

# Like the Rose

*For Baldomero and Adeena*

*Hugo N. Olaiz*

MY REAL NAME IS CARLOS, but ever since I turned eight everyone calls me Charlie. That's the name I received from Allen and Johnson, the first two Mormons who ever set foot in Paso Seco. Allen and Johnson had already knocked on every door in town when they finally got to ours. You see, we live in the last house on the last street, so by the time they found us they were about to leave town for good.

At that time everyone in Paso Seco was Católico Apostólico y Romano, but Abuelita used to say that we were not. It had all started about ten years before, when Mother got pregnant and the man that got her pregnant left town. Padre Alfonso said very bad things about Abuelita and Mother during mass, and after that Abuelita swore she would never set foot in the Catholic church again. Then when Abuelita started to have strange dreams and visions, most of the people in town thought she had gone crazy, and Padre Alfonso said it was Castigo del Cielo.

When Mother let the Mormon missionaries in, the whole neighborhood was outraged. Padre Alfonso said we were going to go straight to hell. But from the first moment Abuelita saw the elders, she called them Santos Varones. What I remember is that they gave me a Hershey bar, and that was pretty neat because I had never had a Hershey bar before. Allen and Johnson came to our house every day, taught us the gospel, and then they asked us if we wanted to be baptized. I told Mother I wanted to be baptized because I had never been baptized before and also because the elders were good people. So on a Sunday very early we all went down to the river. Allen baptized Mother and Johnson baptized me. I remember I was dressed all in white and even had white socks on. The water was cold, so after the baptisms we all returned home, Abuelita

made some hot chocolate, and the elders brought a heavy cake they called *brownies*. Allen wanted to know how to say *brownies* in Spanish, and we told him we didn't know because we had never seen this type of cake before. The elders taught Mother how to make the cake, and we always called it *brownies* just like the elders did.

A few days after our baptism, Allen and Johnson came by with the news that they had rented a house where they could live and hold meetings. Mother asked them what house it was, and the elders replied it was La Casa de las Locas. Abuelita started to laugh and told the elders that men used to go to that house to dance and drink with women who lived there, and that's why they called it La Casa de las Locas. The elders were embarrassed when they heard the story, but they had already cut the deal, so after that everyone in town knew the Mormons were having meetings in La Casa de las Locas.

Family Home Evenings were what I enjoyed the most. They were on Mondays and everyone was there—that is, the missionaries, Mother, and me. We sang a hymn, had a prayer and a short lesson, and then cooked something. I guess in the old times the kitchen must have been an important part of La Casa de las Locas, because it was big and very comfortable. The elders taught us how to bake cinnamon rolls, and banana bread, and chocolate chip cookies, and apple pies. We also learned how to make French toast and lemon bars.

Four weeks after we started to meet in La Casa de Las Locas, President Shumway and his wife came to Paso Seco for the first time. Mother told me he was boss of all the missionaries in the country. I shook hands with President Shumway just as I used to do with the elders, but he stopped after the first part of the handshake because he didn't know how to continue. He had been serious until that moment, but when he saw the handshake the elders had taught me, he and the others started to laugh, and then I realized there are many ways to shake hands.

People had all kinds of opinions about the elders, swapping many stories that I couldn't believe. Marisa the seamstress was Mother's best friend. She had heard that the Mormons had come to town to kidnap young girls and take them to the United States, so she was really scared and didn't want anything to do with the elders. But then one day Marisa passed by La Casa right when we were making pancakes. The kitchen window was open, and later she said that when she smelled those pancakes she realized that maybe the Mormons weren't all so bad, after all. The batter for the pancakes was easy to make and we could buy margarine or jam, but the maple syrup was a different story. Most of the time we used honey instead, and then one day a new elder came with a bottle of maple flavoring. It was so big that we used it for years and it's still half full.

We knew Allen would soon go back to the United States, but still we were very sorry when he left. Before going he gave us a photo album with his picture on the first page. Elder Johnson came back from the capital with Elder Strong. Strong used to say his name was Elder *Fuerte* because *fuerte* means strong. The elders worked very hard in Paso Seco, trying to teach the people in town, but they couldn't find anyone else who wanted to be baptized.

There were two or three young girls who came to church often, and one of them asked me to find out if Elder Strong had a girlfriend. When I asked him, his face turned red. He told me he did not, but that was a secret between the two of us. He told me that whenever a girl asked me if he had a girlfriend, I had to tell her that he had a very beautiful girlfriend in the United States, and that they were going to get married very soon. I did that not only for Elder Strong, but also for all the elders who came after him. I even started to invent names and descriptions for these American girls I had never seen. The elders loved to hear my descriptions, and they even helped me to come up with more English names. They always told me that, in this case, lying was all right.

