

I still remember the moment I discovered that a world existed outside Brownsville. I've been trying to explore it ever since.

In the Year 1974

TIt was only a few months after I turned ten that I discovered the world. Before this time, I had spent most of my life in Brownsville, at the southernmost point of not only Texas but also the continental United States. One of our few excursions from home was driving across the international bridge to Matamoros so I could get what my father considered a “decent” haircut, by which he meant a very short haircut that cost less than a dollar, tip included. The barber would bring out a special cushioned board and lay it across the armrests of the chair. Then I’d climb up and sit still for my haircut, waiting patiently during those times when the barber had to stop and make a *ss-ss-ss* sound at a pretty girl passing in front of his shop. Afterward, my father and I would walk to Plaza Hidalgo, where he could get his boots shined and I could buy a candy from the man standing on the corner with the big glass case. I always went for the calabaza candies, which were made of a rich pumpkin and looked like jewels extracted from deep within the earth. ¶ As far south as we were, I knew there was a world beyond Brownsville because my sister and two brothers had left town years earlier. When we drove to Houston to visit my brothers, one of them would take my mother to the mall so she could shop at the big department stores we didn’t have at Amigoland Mall. After shopping, we’d go back to my brother’s house, eat, rest, maybe eat again, maybe watch TV, and then go to sleep. A couple



A CUT ABOVE: A barber shop in Matamoros, Mexico in the early 1970's.

JIM SUGAR/CORBIS

of days later, we'd get in the car and drive back to Brownsville. My parents weren't interested in seeing Houston. Houston was a big city with a lot of freeways where they were bound to get lost, and did, every time we visited, which was how I ended up seeing more of the city. My parents traveled to Houston to visit family, not to be running around getting lost. They had no interest in the roller coasters at Astroworld or ice-skating at the Galleria or anything else. My father worked as a livestock inspector for the USDA and spent a good part of his day patrolling the Rio Grande on horseback to make sure horses or cattle weren't being crossed into the country. During his rides he had been startled by rattlesnakes, bucked off his horse, and shot at by drug smugglers—he didn't need any more excitement in his life. Besides, it was usually hot in Houston, and he hadn't worked out in the sun the other 51 weeks out of the year so he could drive to another city to sweat on his vacation.

I should mention that my parents were older than most parents with a ten-year-old in the house. My mother was 52 and my father was 60. Being older, they had developed certain habits that weren't going to change. For instance, my father believed in sticking to certain meals. Food fell into three distinct categories: Mexican food, which he could eat every day and die a happy man; American food—meals like hamburgers, hot dogs, and fried chicken—which we ate occasionally; and other people's food, which included all food he refused to eat. Whenever I suggested trying something different, like Chinese food, he'd look at me as if he and my mother might have brought the wrong baby home from the hospital.

As I understood it, this was my father's unstated philosophy: *We have our food—fajitas, tamales, tacos, enchiladas. It took our people many years to develop these foods. We even have two kinds of tortillas, flour and corn. One day you can eat flour, the next day corn. So tell me why you want to eat other people's food? Leave their food alone. The chinos have their own food. They like that white rice. But do you see them eating our rice with those little sticks? No. The Germans, I don't know what they eat, but whatever it is, that's their business. The Italians, they like to add a lot of spices. I tried it one time and it gave me agruras, and then there I was, burping all night. Your mother had to make me an Alka-Seltzer. And you want to eat other people's food?*

All of which meant that if my father ate carne con papas, I ate carne con papas. If he ate picadillo, I ate picadillo. If he ate taquitos, I ate taquitos. And so on, until 1974, the sum-

mer my sister, Sylvia, invited me to stay with her in Austin for two weeks. She and my brother-in-law were in their early twenties, and my nephew was only a year old. One of the first things we did in Austin was walk around the University of Texas, where my sister was a student. Then we rode the elevator all the way up to the top of the UT Tower, and I felt my ears pop for the first time. From the observation deck, I saw tiny people walking around on the street, but I couldn't tell which were the hippies and which were the ones with short hair. Some of my sister's friends wore their hair long, like the hippies I'd seen around town. Rolando had a handlebar mustache and hair down to his shoulders. He was the funniest of my sister's friends, and the smartest. You could ask him any math question, and he'd answer it as though he had a calculator stuck in his head. "What's fifty-six times seventeen?" I'd ask him. And he'd go, "Nine hundred fifty-two." That fast. Rolando came along the night we played putt-putt. He beat all of us because he knew how to hit his ball so it would go under the windmill just right. When we finished playing, he asked me if I wanted a souvenir. I said yes, thinking he was going to buy me a T-shirt at the front booth. But instead, he took my putter and tossed it over the fence, into some hedges. Then we all walked out, and Rolando grabbed the putter for me. "There's your souvenir," he said.

My last night in town, my sister and brother-in-law asked if I wanted pizza. "Pizza?" I said. I'd never actually tried the food. We drove to a Pizza Inn, and my brother-in-law ordered a pepperoni pizza. The waitress brought plates for everyone, even my baby nephew. I thought of my parents back home and what they might be eating that night. A few minutes later the waitress brought out a steaming pizza and placed it in front of us. None of it seemed real: the triangle shape of my slice, the perfectly round pepperonis, the doughy end crust, the gooey melted cheese. It was as though I'd crossed into another world, one my parents never knew existed. I was still several years away from leaving Brownsville, but in that moment I felt as far from home as I ever would.

My mother called the apartment that night.

"Guess what we ate?" I said.

"What?"

