

## Chapter 23 – José Sánchez – He Came to the States, He Worked, He Returned to Nuevo Ideal, Durango

José Sánchez is in his late thirties. He is back in his family home in Nuevo Ideal, Durango. He is working his father's ranch and doing contracting work. This is a small town in the northern part of the state of Durango, a few hours north of the capitol city of Durango. Durango is a western state, bordering Chihuahua and Sinaloa, both states noted for drug production. Durango's most well-known favorite son (at least to Americans) is Pancho Villa.

If the above was all you knew about the state, you would have a negative impression. I put those facts in to show that facts can be misleading. To my mind, there is probably not a more peaceful state in Mexico than Durango or more open, honest, friendly people.

It's unlikely a foreign tourist would stumble into Nuevo Ideal, unless, like me, he was a hot springs fanatic. Even so, how I ended up in Nuevo Ideal and in José's spacious, well-appointed living room needs some explanation.

### Prologue

It all started with the Internet, as do most stories in the twenty-first century. The phrase, "once upon a time" will be replaced with, "Once upon the Internet". This story, like many good stories started with synchronicity. I had been delayed in leaving for my trip to Durango because of car trouble. While waiting for the car at the Ford dealer in Texas, a salesman struck up a conversation, naturally with the motive of selling me a new car. That's what salesmen do. I told him we were just waiting for my car to be ready to take a trip to Mexico. As people invariably do, he asked where we were going.

*A little town you've probably never heard of – Otáez, Durango.*

*You mean Santa Maria de Otáez. My family is from Nuevo Ideal, Durango. Why on earth are you going to Santa Maria de Otáez, he asked.*

What were the odds of running into someone from that remote part of Durango state in Mission, Texas?

*There are hot springs there (aguas termales) that are supposed to be in the shadow of a live volcano. One of the readers of my book on Mexican hot springs told me about it. She hadn't actually been there, but had heard about it from locals.*

*I don't know about that, but maybe you would like to talk to my cousin, José who lives in Nuevo Ideal?*

I left the dealership with a well-running Ford and the cell phone number of someone in a small town in Durango.

## Interview

We'd called José from a restaurant run in town that was run by Mennonites. That's a whole 'nother story. José said he'd stand by the road to meet us since there were no street signs in his *colonia*. Surely enough, at the kilometer marker sign on the highway, stood José and his dog. I figure that a man who has a dog has to be okay. We offered to let the dog ride in the car, on the way back to the house, but that was not a culturally accepted thing to do. Americans and Canadians treat our animals like family, but for the most part (of course there are exceptions, usually involving Chihuahuas), Mexicans see dogs as working partners. So the three of us rode and the dog ran ahead to guide us to José's house. It was modern, as in built in the 1930's or so, large and had enough room for trees and an outdoor sitting area. José's mother greeted us, then returned to her *telenovela* on TV. We sat outside, sipping refreshingly cool *aguas* or fruit-flavored water that mamá had made in anticipation of our arrival. No matter who you are, you are not a stranger in a Mexican home.

*José, what can you tell me about your life?*

I lived in the States for several years. I worked in construction, as a painter. Oh, of course, I was illegal, but there were plenty of jobs and the employers needed people to do them. My bosses liked Mexican workers. We work hard and don't complain. Sometimes that means that we don't get all the safety equipment or scheduled breaks and things, but mostly, I think the guys I worked for were fair.

*What did you think about living in the United States?*

I liked the American people. They were not very friendly, but I still liked them. They didn't mix much with us, but we didn't mix with them either. I liked the orderliness in your country. The streets and highways are good. The police are mostly fair. There are some who just like to beat up Mexicans, but most of them are pretty fair. But there are too many laws. There are too many restrictions to life. Here, if you do something wrong, you can pay and go on. There, you have to go to jail. I tried to never do anything wrong.

When I was learning English, I watched a lot of TV. First I watched the soap operas, which are like our *telenovelas*. Eventually, I watched situation comedies to learn slang and the news. I also listened to talk radio. Most talk radio has guys who hate Mexico. They made me mad at first, but they made me want to learn your language so I could prove them wrong. There are guys here who hate Americans, but there aren't as many as there are guys who hate Mexico in your country.

But you know, I see their point. If Americans were coming here and beating out Mexicans for the same jobs, I would be mad too. But in all the jobs I worked, I never saw

an American trying to get it. At the construction sites, sure, there were Americans, but most of them were not the laborers like us. I was only advanced because the American guy who had the job before me couldn't do it.

I talked to the guys who worked at meat packing plants. *¡Ay caramba!* That is an ugly *chamba* (job). Americans would come, last two days and quit. Only the Mexicans and the Central Americans would keep doing it.

We paid Social Security that we will never collect. But some of the Mexicans stole social security numbers in order to get jobs. That was bad, but it happened. For fifty to a hundred bucks, you could get all sorts of documents. I never did any of that, but some did.

