



Just Between Us

By Mario Lopez, Steve Santagati

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Now, as he turns forty, Mario looks back on his life with a newfound perspective and a humorous sensibility of how things have changed with age, divulging for the first time the endearing, surprising, and sometimes difficult experiences that shaped him into the loving father and husband he is today.

In *Just Between Us*, Mario shares a behind-the-scenes look into his successes and disappointments in the entertainment business and how his tight-knit family and long-standing values helped keep him grounded, no matter what.

With wit and candor, Mario reveals his most intimate never-before-told stories, including the details of his often tumultuous and largely public love life—giving readers a look at the ups and downs of his romantic past leading up to his happily-ever-after with his beautiful wife and their two children.

This is Mario Lopez unfiltered, for the first time ever.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Mario Lopez is an actor, producer, Emmy Award-winning television host, and the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Extra Lean*. He is currently the host of the entertainment news show *Extra* and the nationally syndicated radio show *On with Mario Lopez*. He lives in Los Angeles with his family.

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PROLOGUE

Every now and then, the universe has an uncanny way of reaching out, tapping me on the shoulder, and bringing me back down to earth. Sometimes the message is delivered to remind me of something that I've forgotten or maybe just to grab my attention in the midst of my usual action-packed schedule. Other times I feel the tap more as a big jolt that leads to an important discovery or decision—like the realization that hits me early one morning as I'm getting ready to hike one of my favorite trails at Griffith Park.

I love this park for the sheer amount of urban wilderness it contains, a refreshing break from the sprawl of Los Angeles. It's also practically in my backyard, so it's perfect for an early-morning hike and a good workout.

By the time I arrive at the park and start to stretch, it's just past six a.m. Not long after dawn, the sun has only just begun to come up. Bleary eyed, I definitely could have used that extra half hour of sleep. It's true: as committed as I am to a daily fitness regimen, I am no fan of the five thirty a.m. alarm. Then again, this happens to be the only time to get in a little workout before the demands of the day kick in. And there's something I love about the solitude of these early hours. The quiet is such that my inner thoughts seem like another person standing right beside me, talking and offering wise counsel.

Well, at least that's how it feels in these moments as I finish stretching and head over to a large park map in order to look for directions to the trail I plan to run. Standing there, I scan the map until my eyes land on the mark that shows where I am, pointing out the spot with bold red arrows and the words "You Are Here."

Those three words, intended to state the obvious, do have a kind of congratulatory vibe. Wouldn't it be helpful, I think, if we could start every day with a map and a marker to tell us: "You Are Here"?

That's when I feel the proverbial tap on my shoulder.

My first reaction is to ask myself if, as the map tells me, I am here, where exactly is that? More to the point: how did I get here? In truth, these aren't easy questions to answer. But seeing as I'm about to hit the milestone birthday of forty—a big one—I realize that's cause for reflection. Cliché as that may sound, it's one of those rites of passages that suddenly bring me face-to-face with the past and a life lived, for the most part, at full throttle.

It's hard to ignore the message of "You Are Here"—it's time to slow down, look back, and take stock of my life so far. All of it: the choices, the triumphs and defeats, the smart moves and the mistakes, and everything in between. Daunting as that can be, as I start up the trail that leads to a summit, I accept that only by recalling where I came from will I be able to see more clearly than ever where I am, who I am, and where I'm headed.

A couple of miles later, as I reach the top, the sun has broken through the marine layer and I can't help but smile as I look out at the sprawl of LA spread out below me. And that's when the idea for sharing my story, no holds barred, is first conceived.

When I glance over my shoulder at the long stretch of road I've taken—curving and winding from my childhood in the Latino community of Chula Vista, just outside of San Diego, all the way to the "You Are Here" map in the same park not far from the Hollywood sign—I smile, I laugh out loud, and sometimes I want to cry.

I've been in show business since I was ten years old. I've worked in almost every arena of the entertainment industry: as a kid in numerous commercials and TV series, as a teen actor who came of age in hundreds of episodes of *Saved by the Bell*, as both a guest star and leading young man in a bevy of projects made for television and film, as a triple-threat stage performer on Broadway, as both a contestant and a guest judge on *Dancing with the Stars*, and, of course, as the host of *Extra* and in an array of other hosting roles, in all of which I've spent hundreds upon hundreds of hours interviewing countless celebrities and Hollywood luminaries. In recent years, I've added other endeavors to the list—as the host of my own nationally syndicated radio show and as a producer with pots simmering on multiple burners. As an entrepreneur, I can assure you that many of the lessons learned along the way have been hard won. And as a loving husband and devoted father—my most important roles—I can also say that recognizing what truly matters in life is chief among those lessons.