After six months the elders started to call the town *Pozo Seco* instead of Paso Seco, and Elder Cluff once said that this town was drier than a Mollie Mormon kiss. I didn't know what a Mollie Mormon was, but after that I told every new missionary that Paso Seco was actually a dry pit, even drier than a Mollie Mormon kiss, and they all laughed their heads off. The elders never asked Abuelita to get baptized, because no one knew for sure if she was crazy or not. One Saturday very early in the morning she got sick. Mother was getting ready to go to the capital, and I was left in charge. I told Abuelita I was going to make a breakfast, something called *French toast*, that she had never had before. When she saw the breakfast, she started to laugh and said that was not French toast but *torrejas*, and that she had eaten them since she was a little girl. Abuelita eventually got better and made *torrejas* for me many times, but when I was with the elders I still called it French toast. And after this episode I was never sure if the elders were teaching us things we had never known or things we had just forgotten.

President Shumway had told Mother he couldn't afford to keep the same two elders for a long time, so every month a new one would come and another would go, and every elder left a picture. I was in charge of adding the new pictures to the album. Two years passed and Mother discovered I was cramming more and more photos right before the last page of the album. I told her I thought that when we finished the album it would be the end of the world. Mother thought that was very funny and told the elders. At the next Family Home Evening Elder Sanders taught a lesson on the Second Coming and ever since then they've called me *Char-*

*lie el Apocalíptico*. That evening Elder Pennock baked cinnamon rolls, but the oven was too hot and when we took the first batch out they were all burned. Elder Sanders said that it had been an object lesson, because those rolls were one of the signs of the Second Coming.

One day Sanders and Pennock came in plain clothes which was quite strange, but they explained to us that with the revolution and everything President Shumway had told them to dress like that. For several days they spent most of the time in La Casa, writing letters and listening to the radio. I visited them every day, ran errands, and even bought them the newspaper; this was also unusual because the elders had a rule that said they weren't supposed to read the news, but I guess in those days there were many rules they were allowed to break.

That Monday we had a special Family Home Evening and we made s'mores. To make s'mores was very difficult because we had to make the marshmallows ourselves, and then wait for the elders to receive a package from the United States with the Hershey bars and the Graham crackers. And sometimes the package would come with a hole in it, or the elder would be transferred before the package arrived, so we had to wait for another elder to receive another package. But then it was neat because we would go outside to make a fire, bend a few of the elders' hangers, and use them to toast the marshmallows. Elder Cluff loved to bend those hangers. He used to say that the hangers made in the country were only good to make s'mores. And he was probably right, because before leaving for the United States he gave us all his American hangers, and we never had to buy hangers again.

Three days after the s'mores, Sanders and Pennock told us that they would have to leave town and that the church was going to be closed. Mother took me with her to the capital to see President Shumway, to tell him he couldn't close the church in Paso Seco. President Shumway listened carefully. Then he explained he was closing the church not only in Paso Seco, but in the whole country before leaving for the United States. He told Mother that, in order to keep the church running, men were necessary—men like Brother Wilson, who worked at the American Embassy, or like Brother Riveros, who had been a professor before emigrating to the United States. He told her that the gospel was for everyone, but that the church had to be lead by men.

Since the revolution many things have happened in our country, and many things have changed. The worst part is the rationing because we receive only a little flour and a little sugar, and the sugar we receive is usually brown. Last time we got flour Mother made some waffles. We had no honey, but Mother had kept some jam hidden and we always have the maple flavoring. That flavoring is about the only thing we have left.

Sometimes Mother and I go to the bookcase and open the album. We take a look at the pictures and we laugh as we recall old stories. I wanted to order the pictures alphabetically, so that we could easily find any elder in the album, but Mother told me that it was unnecessary, because she knows all the names by heart. So we left the pictures in the same order, with Allen at the beginning and Pennock at the end. It is funny to have them like that because that album is the history of the church in Paso Seco.

La Casa de las Locas is now a place to dance. On weekends they play very loud music, dance until three or four in the morning, and sometimes finish the dance with a big shoot-out. The neighbors say they liked it better when the Mormons lived there. Marisa told me she wishes she'd been kidnapped by the elders and taken to the United States rather than staying in this hell of loud music and big guns.

Now I am twelve, and next year I will be drafted into the Ejército Popular Revolucionario. Mother says that she won't allow it, that if the government maintains the draft we'll emigrate to the United States. The elders used to say that at the Second Coming all the Mormons will go to Utah, and that they won't need passports or visas to get there. But Sanders told me once that Zion is in all the places where people are trying to be good. If Sanders was right, then we don't need to go to Utah. We can have Zion here in Paso Seco and see the desert blossom like the rose. Some day they might even call off the rationing so that we can make upside-down cakes, and lemon pies, and cookies, and waffles, and banana bread. That would be really neat. Because the aroma of the banana bread is great. And I remember those chocolate chip cookies and those warm brownies. They smelled so good. And those cinnamon rolls. They had an aroma that I don't think I'll ever forget.