



Alessandra Olmedo's story of

Lilian



Lilian Maria Andrea was born to Juan and Elvira Garcia on September 28, 1936 in the sleepy coastal town of Tuxpan, in Veracruz, Mexico.

Lilian was the firstborn of three children of the Garcia's. She had a sister, Lourdes and later a brother, Juan Junior. However when Lilian was 3, Lourdes died aged 7 months from a fever that even in those times should have been easily cured.

Juan loved his little girls and when baby Lourdes died, young Lilian became the center of his life. He spoiled her and demanded everyone around him do the same. Three year old Lilian sat on his knee before he went to tend to the General Store he owned in town and list all the treats she craved: mangoes, oranges, guavas... When her wish was fulfilled, she would eat a couple of bites and leave the rest. Her mother Elvira would shake her head, while her adoring father rewarded Lilian with laughter and hugs.

Lilian's world was filled with wise adults like her grandparents Eneas, "El Abuelo" and Doña Emilia and numerous Aunts and Uncles. She also had a nanny; a "hired" playmate, a girl slightly older than her, whose "job" was to play with Lilian. She had all the toys she could wish for and beautiful dresses sewn by her mother from exquisite European fabrics purchased by her father.

Lilian's grandmother Doña Emilia died from ovarian cancer at the age of 46, when Lilian was only 4. Her memories of her grandmother are blurry but she remembers sitting at her bedside, holding her hand and listening to her moaning in delirious pain.

When Lilian was 6 her world collapsed. Shortly after her brother was born, her parents separated in a bitter dispute with public humiliation. Her father paraded his mistress, while claiming that Elvira had been unfaithful to him and that baby Juan – his spitting image- was not his son.

Lilian's childhood went from fairy tale to misery overnight. Her father wouldn't pay support so Elvira and her two children moved to El Abuelo's home, renting out their former residence, and Elvira worked as a seamstress to earn a living. Lilian remembers sparse meals of homemade quesadillas fried in lard and stuffed with refried beans, fried plantains, fruit from El Abuelo's yard and sometimes little luxuries like sardines or ham tortas when their rich uncle came to town and filled the pantry.

"Tuxpeños" are, as the vast majority of Mexicans, staunchly Catholic -church-going, saint-worshipping, Virgin-of-Guadalupe-devout Catholics, and Lilian's Family was no exception. Her mother, aunts, uncles and well-meaning but nosey godmother were constantly lecturing her about God's disappointment in her mischief. She hated going to church when she had better things to do, like climbing up trees to pick sour cherries. Lilian was restless; however, her godmother promised her that if she went to church, repented from her sins and prayed really hard, God would listen to her and grant her ANYTHING she asked of Him, because He loved her, He was omnipotent and He wanted her to be happy.

So Lilian cleaned up, was good for almost an entire week, went to church and asked God for what she wanted most in the world – to bring her Father and Mother back together. But her father's cruelty continued over a series of painful episodes and Lilian realized that praying wasn't going to fix her broken family. Lilian stopped going to church and believing in God and despite being reprimanded, remained steadfast in her non-belief.

Lilian was a tomboy who caught spiders, ventured into the forest, and became especially adept at learning foul language from none other than "El Abuelo"! She instigated many pranks and wasn't an attentive

student. Her teacher, Miss Regina, got so frustrated that she hit Lilian's hands with a ruler. Elvira encouraged Miss Regina to do this anytime it was necessary.

When she turned 13, Lilian went to live in Mexico City with her rich uncle and his family to finish high school and enroll in a secretarial course. Her aunt was cruel and petty, and made sure Lilian never forgot she was an "arrimada" (a scrounger) and limited the food she could eat. Thankfully, the maid pitied hungry Lilian and snuck leftovers into her room.

Lilian became a tall and slim teenager with thin lips, light brown hair and beautiful brown eyes. Even on a budget, she wore fashionable pencil skirts and tops that accentuated her small waist. She loved the music of the time, Rock and Roll "en Espanol" and idolized Pedro Infante, a Mexican superstar who filmed romantic comedies and sang tender ballads with a Mariachi Band.

Lilian's father only came back into their lives once, feigning remorse to convince Elvira to sell the only asset they owned – their house in Tuxpan – and to give him the proceeds to start a business. After he got the money, he vanished, never to be heard from again. Lilian never forgave him, and had a tough time forgiving her mother for falling for the con.

After completing her education, Lilian returned to Tuxpan for a job in the Naval Ministry office. She soon realized that the gossip of a "Pueblo Chico, Infierno Grande" (small town, big hell) did not suit her. Accustomed to life in the big city, she convinced her mother and brother to move back with her to Mexico City.

They rented a small apartment. Elvira sold clothing, but Lilian's brother quit school and didn't work, so Lilian was the main breadwinner in their little household. Working as a secretary, she gained valuable experience and many lifelong friends. Lilian had a boyfriend that she remembers as "rich" and with a "nice car" however he was "very Catholic" so that relationship didn't last long.

