?"

Our Tío José was a great drinking friend of my father's. He was a stout man who had a fondness for whiskey, a frequent visitor who arrived with pocketfuls of lollipops that he distributed to the younger ones. Sometimes he brought along his two handsome teenage sons as an added bonus. My older sisters were prohibited from dating, so they entertained mutual crushes on Larry and Joe Junior while playing their 45s on the turntable and munching potato chips. On one such visit in 1964, when I was 10, my father announced that we were all to spend a weekend in Ensenada, Mexico, with José and his family.

My mother was, at first, skeptical: It would be no easy feat to transport a total of 16 people, the majority of them children, but Tío José had worked out a plan. He would drive his Pontiac, accompanied by his wife, Tía

Lola, and his children. My father would drive Joe Junior's clunky Chevy, and my oldest brother, Gil, would be in charge of driving our father's white Ford pickup.

Gas and food? Everything was much cheaper across the border. Lodging? Camping under the stars!

Grumbling ceaselessly, my mother packed her good menudo knife, along with her tamale pot for the slow-cooking tripe, and most of her kitchen setup. She had grown up in the fields, traveling with our grandparents who were following the California crops. And although she still used her own mother's cast-iron stove, the one with removable legs for easier transport to migrant labor camps — it still amazed us all that Grandma made both tortillas and bread in this odd-looking apparatus — the stove was kept home.

We children quickly became stupid with vacation delirium. At dawn on the day of departure, we scuttled to pile the truck with our clothes-filled paper bags (we did not own luggage), cardboard boxes containing bread and peanut butter, coffee, chips, snacks and other nonperishables, including a set of dishes and a metal bucket to wash them in. Like Steinbeck's Joads heading out for something better, we joined the caravan for the two-hour drive to cross the border to Tijuana, then another two-hour drive along the bumpy, winding and ill-repaired Carretera 1 to Ensenada.

I was the fifth to the youngest, the invisible child, and for a reason I cannot recall, my mother allowed me to ride with her inside the truck. This is what I remember: the alacrity with which we were waved across the border by a Mexican immigration officer, the muddle of the Tijuana streets and the astounding poverty of the Mexican children as we stopped to buy more groceries, then the unknitting of the streets into the main highway where we passed the shantytowns, or las colonias, on the outskirts of the city. Seeing houses molded from cardboard and garbage, tins and bushes, children whose filthy faces were snot-smearred, men without legs scooting themselves around, brought on a terror larger than my empathy. And although I could not turn away, I sat closer to the warm folds of my mother.

Once we entered the winding carretera, my mother's nerves shot up. "Slow down!" she demanded of my brother. "Watch out!" But I caught my mother's proud smile; her first-born son, as thin as wire, sitting upright and rigid, eternally focused on the road, light sprigs of a mustache, a young man now.

Finally, the caravan of vehicles drove into an empty stretch of beach, parked side by side with trunks facing the surf, and the tedious work of unloading began. Our father prepared the campsite while my older sisters paired off with Larry and Joe Junior to find firewood. My father and Tío José opened a bottle of tequila and took swigs back and forth while working.

We younger ones ran over a series of dunes and into the surf with absolutely no regard for time. We body surfed, built sand castles, chased the waves as if they were monsters and we were their intended victims, body slammed our nakedness against the froth, buried one another — on and on our illustrious and profound play went.

By late afternoon, caped in our towels, we returned to the campsite, trembling and hungry. Apparently, my mother had sent my father to find firewood since my sisters had not returned, and by then annoyance had replaced her worry. In the meantime, we ate cold bologna sandwiches and Ho-Hos and drank Kool-Aid, but we remained hungry until my father returned with planks of wood so uniformly cut that they could have easily been a section of a picket fence. (They were.)

Already boozy, Tío José started the pit fire, and we roasted marshmallows or hot dogs. In between the licks of flame, my lost sisters and the brothers returned, and I saw patches of sand on MaryAnn's hair. Words were exchanged. Later, as MaryAnn sat beside me, her face held such beguile against the crackling of the fire, I thought her more beautiful than Annette Funicello.

Our collective trance broke when Tío José, in a fit of alcoholic anger, got a hold of my mother's menudo knife and threatened to kill my aunt. His wobbling roars and verbal assaults were almost hilarious (he could barely stand up straight) had he not been wielding the huge machete.

His swings to and fro forced all of us, including Tía Lola, to dodge behind the dunes while my mother and father tried to settle Tío down. These were things that adults did all the time. The affliction of split personalities, the mysterious explosions of emotions, nuclear rages that we were often exposed to — confusing and terrifying — made us into children who wavered in their faith in God because He, too, was an adult and prone to similar fits. Crouched behind a sand dune, Larry told us quite calmly: "My dad does this every Saturday."

Perhaps it was the pot of strong coffee and Kahlúa or simple exhaustion that lowered my Tío into a deaf-defying snore. Then we all readied for bed as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

In the truck bed, seven of us lay atop thick Mexican blankets. Even at such a tender age, my younger brother Frank's sinuses rattled like marbles in a jar, hence the nightly bickering as to who would sleep next to him. This night it was to be me, and I considered myself lucky since he kept me awake to witness the stars, inhale the scent of the sea and listen to the smoothing mellow waves broaching the shore. From the truck, I admired the shattered bits of moon on the skin of the water.

While others slept soundly, I could hear Tío's snores in the distance and my sweet brother's gurgling, and I felt as if I was the only person in the world who was awake. I thought about the stars and the beyondness of them, and the darkness, which made up the unknown.

We have no photos of this one family vacation, but the images of Gil behind the steering wheel of the truck, the sand on MaryAnn's hair and Tío's machete threats are easily summoned and deliver a sense of gratitude. Unfortunately, upon our return to the United States, the long lines at the border crossing allowed anxieties to grow to monstrous proportions.

At the gateway, a United States immigration officer studied us. He remained silent even as he reached over and grabbed away a piece of sugar cane I had been sucking on. I began to cry. My mother said nothing to him about his rudeness, and I could see by her trembling as she handed over the documents that she was afraid of something.

"Are you an American citizen?" he demanded. Gil knew to stare straight ahead as the officer deliberated whether to search us or allow us to cross into our own country while I complained and whined. All my mother could muster during the two-hour drive home was: "Behave next time." Since that day, I never have.

Helena María Viramontes is the author of "Their Dogs Came With Them."