

He Imitated a Stiff-Legged Frankenstein

By Sharon McElhone

Que Suerte--what luck it was to land a post with the Andrade family as a writer. Being a contributor to one of the most important newspapers in Silicon Valley and to have worked alongside the prominent editor, photojournalist, and writer Mary Andrade for so many years remains two of my greatest accomplishments. Our skewed system inculcates us as Americans to wear the “white-centric” lens. That lens informs us those newspapers like the *Mercury News* and *San Francisco Chronicle* are the only newspapers worthy of the highest distinctions. Americans swallow a bias that is untrue until we believe it is true. For decades *La Oferta*, the bilingual Spanish and English newspaper of Silicon Valley, has acted as a lifeline for immigrants and bilingual residents. It is also a distinguished newspaper. Seventeen years ago, when I asked Mary Andrade for a job as a writer, three years before I became pregnant with my first child, Mary rescued me. Frank, Tatiana, and Veronica greeted me with open arms too. She showed me that it was possible to circumvent a system that thwarts so many women and people of color. Even though we suffered together at the hands of two catastrophes, the Great Recession and free news delivery from tech giants, I owe them all a debt.

Mary Andrade emigrated from Ecuador with her husband, Frank, and founded *La Oferta* newspaper. Her two daughters, Tatiana and Veronica, grew up listening to the white noise of the printing press running late into the night and early on Friday mornings until it was time to fill the news racks. They grew up surrounded by the casual banter of hardworking graphic designers, reporters, and ad salespeople, all reporting in Spanish and in English as they came and went from a concrete building that sat on the corner of N. 4th St. and E. Gish Rd, 1376 N. 4th Street, San Jose CA to be more specific. Together, for decades, the family realized their vision of a newspaper dedicated to their community, the Spanish-speaking community as well as the English-speaking community. Today, *La Oferta* no longer operates its business from that building and no longer has a printed newspaper. In order to try and compete, Mary and Frank were forced to move the newspaper online becoming an e-newspaper. It was during that time, shortly after I birthed my second child, that I discovered that our American way of life has made it extraordinarily hard for parents by not addressing the issue of childcare. Finding no reliable or affordable source of childcare, I clung to my part-time job at *La Oferta* despite the newspaper’s struggles and looked to Mary for support and mentorship.

When she is not working on the newspaper, Mary documents Día De Los Muertos, a tradition that originated hundreds of years ago in Mexico. Mary is a leading historian on the subject and has captured all the variations throughout the regions of Mexico and beyond. It is a true labor of love, and her work is also a gift to Mexico. Her library houses tens of thousands of photos that catalogue small nuances between each of the celebrations that take place in late November and early December. Her books paint Día De Los Muertos in the most humanitarian way, as a celebration of a person’s life rather than something morose. What struck me most early on about her work is her genuine reverence for Día De Los Muertos in the face of a Catholic upbringing. She approaches Día De Los Muertos with respect, and reveres the celebration just as one cherishes Christmas or Easter. Even more appealing than some other religious practices is Día De Los Muertos does not

announce itself with the frightening concept of a hell in tow. The Conquistadors brought the concept of hell with them from Spain. A group of unsuspecting indigenous people, the Pur'hépecha in the State of Michoacan, who practiced Día De Los Muertos in its original form, was tragically disrupted. Her work of preserving Día De Los Muertos is as important to her as it is important to me to keep talking about the need for a universal childcare system in our country for the sake of preserving a healthy society.

In so many respects, communities and institutions still consider Latin Americans and Spanish speaking immigrants as a sort of sub-class of people in the United States. A lot of women can sympathize with that designation because they also have historically been treated as a sort of sub-class of people. At the top of the food chain is a white man, and then a man, and Americans swallow the untrue bias until we all believe it is true and deny ourselves true equality. What is true is that the Hispanic population in the United States reached nearly 58 million in 2016 according to the PEW Research Center. It is one of the largest ethnic groups. An American or Mexican press that recognized that reality should have published the books Mary painstakingly spent decades creating, but there was no such luck. She ended up self-publishing her books after years of contacting presses that expressed no interest. I know the feeling, for I have spent years talking about childcare issues to little effect. I am patronized less often than brushed off as being a whiner.

