

Tortillas for Honkies

By Kase Johnstun

I faced an unnaturally red-colored bowl of thick, soupy Spaghettios. I sat in Grandma's large kitchen, a kitchen decorated with a frothing beer magnet on the fridge. A gigantic bullfighting poster with my grandpa's name on it hung above the stairs. The yellow and red-dressed matador twisted his body while holding the bright colored red flag. A bull rushed through it past the man. His head turned slightly downward. It showed the face of a dark, little man with a thin moustache.

I told every kid at school that my grandfather, John Cordova, was at one time a famous Mexican bullfighter – the dark, wavy black hair and long twisting moustache matched the matador's on the glossy print hanging in my grandma's kitchen. I was sure that in his long life he had time to fit in a bullfighting career between the railroad chain gangs and the Hercules factory floor. "My grandparents have a picture to prove it," I told friends. The coolest kids I knew at school, including my best friend, Marc Garcia, were Mexican, and I wanted to be Mexican too. I visited their families and saw their pride in heritage. I joined their celebrations. I yearned for their uniqueness in the white landscape of Utah faces. I envied. "I'm Cordova, so I'm Mexican," I told them.

While I envied, my mom and aunts denied. My mom threw her lunch bag full of tortillas in the garbage can on the way to the bus and starved to seem more "normal." She didn't want to stand out, and her food would make that happen.

"My middle name was Betina like my grandmother's, but I changed it to Rose because I thought Betina was Mexican and Mexican seemed bad in Utah in the 60's," my aunt Linda tells

me as she giggles about her innocent disgrace 50 years earlier. “They called me Linda Rose instead.”

That afternoon in my grandma’s kitchen, as a boy, I had fled from home. I had it lucky. I got to run from a house of love and warmth to a house of warmth and love. But I ran for better food. I ran from my mom’s Spam and mayonnaise sandwich, hoping to land right in the middle of a Mexican feast full of tortillas, beans, rice and chili verde – Instead, I splashed down in a bowl of Spaghettios and questions.

“Gramma, what was your name before Cordova?” I asked my grandma across the table.

Grandma responded, “Chavez,” which sounded like CHAH – vess. Her tiny, arthritic and liver-spotted hands crocheted a white doily that would shortly be wrapped up and given as a gift or be placed on a mantle, slightly hanging over the edge. Her thick, octagonal glasses sat down at the tip of her dark brown nose, and her Chavez jowls hung off her cheeks beneath her perfectly placed hair. She glanced up across the table at her blond-haired grandson as I devoured the bowl of sodium-filled round noodles.

“How do you spell *that*?” I had never heard CHAH – vess before in my short life.

She spelled it out for me, “C-H-A-V-E-Z.” I had seen that name written out right in front of me at school. Pens checked it off during role. Teachers taped *Chavez* on masking tape on the edge of cubby holes. I saw Chavez sloppily written on quizzes that passed by me – but what I saw at school sure as hell wasn’t pronounced CHAH-vess.

“My friend is named Ernesto Chavez, but it sounds like Shaw-vezz when he says it,” I said.

“That’s how honkies say it,” she said, “We say it CHAH-vess.” Her ‘we’ spoke for her father Francisco Chavez and her eight brothers and sisters who worked the homesteads of the dry Southern Colorado basins in her youth.

My brain skipped when she pronounced the name. My extended family threw the term *Mexican* around all the time to describe our heritage. I felt proud to be part Mexican but growing up with white and blonde hair until it started to darken in my mid-teens, being Mexican seemed so unclaimable. When I told Mexican friends at school that I was part Mexican, they, as kids do, just looked at my face and hair color and said, “No you’re not. Just look at you.” As an adult seeking out what blood my grandparents actually passed down to me, I found Mexican to be no part of my lineage, but was at the center of their cultural heritage. I found through stories it was easier for my grandparents to generalize than to expand on what they (we) really were, which was a mix of Spanish, Native-American, and French (the hunt for complete accuracy continues). But it didn’t really matter. They were dark, and in the late seventies, anybody in Utah with dark skin was either Mexican or Indian, the proper terms of Latino, Hispanic, and Native American not quite on the tongues of the average white Mormon.

“I had a fourth grade assignment to make my family tree and find out my heritage. I asked Dad [Grandpa] and he told me just to tell them I was Mexican. So I did. He told us all that,” my aunt Leah reflected to me with laughter. “Talk about avoidance.” But they were Mexican. Grandpa and Grandma believed it. They assimilated. Handed the culture down.