The TV news, when it talked about Mexicans, always showed how we were taking away jobs and having babies. Or it would talk about some guy who was “an illegal alien” who committed a crime. Sure, some guys were just bad. But most of us were just trying to work and not do bad things. Some guys who were bad guys here went north and found it easier to be criminals than to work. They were no good here too. They were the ones people remembered when they talked about Mexicans.

*So why did you come back to Mexico?*

I was not deported. I just came home. The final motivator was that my father was getting older and needed help on his ranch. But I was already tired of living up there. Even in the Mexican communities, you always feel like a foreigner. Sure, people around you speak Spanish and the food is similar, but it's not the same. The people are from all around the country, not your home area. Their Spanish is different. The food is not as good. And you never feel quite as free in the United States as you do in Mexico.

*I've heard that before, but what exactly do you mean? Is it related to being an illegal immigrant?*

Sure, naturally that is part of it. But you're just aware of more laws that restrict you. In Mexico people are freer to do what they want.

So, I saved my money – naturally I sent most of it back to my family – and came home. I started a little painting business here. Later, I also went to work for our family ranch.

I learned a lot about how to work in the States. Here, we are not as strict in quality control. In painting, that means there are more drips, more touch-up that is never done. In construction, things work, but they are not double-checked. So there might be gaps between where a pipe goes into a wall or where an electric junction or switch goes. In the US, those things are always finished. Here, guys just leave them. That's one valuable thing about working in the States, and maybe one difference between our countries. You pay more attention to details than we do. It's because of this that guys who worked in the States are more successful when they come back home. Mexicans appreciate quality, just like you do. We perceive that a man who worked up north will do a better job than a Mexican who never left home.

This is not always true, of course. It takes more time to do things right. People who hire you want quality, but don't want to pay for it. So, eventually, most guys end up doing things half-assed again in a few years.

*I've heard from other construction people that overall construction prices are similar for new construction as in the States. True or not?*

Not exactly, but sometimes. It is hard to make generalizations about Mexico because things are so different from region to region. But many times that would be true. For example, concrete, which is made in Mexico and is one of our big exports, costs more here than it does in the States. Labor is, of course, cheaper, but everything takes longer to finish. I don't understand that because the same guys who worked on crews in *el otro lado* [Spanish phrase for "the other side," which means the other side of the Rio Grande or the United States] and worked just as fast, if not faster, than the American workers, slow down when they get back here.

Of course, things are much better in terms of quality now than they were when I was a kid. But you know it is funny. Mexican stonemasons or bricklayers, for example, were well-known for their accuracy in the old days. They used only a piece of string and a level and did a good job. Today, guys can have technological equipment and not do as well.

There are *haciendas* built hundreds of years ago that are still standing and in good shape. There are little house build twenty years ago that are falling apart. Sometimes, it is just greed. A construction boss will be *codo* [stingy] on the mixture of his concrete to keep a few pesos in his pocket or use inferior materials when charging for quality ones. You see this a lot in government projects. I'd like to say that this is changing, and it may be, but I can not swear to it. We distrust our government, even more than you do in the States.

*Most everyone I've talked to has complained about the government. Can you be a little more specific?*

Most Americans complain about their government, and sure, there is corruption and what we call a *patron* system where a politician hires his family and friends instead of people who are qualified. And there are government construction projects that are poor quality. But overall, I think you have a much better system than we do. We like to think it is changing, and it is, but it is a slow process. We are a young country. Our last revolution was in the early part of the last century. We've only had a real democracy for a decade or so. I think that one area where people talk good about this current government is in the battle with the *narcotraficantes*. I think they are real in the fight, not like the previous administrations. It was the previous corrupt governments that got us into this mess. [He smiled] But we have been fooled before by our governments.

*Since construction is your area of expertise, can you tell us how things are done here in Mexico?*

I think one of our traits as a people is that we don't think ahead, at least in the construction trade. I mean, everybody knows how big a wall plate for a light switch is.

When the workers put up the concrete, cut the wallboard or drywall, they could measure exactly. But they don't. That's why you see so many light switches with extra space around them. The same is true for where pipes go into walls. It doesn't affect the working of the light switch. It still works, so we put up with it.

In my own business, painting, in the States, we were careful to put down drop cloths and to finish up the parts where the wall and the ceiling joined with a detail brush. Here, guys put down a broken-down cardboard box that is the wrong size, or newspaper, so paint drips everywhere. They spend more time cleaning up than if they did it right in the first place. And the same *Raza* [race, as in ethnicity] that is famous for intricate pottery painting can't finish the joins of the ceilings and the walls.

Electricity here is expensive. More houses are getting air conditioning and electric heating. Yet, there are so many gaps for air to escape that we pay much more than we should. But I read about better construction techniques and more energy efficient ways of doing things. So maybe we are changing.

*So what does a house cost here?*

This is a small town. Houses are cheaper here than in a city. Most houses are two bedrooms, sometimes three or with a little casita in the back for the mother. The house across the street is for sale for about ten thousand dollars. That's the Mexican to Mexican price. You would pay more for it. I think that is fair.