"Pizza!"

"Pizza?"

"Yeah, and when I get home, we're all going to get some."

"If that's really what you want, maybe we can try it." She sounded distracted. "Don't hang up," she said. "Somebody wants to talk to you."

“Are you having fun?” my father asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“And you been behaving?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s a good boy.” I could hear his stubble brushing against the receiver. “You need to be careful tomorrow, okay?”

“I will.”

“We miss you, *mi’jo*.” He said it softly but clearly.

I hesitated for a second. “Okay, see you tomorrow.”

The next morning my sister made me sit behind the bus driver. She said I wasn’t supposed to talk to anyone or get off the bus when it made stops. I told her not to worry, that I had my golf club in case anything happened. The bus pulled out, and my sister and the baby waved good-bye.

Over the next 350 miles the land changed from hill country to brushland to river valley. I started getting hungry around Corpus Christi and wished that I hadn’t eaten my ham and cheese sandwich before the bus left Austin. I wondered if my father would say yes to eating pizza. For a long time I imagined I was in a car on the other side of the highway, headed north instead of south. After a while, I fell asleep and then woke up just in time to see my hometown: the swaying palm trees; the fat water tower on its skinny legs, a lonely seagull hovering high above the catwalk; the bell tower at Guadalupe Church; the tamale place next to the freeway; the used-car lots, the used-car lots, the used-car lots.

I saw my parents standing outside the terminal. My mother was wearing her royal-blue smock from the grocery store where she worked. My father had on the straw cowboy hat that he wore for work every day. He hadn’t noticed that one of his pant legs had stuck inside his boot. As soon as the door opened, my mother came up and hugged me. “How was your trip?” she asked. Then my father shook my hand and put his arm around my shoulder. When we got to the car, he put my suitcase in the trunk and told me to sit up front with him. “I hear you want pizza?” he said. I nodded. “You sure?” I nodded again.

Most of the lunch crowd had left by the time we got to the Pizza Hut. I slid into a wooden booth, and my parents slid into the other side. My father held on to his hat until the waitress showed him the coat hook on the edge of the booth.

“Would you like to see a menu or do you want the buffet?” the waitress asked.

She looked at my parents, who looked at each other for a second and then looked at me for the answer. But the truth is, I didn’t exactly know what she was asking us. The word “buf-

fet” was as foreign to me as the word “pizza” had once been.

“No, we just want to order pizza,” I told the waitress.

My father nodded in approval.

“I’m real hungry,” I said, “so I want a large pepperoni pizza. My father will eat a medium pepperoni pizza. And bring my mother a small pepperoni pizza.”

The waitress looked up from her notepad. “You sure you don’t want the buffet?” There was that word again.

“No, it’s okay,” I said. “We just want pizza.”

After she left, we sipped our iced teas and waited for the food. I could tell my father was proud of me for taking charge and ordering our food, the same way he would have.

After a while, the waitress came back and set the table. The manager helped her slide another table up against our booth. My father seemed impressed with all the work. The waitress returned a few minutes later and placed a small pepperoni pizza and then a medium one in front of my parents, leaving very little room for their plates and iced teas. My father looked at my mother when he realized how much food we had in front of us. Then the manager set a large pepperoni pizza on the extra table. “Can I get you folks anything else?” he asked.

I kept my head down and tried not to make

eye contact with my father, which was easy, because he was busy eating more food than I’d ever seen him eat. My mother whispered to him in Spanish about this being a special lunch. To which my father answered, in English, that this would have been more special if we’d gone to a regular restaurant. Then he took a deep breath, exhaled, and continued eating. In the end, the waitress still had to bring out two boxes for the leftovers, and my mother had to dig into her purse to help my father pay for lunch.

After this we went back to eating the same foods. As far as I know, my parents have never entered another Italian restaurant. But me, I eat pizza wherever I go—Brooklyn, Chicago, Paris, Mexico City. If some fancy hotel has it on the menu, I know what I’m ordering. If I’m leaving a bar at two in the morning, it’s nearly impossible for me to walk past an all-night pizza place. Who knows how many times I’ve eaten a cold slice while standing next to the refrigerator. Once, I even ordered a pizza in South America. I’d finally saved up enough money to take what I considered my first real vacation. I spent most of my time in Chile, but on New Year’s Eve I caught a flight to Ushuaia, Argentina, the city at the southern tip of the continent and the world. To get there we flew over Patagonia, and the massive ice formations

looked close enough to touch. Then I spotted the elusive straits that Magellan had discovered more than four hundred years earlier. And the land became only more distant and remote the farther we traveled into Tierra del Fuego. As we approached the airport in Ushuaia, the plane circled over the Beagle Channel, passing tiny islands of penguin and sea lion colonies along the way. The plane shook desperately against the Antarctic wind, and I thought to myself then that this was where wind was invented and here was the origin of the warm breeze we felt so far away in Brownsville. I was traveling alone and that night went out to an Italian restaurant, where I ordered a small mushroom pizza. After dinner I walked to the channel, trying to stay warm while the wind whipped around me and whistled lightly, as if someone were calling me to come closer. I stepped toward the edge of the water and pulled out a bottle of champagne I’d stashed in my jacket. An ocean liner was docked off to the side, and at midnight the crew sounded the ship’s horn to mark the new year, 1994. People were laughing and clapping in the distance. I uncorked the champagne and took my first drink. The Andes were at my back; Antarctica was straight ahead. And the wind never stopped whistling. I stared into the darkness and wondered what else was out there. ♣