There are a few reasons I chose to take on the challenge of putting down in words not just what happened in my story but how I felt at the time and especially what I learned in the process. At the top of the list was for me to make sense of *mi vida loca*—my crazy life—as it has been at times. Writing allows you the space to sit down, have a drink, and open yourself up to the memories. It's about retracing your steps to gain a deeper understanding of the journey, maybe for the first time ever.

Another reason I'm writing is to acknowledge the champions and mentors who have been there for me at every important turning point. Hopefully, I can pay it forward by sharing with you the same brand of encouragement and belief I was given. Whatever your aspirations, I hope that my experiences might prove valuable for your own journey.

As the pages ahead will show, I've made my share of mistakes. No one is perfect and I'm a prime example. But at my core, I've always lived by the values that my parents instilled in me and ultimately, mistakes and all, I'm proud of who I am and what I've done. Once I found my path and the goals that inspired me to pursue them with passion and purpose, I worked hard, giving my all. And now, man, I'm living my dream, proof of my hard work and damn good luck.

Without question, there have been highs and lows. But life is not really about arriving at that one spot marked "You Are Here." It's about all the choices you make in getting there and about the consequences of those choices. That's why I've decided to divulge certain stories that include intimate subject matter, some of which has to do with stupid and sometimes heartbreakng mistakes that still haunt me to this day. There are no do-overs in life, so I had to learn to pick myself up and move forward, never forgetting the lessons learned.

At first, I was not prepared for how difficult it is to bare your soul on paper. The feeling of being exposed and vulnerable caught me off guard. So did the need to write without counting characters like on Twitter or second-guessing that last click of the send button. I soon saw that this was going to take trust and confidence to put myself out there in such a candid way. Then, after I got past my own resistance, came pushback from my agents, managers, and publicists. The buzzing in my ear from well-intentioned counsel was clear: "No,

Mario, you can't say that. Think of your image." "No, Mario, you can't do that; it could ruin your career."

Usually I listen, but this time I couldn't. These are my stories to tell. I didn't decide to change certain details to protect the innocent because, in Hollywood, no one is innocent. And, besides, as I've learned over the years, the truth is powerful. That's a lesson I rank high under the heading of "Things I Know Now That I Wish I Knew Then." As tempting as it is to tell people what they want to hear, I know now that the truth is the best response to every situation. Dishonesty takes too much out of life, and you don't have to use your memory as much.

By sharing a few of these lessons—call them truisms, or "Marioisms"—I hope to show that the experience that comes with age is a good teacher. And what I've had to learn many times is the truth that life is not fair. That doesn't mean that life is bad or not fun. It means that if you spend your time looking for "fair" you'll be missing out on a lot. All you can do is learn from the mistakes, bring your best to every endeavor, and strive to make choices that let you feel proud of yourself.

A big one on that list for me right now, if I had it to do all over again, is that I would have kept a better journal; some of the names and details that I would love to remember have vanished with age. I'm sure that in writing this book I have neglected to mention significant individuals and the stories that go along with them.

Along with sharing my own journey, I've also chosen to lift the velvet ropes to give you an insider's look at show business. In the world of money and privilege, Hollywood lives are supposed to be the height of glamour. But that's not the whole story. No one is famous forever, so you just have to make the most of every moment and every opportunity, no matter how much money you have today, no matter how many people recognize you as you walk down the street.

My life is in no way as glamorous as you might assume. At my house, where my amazing, gorgeous wife, Courtney, and I are raising our two beautiful children—our three-year-old daughter, Gia, and our infant son, Dominic—the time we spend together is the same as it is for most folks. On Sundays, we usually attend church but avoid the morning rush. That means no alarm clock for me. Instead, like many of you no doubt, I get to stumble out of bed late, splash cold water on my face, and head to the kitchen. With cartoons blaring in the background, I'm greeted by my dog, Julio, trying to hump my leg as I trip over the kids' scattered toys and find my wife in pajama bottoms and one of my old T-shirts. She hands me a cup of coffee and then, with a sweet smile, reminds me of everything I keep forgetting to do. That's my reality.

