

*Anabel Argueta*

My mother's name is Agueda Rodriguez. She was born in El Salvador on February 23, 1935. My father has been the only man in her life. She was a virgin when she ran away with my father Elias in 1952, when she was seventeen years old; three months later she became pregnant with their first son, Luis. They had seven children in all. I am the oldest of three girls. I have two older brothers, Luis and Elias, and a younger brother Carlos. I have two younger sisters, Ana and Flor. My other younger brother, Pepe died about nine years ago when he was thirty-six years old.

My mother has known my father since he was a little kid because they were both born in the same village. My mother married my father in 1959 after I, their third child, was born. Even though all my of mother's children are my father's by blood, the first three do not have his last name as their first last name. In El Salvador when they were young, if a couple was not married when their kids were born, they had the mother's maiden name as their first last name; these kids were also considered "bastards."

When my father was young he was a very handsome man. He was very popular with women. They were crazy about him, including my mother. Besides being handsome, my mother thought that my father was a very good man because he went to work even though he ran away from his parents when he was thirteen years old. His stepfather used to severely abuse my father physically. His mother did not defend him. Instead she would always side with the man and would also hit my father for no reason. After my father left his mother's house he was forced to do all kinds of different jobs in exchange for food. He never complained. He used to get up at four in the morning and walk a long distance to get water for two old ladies who lived alone. He did many errands for them in exchange for food and board.

There was a time when my mother did not see my dad for a while. When she saw him again he would follow her everywhere. At that time, my father was barefoot and only had two changes of clothes. She did not care that he did not look nice or that he did not have any money. She was twelve years old and he was thirteen. They started an on and off romantic relationship until my father decided one day to go and ask her parents' permission to visit her. She does not remember if he asked them if he could marry her. Mother remembers that her father gave him permission with the condition that he was going to see her only in their house.

When my father was about fifteen years old he got a job with the railroad company. He kept visiting my mother's house and her parents loved him. Her family saw that he was a very responsible and hard-working man in spite of being so young. One day in 1952 my father convinced my mother to run away with him and she did. Due to the kind of job my father had with the railroad company, for which he was very well paid, he did not come home every day. The reason my mother had seven children with him was

because he never allowed her to take birth control pills. My mother thinks that because he was a womanizer he did not trust her to be on the pill. Today my mother thinks that some macho men want women to have many children to control their mobility.

Due to the job my father had, he had many opportunities to have many women. He also had the excuse to be absent from the house for long periods of time. My mother remembers that when one of her daughters was born he did not come right away to see the baby. He came to the house forty days after she was born. Was that a coincidence? In the Hispanic culture women are not supposed to have sex before that day. My mother found out way too late after she had all of her children that my father had a few women in different train stations, which was probably the reason he did not seem to miss my mother.

My mother remembers that one day she had a nice set of green sofas that looked like the ones in the "I Love Lucy" show. The sofas were almost brand new. She does not remember exactly how they suddenly appeared at her house but she knows that my father had bought them for a woman that he had in the city. She thinks that my father brought those sofas to their house only after my mother found out about the other woman. She remembers that one day she went to the city to visit him unexpectedly and found the woman in his room ironing his clothes. My mother, who was very angry, took the iron away from her. She then started looking around the apartment to see what other things my father had bought for the woman.

She was upset that he had bought nicer things for that woman than for her, his wife, who had all these kids that were his. My father took advantage of the fact that besides the house that he shared with my mother, he rented two rooms in two different cities where he spent every other night. His type of job facilitated that kind of lifestyle because every other night he had to sleep at different ends of the country. El Salvador is a very small country; its size is equal to the state of Massachusetts. The train would travel every day back and forth from one end of the country to the other. My father came to see his wife and children only on weekends, holidays, and three weeks of vacation every year.

My mother always believed that my father was going to change; besides, she alone could not support us because she did not have a job. She had faith that he was going to change for her and the children. Despite having so many children around she was still lonely. My mother took her stress out on her oldest daughter. In the Hispanic culture the oldest daughter is usually the one that is supposed to help families with raising the rest of the kids and chores around the house. For that reason, on most occasions the oldest daughter is the one that is in a position to get hurt when things go wrong. My mother used to be very physically abusive with her oldest daughter even though there were no reasons for it. She always found a way to hit her for no reason. She was always better with the boys. The boys had more freedom and not so many responsibilities. The girls were to obey the boys and also serve their meals. My father never put a hand on any of his children even when my mother complained to him about them. He did not want to be the bad guy when his children were little. When my

parents were angry with each other and wanted to talk or fight they walked to a piece of land they owned about three blocks away from their house. They came back four or five hours later like nothing happened, pretending that they were happy.

