

## **Hay Luz en la confusión (There is light in the confusion)**

by Maritza Arreola

*My entire family began migrating to various parts of the United States from Mexico over the last few decades, so even though I knew I wanted to interview someone within my family I still had so many stories to choose from. But I realized how little I knew of the most important stories: my own parents'. Until as recently as this past year, my mother, Luz Arreola, never told me about her migration experience and was selective about what she shared of her life beyond myself and my siblings. This interview ended up being about two hours long, and most of what she shared was as new for me as it will be for you.*

For most of my life, I always had a very basic version of my parents' migration story. My dad was living in Durango, Mexico and then my mom moved there to teach preschool. It was customary for teachers to stay with locals, and the person she ended up staying with happened to be my dad's aunt. My dad left the woman he was with for my mom and soon they got married, had my brother, and came to the United States where they had me and my sister. In the past, everything about what they shared was rooted in the specific and personal, with sayings like "We came for you to have a better life." But throughout this interview experience, I learned how much of those seemingly intimate and personal choices were tied to larger structures impacting our lives. For example, I knew my mom came to work as a teacher in my dad's area in Central Mexico, called El Vizcaíno, which she said is a municipality of Durango just outside the state. It wasn't framed as more than a choice or happy coincidence that she would work as a teacher and that she would end up working in El Vizcaíno. In reality, my mom's decision to go into education was rooted in her lack of opportunities growing up. She said, "I think that being a little educated there made it possible for me to understand how important education was, because I was also in a situation that was very difficult there. I was young and my parents were divorced and we were extremely poor. When I lived with my mother, I had to pick grapes and cotton, and so did my mom and many times we didn't have money to buy lunch to take and many times we would have to rely on people giving us something or sharing with us. We were hungry on many occasions." She was able to earn her degree from la Escuela Normal General Lázaro Cárdenas Del Rio in Lerdo, Durango after middle school and then got a job right after.

But again, her ending up in El Vizcaíno wasn't random either. She was sent where teachers were needed, and that was generally far rural areas for new teachers. Teachers assigned to the cities were a mix of those who have been teaching for many years and, more often than not, those who had connections to make their way through the system. Coming from an extremely poor family, Luz knew she'd have to work many years before she'd be assigned somewhere that would give her and her family access to resources and opportunities.

But her goals were very much rooted in Mexico. She knew she couldn't stay in the rural areas she was working in, especially if she were to have a family; after all, my father wasn't able to go past 6th grade because there were no high schools in the area. But leaving the country wasn't even an option for her until she met her husband and his community.

The authors of *Immigrant America* look into this reality, which challenges the commonly-held myth that it is the poorest people of the poorest countries that are "invading" the United States: "The first reason that the poorest of the poor seldom migrate is that they lack the necessary contacts and information to make such a move meaningful. The option of moving abroad in order to improve their economic situation is not self-evident and is foreign to many of the world's poor" (Portes and Rumbaut, 16). Luz believed that only rich people went to the United States as tourists. The idea of leaving for the country for better opportunities wasn't an idea she was familiar with until she heard about all of my uncles who had done just that. But the authors continue saying, "[second], even if they somehow become aware of the migration alternative, they would still lack the economic means to implement it. International migration, whether legal or unauthorized and whether coming from near or faraway countries, is generally an expensive proposition, not within everyone's reach" (Portes and Rumbaut, 16). My father had already made many failed attempts to join his brothers across the border. He had already experienced deportation by the time he met my mother. Together, they were able to make the attempt successful.

In December 1986, my parents joined a group of about fifteen people who would be transported by car from Tijuana to San Diego. She recounted the group separating her from her husband, and being stuck with strangers

most of the time until they crossed the bridge with no problem in a car with the seats removed, all sitting on the floor having had no showers or food over the journey. From there, they took a Greyhound bus to San Jose, lived in Mountain View, and eventually got tourist visas. Luz went back to Mexico after a few months, since she only got a temporary leave of absence and didn't want to lose her job, and gave birth to my brother. Seeing only then that there wasn't a chance of getting transferred to the city to provide a quality education for my brother, they came back to the Bay Area by plane, again with a leave of absence from work that she never went back to. Luz's experience in the United States was incredibly isolating in the beginning. She said she was grateful that her husband worked enough that she didn't have to, partly because she identifies as a very shy person but in the beginning she couldn't speak English. At the same time, they ended up living in what was and still mostly is a predominantly Latino and immigrant community where the nearest elementary school, Castro, was bilingual and overcrowded. Interestingly, looking at data found by Pew Research, my parents had come to stay in the country the year the data begins (1990) showing a half million increase in unauthorized immigrants living in California. Also interestingly, the point where the number stagnates (1995), is around the time when more schools were being made, families were filtering their kids out of Castro, and policing and legal crackdowns increased dramatically in the area (Pew Research Centers Hispanic Trends Project). But before deciding to move us to another new school in the district, my brother had attended Castro. After noticing he was losing some of his Spanish, Luz decided to sign him up for the bilingual program. Within that year, she noticed he could no longer read in English or Spanish and was struggling in other subjects. Because she actively volunteered in the classroom, she was able to investigate why this was. When she asked how they were taught to read, a teacher said "You just point at the words and you read them and they will eventually get it." Frustrated, she moved him into regular classes and never attempted bilingual programs again, for any of us. She remarks that it was perfect in theory but it didn't work in practice, and that to get the great education she wanted for us, it had to be in English. At the same time that she actively learned English through many trips to the library or watching Sesame Street with us and avoided speaking Spanish at home, she worked as a translator for my bilingual peers and their families. But it was a difficult decision for her to choose our education over our being in community with fellow Latinos. She said, "Sometimes I feel a little guilty that I just put you out there and that I was safe in the house not having to face any of the social things that happened when there are racial differences and all of that, the same like your father when he went to work and he had to face these people talking to him in a bad way." But she still feels she made the right choice for us. When I asked her about her identity, whether she felt assimilated, she said she experienced more pressure to assimilate in Mexico than here in the United States, with her understanding of assimilation being an imitation of something that may not actually mean anything to you. In her teaching job in Mexico, she was expected to visibly show support for the government by attending events celebrating holidays she didn't care about, describing it as institutionally sanctioned - if you didn't participate, you didn't get your check. She feels she doesn't have to do that here, and that being a reason she more identifies with this (American) society than with that (Mexican) one. She made clear that she isn't ashamed of being Latina or from Mexico, but she doesn't feel tremendous pride about it either - all the beautiful things about the country were things she said she never got to experience. Her connection to Mexico lies in the people, in her family. Something that struck me was how when asked to reflect on her experience, on whether she would change anything, that Luz went back to her past framing of the journey as for us, as to give us a better life. It was here that I understood why she had kept it at that for so many years: us succeeding in the way we have has been *la luz en la confusión*- light in the confusion. In her concluding thoughts, she said "I think I'm pretty satisfied, especially because mine and dad's happiness comes from you being okay and doing the things that you like to do and if you are ok, we are ok. So I don't think I would change things."

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#### Works Cited

- Portes, Alejandro, and Rubén G. Rumbaut. *Immigrant America: A Portrait*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
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