

POLO, DRAW ME KILLING THE SHERIFF

Jackson Elementary School

Beeville Texas, 1952

The school bell rang. Excited about our new day, we entered the classroom and were soon sitting at our desks, ready for another day in the fifth grade. We sat quietly, expecting our teacher to arrive at any moment. After what seemed like a very long time, the school secretary entered and explained that our regular teacher would be absent that day. A substitute teacher would soon be there, she announced, and admonished us to remain quietly at our desks until she arrived. The secretary stopped at the door, looked back severely and left us.

We were student at Jackson Elementary School in the south-central town of Beeville, Texas, 50 miles north of Corpus Christi. This was a segregated school for Mexican students (Mexican-American today). We always called ourselves “Mexicanos” and the Anglos called us: among other things, “Mexicans.” We had very little contact with whites other than as our “patrones” bosses, police, teachers, etc. Even as kids, we did not feel “American,” only white Anglo people, it seemed, were entitled to that designation. We called them “Americanos,” gabachos, gueros (blondies) and sometimes gringos.

I’m not sure how many years or decades this situation existed in Beeville. One must remember that Anglo-Americans were the more recent arrivals, whereas Natives and Mexicans were here long before their arrival.

At our school, along with other oppressive features, was the rigid rule that no Spanish could be spoken anywhere on school grounds. When one of our students was “caught” speaking our native tongue, he or she was sent to the principal’s office for a severe scolding and an

equally severe spanking with a wooden paddle. The younger first or second graders were not paddled, but were lightly hit on their mouth by the teacher's open hand. Since most, if not all the students' first language was Spanish, we endured repeated spankings. To us, the teachers seemed so ready for the slightest reason to spank students, sometimes with visible hatred in their manner. In spite of this, we Mexicano kids laughed and played and enjoyed learning even from our racist teachers.

So it was on that day, being temporarily without a teacher, that we students in the fifth grade began to play and romp as any children would under similar circumstances. Soon, we were throwing wads of paper, drawing on the blackboard and running around the classroom.

Sitting midway back in the classroom, I watched the scene with some concern. Along with a few others, I had remained at my desk longer than most. Finally, even I got impatient and went to the blackboard to draw. My classmates, who knew me as Polo, saw me as a good drawer, having recently won first place in a fifth grade art contest. As I approached the blackboard, I had no idea what I was going to draw. Images which I liked to draw were horses, lions and I often drew the figure of Christ. In fact, my first place award in the art contest had been of Christ bearing his cross.

I often felt out of place, even embarrassed at being a protestant Baptist, and not going to the same church as my classmates. I knew nothing about Our Lady of Guadalupe or other aspects of the Catholic Church. Our Baptist Church stressed Jesus Christ and in a life experience with few or no personal heroes, I revered the person of Christ.

That day I was joining the fun at the blackboard to draw perhaps a lion or a horse, maybe an airplane or maybe even Christ. I was about to start drawing when one of my classmates loudly called to me, "Polo, pintame ami matando al sherife!" I recall the boy using the word "Pintame,"

which means “paint me” but meaning “draw me killing the sheriff.” Others, too, shouted similar requests and soon I began drawing. But why, why would a bunch of Mexicano fifth graders want to be drawn killing our town’s sheriff? What could possibly motivate those children to feel so badly about, or feel hate, toward the sheriff? It was something unresolved in our community, a collective affliction imbedded in our minds which that day was vented by my classmates.

Some years back, our town’s sheriff, Vale Ennis, had murdered three innocent Mexicano men with a submachine gun. Sheriff Ennis claimed self defense, even though the murdered men had been unarmed. As everyone expected, Sheriff Ennis was exonerated by the white community. We, the younger ones, often heard in our homes, with our families and friends, discussions which told about other murders committed by Sheriff Ennis and from which he had been cleared again and again.

We were reminded of those murders in many ways, but one particular scene occurred every time we went to pick cotton along Highway 59. We passed an abandoned “ranchito,” that is a “small farm” on the side of the road, which had been Don Felix Rodriguez’s farm where he and two others were murdered by Sheriff Ennis. A feeling of sadness affected us on the back of that truck. Don Rodriguez was well known in Beeville, as were the other two men. We younger kids had not had direct acquaintances with Don Rodriguez because we had been younger children when the killings took place. In my family, the resentment was strong as Don Rodriguez had been my mother’s cousin.

One Christmas, my grandfather, Don Rumaldito, gave me a gift of two plastic play guns with their holsters. After I had opened the present, my grandfather, who was a deeply religious man, said to me, “with these you are going to kill the sheriff.” Of course, this was said playfully, but only partially so. Those were the feelings that engulfed our fifth grade classroom, as soon as

the sheriff was mentioned that day. I drew large figures; a child's drawing like an indictment of a criminal. One of my drawings was that of a fallen figure with a cowboy hat, pointed boots and five point star representing the sheriff's badge. I drew other smaller figures representing us fifth graders killing the sheriff. I drew various other images of the sheriff, one showing him hanging from a tree by the neck. Other figures showed the children plunging sharp knives into the hated sheriff.

Our community was aware of other killings by the sheriff of which he had been exonerated as well. Law enforcement in Texas during those years, was repressive and racist and other small Texas towns had their own killer sheriffs adored by their white citizens for keeping Mexicans "in line."

