

GRANDMOTHER'S FAVORITE MUSIC

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A Story

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humbertob76@yahoo.com

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MY mom brought her elderly mom to live with us right after I turned four. It was an act of both kindness and convenience for my mom to commit; but at least she did something. None of my mother's brothers nor any of her sisters even hinted at taking 'Buelita Flora (as we called her) into their homes. So, soon after 'Buelito Miguel's funeral mom just went over to 'Buelita's old, rented house and helped her pack what little stuff they could gather and brought her home to live with us.

As a single working mother my mom could use 'Buelita's help around the house. We were four kids - all under the age of seven. Roy was 6, Mary was 5, I was 4, and Rene was 2. Mom almost understood what it was like to be a broken-hearted widow since my father suddenly up and left a week before Rene was born. There was no hint of anything being wrong. One day my dad just did not come home. No phone call, no letter, - nothing. His boss at work said that Dad had stopped by to pick up his paycheck, and nothing seemed awry. He later cashed it, and the bank teller was the last person to see him in the area. Then he was swallowed by the earth.

'Buelita Flora was, for us kids, a fresh addition to our household. While Mom went to work year-round at the bodega across town, 'Buelita would ready Roy for school and then feed us all our breakfast which often consisted of her freshly made corn tortillas filled with chorizo, egg, barbacoa, or just refried beans. She had a much defter touch in the kitchen than Mom and we kids just couldn't get enough of her cooking.

When weren't eating, 'Buelita had us go outside the house and kept us running around until we grew tired and she would bring us back inside, give us our daily shower and had us listen to the radio afterward until we fell asleep listening to some Spanish radio station. These were the late 70's but she would set the radio dial on a station that played nothing but Spanish oldies. I learned much about the music of the olden days thanks to 'Buelita's preference. Somehow, it just grew on you.

Los Relampagos Del Notre were her favorite singers. She had a mad crush on Cornelio Reyna. 'Buelita especially liked a song titled, "Que Tal Si Te Compro". She would smile brightly and sing along happily every time it was played. I couldn't help but like the song too since I could see that it made her quite happy. But the song titled, "Ella" by Jose Alfredo Jimenez would stop her in her tracks and make her cry. I would never have known why it made

her cry except that one day I heard her quietly ask, "Por que, Miguel, Por que?"

Being about seven at the time that this happened, I innocently asked, "'Buelita, why do you always cry when you hear that song?" She responded "Buelito Miguel would always sing it whenever he was around the house. It was his song," she said. And we left it at that.

When Christmas came around that year my mother bought a cassette player with AM and FM radio. It had a much better sound than the old transistor radio that we had listened to for years. Roy, who turned 10 that year, taught us all how to use the cassette player to play our songs and even taught us how to record from the radio to a cassette and how to record our voices on cassette too.

It took a few weeks but 'Buelita soon had a small collection of her favorite cassettes to listen to. Since my mother continued working almost nonstop it was up to my grandmother to watch over us kids in her absence. One of her favorite past times was to have us read and do our homework while her favorite songs played in the background. By the end of the school year, we were all quite capable of singing along to most of the songs from her collection. From Javier Solis' romantic ballads to the accordion-based songs of Los Relampagos del Norte. We sang so many of my grandmother's favorite Spanish songs that it wasn't long before we would be sitting around "en la sala" and singing "acappella". 'Buelita never sang along with us but preferred to sit back and let us sing out to our heart's content.

When summer came around, we simply switched from doing schoolwork to singing. And by summer's end we knew all of grandmother's favorite songs by heart. It was 1980 and the dawn of a new decade brought some drastic changes to our little south Texas house.

The new school year had begun and by then, even little Rene was attending school. Mom was now a supervisor at the bodega, and her work responsibilities kept her away from home for longer periods of time than in previous years. It did not matter whether the packing shed dealt with tomatoes, lettuce, cabbage, bell peppers, cantaloupes or any of the abundant vegetables of the region. Mom seemed to be working nonstop and thus, leaving her with little time to spend with us. To make up for her absence around the house, she would try to get us a few surprises from shoes and clothing to the latest in music entertainment.

By 1986 we were into the music of Michael Jackson, the Police, and Tears for Fears. 'Buelita's music fell to the wayside as our musical horizons expanded increasingly more. In July 1987 'Buelita suffered a terrible stroke that left her paralyzed from the left side of her body. Since she could hardly

fend for herself, Mom had to quit work to care for her. However, Roy had gotten an after-school job and combined with the monthly food stamp help, and 'Buelita's social security disability benefits we got by.

Our schoolwork and activities kept us busy and that was a major reason for us slowly but steadily distancing ourselves from grandmother's influence. Her incapacitated state made it difficult for her to communicate with us except for a few attempts to converse with us kids. Our young restless ways made us impatient and when possible, we would avoid initiating any conversation with her.

We could have done a better job of socializing with her, but Rene was downright rude. He would often walk away from 'Buelita whenever she tried to talk to him. She would be gasping and stuttering to get a foothold on what she was trying to say, and Rene would walk right by where she would be sitting - frustrated that she couldn't get her message out fast enough. It was a year or two after her stroke that she stopped trying to converse with us. Only mom made any serious attempt to keep her as much in the family inner circle. Our youthful inexperience in life made us blind to 'Buelita's family social needs. Like a big ol' elephant in the middle of the family living room, we all knew she was there except that none of us kids made a sincere effort to acknowledge her presence. Nevertheless, she was there, a sublime presence, but she was there.

