



# Growing Up in the United States

by Luz Martinez

The chatter of their voices and the drum and hum of the machines is what I hear. This only serves to make me sleepy again, for the warmth of my nest is cozy. My nest made up of sheets is under the folding table where my mother works in the basement of the hospital. It is very hot here and there are many women. As I look around I see that they are all women. Some speak my language others do not but they are all doing the same work my mother and mother's cousin do, they wash and fold sheets all day long. There is no one to take care of me at home so my mother brings me to her job. All the women here take care of me and with my coloring books and my little nest under the table I actually find it quite comfortable. I overhear my mother telling my aunt (in Mexico all your parents' cousins are aunts and uncles) that we are fortunate that her boss is so nice and that he allows my mother to bring me along.

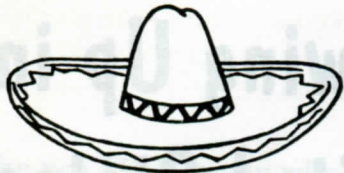
After work we return to our apartment also in a basement of a building. The water pipes run through our ceiling and they are encased in aluminum foil. I overhear my mother tell my aunt that we are lucky to have found such a cheap apartment so close to my mother's job.

On weekends we visit my aunt who also lives in the basement of a building. She too says she is lucky to have found such a cheap apartment close to her job. Maybe in this country everything is in basements of buildings.

These are the first memories of our migration to the United States in the late 50s. The images are those of a child who was the first to learn the language, the customs, the attitudes of a country foreign to my family, relatives and friends. As the eldest child my responsibility

was to translate the language, the culture and the customs to adults in our family and the barrio.

In my school we were the first of the new immigrants in the neighborhood. At school it was my job to translate to the teachers what the other children were saying and to translate to them what they at times thought were our strange ways. "Why do you wear socks on your hands in the winter", they would ask. Because "I lost my only pair of gloves and we do not have money to buy new ones", I would respond. "Why does your cousin always wear the same dresses", they would ask. Because "my aunt cannot afford to buy her new ones", I would again respond. Our names were funny sounding and always were cause for jokes. Our dark features somehow said that we were



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strange looking to those who only knew those who look like them. If our features were resembling

Asian we were chinks if we were very dark skinned we were niggers and if we just looked Latino we were spics.

There were the tragedies and my first impressions that being a woman was really tough. All the women worked in factories, laundry shops and later as domestics. They worked whatever shifts they could and worked long hours for less pay than the men. Besides putting in shifts that required them to come home at 2:00 a.m., they would sleep until 5:00 a.m. so they could cook breakfast for their husbands. They caught another nap before waking up to prepare the children for school, take them to school, return home to wash clothes, iron, clean the house, prepare lunch and make sure dinner was cooked for their children and husbands. On weekends errands and grocery shopping for the week was done. On Sundays the women had to get up early to cook for the family get together that usually started right after Sunday morning mass.

The chores of domestic life were only part of the burden for there were untold stories of domestic violence, infidelity and accusations of illicit love interest. At times one of the women would accept a ride home from a co-worker and the husband would get jealous and would think that because they were working they have contact with other males. The women would cry among themselves and lament the unfairness of their fate but little else could be done. There was always someone to remind her that her fate is not nearly as bad because after all she could be back in her own country alone and who knows what her husband would be doing alone in this country. What that usually meant was that many of the men living alone in the States had taken up with other women. Now they cared for two

families and getting ahead financially only meant that there were now more expenses with more excuses as to why the money was not sufficient. Always someone ended up losing in these deals and that someone was always one of the women. Many of the "new" women were lied to, and told by the men they were either single or divorced. Of course everyone would know that was not true but no



one would warn the "new" women. The loyalty to the men and how they conducted their personal lives was something that was above reproach. If at all discussed it was only in jest or with some sort of admiration. I always wondered whether this acceptance would be given to the women who were working to send money back home. My question was answered when a married relative fell in love with



another man. The scandal was so great that she fled in shame. Her only son was kept by her husband and she was banished by her parents, siblings and other relatives. If the women who supported her were to see her it was done secretly. The husband on the other hand was treated by all as a wounded war hero. It was not until many years later that I heard women secretly say that her husband had not

the women also worked hard and were just as frequently exposed to exploitative work conditions but when she came home she was also exploited.

The one thing that to this day impresses me is the network the women weaved among themselves. The women would participate in home based income generating activities to earn a little more. Selling of mail order cosmetics, sewing, selling of jewelry, cooking and or babysitting. In addition to their income generating projects they would participate in what is referred to as *la tanda*. This was a group of 10 to 15 women who would pitch in a designated amount of money into a common pot and each women would have a turn at getting a lump sum. This enabled them to make large purchases such as beds, dressers or other large ticket items. Many of these *tandas* lasted years with all the members benefiting from this informal banking system.

As the old wave of immigrants make way for the new ones the same issues are played out like *dejà vu* vignettes while other issues are more applicable to the new wave, that is finding jobs more difficult to find. Many have already have heard or experienced that the immigrants' dream of a better living is not always true in the States. The rents are higher and the more affordable places are located in high crime areas. The schools their children are attending rank the lowest in academic teaching, and the buying and saving power of the dollar is not what it used to be. But for those families that continue to look for a better future the barbed wires and every additional law to deter the poor from dreaming are not strong enough to keep them from looking for a better life. At all times, these migrations take a stronger toll on women.



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been all that loving and this might have caused her infidelity. For many years she avoided her family for she still felt ashamed by her actions.

While the men did work hard and were frequently exposed to exploitative work conditions they always had their wives to take care of their homes and children. On the other hand

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