I was in my second trimester, when Mary asked me to help edit her fourth book called *Day of the Dead—a Passion for Life*. By the end of the editing process in 2006, walking for me was an awkward and painful venture. The ligaments in my pelvis had softened with a surge of relaxin in preparation of giving birth. On occasion, when we were together, my brother made fun of the way I walked. He imitated a stiff legged Frankenstein and moaned his way across a room or parking lot, which I had to admit did bear a resemblance to what it was like to be nine months pregnant. It was extremely uncomfortable carrying around such a distended abdomen, but I found that working gave me great pride and extra strength to push on through the discomfort. I felt accomplished in my career of choice. Mary's trust in me to help her restructure the book gave me more confidence. We never could have guessed that four years from the day we completed that editing job, she and Frank would be faced with losing the *La Oferta* building they owned. Late one night, Mary called my mother to discuss listing the building in great haste in order to stop it from going into foreclosure. The Great Recession snuck up on us like a reticulated python we never saw coming. I never projected a hardship to stay in my line of work after I gave birth to my daughter either. Suddenly, childcare was unaffordable, and I still had a great desire and need to work. Mary and I both found ourselves facing great personal struggles. The *La Oferta* building had a loan, but a poorly written one. Millions of Latin American people had them. The loan adjusted to a higher interest rate and placed the Andrades at risk of defaulting for the first time in their life. Adding more salt to the wound, the paper grew thinner and thinner over the months, as everyone in the newspaper and book industry saw the Internet pulling away readers. Advertisers stopped buying ad space from *La Oferta* and as the flow of advertising dollars that supported the paper shrank so did the paper. I was stranded at home with a baby and a choice to be a "stay at home mother" made for me after childcare became unaffordable. I still carried my real estate license, but even that didn't produce enough income because the real estate market had collapsed. They were grim times.

It was decided that the *La Oferta* building had to be sold immediately. My mother

and I listed the property in order to save *La Oferta*. Wearing all three hats - mother, reporter, and real estate agent - I became angry thinking that a small immigrant family business could be snuffed out after dedicating over forty years of service to their community. For them to be of retiring age, having earned peaceful golden years, done such meaningful work, just to have it end at the hands of calculating executives orchestrating a heist of the middle-class treasury, burned me up. But I was also busy with the predicament of where to place my child so I could go to work, which turned out to be a daily conundrum that left a woman exhausted.

One afternoon, after the building was listed, on a day I came to her not as a real estate agent, but wearing my writer's cap with an idea for a new story, I sat on her black leather couch in her office under the three photos of her shaking hands with three different presidents: President Clinton, President Bush, and President Vicente Fox. She was wearing her typical Mexican dress. The stress of being in danger of losing *La Oferta* and the building all at the same time didn't show on her face. I sensed it was because of her experience of running a business and also of being an immigrant. Those things teach you to weather uncertainty and still carry around a measure of hope that allows you to carry on. My husband and I had only begun to learn what real endurance meant. We had two babies and the great recession was poised to crush us. At the same time, we'd become fixated on surviving the grueling economic times. Dave picked up any construction work he could find, while I struggled to manage caring for the children and juggling work at the same time. It wasn't working out too smoothly because we had no access to childcare. That day we talked in her office, Mary didn't appear to notice the cloud hanging over all of us. In contrast, my indignation in regards to the predicament grew greater by the minute. It was my first experience witnessing the unadulterated rape of middle-class Americans. Many mothers experience financial hardship two-fold because when two incomes become necessary to pay for expenses, childcare turns out to be so costly it makes working a wash and mothers need a place to leave children in order to work. And the crisis continues. All American families, who are supposed to have equal access to the American Dream, don't, because there isn't a universal childcare system in place. We've simply made women responsible for childcare, and we don't think about the price that is paid. I shudder to think of my divorced mother, who raised her children alone. Mary and I didn't talk about the worst outcomes. We smiled at one another. We focused on the idea for the next article for the paper. Next, we directed our energies on coming up with a strategy to sell the building. We closed our conversation by talking about family. I told her that finding stable, affordable childcare was impossible like a parrot that won't stop repeating the same phrase over and over. If anyone would understand, it was she. It was Mary, after all, who took me under her wing when it seemed no one else would give a young female writer with a family a chance. She let me work at night, from home, on weekends after I became pregnant and could no longer be at the office whenever I wanted to be. A baby should not just be a footnote after a list of career accomplishments. Childcare needs to play a larger role in the American worker's success. Mary took me under her wing because she knew what it was like for a mother to take care of young children and also have dreams of one's own. It is a plight that men often do not understand and so when they get an unequal share of power in our government and in our institutions, it is for lack of understanding and empathy that there is no push for a childcare system. That afternoon, sitting under the "Pioneer Award of Excellence" she received for her work, Mary told me a haunting story. She spoke of a