And that raises one more reason to write this book: so that eventually, many years into the future, my children will know about the journey I've taken and how it was shaped by the dreams of my parents and grandparents. In thinking about that possibility, I worry about all the lessons I have yet to teach them. Fortunately, we'll have time to do that. Besides, they'll want to make their own choices and learn their own lessons. Still, there is one I hope they'll discover from my takeaways. Simply: I'd have put more trust in God for my future back then, now, and tomorrow; I know He's got my back.

In the end, I wrote this book for all of us. For my fans—because I genuinely appreciate your loyal support all these years—and for everyone who has had a part in my story, and, again, for me, because I rarely slow down long enough to look in the rearview mirror of my life. Up until now, my focus has been in only one direction: forward.

Think of this as a long-overdue conversation, just between us. Thank you for coming along for the ride. For all my hesitation, I'm thrilled to get this all off my chest. My confessional booth is now open. As the map in the park was there to point out, without the past, without all its pain and glory, I wouldn't have arrived here, right where I am, blessed to be talking to you.

So this it: my story unfiltered, unplugged, and uncensored.

Vámonos.

CHAPTER 1

As the bird flies north over Mexico, he passes over the border town of Tijuana and then into the United States, and comes to the first stop before arriving in San Diego—the urban enclave of Chula Vista, California. Chula born and bred, I began life right there in a modest corner house on Paisley Street and grew up in that same neighborhood littered with single-level Monopoly-looking family dwellings. The scenery was a constant. Houses landscaped with rutted lawns, angry bushes, and snarled fencing. Streets cracked and potholed from the relentless Southern California sun. Chain-link fences, stray dogs, cars parked on the front lawn.

Chula Vista was my home, the world that raised me, and a part of my DNA. I loved it all—and still do.

We were a little more than three miles from the border with Mexico, just across from Tijuana. People would call my hometown “Chula Juana,” because it’s practically Mexico. We didn’t cross the border; the border crossed us. As a result, living in Chula Vista—a predominantly Hispanic community—was a lot like living in Mexico. Even the signs were written in Spanish. There were taco stands and mariscos and bodegas on every block. Car radios driving through the center of Chula pumped mariachi music and the latest love songs sung by Mexican pop stars. And everybody spoke Spanish. My grandmother has been here—in this country—for fifty years and still doesn’t speak English. That’s how Mexican it was.

The name Chula Vista literally translates to “pretty view,” and in Spanish slang becomes Mama Chula or Papi Chulo, meaning “sexy chick” or “sexy daddy.” So I guess you could say I grew up in “Sexy Town.” If that was to be part of my heritage, you would never have guessed it back when I was a baby. In fact, as my mom would often recall in the midst of family gatherings (in case anyone didn’t know or had forgotten), “Mario was the fattest baby you’ve ever seen in your life!”

How fat was I? So fat, Mom would say, “I used to have to spread his skin apart to clean between the chubby rolls.”

Other family members would soon start to comment, laughing and shaking their heads, as if they still couldn’t believe how fat I was. Next thing I knew, somebody would bring out baby pictures to prove it.

And here’s the truth: I really did look like one of those shar-pei dogs. Or a Mexican Buddha. The reason, Mom would explain, was that I was breast-fed until after my first birthday and yet I would still eat everything in sight.

Luckily, I eventually outgrew my chubster stage. Even luckier was that I lived to tell the tale of what happened earlier, right after my birth, when by all the laws of modern medicine I was expected to die.

My mother tells this story even better than I do. Whenever the subject came up at a big get-together and she began to reminisce, you could hear a pin drop. Clearly, this was a traumatic memory for the relatives who went through it with my parents. At the time of my birth, my mom, Elvia Trasvina Lopez, and my dad, Mario Alberto Lopez, had been married for two and a half years. Both my mom and dad and their families came from the same city in Mexico—Culiacán, the capital city of Sinaloa—although they didn’t meet until they both lived here. They were also each around nineteen years old when they arrived, separately, of course, and legally—or, as we all used to joke in Chula Vista, at least I think it was legal. In any case, they were already bona fide U.S. citizens when they met in San Diego.

By that point, my dad had lived all over California before settling in the area and my mom had come directly to San Diego with her family. Without a doubt, Elvia must have had lots of young men pursuing her in those days. A beautiful woman with infectious energy that people would gravitate toward throughout her life, she had at one time worked as a model for runway and local fashion shows. Rather than being a girly girl, however, my mom was always just as comfortable in jeans and a T-shirt. Down-to-earth, charismatic, bright, and on the go, she also had this heart of gold and naturally took charge whenever family or friends in the neighborhood needed her help—like an angel. No wonder she caught my dad’s eye.