I struggled to make sense of the differences between the pronunciations I had heard at school and what my grandma had just told me in her kitchen. Ernie Chavez was the most Mexican person I knew in my life up to that point. He had a rich, dark complexion, his black hair omitted all other colors, and he ate enchiladas at school on Tuesday’s, Thursdays, and sometimes

Fridays. I had slept over his house and knew his parents. Their thick accents echoed “Mexican.” They spoke Spanish to each other when they didn’t want Ernie’s friends to know what they had to say. When Ernie got into trouble, he got into trouble in Spanish – his mom broke into English only to let us all know why we were all to blame for moving the satellite dish; “You not trying to watch the *Naked Gun*, you trying to watch the naked ladies.” When Ernie had to finish chores before we went to the movies, he did with dark Mexican hands. When I thought of Mexicans at age 10, I thought of the Shaw-vezzes not the CHAH-vesses.

My grandma just had to be wrong. Her skin lacked the rich darkness of Ernie’s. It, literally, paled in comparison to that of his mom’s. Her Spanish withered away in her childhood, and what remained, she only broke out to cuss out my grandpa in words she didn’t want me to hear. It took years for me to figure out that *cabron* was not a pet name and *pinche cabron* was not a more affectionate pet name.

In my young world, Ernie estabas Mexicano. Grandma fue Mexicana.

“Ernie is more Mexican than you,” I told her that afternoon, “You must be saying it wrong.” All I had to do for proof was to look at her skin. The color scale of darkness, I believed as a child, matched the ethnic scale of authenticity.

After listening to her 10-year old grandson tell her how to say her name, Grandma looked up from her slowly moving, doily creating hands; they continued to crochet while she spoke.

“I know how to say my goddamn name,” she said to me without the usual affectionate qualifier of “you little shit” or “you smart little shit”. These phrases equaled “you cute little bugger” or “you smart little guy” in other families. Her uses of the word shit bordered on infamous. My parents never said a word about it.

She repeated that she knew how to say her goddamn name, as if I had crossed a line and she had to draw it again for me.

“You know Uncle Ernie, don’t you, my brother?”

“Yes,” I remembered him briefly. I remembered sitting next to him on the large boulders that outlined Willard Bay, separating the fresh water of the mountains from the salt-infused water of the Great Salt Lake that surrounded the bay on three of its four sides. We fished for walleye and catfish out there with worms. I looked up at his deep brown skin as it drooped off his face and wondered if his cheeks just might fall off. His drooping jowls matched my grandma’s, the same jowls that begin their descent in my mirror. He handed me a worm to put on the end of the hook and ushered me slowly down to the edge of the water to help swing my rod and drop the worm down into the shallow bay. My older brother Jake and my grandpa, two people who lived to bait a hook and snag a big one, had their bait in the water within seconds of getting out of the car. But Ernie took his time to help a four or five year old get his bait on his hook before he slung his rod back behind his shoulder and then forward over his elbow to cast into the water.

“His full name is Ernesto CHAH – vess,” Grandma cast at me. When I asked my mom about Uncle Ernie, she stammered. The story always leads to a retelling of when she watched in “horror” as all the Cordova men got drunk and beat Uncle Ernie to a pulp. Grandma had to step in and push them all off him so he wouldn’t die.

“He would not be happy if you called him Uncle Ernie Shaw –Vezz,” she finished. Across the table, my grandma had stopped crocheting and stared at me. Her face told me to shut up soon. Uncle Ernie suffered Alzheimer’s disease and hadn’t gone so easily and did not make

his passing for his family easy either. His last months of life were filled with angry outbursts and lashes toward everyone when they visited.

I dropped the subject but not before I said stubbornly, “I think Shaw – vezz is how you say it.”

Between zero and 10 years, I took up near permanent residency at my grandma’s house. My mom spent her days helping my dad start up his accounting practice. Jake began pre-school early. I shadowed my grandma and grandpa. If Grandpa watched Bonanza, I watched Bonanza. If Grandpa cleaned the garage, I cleaned the garage. If Grandma cooked sopapillas for breakfast, I cheered, and if Grandpa needed me to run downstairs and stir that week’s batch of beer, I stirred.

In my memory, Grandma always seemed old to me – withered, tired, and wrinkly with brown skin wrapped around a smile and yellow eyes.

My grandma’s life had not been an easy one. She married young, 14, to get out of a house of nine children after her mother had died of breast cancer. The Depression era hit the Las Alamos County, Colorado hard before the war and the towns of Trinidad and Trinchera struggled to recover. Taking the arm of a 21-year-old man, a Cordova, a family which three of her brothers and sisters had already married into seemed a logical choice. Plus, she found him handsome, witty, and charming. She waited tables in Utah for the next 25 years. Her first heart attack surprised her in her early forties, fried meals in lard and butter then mixed with beef fat for substance narrowed her arteries quickly. She tackled her alcoholism when my grandpa whooped his in the mid-1980’s. After an orthopedic removed multiple bones in her feet that led to numerous surgeries for 30 years, she developed and licked a prescription drug habit, a habit the

family had to closely monitor. But I never saw any of this, even though if it happened right in front of me.

