

THE HUMILIATING EDUCATION OF JOSÉ
FRANCISCO

The Humiliating Education of José Francisco

A Story

H U M B E R T O B O C A N E G R A

Copyright © 2026 Humberto Bocanegra

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced without permission.

humbertob76@yahoo.com

The Humiliating Education of José Francisco



THE ribbing began almost as soon as José Francisco first walked into our science class at Navarro Elementary. It was third period class and José had taken most of the morning getting himself registered for school. Our teacher, Mrs. Foxworth, took his admissions paper and read his name aloud for all to hear.

"José Francisco Cortez de Anda. Damn, boy, you have as many names as I do in my entire class roster," she stated dryly.

Some of the kids in class giggled but most just smiled or showed no reaction. We were 100% Mexican American since we had all been born in the United States but were definitely of Mexican ancestry. Our features were non-distinguishable from José's. However, our English was far superior. As precocious kids as we were, we were still the top 5th grade class in school.

"Instead of running out of breath every time I call your name, I'll just call you, Joe Frank," continued Mrs. Foxworth, "Now go sit down beside that fat boy back there wearing the old football jersey. His name is Geronimo or something like that."

She was talking about me and so I corrected her, "My name is Guillermo, not Geronimo."

"Same difference, Geronimo," she replied, "just show Joe Frank around and make sure he stays out of trouble."

José came and sat down beside me. It was just because Cynthia Alvarez was absent that day (when she hardly ever missed school) that José happened to be assigned next to me.

"Hey, José, where are you coming from?" I asked.

"Vengo de Michoacán," he answered.

"You mean Michigan, don't you?"

"No, no, vengo de Michoacán - en Mexico," he corrected me.

"Hey man, no hablas en English o que?" I asked.

"Si, pero un poquito, porque nomas tengo un año de estar aqui."

Before I could say anything else the bell rang for us to change classes. Our English class would move from one classroom to the next and so I decided to wait for José.

Mrs. Foxworth noticed that I was waiting for him and commented,

"Make sure Joe Frank gets his proper lunch at the cafeteria - having to rely on all that non-nutritional stuff such as tortillas that he probably gets at home."

This food is one hundred times better than the junk his mom probably prepares for him.” She then waggled her obese body out the door.

I simply nodded my head in agreement and felt as if she was putting me down as well because I had just eaten a flour tortilla taco filled with eggs and beans earlier that morning. Heck, most of us in class ate homemade tortillas every morning, noon, and night, except when we had school, of course. So, I ignored her instructions about telling José to order himself a cafeteria plate for lunch. I figured he knew what to do when the time came for our lunch break.

We had math with Mr. Barton for the next class period. I walked José up to the teacher’s desk and informed him that Mr. Barton was very strict, and this was supposed to be his last year as a teacher. For an old man he could still yell up a storm, and we did our best not to rile him up. Someone said that he was already over fifty years old and that really seemed like a very long time.

José smiled in a thankful manner, and I went to sit at my desk. Mr. Barton closed the classroom door behind him as soon as the tardy bell rang and it was then that he first noticed José. José was standing at the opposite side of the teacher’s desk, so Mr. Barton calmly and meticulously sat down at his teacher’s chair and began talking.

“I cannot believe we are days away from our Thanksgiving holiday and you are just registering in school. You must be a migrant worker – no doubt. Where are you coming from boy?”

“Michoacán,” came the barely audible response from a timid José Francisco.

“It is pronounced Michigan. Do you hear me, son? Mi-chi-gan! That will be your first lesson of the school year. I cannot believe that you just came from the great Wolverine state and you cannot even pronounce it. I have relatives in Kalamazoo – I’ll have you know. They tell me there’s a large influx of Mexicans in that area now. There are even some that are living in my old neighborhood. Who would have thought such a fine neighborhood could go down so fast. You weren’t anywhere near the Kalamazoo area were you, boy?”

José did not answer. This piqued Mr. Barton’s interest.

“What’s wrong – did the cat get your tongue?”

I could see the discomfort that the one-sided conversation was causing José, so I blurted out, “Sir, he doesn’t speak English that well. He just got here from Mexico.”

Mr. Barton looked at me and then at José.

“I thought you said you just came from Michigan. Are you trying to pull a fast one or what,” said an irritated Mr. Barton.

"No, señor. I just came from Morelia, Michoacán."

"Well, I'm glad you were nowhere near the Kalamazoo area. Do you know what country this is?"

"Si, it is the Junited States."

"Wrong, José, it is the United States. It does not have a J in it."

José said nothing for it was obvious that Mr. Barton was in a "put down" mood.

"Now go sit down and pretend you are here to learn something."

José took his writing notebook and found an empty chair in a row opposite the room from where I was seated. He commenced to copy the math problem from the chalkboard and was quiet for the rest of the period.

When the bell rang Mr. Barton dismissed us all with a wave of the hand, as was his customary way. The entire 5th grade class was scheduled for lunch and thus, I headed straight for the cafeteria. The lunch meal consisted of hamburgers and tater tots. Being that we all ate traditional tortillas, rice and whatever, at home, the rare experience of eating the culturally different hamburger was a welcome culinary respite.