As it so happened, Mom’s brother, my tío Victor, knew my father before my parents met. Now, when it comes to machismo, my father wrote that book. He is a classic man’s man, as old school as it gets. Always making sure he stays in shape, he’s long been known for his physique: broad shouldered with big arms, a big chest, and big strong hands, and yet also as compact as a pit bull. Plus, he doesn’t usually filter what he says or to whom—which, in his younger days, meant he didn’t play by the rules and got himself into a bar fight or two. Well, that’s how he met my uncle. Seems that they got into a fight over a girl they were both interested in. But because Dad knew how to shake hands after fists had flown, Tío Victor figured this guy was a gentleman and they became friends.

When my dad met the beautiful Elvia, he mentioned, coincidentally, that he knew her brother. A good icebreaker, I guess. Dad was quite the ladies’ man, so much so that when he met my mom, he introduced himself as Richard Lopez. Why an alias? Because that way he would never get caught running around with another girl. Changing names was his system for staying straight. Once he realized Mom might be the one, he fessed up and told her his real name was Mario. She still didn’t understand the point of the alias, but later on, when she did, Mom simply said, “Okay, well, you’re always Richard to me.” From then on, everybody called him Richard.

Elvia and Richard dated for a couple of years and settled into married life together before starting a family. When at last I was born on October 10, 1973, I was given the name Mario Lopez, which should have made me a junior, but for some reason my mom and dad opted not to give me the middle name of Alberto. That made me the only person of Mexican descent that I know who doesn’t have at least one middle name. Nonetheless, I made a promising entrance, weighing in at eight and a half pounds, and was welcomed into life by all the grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older cousins who were on hand to celebrate the joyous occasion of my arrival. But then, to everyone’s shock, almost overnight, I shrank to less than half my birth weight.

The problem, they later discovered, was that my stomach couldn’t handle the milk. I’d vomit and have diarrhea and then become dehydrated. As soon as I showed signs of dehydration, my parents would rush me to the hospital and the doctors would use an IV of Pedialyte to quickly hydrate me. They did this over and over again, for a period of almost three months, without resolving the crisis. Before long, the doctors had to sit my anguished parents down to say there was nothing more they could do to prevent me from wasting away.

Whenever my mother told this story in a group, she would start to cry all over again, remembering how a doctor advised them, “You must prepare for the worst.” The doctors thought I was going to die. It was not a matter of if but when.

A priest was called in to bless me and say a prayer—my last rites. My parents were beside themselves, understandably. But my father, stubborn to the bone, refused to accept the fate the doctors had handed down. With absolute conviction, he stated, “No! My son is NOT going to die.”

Mario Alberto Lopez aka Richard had reason to believe the doctors could be wrong. In his younger days,

before I was born, Dad had beaten a dire prognosis from medical experts. In that era, he worked in a machine shop where he hoisted heavy loads of material—over a hundred pounds at a time—all day long, moving the loads from one spot and then setting them on the milling machinery. After a while, in spite of his strength, the physical demands of his employment began to wreak havoc on his body. What kind of havoc? Really scary stuff. As my dad once told me, “My spine was completely crooked and I was in constant pain.” Barely able to walk, he also couldn’t sleep, no matter what medications they gave him. The doctors recommended an array of expensive tests and invasive procedures. But rather than accept that those were his only options, Dad agreed as a last resort to go with his dad, my grandfather Tata Lopez, to see a witch doctor, or bruja. She was located in an out-of-the-way place near Rosarito, Mexico. Upon seeing Dad and hearing of his ailments, she immediately went to work.

If anyone ever asked my father what she did exactly, he would only say, “Oh, she performed that Santeria black magic stuff you hear about.” This seems to have involved cutting off a chicken’s head and spraying the blood on him. And then some. Whatever the approach, it took all day and Dad walked out of there like a mummy, totally wrapped in bandages. During the healing process he had to bathe in seaweed from the ocean. As crazy as it sounds, it worked. She had managed to straighten out all of his bones. The witch doctor cured my dad.