I saw none of the drunkenness or the fights. As a tiny squatter at the Cordova household, I saw smartass comments with smiles that followed and I heard, “That old son of bitch drives me batty.” I saw the light that shined so brightly, although the star had already burnt out.

Every morning I would walk into a house that had been alive for hours, as my grandparents typically got up around four a.m., after going to bed around seven the night before. All of my older cousins had headed off to school, and my two younger cousins were still so tiny that I had Grandma to myself for years.

“Come here sweetie,” she would say to me. She would outstretch her arms, and I would run to her where she sat in her tiny, pink comfy chair reading romance novels. As a child, I wrapped my tiny arms around her round waist and buried my head into her belly, practically tipping the chair backward. She squeezed me tightly with one arm and brushed my blonde hair back with the other. “How’s my boy? You hungry?” No matter my answer, she fed me anyway.

Grandma and I spent entire days in her basement putting together gigantic puzzles. We began with baby puzzles; by the time I headed off to Kindergarten, we had put together giant landscapes with thousands of pieces of pictures of marinas, mountains, and Starry Nights. We worked side by side for hours placing each piece of the thousand that lay in front of us into its proper place, each tiny piece giving a clearer view of the larger picture.

One day Grandma busted out Chubby Checker and, with as little movement as possible, taught me to do “The Twist.” With her fucked up feet she didn’t move much, but at the very end of her pant leg, I could see her tiny, slippered foot twisting. Her arms swayed back and forth just above her waist. “I loved this song,” she said. She made me twist until I got it right. One day at

school years later, I busted out “The Twist” to blank stares from my classmates. (This was years before the “The Twist” revival in the late 80’s.) When Grandma and I weren’t twisting, Grandpa would play La Cucaracha on his guitar and harmonica, and I would mimic his 1940 style dance moves. Between “The Twist” and the lessons grandpa taught me, my moves were not fully appreciated in second grade. I had developed the personality of two smartasses in their sixties and taken it to school with me. After making an odd joke to impress a 3rd grade girl, Kelly Griffenstat told me, “I know your name. Your name’s Weirdo.”

The vinyl record of Chubby Checker got put back into its sleeve. Grandma busted out Verne Larry’s “Mr. Custer.” Grandma and I mimicked the war cries of the Injuns and laughed when Charlie got an arrow through the head. “Ow, ow, ow, ow, ai, ow, ai! Please Mr. Custer, I don’t want to go.” At that age, I had no idea she was half Indian, but she sure loved to sing with me after doing “The Twist.” I’m sure she told me that her mom, Betina Taipia, was Native American, but I was too caught up in the howling and dancing to care, or to a fault, remember.

Although my parent’s home and my childhood there could be viewed as an episode of “Leave it to Beaver,” I never yearned to go home because Grandma’s house just felt like another room of ours, equipped with funny old people to dance with.

Every once and a while I heard Grandma rustling around in the guest bedroom, so I shadowed my way in to find her bending over at the waist with one hand on one knee, unable to fully squat to reach the floor, as she didn’t need to in her 4’10” body. She pulled out a black and white photo of her brother, Manual. He went missing in action in the war. He was eventually reported dead. The photo had been kept pristinely for 40 years, edges perfectly square with the gloss still shiny, making the trek from the high plains and desert mountains of Southern

Colorado. She brought the photo with her from the basin of the Cordova and Cuchara Passes (the Cordova Pass named so in 1978, years after her and grandma's departure).

I sat on her bed. She placed the photo between us and told me how much she missed him and how much I reminded her of him. In the photo, he wore his perfectly pressed Marine uniform. He looked directly at the camera with pursed lips and an intense stare.

"You look so much like him. And he was funny, just like you. He wasn't an idiot comedian or clown or something stupid like that. He was quiet, but always made me laugh, just like you do." It became ritualistic to get the photo out and look at him; my grandma almost always forgetting we had done it before. When young, I could never see the resemblance. Manual Chavez, like my grandma, was half Comanche Indian and half Spanish. She and her brothers and sisters represented a common marital bond in the mid to late 1800s between Spanish homesteaders and the Indians of the Southern Rocky Mountains that bordered New Mexico. His narrow eyes and thin nose pierced through the picture at us. My aunt Linda would tell me later that Grandma said he could be cruel when he was young. Grandma never reflected on him that way. As with most memories of cruelty in youth, it must have faded with years, while the missing of him grew. I learned to agree with her though. I saw it made her happy to tell her that I saw the resemblance.