I collected my plate and found a place at the far end of the cafeteria. For a packed place everything was quite orderly. It wasn't long before someone sat across from me and put a paper bag on the table. I looked up and saw José smiling at me as he planted himself on a seat directly across from mine.

"Hey, José, qué paso, man?" I asked, as was the usual greeting back then.

"Nada," he answered as he proceeded to take some tacos out of his paper bag. They were nopalito and egg tacos as well as a red salsita to add to the mix. They smelled delicious. He caught me staring at his lunch and he graciously offered me some.

"Gustas un taco, Guillermo?"

Even though I had looked forward to eating hamburgers all week, the sight and smell of those delicious tacos soon made me forget about the burger.

"Si, thank you," I said as I reached for one and took a big bite out of it. It tasted great and I recalled that the last time I had had such good food was when we had visited my grandmother the previous Easter. She had prepared everything from arroz, pollo y mole, to atolé and capirotada. That had been a feast indeed. However, my mom often stuck to the basics such as tortillas, rice, and beans to feed us four kids in the family.

I devoured the taco very quickly and José kindly offered me another from the remaining stack of four or five.

"Provecho," he said as he motioned to the rest.

I was reaching for another when a voice behind me stopped my motion.

"I just know you aren't going to eat another one of those, Geronimo!"

I immediately recognized the voice as that belonging to Mrs. Foxworth. She had been making her rounds during her assigned lunch duty and had apparently been watching José and me for a while.

"Those things are bad for you. You can get very sick with that kind of food. Eat your hamburger and don't be getting other people's food!"

"Está bien, Miss, yo dije que yes. Guillermo si puede get two or three tacos," said José as he motioned with his fingers to explain the situation.

"No, Joe Frank," she retorted.

"We want all the students to eat healthy American food. What you should do is do yourself a favor and start eating healthy foods like our burgers and fries."

José did not want to argue with Mrs. Foxworth so he quietly rewrapped and put the remaining tacos back in the bag.

"That's better, Joe Frank, you see? You've already learned another lesson today," she said smugly as she turned and moved her 5-foot two-inch 225 lb. frame away toward the other side of the cafeteria.

I could see José had been embarrassed by the entire ordeal. He did not eat any more food at school that day. As a matter of fact, he did not eat lunch at school anymore preferring to go and sit down under a small mesquite tree in the school playground during lunch. I would join him as soon as I finished eating lunch every day. He really was a great kid, and I hated to see him skip lunch, but he always told me he wasn't hungry and I did not know whether to believe him or not so after a while I just stopped asking him to eat lunch with me anymore.

During the remainder of the year José progressed slower than I had hoped. Despite his best efforts he found the language barrier a little too difficult to overcome and he slid further back as the rest of the class kept progressing. In each of my classes I did what I could to help him along.

"José, you need to practice el English mas," I explained, "o sino te vas a quedar behind. Por que no vas a mi house y te hago help con tu homework. Esta easy pero tu no lo haces."

"Es que tengo que trabajar para ayudarle a mi mama. No tengo tiempo para la tarea," was the only response he could muster.

I stopped asking to help with his homework after a while.

One month before school ended that year José was absent for an entire week. When he returned it was another depressing situation that made him reevaluate his place at school.

Demanding an explanation for his absence, our first period science teacher, Mrs. Bowe, drilled him in front of the class.

"Why were you absent, José?"

"I was sick, Miss," he replied meekly.

"Well, that's a surprising answer," she half mockingly continued, "What were you sick of?"

He put his hands in his pocket and fidgeted about a little and his answer still was vague.

"Estaba sick de mi whole body."

"Could you be a little more specific, José?"

He looked at me for a moment, and his pleading stare moved me to intercede.

"Que te paso, José?"

"Fui a la casa de mi abuela en Reynosa para que me curara del mal de ojo."

"Que te hicieron?" I prodded.

"Me barrio con un juevo y me curo."

Mrs. Bowe got frustrated at our private conversation and scowled at me, "Geronimo, if you are going to designate yourself as my interpreter, don't forget to interpret for me - I'm waiting here!"

I hesitated to tell Mrs. Bowe about Jose's explanation.

As she glared at me, I looked toward José. The class was quiet with anticipation and José nodded his head. I did my best to get it right.

"He went to Reynosa so his grandmother could cure him."

"Is she a doctor or nurse, or what?"

"No, she's just his grandmother."

"Well then, how is she qualified to cure him and of what?"

"His grandmother knows how to cure people from the evil eye."

"The evil eye?!" she asked incredulously as she looked at me and then at José and back at me.

"How do you cure someone suffering from this evil eye thing? And, furthermore, how in the world does someone get the evil eye?"

I looked at José and asked him, "Qué como te hicieron ojo?"

He hesitated to answer as he looked nervously around the classroom. All eyes were now on him, and I could tell that he regretted even mentioning the whole evil eye thing in the first place. Still, he offered an explanation of how his mother thought someone had vexed him.

"Mi mama cree que me hicieron ojo cuando le cante una cancion a mi tia durante una fiesta hace una semana. Porque los siguientes cuatro dias me senti muy mal."

