

Rufina's Party

Written by Nancy Tilly

Wednesday, 10 June 2009 09:19 -

Though I leave the door open for her, she always knocks and I say the usual "Hola!" She asks how I am and we visit a few minutes before she starts dusting and vacuuming. "Senora Nancy," she says, "we having a baby shower for Ilda Sunday." Rufina's thirty-year-old daughter Hilda is having her first child. "We want you and Senor Eben to come."

I'm honored she's asked us. Rufina is among the people I respect most—for her dependability and pride in her work, her natural good spirits, but even more for her sensitivity to nuance. On one of her first days she called from the next room, "Senora Nancy?" and I said, "Que?"—in my rusty 1950s Spanish. She appeared in the kitchen door wagging her index finger at me. "No, no," she said and explained that "Que?" is not the way to answer someone you respect. I must say, "Mande," tell me.

Now, a year later, I'm used to her cheerful corrections on small but important matters of protocol and etiquette, of grammar, verb number, and tense. The teacher in me sees what a good teacher she'd have made, and I realize her gentle tone points to the way she raised three successful children in a new country. Hilda has a BA from North Carolina State University; Aremi married a carpenter and now stays at home with her two boys; and Romancito is studying at the Pittsburgh Culinary Institute. I wish I'd known Rufina when I made my own motherly corrections—they'd have been more confident and effective, above all, kinder. Rufina says when you live with someone you *have* to use a good tone with them. I store up her tone and attitude for my mythical grandchildren.

That Sunday, bearing gifts, we drive the mile to Rufina's. She and her husband, Roman, live in a neighborhood of small houses, some rented to students, others occupied by working people in Carrboro, Chapel Hill's sister town. Eben and I pull up to their yellow house, circled by tulips and daffodils, its front porch colorful with baskets of red and pink geraniums. Between the house and the Jehovah's Witness church next door stretches a grassy yard that's also theirs. Many cars are parked on the emerald green that stretches back to Roman's vegetable garden.

From the other side of the house comes lively Latino music. Roman has hitched a white tent on metal poles to their garage. Tables on one side hold plates, napkins, forks, and cups, and they've set up enough folding chairs in a rough circle for a crowd. We meet Hilda, who introduces us to several couples and her husband, Luis. I greet him by name and he tells me, "It's Louis." I remember Rufina saying her family members prefer the American pronunciation, and say, "Hi, Louis." Hilda asks if we'd like some *horchata*, a sweet rice drink. Eben thinks of his high glucose and I think calories, so we settle for water instead. Hilda brings us plates of

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food Rufina has cooked. She's checked ahead to ask if we like tamales. We do. They're *muy picante*, but delicious. So are the tostadas and tacos.

People keep arriving, most of them couples with children. Two young women sit across from us, slim Lakshmi, and Nadine, who is dark and plump. Like Hilda, Nadine works for Duke University. She grew up in Charleston, South Carolina, and isn't Mexican but—she hesitates before she says it—"Palestinian." I wonder if she's afraid we'll react badly to her background and tell her about my old divinity school friend Jan, who adopted a wounded teenager on the Left Bank and raised the money to fly him to Boston for surgery that eased the last months of his life.

As we talk, I feel a pang of loss for my Atlanta family's Fourth of July picnics at my aunt and uncle's place, The Farm, the picnic tables loaded down under old pecan trees. By now the aunts and uncles have all died, and most of my cousins have moved to Florida. It feels good to be part of a family group again, though I wouldn't have guessed it would be a Mexican-American family. Twenty years ago I was shocked when I first saw Hispanic men in the old A&P across Highway 15-501. I knew California had Latino workers, and in Chicago I signed petitions for Cesar Chavez, but migrant workers in Chapel Hill? My mind did the same somersault it did at the University of Chicago when I introduced myself to the dean of students and found he was a young man of color.

These shocks were necessary, I think, to challenge my Old South attitudes. In sixth grade in 1946, in Winder, Georgia, I discovered Southerners had owned *slaves*. Unbelieving, I interrogated Mother. "There were good slave owners and bad ones," she said. "Ours were the good ones." That was the first time she told her family's much-trumpeted story of the Nelson family butler who buried the silver when he heard the Yankees were on the way. Mother told the story as evidence our family had treated Negroes kindly.

In sixth grade, I believed her. She'd befriended two of our maids, Amagene and Lizzie, and when Lizzie came to her lake house they went out fishing in Mother's tiny boat, the *Me Too*, made lunch together, and ate in the dining room. By the 1970s Mother's racial attitude was tinged with irony for me. She treated Lizzie and Amagene with more courtesy and sympathy, I thought, than she did us, her three children.

But her attitude toward the black women who worked for us showed me the good sense of

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racial equality that helped me become a liberal on racial issues. My two years at divinity school marked a U-turn in my life. I thought I'd arrive at an easy acceptance of other people, whatever their color or background. But even now I can trip over Atlanta attitudes so deeply ingrained they lead me against those ideals. I've spent my life revising my Old South self.

At Rufina's, another Anglo couple arrives, with a seven-month-old baby. The man introduces himself, we shake hands, and he introduces his wife, Michelle, who is a teacher. They've migrated from Syracuse, New York, and see the South mainly as a place with a milder climate. He would never guess that we Old South Southerners see ourselves in terms of ancestors, family silver, Southern hospitality, and the obligations of *noblesse oblige*, which says we've received many gifts and are obliged to use them to help those less fortunate, whatever their race or class. With such bred-in-the-bones attitudes we Old South types separate ourselves from more recent immigrants, whether from Mexico, Syracuse, or any other Yankee place. That's what my Old South upbringing tells me.

My twenty-first-century self rolls its eyes at this lapse. *Noblesse oblige* is so nineteenth century. Louis takes charge of the newcomers' baby. The boy is not thrilled to leave Mom but doesn't cry. I tell Louis he looks at home with the baby, and he says he has "a lot of nephews." I ask how many, and he says, "Fourteen." Someone calls out that his aunt had twenty children, and everyone laughs. Soon the baby is smiling and playing what we Southerners call peep-eye with Louis.

People are pouring in now. Hilda and Rufina make sure everyone has a drink and a plate of food. Eben and I had planned to go to a movie, but when I tell Rufina we're going, she says, "We going to have *games*." So we stay. One of the women passes out small baby-blue pins we get to keep as long as we don't cross our legs or ankles. Catch someone when they forget, and you can take their pin. I see this as our collective prayer for Hilda to have an easy labor. Whoever collects the most pins earns a prize. Eben and I soon lose ours, to Nadine, who sports a large collection across her broad bosom.

For the next game, Louis dresses a baby doll in its full outfit, including bib, while blindfolded. He's a good sport about using diaper cream too, then Pamper-ing the doll, pulling on blue pants, a shirt, and the bib. We all applaud. Rufina gets two people to hold the ends of a line with twenty clothespins attached, and we women take turns naming things a baby needs as we pull one clothespin for each item. We get ten seconds but can use only one hand. I pluck four. The quick-thinking winner triumphs with nine.

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The party's still going, music playing, the same three-year-old pushing a gigantic Tonka truck up and down the grassy yard, children tossing Frisbees when we leave. Rufina thanks us for coming, and we thank her for having us. Hilda and Roman see us to the car amid thanks on both sides. We say what a great party it was—parties are a universal language, I see—and tell Roman, again, how happy we are that he and Rufina became citizens last October. The four of us smile as we say goodbye in the waning light, and I think as we drive home that all of us are faces of the New South.