This was my father’s justification for taking the drastic action that he did when my condition worsened and the doctors deemed my case to be terminal. He and Mom had been through so much, constantly taking me back and forth from the hospital every time I became dehydrated. At his wit’s end, my dad marched in and kidnapped me from the hospital—a last-ditch effort to save my life—and took me to be seen by the very same witch doctor who had saved him. Within an hour or so, he’d made it across the border, and in a candle-lit room filled with smoke the bruja made her mystery concoction. Eye of bat, wing of beetle, hair of dragon? Perhaps. Whatever the magic was, she mixed it with Pedialyte and suero (fermented milk like yogurt). She brewed it up, added goat’s milk, and said to my dad, “Give him that.” The concoction had Carnation evaporated milk in it—a quarter of the bottle—and the rest was mostly water.

It worked. No more vomiting or diarrhea. Digesting milk was no longer a problem. I was healed.

The same hospital that couldn’t save me and was willing to almost leave me for dead also billed my parents for those same failed treatments. The bills made a huge stack about a foot high. The hospital charged my parents something like seventy grand—which was astronomical by 1973 standards. The hospital charges were for the care, not for the cure they didn’t provide. The witch doctor cost six hundred dollars.

Within a few weeks after drinking the potion, I not only started putting on weight and rebuilding my strength, but my appetite spiked until it was off the charts. Making up for lost time, I was so insatiable, apparently, that I soon became that fat Mexican Buddha baby everybody in the family loved to joke about. According to reports, I just got fatter and fatter until I finally began to walk. And once I went bipedal, as my mom would say, “Mijo, all bets were off!”

Of course, she and my dad were thrilled with my full recovery and rapid transition into bruiser status. But that brought with it a new set of concerns. Like one night when I was just starting to motor around the house, wobbling from here to there. Mom and Dad, both seated on the couch, began to call my name at the same time, each opening up their arms, as if to see which parent I’d go to first. After toddling in one direction, I’d change at the last minute and wobble over to the other parent. Unable to make up my mind, I kept it up for a while, going back and forth until finally I fell face-first—smack—right onto the corner of the coffee table.

Mom began to wail, becoming hysterical at the sight of blood gushing from what turned out to be my broken nose, and then almost fainted, prompting my dad to rush both of us to the hospital—to get me stitches and to

make sure she was going to be all right. In the aftermath, I was left with a pronounced Frankenstein scar on my nose between my eyes that you can still see if you look closely. Considering a multitude of other close calls in the years that followed, the scar is no big deal. Besides, it gives me character, or at least that's what the girls would say.

The broken nose hardly slowed me down. By the time I hit preschool—in the period when our family grew to a total of four, thanks to the addition of my younger sister, Marissa, three years my junior—I was basically transformed into a young Speedy Gonzales. Living with boundless energy and very little fear, I may not have consciously recognized how lucky I was to be alive. But from as far back as I can remember, I had a vast appreciation for every experience that life had to offer and didn't want to miss a thing.

Whatever was happening at home, with our immediate family or with our larger extended family, at school or in the neighborhood, I wanted to be a part of it. Sometimes I wonder if the witch doctor didn't put in a little extra ingredient that made me into something of a ringleader or instigator. Or maybe this was just early training for my eventual hosting skills.

Who knows? What I do know is that I may have caught the performing bug as early as three years old, when, because of exposure to mariachi music, which my dad loved, I started singing Spanish songs and winning local competitions. It was also at age three that I started to read, something that came easily and that I'm sure my mother encouraged—and, allegedly, spurred my uncanny knack of being able to memorize what I've read or heard, even if I have no clue what any of it means. To the amazement of most adults, I could deliver word-perfect renditions of soaring mariachi ballads by the likes of Vicente Fernández, a Mexican icon. My dad couldn't resist bringing me with him to mariachi bars in Chula, where I would entertain him, his buddies, and whoever else was in the place. He would lift me up onto the bar and I would happily sing passionate love songs such as "Sangre Caliente," "La Ley del Monte," and "La Media Vuelta." This went on for years.

By no means were my early forays into mariachi music an indication to anyone in the family that entertainment could be my calling in life. Not by a long shot. The truth is, I was a hyper kid who could not sit still—what today would probably be seen as having some form of attention deficit issues—and so, to keep me from getting into serious trouble, Mom, in her infinite wisdom, had to devise a strategic plan of action. Her first move? Enrolling me in dance class at age three. It took me many years before I figured out the method to the madness.