My mother was a better mother when my father was around. She would cook very good meals for him. She would serve a whole roasted hen on a platter just for him. For her children she would use the legs, wings, and other small parts of the hen to make them soup. She never hugged her children or said loving words. For my mother to be a good mother was to provide her children with enough food and shelter. She was always better with the boys. The girls were to obey the boys and also serve their meals.

My mother was betrayed by her sisters because they were jealous of her. They thought that she was her father's favorite daughter. Years after she got married she saw that Marta, one of her sisters, was doing everything she could do to seduce her husband and because he was a womanizer my father, of course, could not resist the temptation and slept with his sister-in-law. It was very unusual during those times for a woman to behave that way. My mother did not have a very close relationship with her mother due to her sister's behavior. Her mother was absent from the house a lot, sometimes for days, chasing after her sisters.

My mother never had any good female role models that she admired and looked up to. Pretty much what she remembers about her mother is that she was never home. Her mother always used to run after her older daughters who used to cause her troubles. My mother always stayed with her father. What she remembers about aunts and other women in her life when she was growing up is that they were very common and ordinary women; her mother was not bad to her but she does not remember admiring her.

My mother did not trust or believe in many men either because when she was growing up some men tried to abuse or seduce her even when she was married. Her sister's husband, Salvador tried to rape her while she was sleeping. One of those times when she was already married, my mother was sleeping at her father's house since my father was only there on weekends; she felt that someone was forcing himself on top of her and was covering her mouth with one hand; she fought until she could scream. Her father heard the screams and came out of his room running; he found his son-in-law on top of my mother and sent him to sleep in his room. My mother's father was a different man; he always had a reputation of being a very respectful and righteous man that people in the village voted for him to be the judge of the municipal court. If my mother admired a man, it was her father, the one who taught her right from wrong. Her father always defended her from everybody.

Back when my mother came to the United States she remembers having the same ideas about gender roles that society ingrained in her in El Salvador. Now her ideas have changed a lot. Despite the fact that she is a very religious woman, she no longer believes that a woman should be submissive to men or that a woman should stay married to a man who is unfaithful and abusive to her. Since coming to the United States in 1983 she

changed her views about gender roles and she admires her oldest daughter the most because her daughter has always been a very strong woman. Her daughter divorced her husband when her children were three and eight years old regardless of what my mother and other people told her.

My mother was taught since she was a little girl, by example more than words that women were not equal to men. She knew that she needed to always listen to what men wanted. Due to her father being a respected man in the village, males did not harass my mother as much. Her father always defended his daughters and he would talk with whoever was bothering them. She observed that other females were constantly being disrespected sexually. When my mother spoke to her mother about men's behavior, her mother told her that men were like that and to ignore them. Her parents always told her that after she got married, her husband was going to take care of her and all the finances. She was also told that a woman was supposed to stay home and do what the husband said and that for the well-being of their children a woman could not divorce her husband, no matter what.

My mother acted with her daughters the same way her mother used to do when they complained about their husbands being abusive. When her daughters came to her with the same complaints she told them what her mother told her, "ignore them, men are like that." Two of her daughters had a lot of problems with their husbands because of domestic violence and my mother always told them not to get divorce because all men were the same. The results were that her daughters did not ask for her advice anymore. Her daughters learned to solve those problems on their own.

One of the problems that she had for so many years that she believes was related to being a woman was the terrible feeling of isolation that she felt regardless of how many children she had. She was married for so many years but she was forced to lead a single mother's life. She does not regret having had all the kids that she did; what she regrets is that she did not learn earlier that some men never change. She now realizes that if my father really had cared for her and his children, he would have been different. He could have moved his family closer to the city where he would have been able to see them often. My mother can see clearly now that my father was happy having the life that he did. Mother changed after she separated from my father. She used to complain and be bitter about all her years wasted waiting for something that was impossible. Now she has forgotten those years and has moved on, keeping herself busy going to church, reading, and spending time with her sons, daughters, grandchildren and friends.

My mother has also realized that people are the way they are according to how their families brought them up and where they were born. She does not blame men only anymore. She blames cultures and their systems. My mother still does not see total equality between men and women in this country but for her, the difference between the genders in the United States and El Salvador is huge. In twenty-seven years of living in the United States she has learned to have independence, peace and freedom; simple things that other people take for granted. She has gone back to her

country a few times and she has also noticed big changes in the gender roles but only among the younger generations.

My mother taught her children the same things that she was taught because she did not know that what she was doing was wrong. She was an uneducated woman with no other choices. She was forced by the circumstances in her life to continue the same way. Mother is thankful to her oldest daughter for having done what she did for bringing the family to the United States because of the war in El Salvador during the eighties. This not only saved their lives, but also gave them better lives in the United States.