The average American who thinks he is 'poor' is much better off than a poor Mexican. If an American wanted to move here, [he laughed at the thought] which is pretty unlikely, people would think he had more money. And, if he could pay a higher price, then he would have more money, wouldn't he? I hear that there are Mexican and *gringo* prices for houses in towns where there are a lot of Americans. There probably are. I know a *gringo* in Durango City who bought a very nice house for thirty thousand dollars. But he was married to a Mexican woman and had her cousin do all the negotiating. Otherwise he would have paid more. That's just the way it is.

*What do you think of Americans moving to your country?*

[Laughs]. You mean, "the dry ones?" [This is a play on the word *mojados* or "wet ones", for illegal Mexican immigrants. It comes from the stereotype that they swim the Rio Grande to get into the USA]. I think it is great. It just goes to show that you can't get all your news from the TV and radio. [Laughs again]. Most Mexicans like *gringos*. We find them entertaining. You people have some funny ideas about how to live. We never laugh at you because that would be impolite, but we enjoy you. It used to be that most Americans who moved here were guys who met a Mexican girl. I think Mexican girls are agents of *Migración* (immigration). [Laughs]. Either that or they were old people on Social Security. Now there are more young couples moving here.

We don't see any here, of course, but I have cousins in Pto. Vallarta and Mazatlan. Lots of *gringos* move there. They are good for the economy. Only some of them never try to understand Mexicans. They stay to themselves. Most of them are legal, but there are

many who are just as illegal here as I was in the States. They come here on a tourist permit, stay too long and get jobs. They really do take jobs from Mexicans. But there is a double standard. Oh well, *asi es México* (such is Mexico).

*Would you go back to the States to work if you had the chance?*

[He thought about this, shook his head as if he had come to a decision]. No. Probably not. It would depend. Right now, I feel I can make a good living here in my country. But many people from here go north. Half the houses on this street are empty because the men have gone to the States to work and the women have moved back in with their families.

But for me, I am doing well here. Working on the ranch is hard but it is good to work on your own land. And I can still build houses as long as anyone is building. I employ a couple of guys. I feel freer here and my family is here. I do not think my father could take care of the ranch by himself. The only troubles can be that the cost of raising cattle gets to be too much. In my construction business, sometimes people, rich people, want quality, but don't want to pay for it. So we will see. We will see.

It is not like I am a poor guy. If I was, I might think differently. I have a nice enough house. It is not a big house and this is not a rich neighborhood, but I know all the neighbors and they are good people. By US standards, this would be a poor neighborhood. But in the US people would feel poor and act poor. Here, people are proud and are happy. That's a big difference. We don't expect our government to take care of us. We take care of ourselves, our families and our neighbors.

*If you could talk to my audience and tell them about Mexico, what would you say?*

This will sound funny, but don't judge us Mexicans by the ones who come to your country illegally. Sure, I did and I am a good guy. But I learned English and I never wanted to stay in your country any longer than I had to. Most of the guys who go north are hard workers and honest, but some are just lazy bums who think living there is easier. It is not. It is very hard.

Come to my country and meet us for yourself. We are good people and we like Americans.

*Thank you, José. And that hot spring, do you know how to get there?*

Truthfully, no. But as we say in my country, go down the road a few kilometers. That does not mean we know what is there, but that we hope you will meet someone closer who knows what you are looking for.

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I left José's house with another insight into the Mexican people and a friend for life. That was the greatest gift from that trip. I never did find that hot spring, or anyone who knew for sure that it existed. The road to *Santa Maria de Otáez* was a six-hour switchback drop

from the paved road, which was a couple of hours from the nearest hotel in Santiago Papasquiario. The owner of the hotel there knew of *Santa Maria*, and had a cousin who was a guide in the area, but she'd never heard of a volcano. She also did not think there was a hotel or restaurant there, since it was only a *pueblito*.

As José said, time is the most valuable commodity in Mexico and I was running out of it. Spending two days travel on what might have been a wild goose chase was an expense I could not afford. But *Santa Maria de Otáez* will always be there, unless there really is a volcano and it erupts and covers the town. If a volcano erupts in a far-off village in Mexico, does anyone hear? They did when *Paractín* erupted in 1943, but that eruption lasted for nine years. Until I hear that, I will always wonder about *Santa Maria*. Sometimes, it's better to fantasize than to discover the reality.

But while looking for another hot spring nearer civilization (that we never found either), we were invited into the house of a gentleman who had the biggest *hacienda* in another small town. He saw us asking directions on the *zócalo* and came out to help us. His name was Fernando. He spoke perfect English and invited us to his home for a coffee. He, too, had worked in the States, though since he was an upper-class rancher, he was buying and selling cattle. He had come back to his little town to buy the old *hacienda* to preserve it and to provide employment for his town. Whenever people ask me if I am afraid to travel in Mexico, especially off-the-beaten track, I think of that tall, sophisticated *caballero* [which in general Mexican Spanish usage means a gentleman in the old-fashioned sense]. I wish I had had the Mexican sense of time and taken more of it to enjoy his hospitality. Because in the big picture, people are more important than plans.

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