• • •

Back in the day—I'm talking about Chula Vista of the 1970s, up until I was six or seven years old—I assumed everybody around me was Mexican too. I thought everybody spoke Spanish, ate tacos, liked Chihuahuas (for want of a better stereotype), and had a last name that ended with z—Gonzalez, Fernandez . . . Lopez. And so on. This was only natural. When you're a kid, the world outside your window is the world. So, of course, I concluded that everyone was just like me. Soon enough, I would learn that wasn't true at all.

Yes, much of the population of Chula was Mexican, but we also were home to a mix of other Hispanics and fellow immigrant families, not to mention a few white people—the "salt" sprinkled on the top of the colorful, multicultural melting pot in which we, Latinos, were the majority. The diversity had to do with the nearby navy base in San Diego, which attracted all types and nationalities to the area. Chula Vista had a strong Filipino community, a black community, even a Samoan community. Eventually, once I started meeting people from different backgrounds, I gained a much broader worldview. The differences, in my opinion, were cool. Not only did I become extremely accepting of others who weren't like me, but I genuinely enjoyed getting to know how those differences shaped them—their race, culture, food, music, lifestyle, you name it. That inclusive attitude is part of the world that shaped my sensibilities and is an aspect of what

makes San Diego so beautiful.

The atmosphere of inclusion is probably also what allowed me, a border-town kid, to grow up feeling that my childhood was really all-American—in the way that I felt connected to fellow citizens, that this was my country and we all belonged. Those patriotic, traditional values were prevalent in Chula Vista, and important to my upbringing. Once my schooling started, weirdly, it was almost like growing up in the fifties—kids' parties, school dances, local hangouts, football rallies, prom, and constant family involvement. Kind of like a Latino-themed Happy Days.

Then again, Chula neighborhoods like mine were tough, especially back in the 1970s and '80s. As a border town, we had criminal elements associated with drug smuggling and hard-core gangs that added to dangers for everyone. We were, after all, the barrio—the inner city that could be even tougher than in comparable blue-collar neighborhoods of Boston or Chicago. Like those being raised in urban areas, we too weren't free to roam in the woods and run around building forts, making slingshots and bows and arrows, or learning to hunt and fish. Instead, in Chula Vista we played football in the streets, dueled each other in mud- and rock-throwing contests, and, more or less, lived on our bikes.

The good news from this mix of influences was that Chula offered an education in itself—a way to appreciate my heritage, to enjoy a normal childhood in a hardworking middle-class community with all-American values, and to develop the street smarts that living in a tough neighborhood demands. Of course, the foundation for all these lessons came from growing up among the colorful cast of characters who were members of my extended family on both the Lopez and Trasvina sides.

Whenever there was any excuse for a get-together, the word would go out and next thing we knew all the relatives would converge either at our house on Paisley Street or, most of the time, over at the home of my maternal grandmother, Nana Trasvina. A matriarch of our family, Nana probably had the strongest influence on me during my childhood, other than that of my parents. She was a true sweetheart, loved everybody unconditionally, and, as a devout Catholic, lived her faith by example, going to church daily at six a.m. Nana always had on an apron because with all of us congregating so often at her house, she was always cooking. In fact, I never saw her when she wasn't in the kitchen. And I never saw her when she wasn't in a beautiful mood.

Nana's solution to a household full of rambunctious kids was to insist we go play outside. Her belief that fresh air and exercise were important was what later inspired my children's book, *Mud Tacos*. The story captures the essence of my early childhood, back when kids had to use their imaginations, back before computers and iPads. All of us kids in the neighborhood would team up and make mud tacos—mud, leaves, and worms. Beef, taco, and cheese. We'd set up our little kitchen outside and make up plates full of mud tacos to share with the family.

In hindsight, I'm amazed that when it came to our gatherings we all could fit inside Nana's house or ours. Besides our family of four—Mom, Dad, Marissa (pronounced Ma-ree-sa), and me—the lineages included Mom's five brothers and five sisters along with their kids, and Dad's four brothers and four sisters as well as their kids. Mom was the oldest girl. And Dad was the oldest, period. He always seemed older than fire and dirt.

All of my cousins lived across the street, around the corner, or within walking distance. Louie and Gabe lived across the street, Alex and Victor and Ralphie lived around the corner, and all of my mom's family—everybody—lived within a couple of miles of each other. The saying "Mi casa es su casa" really applied, no matter where we gathered, as did the phrase "The more the merrier." Man, did I love those times, so much so that even though I'm no longer in Chula Vista, my house in LA is still ground zero for

overflowing get-togethers.

