

5-1-2006

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### Recommended Citation

Browning, Diana Santos (2006) "La Sobrina (The Niece)," *Forces*: Vol. 2006 , Article 25.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.collin.edu/forces/vol2006/iss1/25>

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## La Sobrina (The Niece)

Diana Santos Browning

*Tio Juan* was a tall man, the **eldest** of my father's five siblings. My **memories** of him are clear and crisp. He always wore a **fedora** hat and **smoked** cigars. To this day the aroma of cigars

evokes his laughter in my heart. For you see, *Tio Juan* was my favorite uncle. Every time I saw him he would hug me tight. With a *cerveza* in one hand and a cigar in the other, he'd bounce me on his knee as he, my father and my grandfather solved the problems of the day underneath the Texas stars.

During his life time, *Tio* worked hard at a variety of jobs. The one I recall the most, however, was when he worked cutting meat at the meat market. The meat cutters had large, sharp blades on them, which caused him on two separate occasions, to lose parts of two fingers. I didn't care what his hands looked like. I was a little girl who adored the man who would dance with me at family weddings. He would twirl me around the floor to the sound of the *cumbias* and *polkas*, my homemade dresses with petticoats swishing as we danced.

Time moved onward. *Tio* had his share of problems in life. He favored drinking just a little too much. After several years of trying to make their marriage work, even though she still loved him, my aunt left. He tried to get on with his life. *Tio* moved around a lot and communication with him was erratic; but every phone call or letter brought elation. In the meantime, I was growing up, making plans. Those plans included marriage. As *Tio* floated in and out of my life, I don't think he realized how fast I had grown.

One day, shortly after I'd announced my engagement, he dropped by the house to visit. My father was home and he and I greeted *Tio Juan* with warmth and enthusiasm. My father was younger than *Tio*, but only by four years. Dad was older

than the fathers of most people my age. He'd served in World War II. He married later in life and I was born when he was 40 years old. My father had done a lot of living before I was born. I think because of his experiences during the war, he was more open minded than Tio. In a fox hole one must learn to depend on the soldier beside you, regardless of race or religious affiliation, because that soldier may be the one who saves your life.

**T**he young man I'd chosen to marry was not Mexican-American. He was white. Anglo—a *gringo*. But I didn't see the color of his skin. This disturbed Tio very much. He immediately made it clear that he had come to visit for one reason only. Tio told me, in front of my father, that if I married this young man who was not Mexican-American, I would no longer be his niece. My heart could not believe what I just heard! I was deeply wounded. One thing I'd learned from my father though was to always stand up for myself. Without skipping a beat I told Tio that, with all due respect, if my own father was not prohibiting me from marrying this young man, I'd be darned if he was going to. With that Tio turned and walked out of my life forever.

**T**io Juan died four years later when the apartment he was living in caught on fire while he was sleeping. I never heard his laughter again; I didn't get to say goodbye. It has taken many years for the wound in my heart to scar. It has taken just as many years to realize that Tio's attitude towards my marriage to a *gringo* was not because Tio was hateful. Because of the era in which he grew up, I'm certain he experienced many injustices as a result of his ethnicity; he didn't want me to experience similar negativity. I don't have very many tangible reminders of him. The mementos I did have I threw away after I got married. I did not then see a reason to keep them. All that remain are a few faded photos of a younger, happier Tio, the way I remember him. I could choose to be resentful of Tio's decision to disown me, but instead I've chosen to keep only the tender memories of Tio etched in my heart. He will always be my favorite uncle.

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