

## SOCORRO

At the end of March Socorro rang the doorbell beneath the sign that reads Clases de Ingles para Adultos. Through the gate I saw a slight woman, with dark skin and black hair clipped up onto her head with a plastic butterfly. Two children, a boy and a girl, stood beside her. When we sat down to chat about lessons, she revealed first, that she has no English, and then, that this second daughter Roxanna, who is supposedly learning English in the fifth grade, knows none either, except for what passes for English in Oaxaca's schools: hello, my name is, goodbye.

Nevertheless the mother and these two younger children plan to go to the United States in July after their school year closes. Socorro wants intensive classes from right now until departure day, so that when she disembarks from the airplane in Texas she will be able to communicate. OK, we arranged days and hours, and Socorro understood she must pay for classes in advance. She told me that would be possible because she is receiving money from her novio in the USA, who's eager for her to learn.

At her first lesson she announced, in Spanish of course, that she's never met this novio, a truck driver from Arkansas who wires the money. They met on Facebook, and "fell in love" with just their photos, and communications translated by Google. Socorro knows the translations are pretty rough, but often her cousin helps out.

At first I imagined this cousin to be here in Oaxaca, but no, the cousin actually lives in Fort Smith on the same street as Tom, the truck driver. That seems to put to rest any idea that Tom the truck driver belongs to a criminal gang planning to sell into prostitution the innocent Socorro,

although, forgive me for saying so, Socorro is thirty-nine, thin and care-worn. Maybe Roxanne, who is getting tall and has much fairer skin than Socorro. Well, no, just put that aside.

Socorro came faithfully for one week, and then the money ran out. Then it came again. Tom wires his salary, as much as he can, along with paying for passports, visas and plane fare for three. They speak by cel phone, (in a manner of speaking). One afternoon during her class he called and I spoke with him myself. I had trouble understanding his Arkansas accent, and explained to Socorro that she's learning Boston English, which in this situation may do her no good whatsoever. Ni modo, can't be helped, we'll do the best we can. Roxanna should be practicing with you, I told Socorro, but Roxanna appears disinterested. Her grades in school run to 6's and 7's, Socorro apologized: the child is not that interested in studying. The boy, Enrique, has never reappeared.

To the next class, Socorro brought her baby granddaughter, a fat-faced preciosa who soiled her diaper while her grandmother held her. The baby never cried or fussed; Oaxaca babies live so close to a warm human body all the time they have no complaints. Roxanna hefted Baby Paula at arms' length into the air over her head, while Baby Paula regarded the moving sky stoically. We made progress as far as What's your name and Where are you from; although Socorro repeated every word I said and tried to read the text, a somewhat hopeless task since English isn't phonetic. I told her, just listen. Tom isn't going to expect you to read to him. But Socorro wants to read Tom's messages on email.

On April 7 Socorro told me Tom is coming to Oaxaca. He's coming for one weekend, two days. Then he'll return to Texas (he drives a long route which seems to extend from Texas to Virginia, west and east of his home-base in Fort Smith. Meanwhile, Socorro will file for divorce here in Oaxaca.

Divorce is easy enough, since her husband deserted her and their three children. Often in Mexico the male makes a paternal claim on the kids; fathers can block underage kids from leaving the country, but in this case the court, says Socorro, will award custody to her because the husband left her five years ago and lives with another woman. She told me this earnestly, seated on a white plastic chair in the patio where I hold the classes. Behind

her the plumeria tree had just begun its spring blooming; yellow flowers crowned her head against the sky

That family situation abounds all over Mexico. Legally, in these cases the first wife inherits the father's pension when the father dies, if he has a pension, and more importantly, all the children by however many "wives" the father may have acquired inherit equally. It's a just system, I think, for a country ridden by injustices, although dividing a small pension means nobody receives enough to live on. In turn, that leads to many interesting family structures, as for example, everyone refers to his half-sibling as his brother or sister, and with some luck, the wives get along too, at least after the father's death. It's an odd but frequently effective way to create support systems. The first set of siblings often become adults and help the younger set. In a state with virtually no government or social assistance, necessity triumphs. In Socorro's case, her face revealed a residue of anger, an impassive tension.

So, the plan is that after Socorro obtains her divorce, she will fly to Texas with Enrique and Roxanna. Tom has filed for her visa in Texas, vouching for her, with a tourist stipulation for thirty days. From there, they will truck to Fort Smith, where Socorro and the kids can stay with the cousin. Not with Tom. I hate to think Tom may be a religious nutcase, thus far I have no reason to think so. More likely, and hats off to Tom, he's following carefully what it means to be a Mexican in Arkansas and the USA. If he wants her to be able to return, he's making each step legal and clean. The actual number of undocumented Mexicans stood at 80,000 counted, in just Little Rock alone. Statewide, who knows? 2007 estimates claimed 187,452. It looks like Tom foresees wanting to keep his imported family, which also speaks well of him in the hats off department, unless he thinks he's getting free labor and a chicken-plucker to boot. No, no, probably he's just lonely. Excuse my recurring negativity and cynicism. Arkansans at least are pragmatists, since they must harvest crops and package chickens in their enormous industry. One hopes that living in a state which is not overly friendly to blacks, Asians and Latinos, Tom knows what he's doing, staking out a claim and spending money to file on it.

A friend of mine says, furthermore men in Tom's age bracket never learned

to express well their feelings to women. Then came the internet. Thomas writes he loves her. I don't know if he writes he needs somebody, a small family, to wait for him to come home every five days.

And what is Socorro doing, uprooting her kids and going off to a culture nobody could like? This speaks also to pragmatism, doesn't it. I would like to say we're talking about love and etcetera, but I doubt it. Maybe later. At least Socorro will not be cast into Arkansas USA alone; she will have the immigrant Mexico community. If her cousin lives there, it must be one of those settlements where one Oaxacan was followed by a thousand, mostly undocumented excellent workers.

If the visit in Fort Smith works out, that is to say, they like each other in person, Tom will come down to Mexico for them to marry. Tom is fifty. Is that too big an age gap? Was he once also married?

After they marry Tom can return to Fort Smith and file for his wife's permanent residence, along with that of the two underage kids.

For our next class Socorro reported to me that Tom has blue eyes, and is not as large as she thought. Truck-drivers don't drive with their strength, I told her, they drive with their wits, and the truck does the work. She thought that probably Tom is plenty smart; he told he has never had an accident. As for the children, they thought he was OK, not an entertaining guy, too serious, but kind. So it looked like all systems were Go.

And go she did, putting all her energy into selecting clothes and learning English, both necessary for the trip. What's the weather like in Arkansas in the summer? Damned if I know. Hot, I suppose. Tornadoes? Thunderstorms? It didn't seem like my place to fill her in on what her cousin could tell her, so I let it slide. She wasn't after all heading into an abyss.

By now she had her passports and visas, and was fluttering in her chair, trembling like a hummingbird on the wind, vibrating I guess is the right word.

When she didn't show up the next day I didn't worry, I assumed she was packing and saying goodbye to her oldest daughter and the grandbaby.

I never found out what became of her. She never came back.

—Nancy Davies. All rights reserved.