Having a tight-knit group of male cousins helped make up for my lack of brothers. One of my absolute favorites was my primo Louie. On the Lopez side, he was the son of my father's younger brother, the oldest of three boys, and a good-looking, all-around great kid. With a ready smile, he had that gift of lighting up a room when he walked into it—not in a boisterous way, more like the glow of a warm candle. Unbeknownst to the family, he knew he was gay early in his teens but didn't come out until much later, during a turbulent period for him after he had abruptly left Chula Vista. After the fact, I was upset that he felt he had to keep the reality of who he was and whom he loved a secret from the family, who would have accepted him no matter what. His story, as it later unfolded, would impact all of us, as would that of my cousin and godson Chico.

There were times as I approached adolescence when I naturally sought out the counsel of my older male cousins to help give me insights on stuff like girls and other worldly matters—sometimes at my own peril. Meanwhile, my younger cousins were like younger brothers for whom I tried to set a good example, though not always successfully. Ironically, although Marissa is three years younger than me, she's about a hundred years older than me in terms of maturity. Marissa does not mess around. Direct and focused, she has the rep in the family for being that person who will tell you the way it is. And tough? She was definitely braver than me, pushing the envelope with Mom and Dad much more than I did.

As different as my sister and I could sometimes be, we both loved our family gatherings and enjoyed hearing the stories that would inevitably come to light after a few cervezas at a family get-together.

“Oh, and what about the time you . . .” someone would start, bringing up a story everybody had heard over and over, and the next thing we knew the entertainment would begin. The music would quiet down and us kids would draw in close, listening wide-eyed as the other person would say, “No, that wasn't me. You must be thinking of somebody else. Here's what really happened.”

Then came the tales of what it was like back when our parents and aunts and uncles were growing up in Sinaloa—what's now known as the drug capital of Mexico. Despite its dark side, Sinaloa has some of the most beautiful countryside and beaches you've ever seen and is also known all over Mexico for its beautiful people. From the reputation we heard it had, it seemed that life there was like being in the middle of the Wild, Wild West of Mexico—whether or not you had any contact with the Sinaloa cartel, notorious for having in its ranks the most powerful and dangerous druglords, male and female.

Though I never found out the details, our family in Culiacán may have included relatives high up on the cartel food chain. Whenever I asked, though, I'd get one of those answers like, “If we tell you, we have to kill you.”

“How bad could the drug gangs be?” I asked my dad once.

“They're serious” was all he would say. Apparently, the Mexican cartels were nothing like your average “sell on the corner” ringleaders or the “made men” like in The Sopranos. They were Colombian serious. Pablo Escobar serious.

That gave me some perspective, but I never got the full story about whether or not Dad at one point was brought briefly into the family end of that business. I figure he couldn't have been in too deep, because he's still alive. Nobody else in our extended group of family members was involved, for sure. If anyone was connected, though, Dad was probably the only one who had the balls, or the insanity, for that kind of thing.

Those weren't the stories discussed in family gatherings, but you never knew what someone might decide to bring up. There was also constant joking and catching up on the latest news and gossip—Trasvina does mean

“through the grapevine”—and food and drink, needless to say, along with music, sometimes live, and always dancing.

Oh, and gambling. We gambled on every card game we could. As a fierce competitor ever since I can remember, I was really into a game called acey-deucey—and still am. It’s simple. You’re dealt two cards out in front of you, faceup. Then you bet on the next card being a value between those two cards. Say you bet a buck. If the third card is between your first two cards, you win the dollar. If it’s not, you lose the dollar. If it has the same value as either of your first two cards, you pay double. So the pot would get huge.

Basically, acey-deucey is a game of luck. It’s all in the deal of the cards. You can decide not to bet, if you aren’t feeling lucky. But otherwise your fate is all up to chance. Maddening to everyone else, I was often lucky with cards and in other respects.

But in the family I come from, leaving anything up to chance in life was not going to cut it. Not with Mom and her master plan to keep me out of trouble. The problem wasn’t just that I was a nonstop bundle of energy who could get into trouble faster than the average kid. The complicating factor by 1980, when I turned seven years old, was the increase of gang activity in Chula Vista, and it seemed easy for many kids to get caught up in that life and all the dealings that came with it. Some of my primos and other relatives got caught up and never could get out.

Users Review

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