

Chapter 2 – Laura Escobar – Realtor and Divorced Mother of Two

Prologue

I met Laura in part because of whom I used to be. Like everyone else, where I am today is a result of where I was yesterday. Our GPS coordinates on the map of life are based on the steps we took, the turns we made, the paths we chose before. In this case, I stopped at Rancho La Pitaya, on the outskirts of Querétaro, capitol of the state by the same name, because I had wondered how it was doing, or even if it still existed. In another chapter I talk about ending up in the backcountry of Durango because I was seeking a hot spring I'd never seen. In this case I wanted to verify that one I'd known and loved still existed.

If I had not known Pitaya existed, I'd not have known to look for it. It wasn't in any guidebooks that I knew of, except ones I'd written long ago. They did have a web site but it hadn't been updated in years and no one answered emails.

Pitaya was a pet project of mine when I'd owned a spa reservation service. They were one of only two high-end spas that had mineral waters. We'd done limited business because they never worked out the part about picking tourists up from the Mexico City airport. Try as I might, I could not sell them. The average spa-goer is not the most adventurous tourist who would take a bus or rent a car and drive a few hours in a foreign country. We stopped doing business, but I never forgot them. Apparently the owner didn't forget me either.

“Mexico” Mike had been out of the travel-writing and spa-reserving businesses for many years. Only rarely could I stop at a hotel and expect anyone to remember me. But Pitaya did. Not only did the owner remember me, he drove forty minutes from his home to greet me and then gave us free, the best room in the house. I swear that suite was larger than some houses I've lived in. There were two sofas, a hand-carved dining table, a bed big enough for a soccer team and more elegance than I deserved. That one act of kindness by an old friend made a battered ego begin to mend.

We only stayed one night and were getting ready to leave. For some reason, I felt compelled to talk to the elegantly-dressed woman standing near the front desk. Call it Fate, synchronicity or coincidence. She was well-dressed, but had the air of someone working, not vacationing. We chatted and, while she hadn't a clue who “Mexico” Mike was, she did enthusiastically consent to an interview. In many ways, although short, her interview was one of the more powerful ones. But, allow me to back out and let her tell her story.

EDITOR'S NOTE: All statistics here come from INEGI, the federal institute of statistics (Instituto Nacional De Estadística Y Geografía <http://www.inegi.gob.mx>) and are based on the most recent published statistics, generally 2004 or 2006, unless otherwise noted.

Laura's Story

Laura Escobar is 49 years old, divorced, sells real estate at an upscale residential development and enjoys her life. Laura is by no means unique, though she is a product of modern Mexico of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Her story would have been a rarity as late as the early 1970's. Since then, middle-class women's roles in society have changed tremendously in Mexico as they have in the United States.

Women have more choices today than in years past. They have more opportunities in the job market to make a living (though in honesty, there is still a gender wage differential). Oddly enough, there is reverse gender discrimination in many fields. Women are hired over men because they are perceived as being more efficient in office situations.

In lower-level jobs, women are also preferred as clerks or cashiers, because they are considered more honest. I first became aware of this in the mid 1980's when I noticed that there were more women gas station attendants (yes, Mexico still has someone pump gas for you). I asked several and they laughed, saying, "We are more honest." Later I talked to the gas station franchise owners and they agreed that was exactly the reason they had replaced men. Anecdotally, reports of being short-changed at gas stations went down about the same time.

One obvious example of gender preference is that advertisements for lower than management jobs often specify *muchacho* (boy) or *muchacha* (girl) or *hombre* (man) or *mujer* (woman). Something that is not so obvious is that the same ads will specify "*con buen presentación*" which could be translated as "good-looking" or "well-dressed or mannered." It could also be code for "non-Indian looking."

Laura could be a poster-woman for one type of a modern Mexican woman. Forty years ago, divorce was practically unheard of, except for the very rich. If a woman got divorced in the old days, she was generally given a lot of grief by her family and considered something of a social outcast. Today, women's position in society has changed greatly and women are waiting longer to marry (about age 25 versus late teens twenty years ago), many are more self-sufficient financially (52% work outside the home) and divorce, while still not as common as in the United States is not the rarity it once was. The average age at which women get divorced is about 35.4 years. The average number of children per woman of childbearing age has declined to 2.2 (2004).

I met Laura at Rancho La Pitaya, an upscale residential development with a Gran Turismo hotel and spa west of Querétaro, a city of more than a million and a half people and capitol of the state with the same name. It is in central Mexico, 214 kilometers (134 miles) north of Mexico City. To me, real estate salespeople have a certain presence about them and Laura could have been a realtor in Mexico or Los Angeles.

You were originally from Mexico City. Why did you move to Querétaro?

I left Mexico City because of the crime, pollution, and traffic. I have to work because I don't have a husband. I have two daughters, 19 and 13. I love to live in a place like Querétaro with a lot of services, yet tranquil, a university and so on, yet with the life of a little town. If my daughters go out to the *Centro* or to a bar, everything is all right. And it is easy to drive, unlike Mexico City. I am 15 minutes from work and work here in the state of Guanajuato, which is many miles away.

There is a lot of fear of kidnapping in Mexico City. My daughters don't worry about me here. Here you can feel very comfortable. You feel okay.

You are a divorced mother – is that more common than it was 30 years ago?

Yes. There are many more divorced women than there used to be. I have a very pretty life. I have my daughters, my house, and my job. From 100% of the couples from 10 years ago that I know, 90% are divorced. I don't know why.