Mom would set 'Buelita on one end of our living room sofa and turn the radio on for her. It had been years since any of us kids had listened to any Spanish songs much less Spanish radio. Even though 'Buelita would spark back to life anytime a familiar oldie would come on we couldn't have cared less. Whenever Mom wasn't around, we would switch the radio station to the English channels where Madonna and Phil Collins sang. Poor grandmother had to sit there and bear with our music choices. Her paralyzed state kept her from escaping to the sanctuary of her bedroom. I'm sure she would have sprinted out of the room if she could, especially when Rene would listen to the hard rock sound of Metallica or Bon Jovi. Rene liked to borrow our older neighbor's hard rock cassettes so he could stay current with the new rocking sounds, He would blast the stereo loudly, regardless of whether 'Buelita was in the room or not.

One day when all of us kids were sitting in the living room with 'Buelita she stirred from her spot and tried to communicate with us by lifting her good hand and pointing at a box of cassettes. I got up and opened it and told her that her old cassettes were not there. However, she continued to ask me to look carefully for her music. Mary interrupted and told me that Mom had put away 'Buelita's cassettes in her room and she went to retrieve them for her.

'Buelita was quite happy to see the old cassettes again as Mary took the time to show them to her one by one. We knew that grandmother would next want to listen to one, so Rene revealed that the cassette player was broken. It was like a stroke of genius. Even though we had listened to music that very day, Rene claimed that what we had heard was actually the radio. So, we dodged a bullet that way. The idea of listening to the old Spanish songs did not appeal to any of us kids, especially her Vicente Fernandez, and Antonio Aguilar tapes. That music was "old country", and we had grown past that old sound.

There was one rainy day in April a couple of years ago when Rene, Mary, and I had arrived home from school, and all converged onto the stereo to be the first to pop a cassette into place to listen to our favorite tunes. 'Buelita was sitting in her customary place at the edge of the living room sofa. In her hands she held a cassette with old markings, which read "Mis canciones favoritas de todo el tiempo" (My all-time favorite songs). After reading the inscription I placed it back in her hands and she looked at me with a pleading look as if asking, "Will you play it for me?"

I assumed that the tape was full of Jose Alfredo Jimenez and Javier Solis stuff and maybe a few songs from Los Relampagos del Norte. With the weather being so wet outside, I really did not feel like being cooped inside our small house listening to the old country stuff so I stalled my grandmother by telling her I was going to tape a few English songs for a friend of mine and that we would listen to her tape later.

It never occurred to any of us that we often put 'Buelita through hours of torturous music when we blasted the house with the sounds of AC-DC, Metallica, and Pantera. We, selfishly, felt that if we liked the music, well, then everybody should have liked our music. Yet we couldn't extend the same courtesy to our grandmother.

Since we were all at home Mom thought it would be as good a time as any to go out and buy the groceries and do the laundry. Her absence left open a window of rocking opportunity, which we exploited for hours. It was after 9 in the evening when Mom returned with the groceries and our clean laundry.

We didn't even hear her enter the room but only noticed her presence when she walked up to the stereo and turned it off.

Our awkward rush to right everything was quite evident, especially when Mary rushed to 'Buelita's side and feigned concern over her comfort. As Mary propped her up the cassette, which she had been holding patiently in her hands, fell loudly on the floor. Since we were in our appeasement mode Rene volunteered to pop the cassette into the stereo. We all knew that Mom did not like for us to listen to any music late into the night. We all thought Mom would

tell Rene to turn the stereo off and just wait until the following day to listen to whatever music 'Buelita wanted to hear. But Mom could see through our actions that we wanted her to stop us before we put on the old Mexican country music that 'Buelita had requested and so she let us proceed without making a move to stop us.

We all thought, "Chihuahua! Now we're really going to have to listen to that old music." We all sat back and prepared to listen to the torturous sound of old Mexico.

'Buelita was half asleep when Rene hit the play button and we kids just sat there not really wanting to be there anymore.

When the music began to play, we were taken back to a time we had totally forgotten had even existed. Instead of the old Mexican groups and singers belting out their big hits we heard kid's voices singing. They sang clearly and with strong confidence and conviction.

They sang "Las Mananitas" with incredible clarity. Soon afterward a little boy sang "El Rey". That used to be my favorite song. After the second song some children appeared to be giggling and discussing what song to sing next. They agreed to sing "Que Tal Si Te Compro". And when they started singing it dawned on all of us kids that the voices we were listening to - were our very own.

Grandmother had recorded us secretly as we had sat and sung all the old Spanish songs all those years ago. We looked at each other and then at 'Buelita and tears were streaming down her face. She looked at our mother and said, with no problems at all, "Los angelitos cantan. Es como musica del cielo." And then she closed her eyes and said no more.

We were speechless as my mother started to cry too. She sat beside 'Buelita as she hugged her and rocked her back and forth slowly. The angels of yesterday continued singing as 'Buelita went quietly to sleep forever.

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