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CULTURAL WORKS

## Doce horas: A Family Border Tale

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### Abstract

This creative non-fiction piece written in Spanglish called 'Doce horas: A Family Border Tale' comically narrates my family's adventure crossing the U.S.-Mexico border by car a few days after New Year's. The story deals with identity negotiation, biculturalism and bilingualism in a non-conventional American family raised in Mexico. The narrative voice in my piece provides a unique perspective broadening dialogue(s) on Mexican American identity.

### Keywords:

K. Angelique Dwyer; Short Story; 'Doce horas.'

*'Llévele, llévele ... La figurita del chavo ... ¡hay elotes! Óyeme, pero ¿qué es esto? I thought, mientras my family and I were stuck in traffic—en el tapón—for 12 hours. Yes. TWELVE HOURS stuck. No motion. Stopped, on our drive back from Central Mexico after 'las vacas' de navidad. ¡Qué rollo! We've driven this at least 20 times in my lifetime. Pero nada como esta vez. ¡Qué circo! And it wasn't because we were travelling with two kids, a dog, my senior parents and teenage nieces ... nel. Esos gritos infernales de '¡¡¡se le acabó la batería a mi i-pad!!!' eran music to my ears comparado con lo que les voy a contar. Y como si fuera corrido de Antonio Aguilar, 'viene de ay, compadre':*

*'Un día 28 de enero ...'* Well, it was actually January 4<sup>th</sup> to be precise, después de haber disfrutado las fiestas con mi familia extendida en Jalisco, una selección de las familias Dwyer, Dwyer Razo y Salivia Dwyer se lanzaron de regreso a hibernar a los lagos congelados de Minnesota. We had planned to leave sooner but el Piti, didn't recommend it. 'Never leave the

day after New Year's. 'Imposible cruzar la frontera. So, we waited a couple days. We left the same way we arrived, en caravana, de 'roadtrip' desde Minnesota hasta Jalisco: dos carros, 4 días, buena conversación, *esnakeando*, y tomando fotos a lo loco, porque le prometí al maestro de mi hija, que le mandaría fotos, so he could share with the rest of the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade class. I was psyched about it because: what a better way than to introduce the 'dangerous borderlands' to the mainstream than through their white Latina classmate's family taking a roadtrip ¿no? *Obvi*.

We should have known the trip was cursed cuando tres días antes de irnos el patriarca de la familia, también conocido como Don Adán, got a horrible spasm in his back, which ended up leaving him in major pain over a month after our return. Se puso tan fea la cosa que we had to stop in San Toño for 2 days so he could rest. Así que se armó el janguero intra-generacional en el downtown con un muy merecido BBQ and iced tea. The third day, we woke up at 4:30 a.m. (auxilio: try to get a 2-year-old, a 7-year-old and an overstuffed dog in a car at that hour—before coffee) y nos juimos pa' la frontera y 'por ay' p'á bajo,' como dice mi familia puertorriqueña. Even though we're usually shot from all the driving, llegar a México after a 4-day—in this case 7-day trip—no tiene precio. There are just no words to describe the feeling of being back, being home, aunque no haya nacido ahí, it's the home I've always known. Ever since I was a kid I remember descending the Barranca hills into the city and even if it was 2:00 a.m. the whole family would be singing loudly: 'Guadalajara, Guadalajara ... tienes el alma de provinciana ... son mis palomas tu cacerío ... hueles a pura tierra mojadaaaa' as a welcome-back-home anthem. And even though we wouldn't sing cuando bajábamos las curvas de la carretera a Chapala—not because we didn't know the Chapala song, but because it's a lullaby—y no vamos a abandonar al conductor así, oye...—but like sinking into a comfy chair, we would nestle into the realization of being home, al lado de esas aguas, rodeadas por montañas, moradas por el atardecer, y luces lejanas, cual pulsera de diamantes. Truly the core of it all.

Home.  
I miss it.  
The fire place,  
The stars,  
The diamond bracelet across the water.  
The view,  
The tile floor under my bare feet,  
The wooden doors creek.  
My heart aches.

