

Opinion: The cadence of the Arizona-Mexico border no longer soothes the soul

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Byline: By Marcela Davison Aviles Special to the Mercury News

Body

When I heard the news about the recent Arizona anti-immigration legislation, I wondered what my family in Tucson would think. The new law requires local authorities to detain anyone reasonably suspected of being in the country illegally. It requires immigrants to have their authorization papers at all times.

Arizona's governor admitted she doesn't know what an illegal immigrant looks like. Folks in Tucson, including my mother, are fearful they will be detained for "Living While Hispanic." I wondered if I should keep my passport in my purse the next time I visit her.

I also wondered what my grandmother would think.

I spent my adolescence with her in Nogales, the Arizona **border** town where I was born. In the 1960s, Nogales was a town where the line was merely a place people crossed to do business, eat the local food, see relatives, buy staples, live. My grandmother lived there.

In the '60s, I traveled to see her once a month and spend the night. Traveling from Tucson, where my family had moved, I took the Greyhound bus to Nogales and crossed the line to get my braces tightened at the Mexican orthodontist's shop. My orthodontist offered the best deal in town those days he corrected overbites and charged in pesos.

I always traveled a day before my orthodontist visits. My grandmother met me at the bus depot and together we walked back to her duplex, where she would make me dinner and get ready for the trip the next day.

Grandmother's connection to the outside world was her telephone. She didn't own a TV or a radio. We shared a bedroom and a window between our two twin beds, which opened out onto the Mexican frontier. Her apartment was a stone's throw from the international boundary, and there, in the evening, our entertainment was the sound of two cultures mingling: the music of the cantinas, conversations on the street, dogs barking, a radio playing the **cadence** of the **border** through a bedroom window at twilight.

In the morning after breakfast we made the little journey across the line to the orthodontist's. Most of the time we walked past the curios shops, the bakery, the outdoor market, the barber shop, the tortilla store, the liquor store, past the mayor's house, to the section of town where the medical offices were.

Everyone knew my grandmother the round trip took hours, comprised of social visits on our way there, and purchases on the way home, parceled out so everyone felt the love: tequila and tortillas for my father, cajeta for us kids, and exotic soap wrapped in black tissue with red ribbons for my mother. The purchases were stuffed into a large carpetbag with square wooden handles. The carpetbag was the repository of my grandmother's own stimulus package.

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Border crossing guard: "Hello, Consuelo, anything to declare?"

Grandmother: "Just tequila and tortillas."

"How many bottles of tequila?"

"Two." (One for her, one for Dad.)

"How many kilos of tortillas?"

"One." (None for her, one for Dad.)

"Anything else? Any fruit or vegetables?"

"Jes two." (Mangoes, in addition to soap, for Mom.)

And the cop would smile, my grandmother would smile, and off we went, back across the line, **no** need to show papers or to open the carpetbag and dig for a passport to prove identity.

Then, reform was a school for high-school rebels. Then, community by any other name was the name of my grandmother a name that could guide leaders in Arizona and Washington now that the **cadence** of the **border** is the sound of bullets: Consuelo, meaning consolation, a person who provides fair treatment, and comfort.

MARCELA DAVISON AVILES is president and CEO of the Mexican Heritage Corp., which produces the San Jose Mariachi and Mexican Heritage Festival. She wrote this article for this newspaper.

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