

Editor's Note

Michael Sudolsky's "My Tortilla King" profiles his grandfather Jorge Alamilla and his tortilla business. The essay's introduction uses the pronouns "you" and "him" without being clear as to who this is. What kind of work do you have to do as a reader to find out what is going on? Examine the essay's structure as you read. Is the essay unified in topic and structure? Furthermore, pay attention to the physical descriptions the author gives of his grandparents. Is a detailed-physical description necessary in a profile essay?

Consider the author's sentence variety—the use of varied styles adds to the personality of the essay. Finally, Sudolsky chooses to begin and end his essay with memories in italics. What thoughts are provoked after reading these sections as they are originally positioned in the essay? What changes when they are read together as one piece?

My Tortilla King

Michael Sudolsky

Walking to work, it happened again. Pit-pat sounds echoed as they met brick pavers. Shoestrings were flying. She goes to tie the offenders, but realizes where she is. Looking out the corner of her eye, she checks if he's there. Her heart flutters—she sees him.

You get a preview when you hug him. He greets you like always—"Hey, big boy!" There is a familiar smell of fresh baked tortillas, which seems to have permeated his skin. It's pacifying. You notice his liking towards plaid button ups and beige slacks. He's always dressed his best. On many shirts you've seen, there is an ominous grease stain under his right breast pocket (results of hiding chips from my grandma.) He smiles: you forget your troubles.

Jorge Alamilla married his high school sweetheart. They've been together over fifty years. Together they form an item. As I ask questions, probing through his past, grandma interjects with forgotten details. Together my grandparents raised four children: Jorge, my mother Beatriz, and the twins—Hernan and Francisco. When asking about his relationship with my grandmother, my grandfather Jorge says, "She has been my number one; nothing better has happened." Even while old age takes root, their love remains pure. My grandfather's hair has turned gray. Yet despite his receding hairline (still slicked back like the old days), and bruises from a body now

gone fragile, you notice the twinkle in his eye. You begin to wonder, “What, exactly, have those eyes seen?”

His actions become animated. As he recalls his past, remembering sparse highlights of his seventy-five years, memories surge. He smiles, remembering his youth. The memories I have of my grandfather seem to fuse him with the business. As a kid, my brother and I would explore his factory. I remember being filled with questions of curiosity, and him always having answers. Apparently my perception of him has stayed that way, for never before have I heard these stories. As my grandfather reveals why he immigrated to America and how he started his business, he changes. I discover the greatness of his character.

It's a rainy July in Dzilam de Bravo, Yucatán. The year is 1934. On a family farm, my grandfather, Jorge Alamilla is born. Mayan culture flourishes in this small coastal village. Surrounded by its beaches of white sand, my great grandparents have spent their whole lives here. They want more for their children, however, so it is in Mérida, the capital of Yucatán, where my grandfather is raised.

Recalling his childhood, my grandfather is obviously enamored with his hometown. He tells stories of childhood adventures. He describes Mérida's beauty with such passion you can see it. Most importantly, however, he tells you of his father, who after moving from Dzilam, established a grain store. My grandfather worked with him, and by selling beans and corn, he learned much about business. Perhaps it is this small family store that he owes his success.

At the age of twenty-one, Jorge Alamilla wanted to move to New York City. He had married my grandmother after five years of dating, and at that time they had two children. Just like his father, however, he wanted the best for them. His brother in law, Tio Carlos, had already relocated to the city and had been very successful. Knowing only Tio Carlos, my grandfather moved to the big apple—alone.

It is in New York City where Jorge Alamilla rose from nothing. A newcomer in a foreign land of skyscrapers and English, my grandfather wasted no time. Only hours after stepping off the plane, he found a job. Weeks passed. He was living with Tio Carlos, but desired a place of his own. He yearned to see his family, but knew stability was needed. He found such stability by working nights for a janitorial agency. While others complained and performed tasks half-heartedly, he put his all; “The supervisors noticed. I worked like a horse, and because of it I got promoted,” he said. With shorter shifts, my grandfather found a day job working as a superintendent for their future apartment building. Money was no longer an issue. His hard work had been rewarded and his family was finally reunited.