NOTE: According to INEGI, the federal institute of statistics (Instituto Nacional De Estadística Y Geografía), in 2006 the national divorce rate in Mexico was 12.3 per 100 marriages, with Baja California leading the way with 29.9%. So, while Laura's estimate of her friends who have divorced is valid for her circle of friends, it is not meant to be representative of the country. Of those women who are not living with a spouse, 54% are widows, 32.5% are separated and 13.5% are divorced.

A friend of mine's mother got divorced in Mexico in the 1970's. She also reported that 90% of her friends were divorcees. I guess statistics depend on who's gathering them.

One of the reasons I asked for a divorce was that I can't stand many things about men like my ex-husband. He is typical of a lot of Mexican men. He was *acostumbrado* (meaning he was accustomed to the *macho* way of thinking that the woman should do what her man says). If he quit his job, he said, "Sorry Laura, it doesn't matter. You have a job." His attitude was that it didn't matter if he didn't have money for his wife, for my girls, because his wife has money.

The American mentality that men and women must each give part of the money for your home is better. In Mexico, women love to work, but not to maintain a selfish, lazy husband – an irresponsible husband. If I gave him a hundred pesos, he gave it to his girlfriend. Infidelity and not working is no longer acceptable. Now, Mexican women no longer stand for that kind of behavior.

Is it fair to say that Mexican women have changed and the men have not?

Exactly. They [the men] think they have to have much respect – respect in the *macho* sense. They must be the man of the house. The woman must have the kitchen perfect, the house perfect, even if they work all day. If the husband gets home at one, two, three in the morning, the woman has to feed him.

Now many women feel that they must get even. If her husband has a lover, the woman says, “*Yo tambien,*” I don’t agree with that. If you do that you lose the respect, the love, the communication. The most important thing for a couple is respect.

Women do this out of being cynical. We women have the same rights as men. For me not losing respect is more important than getting even.

In my case, it was not only the lovers. He said, “*I don’t have a job anymore, so you must maintain the house for both of us.*” He was lazy. He began to hit me. He began to treat my girls very badly. I couldn’t stand that. So I left.

*EDITOR’S NOTE: The incidence of **reported** violence against women according to INEGI for 2004 was 25.8%. Many news reports and general sentiment says that most of it is not reported because of a belief that the cops won’t do anything anyway.*

So it is more common today for the woman to leave a bad situation?

Yes. Much more so, but it is not as common as in the States. I think many women still think they are defenseless. In Mexico the only thing different is the macho mentality. Mexican women love to work, to laugh, everything. I think the only difference is the mentality of the macho men

Was it difficult for your family to understand?

My mother was already dead. My oldest brother is 60. My father was already sick with encephalitis so he was not aware. My brother and my sister-in-law were very supportive. He was very worried. He talked a lot of times with my ex-husband. He helped me with moral support and money. My sister-in-law was very supportive. Neither judged me. I had a lot of support with the two of them.

Are you Catholic?

Yes.

Did the Church oppose the divorce? Your priest didn’t say you can’t do this?

The priest that married me, actually he is married.

[EDITOR’S NOTE: While what Laura said is not uncommon, “married” is not technically accurate. Some priests do have “wives” (a situation that is well-known in the community) but obviously without the sanction of the Church’s sacrament of marriage.]

You had different jobs and now you work as a real estate agent?

That is right.

Have you always found work?

Yes. When I was in Mexico City, I finished my studies. I began to work for Colgate/Palmolive Company. Then I had to quit because Lareleana, my oldest daughter, was coming. Then I didn't work for five years because I loved to raise my two daughters. After the youngest one was in school, I called Colgate and asked if I could return. They did not have space for me. Then I had a good job with another trans-national. I then got a very, very good job with Banamex in Mexico City. I had that job when I got divorced. I came with my daughters to Querétaro. I got another job with an international company.

What income level would you say qualifies as middle-class in Mexico today?

In pesos with a family of three people, ten thousand to twenty thousand per month is about right for a middle-class income.

To live like that you have to have a college education? In the USA you can advance to middle class if you work hard and are smart. In Mexico is it possible to become middle class without an education?

No. The only way is that you have to have win the lottery or if you go to Las Vegas and win the biggest "Premio." In Mexico if you don't have a good education if you have a lot of money you can buy yourself into a better social level.

In the United States we are a very capitalist society and entrepreneurial. Is it difficult to be entrepreneurial in Mexico?

Right now it is difficult – very difficult. A long time ago it was not difficult. Ten years ago things changed. You have a lot of unhealthy competition. Say you start a restaurant. In three months, another person starts one nearby. Instead of coming up with an original idea, people copy someone else and try to take their business.

There is a story I have heard from many Mexicans about two buckets of crabs. While the story is not accurate about crab behavior in general, it is a parable about human behavior. One bucket, full of American crabs, has a lid on it to keep the crabs from escaping. The other bucket, full of Mexican crabs, has no lid. When asked why, the fisherman said that the American crabs will help each other climb out. The Mexican crabs, when they see one of their fellows making a break for it, will grab him and pull him down. Have you ever heard that?

Of course. It is very common for people to tell that story. The story is from Oaxaca. That is the Mexican way of thinking. Others hold you down.

Are there a lot of government regulations? Is that part of the problem?

No. It is the unhealthy competition.

Given the chance, if you could live in Mexico or the United States, where would you live?

Mexico. Definitely. I like to visit the United States and to shop there, but for me and my family there is a better quality of life here in Mexico.

Gracias.

Thank you.

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