"Maybe God gave me you to replace him," she would say, although I never really heard her talk about God all that much, a woman who would easily tell God he messed up a few things and he should get to fixing them. She held the photo in her hand and looked at it then looked at me and smiled, "He was funny." She choked up a bit every time the photo came out. I choked up with her. If she felt sad, I figured there had to be a reason. She put the photo back into its protective sleeve until another time I reminded her of Manual Chavez.

The next week at school Ernie repeated his name to me, “Ernesto Shaw – vezz.” At that moment, embarrassment and shame swarmed through me, combining sympathy for my grandma and the revelation that I would deny the Chavez name. I chose to only tell people the name Cordova when they asked and tell them I forgot my grandma’s maiden name. I stopped telling my friends about the giant bull fighter poster over the stairs, stopped telling them I was Mexican, and started thinking my grandma just didn’t know much at all.

Sadly enough, SHAW – Vezz was reinforced at home. I can’t blame my mom though. She never got the chance to learn it. Grandma and Grandpa decided not to teach their children to speak Spanish.

“Uncle Ernie was held back in first grade for three years because he couldn’t speak English,” my Aunt Linda tells me after I had wondered for more than 20 years why the Spanish language was cleanly cut in one generation. It didn’t fade slowly like it does and has done in millions of families across the United States. It was cut out like a tumor of ignorance.

The food of the past survives in the kitchens of the present, kinda. My mom never cooked my grandma’s special beans and tortillas, opting to pick them up from a local Mexican restaurant instead. She did, however, latch on to my grandma’s saliva-inducing blend of green chilies, pork and spices, what my mother called and still calls today chill – ee vur –dee.

The language slowly dissolved on the tongues of my grandparents over their lives, eventually disappearing, while their children never really tried to taste it. Within one short generation, CHEE – lay Vair –day became Chill – ee vur – Dee.

At school, Mrs. Wilson taught us Spanish in eighth grade, making the class memorize colors, numbers, and letters. The language was slaughtered in those eighth grade classes and in

classes throughout the country. She rolled her “r’s” every time an r came up in a word, confusing the hell out of every student in the classroom. We never really knew if she meant ‘but no’ (pero no) or ‘dog no’ (perro no) because she rolled the “r” when saying pero, coming out perro. We walked around for days saying, “I wanted to see the movie, dog no my parents wouldn’t let me.”

In high school, a miniature Irishman who knew Gaelic fluently and Spanish barely taught us freshman Spanish. He taught us by having us look up vocabulary every day in class and by quizzing us on the words we found. We were freshman, so we took full advantage of the freedom to create our own quizzes. The lists consisted of the Spanish words for vagina, penis, butt, drunk, and wasted. My mom believed that by the end of my sophomore year I had taken an advanced anatomy class that necessitated knowing the human sexual organs and how to intoxicate them in different languages – she must be so proud of my private school education.

In September 1995, I sat in Spanish 101 at Weber State University. We spent the majority of the first couple weeks reviewing the Spanish alphabet from the beginning. Our instructor, a sandy blonde, blue-eyed returned Mormon missionary (RM) led the class from the front of the cramped room in the basement of the block-like Arts and Humanities building. Most of the freshman-level classes were taught by RMs. Their years abroad to convert the world to Mormonism taught them a foreign language fluently. The universities in Utah took full advantage of this valued commodity by having RMs teach classes for reduced tuition. We lucked out with our RM teacher. He was assertive but nice and knew the language impeccably. The recitation of the vowels and consonants spiraled into days and days of mind numbing chanting.

“Ah, eh, ee, oa, oo,” our RM began, running quickly through the pronunciations of the vowels.

“Ah, eh, ee, oa, oo,” the class repeated as a whole.

“Again, ah, eh, ee, oa, oo,” he directed his choir of freshmen and sophomore students, a choir that sounded like a bunch of teenagers chanting “Mr. Custer” from my childhood or dancing across a bed of hot coals, “Ah, eh, ee, oa, oo.” While I recited the nouns and consonants, I dreamed of some day being let loose to conjugate verbs and grapple with the plu-perfect tense. The weeks in 101 dragged us all through what our teacher said would lay the foundation of the rest of our Spanish speaking lives. He didn’t know *cabron* had already laid my Spanish speaking foundation.