In 1962, she met tall and outgoing Alejandro Olmedo at Italian lessons.

The story of their meeting is a little muddled: Lilian says that Alejandro fell for her after being rejected by the "pretty girl" in the class and that he sought her out relentlessly. Alejandro claims that Lilian wrote him an affectionate note, carefully worded in Italian, inviting him to a party at her house, and therefore she CLEARLY had a crush on him! They have been married for 50 years and these clashing stories still cause a spirited argument between them.

Lilian and Alejandro started dating on October 17, 1962 and they are both proud to say that they saw each other every single day of their four year long courtship, which was as appropriate and innocent as the customs of the times dictated. Lilian recalls that she was attracted to Alejandro's extroverted and witty personality, but the thing she liked the most was that –like her- Alejandro had renounced Catholicism and was a proud Atheist. Lilian had found and fallen in love with a man who shared her views – in Mexico, a true rarity!

They got engaged in the summer of 1966 and were married in a civil ceremony on October 17, 1966. To satisfy his father's request, they also agreed to have a church wedding, which took place on Monday, December 26, 1966. Elvira was invited by Alejandro to move in with him and Lilian right after they returned from their honeymoon.

The newlyweds planned to wait two years before having children and, rather incredibly, precisely on December 26, 1968, their first daughter, to be named Alessandra in honour of their meeting at Italian

lessons, was born. They wanted to have two daughters so their second one, born in 1972 completed their family.

Mom stopped working after I was born and mastered the art of being a wife, a mom, and a hostess. She and Dad made new friends and hosted animated dinner parties.

We travelled to Tuxpan often. I remember holding Mom and Grandma's hands while walking through its streets with them, playing with their friends' kids and grandkids respectively.

Dad had a good job as a salesman and he travelled a lot, but Mom and Grandma stayed home with us and when Dad was in town, we did family stuff like day trips museums, parks, and movies.

In 1974, Mom and Dad excitedly planned to build a house on a lot they purchased in a southern neighbourhood of Mexico City. The design was finalized and construction set to start when the President of Mexico decided to expropriate their lot – directly across the street from his private residence- to build an office. Dad and the architect were chased away by soldiers pointing machineguns at them and my parents had to give up their dream house. Mom and Dad made plans to leave the country that had so ruthlessly betrayed them. They were ready to go across the ocean to start a new life but the negotiations to buy a business in Spain fell through. Mom and Dad stayed in Mexico, purchasing a new townhouse in an up and coming neighbourhood where we would spend the following 24 years.

Mom and Grandma managed the household together: Food was their main vehicle of expression and creativity. They'd sit together at the table making "tamales" and Grandma would scold Mom for adding too much or too little of something. After all, a "pinch" was a perfectly precise measurement, wasn't it? Mom would roll her eyes but comply and in the end, and we all enjoyed traditional "Tuxpeñas" meals.

They would spend entire mornings making taquitos, taking turns in stuffing freshly made tortillas with shredded beef or refried beans, rolling and weaving them together with a toothpick to later fry and serve them with Mexican cream, salsa and queso fresco...

Mom enjoyed baking and cooking, and became known amongst our friends for her specialties: carrot cake and butter cookies.

Mom and Dad travelled to Europe a couple of times in the 70's. I still have Mom's postcards with quick anecdotes about their trip, always saying how much they missed us. We also travelled as a family on vacations abroad. Mom attended our school functions and drove us to after-school lessons.

In the 1990's, Mexico's social climate started deteriorating quickly. In 1998 our family business was broken into and this triggered the idea of moving to Canada. We had visited Vancouver the previous summer and fell in love with the city and its people so it was a natural choice. Including Grandma, we all became landed immigrants in 2000, and Mom became a Canadian Citizen in 2006.

Grandma was 92 and in good health when she came to Canada, but a few years later she started to decline physically and mentally. Mom cared for her until she passed away at the age of 100.

Mom had continued her path from a small town to a big city, and then to a totally different country and culture. But despite being comforted by the beautiful landscape and knowing that we are safe and regardless of everything she hears about what is going on in the homeland, even though she would have never stayed behind, there are times when she becomes nostalgic.

Mom doesn't try to hide that she misses the freedom she lost when she came to live in a country where she is not comfortable speaking the language and where she doesn't feel like she belongs.

And yet, I see glimmers of bubbly Lilian still present; her spontaneous sense of humour, her mischievous smile, and the pleasure she takes in making me laugh with a private joke...

Others have also figured out these qualities in my Mom. They know that her biggest show of affection is through her food; her delicious creations, many of them deep fried, sprinkled with sugar, or infused with spices, are her instinctive way of saying "Me caes bien" (I like you). If you get the twinkle in her eye and an affectionate nickname, you're definitely in her "good books", and if you get the warm hug and "te quiero mucho" ("I love you very much"), you are a favourite and you will be fed even more!