I translated for Mrs. Bowe to understand, "he said he thinks someone gave him the evil eye when he sang for his aunt about a week ago during a party."

Mrs. Bowe half smiled in disbelief, but she went on with her interrogation.

"But that still doesn't explain how he supposedly got it."

I turned again to José and asked the one detail all evil eye sufferers claim does not happen.

"Nadie te toco despues de que cantaste verdad, José?"

"Solamente mi tia me toco, pero habia mucha gente presente en la fiesta," he responded.

Mrs. Bowe stared at me waiting for my next statement regarding José's sickness and miraculous sounding cure. I knew from the stories my own mother had told that a person gets the evil eye, ironically, by being intensely stared at and admired by someone nearby. If the admirer does not touch, caress, or hug, the object of their intense affection, the person being admired may suddenly suffer headaches and fatigue. This ill feeling lingers on for days, weeks, and even months.

However, if the admirer does manage to touch the object of their admiration, they will not suffer such adverse effects. Another way to cure a person afflicted with the evil eye is to "sweep" their body with a chicken egg while reciting a variety of prayers that may include the Our Father and Hail Mary. This should ward off any and all ill effects - provided, of course, that the ritual is based on both parties having strong faith in the entire process.

The ill effects, by the way, are passed on from the afflicted into the egg. Some practitioners would often break the egg and pour the contents into a glass container. Then they would proceed to "reading" the message that the yolk and surrounding elements displayed. If the yolk totally disintegrated it was often taken as a sign of severe evil eye affliction. An affliction so severe that many believed was only a short time away from turning fatal.

"José said that nobody touched him after he sang a song for his aunt," I explained.

"So?" Mrs. Bowe asked impatiently.

"Well, he got the evil eye from someone who admired him but did not touch him. He had to go to his grandma's house so she could cure him."

"Well, dammit, Geronimo - how did she cure him?" Mrs. Bowe, now thoroughly exasperated, asked.

"Well, you know, Miss, she swept his body with an egg - like they always do."

"With an egg, a chicken egg?"

"Yes," I whispered and nodded my head at the same time. José nodded his head as well.

Mrs. Bowe stood up and looked at me and at José with an expression that defies description. I thought she was going to slap José or me or just didn't know what to think.

Suddenly she just leaned back and let out the loudest laugh I had ever heard.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, - Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, that is the most original excuse I have ever heard in my twenty-five years of teaching. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha. You boys really had me going for a while. I was beginning to take you seriously. I never imagined how creative you boys could be. Ha, ha, ha, ha."

I looked at José and he looked down and said nothing. I smiled at him and he smiled back at me, and we both started to laugh as well. The rest of the class giggled and some even laughed too and it took us about five minutes to settle down.

When we went to the cafeteria for lunch that day Mrs. Bowe shared the evil eye story with Mrs. Foxworth and Mr. Barton who also laughed and belittled the whole thing as ridiculous.

"And some of these people actually believe in this kind of stuff," I overheard Mr. Barton say.

"Ignorance, sheer ignorance," Mrs. Foxworth added.

They laughed and Mrs. Bowe even pointed at José as he was walking out of the cafeteria.

"There he goes," she pointed, "the Mexican crooner."

And they laughed some more.

Jose never returned to school after that day.

I went on to graduate, serve in the army, and earned a business degree from college.

However, ten years after my high school graduation, I stopped by a popular Mexican restaurant in Edinburg and after enjoying a hearty meal I found I did not have my wallet and therefore could not pay my bill. The waitress called the owner and asked what she should do regarding my bill.

I was about to explain my dilemma when the man stopped me in mid-sentence.

"The meal is on the house, Guillermo," said the owner.

"How do you know my name? Who are you?" I asked the handsome young owner of the restaurant.

"My name is José Francisco Cortez de Anda. I speak English now my old friend," he responded.

In a split second the years melted away, and I finally knew what had happened to my old friend.

We talked for hours and he told of how he dropped out of school due to the embarrassment he had suffered that day so many years before. He had handled himself so well that none of us suspected he had dropped out due to that particular incident.

He had opened “El Buen Gusto” restaurant years before and it became an instant hit. He mentioned that a few months after it opened Mrs. Foxworth stopped by and was surprised to find that the menu offered a dish called the “Foxworth Special”.

José had identified the restaurant’s most popular orders under the heading – The Restaurant’s Most Popular Dishes. Under the heading was a list that included a wide variety of tacos.

José’s true humor showed itself as he had also included a menu section with a selection under the heading – The Restaurant’s Least Popular Dishes. Underneath was his Foxworth Special. It was nothing more than a simple hamburger.

“I have only sold one during all my years here,” he informed me.

“Wow, how do you remember such a minute detail?” I inquired.

“Mrs. Foxworth ordered it and everyone in her group poked fun at her for ordering a hamburger in a Mexican restaurant. She finished it though, and never came back,” he said.

“Why? Did she get embarrassed or what?” I asked. His demeanor became somewhat solemn,

“Neh! She had a massive heart attack and died later that same day.”

— *the end* —