About half-way through the quarter, we had pronounced every consonant to death and memorized multiple ways to be appreciative and considerate while ordering food; we had finally jumped off the hot coals of vowel pronunciation. It was time to slaughter the language in full sentence form.

“Now turn to page 106 in your books,” the instructor said, “learning the basics of a language is like learning to play basketball; once you learn the fundamentals, you can play the game, but without them, you cannot.”

“Who wants to read the first sentence to us?” He asked. Typically, I am the student who drinks classes in but never offers input, either from fear or bad timing. That Tuesday morning, however, I felt great. I had gotten to bed early the night before and done all my homework for the week. So, uncharacteristically, I volunteered to read.

“Caesar SHAW – vezz fue una persona muy importante en la historia de Estados Unidos,” I read aloud to the class.

“CHAH – vess,” our teacher corrected me quickly. He explained to the class that ‘ch’ is hard like in chalk and ‘z’ is soft like in vase. My head dropped slowly down to my desk. My grandma’s name swelled up in the form of a tear in the corner of my eye. I saw her face look

across at me at that table ten years before and heard her tell me she knew how to pronounce her goddamn name. I took a boy's word over the word of my grandma, the woman who sat with me outside my tiny plastic cube in the hospital for days upon days until my lungs got better, the woman who I ran to every week for food, comforts I couldn't explain until adulthood.

"Kase, you'll get it next time. Don't worry," my sweet RM teacher told me in front of the class.

Every week until my grandma died, the family drizzled in to her house. We hoped to catch the first tortilla as it came out of the frying pan with the perfect amount of brown sears on it. My grandma would place the first batch down, and it would disappear before she made it back to the stove. I sat down at one of the chairs around the round, thrashed table. I felt so nervous to talk to her, a nervousness typically reserved for accidentally pulling all the wrong corn from the garden or accidentally ramming into her car with my bike.

"Gramma."

"Yeah, Kelly, Johnny, Jake, Judd. Oh whatever the hell your name is," she laughed. She pushed up the sleeves of her long, thick sweater to reveal her brown and yellow skin beneath it. Her laughter shot out quickly. Her genuine denture filled smile lit up the room.

"Come here sweetie," she said. She outstretched her arms, and I walked to her. As a young man, I wrapped my arms around her shoulders and brought her head to my chest. I pulled her toward me as tightly as I could. She wrapped her arms around my waist and didn't let go until I did. "How's my boy? You hungry?"

I hugged her. I didn't want to bring up the name discussion again. I hoped she had forgotten our conversation years ago and forgave her "knucklehead" grandson for refuting her. I almost turned without talking to her about it, almost grabbed the first tortilla from under the cloth

and bolted. In my mind, I knew she had probably forgotten, so there would have been no need to bring up old stupidity. I let her go and stood next to her. She flipped a tortilla in the pan.

“Your maiden name is Chavez. We learned about Caesar Chavez in school. Any distant relation?” I asked.

“Shit, don’t ask me things you know I don’t know.” Another chuckle fell out of her mouth. At that moment, the weight fell off my shoulders. Either she didn’t remember or had decided to forget, and hopefully forgive. I handed her the plate she asked for. She slowly spooned the perfectly cooked brown pinto beans onto it, covered them with chili verde, and pulled a couple tortillas from her tiny skillet and handed the plate back to me, “Go eat, yahoodie.”

Six years after her death, I began to write. With each attempt, my hunger grew. I devoured any story of her that I heard from family. I hoped with each word to harbor the richness of her life. I spent my college years trying to learn Spanish, suspecting the language would bring me closer to my roots, to make up for a tiny denial of my heritage. However, learning the language brought me no closer to figuring out who I am or what my grandma was. That came when I began to examine the memories of my childhood, and for better or worse, usually better, they came from two places – my home and my grandma’s home. And in those two homes, family pumped the veins of love. In my grandma’s home, extended family became immediate family, with my grandma’s kitchen the center of our world.

The blood that ran through my grandma and grandpa’s veins has become thin, the pigment married out. Proud German, English, and Irish blood fills our veins. The language has disappeared except for my feeble knowledge of it. Years earlier, we huddled and played around a

table topped with layers and layers of thick homemade tortillas, runny pinto beans, rich and green chili verde, and salsa made from the tomatoes and chilies from my grandpa's garden. As blond children, we bobbed through the kitchen, snagging tortillas from under the tortilla towel.

The food, like "The Twist," has made a comeback. My mom and her sisters have started to follow my grandma's recipes. Now in their sixties, they, like me, try to grasp the feather-like remnants of childhood, and as their blonde, redheaded, and brunette grandchildren run around their tables, they continue the tradition of serving tortillas to honkies.