My grandparents adapted nicely to life in New York, but they missed the foods of Mexico. *Salbutes*, *Panuchos*, and *Queso Relleno*, all of these (and more) lacked

essential ingredients. Even the simple things like corn tortillas remained distant. Grandma recalls making corn tortillas by hand, and bringing spices back in bulk after trips to Mexico. But after awhile, she says, “I wondered, ‘Where are all the tortillas?’”

To my grandfather, the need was obvious. He knew a market for tortillas existed, and in 1976 my grandparents set up shop on Metropolitan Avenue. At this time the store appeared barren. A simple sign declaring “Mexican Tortillas” was displayed. Inside you found a slow moving tortilla press, and a small Mexican woman (my grandma) operating behind it. At first, business was slow, but my grandpa didn’t care. Upon opening, he kept his job as the superintendent for their apartment building, and quit the janitorial agency. This was crucial, for he says, “The business only grew because I was able to put its money back into it. Not once did I touch its money. That is why it grew.”

With time his tortillas became popular. Six months after opening he had enough money to purchase another tortilla machine. He started importing things like jalapenos and spices from Mexico. He began making deliveries to local restaurants. “The business grew really fast because at that time nobody sold Mexican goods.” he claims. “His advertising remained simple”, my mother says. “Besides the yellow page ad, and the number on the trucks, he never advertised. Instead he’d always look for new restaurants to show his product to... He’d simply leave a stack of tortillas and his number. He got the majority of customers that way.”



FIGURE 1 The Mexicanita

Jorge Alamilla placed a small advertisement in the newspaper, and before he knew it business exploded. There were “too many” orders to fill. My grandfather realized it was time to expand.

Ever since the failure of Baja Tortillas, my grandpa remained successful. He changed “Mexican Tortillas” to “Mayab Happy Tacos” (Grandma’s tortillas were “happy”, and Mayab is a term for the Mayan people.) A corporate logo was found: Mexicanita. She was pictured on all their products. They bought the storefront in which they had rented, and purchased a warehouse on Kingsland Avenue. With more space my grandpa had room to purchase a fifty-foot corn tortilla machine. Instead of using money for personal

A company called “Baja Tortillas” had expanded into New York City aggressively. My grandfather watched as this goliath attempted to find a market in the New York area. Baja Tortillas had lines of fast machines, cheap products, and sales men and women advertising their product. They had a good amount of customers, but in the end Baja Tortillas went under. When they failed, all their previous customers needed a new supplier.



FIGURE 2 My grandfather with one of his first trucks.

gain, my grandfather continued to reinvest in the business. Before he knew it, he had five delivery trucks, hundreds of products, barrels of spices, over twenty employees, and the ability to sell it all. My grandfather, Jorge Alamilla, had become the tortilla king.

My grandfather says, “If you work, you get it. Nothing comes easy. Only through hard work can you see the benefits.” I believe him. His life began in a rural community. He took a risk by moving to America. He spoke only broken English. However, through hard work and determination he found himself a million dollar business.

I found a part of Jorge Alamilla I’ve never seen before. Although only an aspect of life, it seems business has shaped so much about him. His devotion towards plaid button up shirts and kaki pants becomes obvious. For the past thirty years they’ve been his uniform. As he sits there, so humble and modest, I realize I’ve finally seen my grandpa. He is a true entrepreneur, exposed.

He’s selling tortillas to a customer. She’s noticed him at school; he’s perfect. Entering his store she pretends to just notice her laces. She ties them. Looking up, he’s staring—It’s their destiny.

Michael Sudolsky is an architecture major.

Works Cited

Alamilla, George. Personal interview. 18 February 2009.