

By Daniel J. Bressler, MD, SDCMS-CMA Member Since 1988



Blancas

For three years starting in 1984, fresh out of my academic Harvard residency, I had the privilege of working at San Ysidro Health Center, a “stone’s throw” away from the Mexican border. Despite my poor Spanish language skills, I was welcomed into the lives and homes of my patients, many of whom spoke no English. When I left the Health Center to start a private practice, a number of my patients “came with me.” I still look after a number of these, my “original” patients, although their ranks are, understandably, thinning. One woman, who has since passed, is refreshed in my memory by the continuing visits of her surviving sister and niece. I have done my best to capture the delight and sadness of her memory in this poem, called, simply, “Blancas.” The names and other identifying information have been changed so as not to encroach on the confidentiality of these lovely people.

Finding no suitor in Oaxaca
You convinced widowed mother and aunt
To jump the easy border with you to San Diego.
Crumpled 1950s dollars for hard labor
Fed and housed your little family of women.
Housekeeping instructions you learned,
And The Pledge of Allegiance.

I first met your mother at La Clinica de Salud.
Her breathing was short and we had free med samples.
At every visit she draped a silk scarf over her shoulders
An irrevocable connection to feminine elegance
Its burgundies and silvers a world away
From the institutional exam room furniture.

You yourself are now past 80, “Blanca Joven,”
And no longer scrubbing floors in upscale Bonita.
Unused to having problems of your own,
You giggle apologies for your pains and debilities.
Larded tamales and tortillas are not the usual diet
I prescribe for edema and hypertension.
And yet, the years roll on taking you with them.

Twenty years now since we buried your mother.
I, too, left La Clinica, that place where poverty
Was always first on the problem list.
You promised to follow me and true as your smile
Here you are in my office, 3 bus changes
Up from South County, always early,
Always eager with your deaf aunt in tow
Calling “Hola, doctor!” across the waiting room.

I remember visiting your mother housebound at the end.
She served me a sopa “reserved for honored guests”
And honored I was by the broth and performance.
She glanced flirtingly at me between gasps for oxygen.
Half sorceress, delaying death with her spells;
Half coquette taking the digoxin only to please her gringo doctor
Hiding her bulging neck veins with that silk scarf.

She smiled as you smile now, taking out Tia Herminia’s pills
Laying them on the countertop of the exam room
For my blessings and rearrangements.
For so long I have felt overpaid by your family’s gifts:
Your example of devotion to your mother and her sister;
The way Herminia holds my face in her hands at each visit
And beams, “Mi doctor!” as if a long search has just ended.
The way “Blanca Vieja” used her scarf to signal me
That love is a mystery stronger even than death. **SDP**