time when she became pregnant for a second time. Her oldest daughter had just turned two months old. Her daughters were born eleven months apart. As a new immigrant, Mary took both girls for a stroll. She pushed Tatiana in a stroller while Veronica waddled alongside her holding Mary's hand. When Mary looked up for a second, she saw a Caucasian woman walking toward them on the sidewalk. As the woman got closer, Mary smiled, but the woman sneered. She gave Mary a look that she said felt like a curse. Mary will never forget that look, like she and her brown children were no more than dirt under someone's shoe. That look of disgust felt all too real to me as I imagined it in my head, thick enough to chew. I'd seen it many times because my mother is a dark-skinned immigrant too. I turned out fair skinned only because of my blue-eyed biological father. When I was a little girl toddling around with bone white curls in the seventies next to my mother, people regularly suggested that my mother must be the nanny or the maid. Some would even ask her to clean their houses. People gawked in disbelief after she replied that she was my mother. My mother seemed to need to cross ten mountains before the doors of equality opened for her. Mary studied journalism at a university in her home country of Ecuador before arriving in the United States. I wondered what that white woman must have been thinking. Today, Mary is one of the most important bay area newspaper figures of her time. Mary and Frank have never touched drugs or been to jail. They came here legally. The thought of that Caucasian woman's scowl rattled me. Who was this American that placed herself above a woman like Mary, this "American" woman who could even be me if I wasn't born to a mother with brown skin, been born a half-breed? I did not like to think about what the future might hold once Mary ended that story: what my own future would look like as a young working mother with children when I was just trying to stay in the game.

They didn't lose the *La Oferta* building to the bank. Instead, they sold it to a doctor before it went into foreclosure. "Thanks, God," my mother declared with relief in her heavy accent after the escrow closed. But it wasn't solely God. It was hard work, persistence and diligence. Still, I found myself sitting in great wonder when we gathered at the title company to sign off for the sale. So many other people had defaulted and had been foreclosed on that year. We were all still hanging on by some grace. After the sale of the building, Mary and Frank continued the process of moving the paper online while Mary also dedicated time to flying to Mexico in order to capture more images of Día De Los Muertos. Mary and Frank continue to be a magnificent example of the endurance that makes great Americans.

How do working mothers or immigrants achieve equality in this crowded space filled with so much bias that we interpret as the only reality? There is that window between when children are born and when the children are able to go to school, where working mothers' and fathers' thoughts and concerns rest with them, that needs to be addressed. In addition, we must always remember the stories of immigrants. Without more recognition of the contributions that immigrants make and without the erection of a national daycare system, the kind of struggle parents and immigrants endure stalls our ability to provide security for Americans. Those are the real issues we need to be addressing today.