Bueno, pero ya me puse sappy. The whole point of this is to tell you what happened. Porque un buen cuento nunca cansa y siempre divierte. Así que, after spending a great Christmas together, where my cuñada and I finally got the opportunity to cook a meal instead of Don Adán and la Señora Linda always working in the kitchen like Trojans, pos ándale que nos tocó a nosotras ... y que se arma la competencia de meatloafs. Christmas Day we went with El Piti & familia a los toros y al bailongo. My kids were like "wow": la banda, las papitas con chile, las botas de avestruz, the bathrooms ... pretty cool cultural exposure. They also learned that while the enraged words: '¡Háblame en español!' work so well in the U.S. after they ask loudly: 'Mommy, why is that lady so mean?' for everyone to hear; it doesn't work well in Mexico. Así que en plena plaza de toros as people are coming in and finding places to sit, my daughter goes: 'Mami, ¿por qué esa señora tiene una verruga tan grande en la cara?' the words '¡Háblame

en inglés, carajo!’ could not have come out faster from my mouth. Too late. Just smile. The lady may not have noticed we were referring to *her* mole specifically. ‘Buenas tardes.’

En fin, la pasamos chido. Y como todo tiene final, pos nos lanzamos de regreso unos días después de New Year’s. Actually, it wasn’t all that bad of a return trip. We managed to leave early—cuando canta el gallo—we had lunch pre-made and only stopped a couple times. Como suele pasar, both of our cars were nearly ravaged by the snake vendors in San Luis Potosí as we stopped for gas. I still remember the impression it had on me to see another kid of about my age RUN up to my window con culebra en mano. What a juxtaposition: My 12-year old self daydreaming the trip away as I listened to the tapes in my Walkman and these kids selling snake skin in the middle of the desert just to make it. It was like being slapped in the face by the harsh reality de la vida que les tocó. Para los que no sepan, ojo, porque lo que pasa es que: si le compras a uno, se te avientan todos, onda ‘The Walking Dead.’ You’re lucky if you’re able to exit the gas station without harming anyone. Gruuueso. Pero, aparte de eso, we made it to the border radius intact, until ... well ... we should have known.

First: let’s look at the facts: 1) this was pre-Trump; 2) we were 10 miles from the border; 3) had made record time; 4) had a hotel reserved al otro lado; 5) the GPS indicated that the remaining route to the hotel would take us 15 minutes; 6) we had minimal provisions aboard. De repente, we slowed down. Llegamos a una fila masiva de carros moviéndose a vuelta de rueda. The questions in the car start: ‘What happened?’ ‘Why’d we stop?’ the oh-so-horrible for-any-driver-ever: ‘Are we there yet?’ and amidst the smog, the intermittent break lights and mini vans beside us—like a neon sign indicating we had arrived at the land of Bizarre—emerges a vendor with a huge Cristo en la Cruz for sale. ‘Llévele, llévele ...’ y te hace precio, ¿eh? Behind that vendor: el carrito de los elotes comes through the traffic lanes. Luego, otro con la enorme imagen de la Virgen de Guadalupe, el de las paletas, brooms for sale, the ginormous ‘Last supper’ painting with a gold frame, and oh, the many etceteras. Things you would never dream would be for sale in the middle of the road just a few miles from one of the most talked-about borders of the modern world. We look at the vendors and start talking shit: ‘hay mira eso ... nombre, ¿quién va a querer una pinche madre de esas? ¿ni que fuera qué?’ not knowing what bad karma might come of it. Después de unos minutos, after sheer boredom—and when we were still optimistic about the traffic lessening—we bought 4 overstuffed figures of el Chavo del 8 and friends. Se nos hizo raro when we saw people getting out of their idling cars to access their ice chests, like tail gaiting. Then, small groups of people would walk past us in the dark. ¿Y esos? 6 hours later—after we had peed in a bottle inside the car and almost had our bladders burst—we found out people had opened their homes to rent the bathrooms out to desperate travelers. Hicieron buena ganancia, eso sí.

That night we experienced a varying range of human emotions: Determination (we *had* to cross the border—no había de otra, I mean, you’re not gonna make a u-turn and drive 14 hours back when you’re only 15 miles away... right?). Optimism (there’s traffic, pero sí se puede, hombre). Joy (‘que *pinches* cuadros más feos’). Anger (WHAT is the hold up?). Desperation (... que me estoy orinando ...). Exhaustion (12 hours stopped in traffic after a 14-hour drive, I don’t think I need to explain this one). Curiosity (¿quién fregados se traga un elote en pleno desierto?). Had the city of Nuevo Laredo not made enough that month or was the universe just messing with us? WTF? It all dawned on me: I knew why there was oversized religious imagery for sale: ‘Pa’ que te arrepientas, cabrona.’ Repent and pray to the higher power to get you out of this faster. A no, pero ¿tú? criticando y contenta. Ándele. Yep, you had to laugh about the last supper guy and the verruga lady. *What goes around ... jamás su tronco endereza.*