My drawing on the blackboard that day became a release of repressed feelings in my classmates and hopefully, a source of healing as well. I, in particular, felt deep satisfaction as I drew.

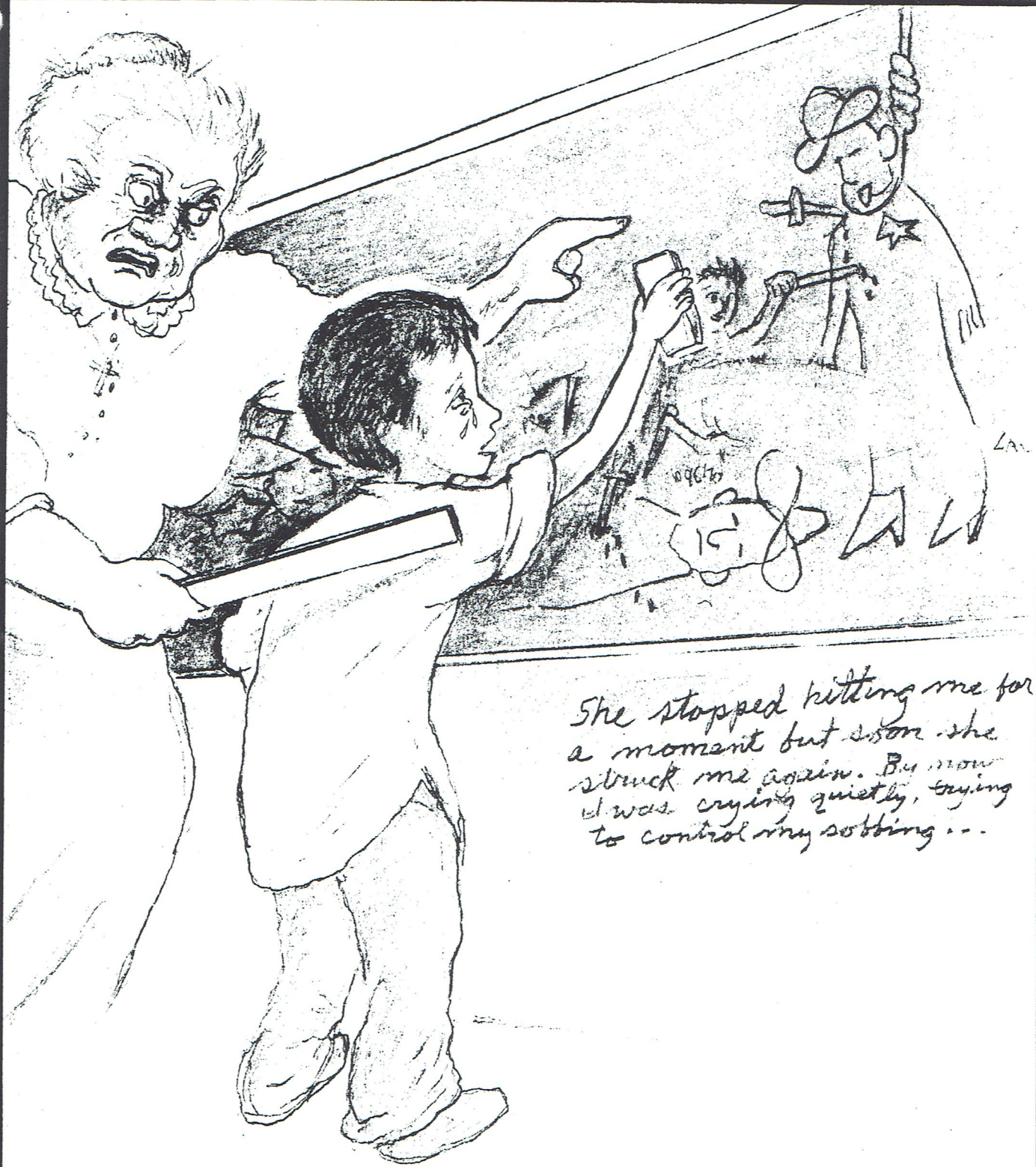
I was so involved in my drawings that I did not notice the students rushing back to their desks. I turned to ask whether anyone wanted me to draw something more. Standing behind me, like an enormous shadow, was the substitute teacher. She was, or it seemed so to me, a tall, massive bull, with an angry scowl on her face. Apparently, she had been observing me for some moments and her rage had grown as she came to understand the meaning of my drawings.

I froze where I stood, terrorized and unable to move. Without uttering a word, she moved around me to more closely examine my drawings. At this, I rushed to my seat, joining my classmates in their nervous apprehension. The substitute with her burning glare found me cowering at my desk.

“You, come here,” she screamed, “and erase this garbage, now!” Almost falling, I quickly rushed to the blackboard and began erasing my drawings. Meanwhile, the substitute had gone to our teacher’s desk and found a large ruler. Coming back, she stood behind me, at first seeming unsure where to strike me, but she proceeded to hit me across my back. She stopped hitting me for a moment, but soon she struck me again. By now, I was crying quietly, trying to control my sobbing, and when I thought I had erased all my drawings, I quickly returned to my desk.

On seeing me return to my seat without her permission, she screamed, “come back here, you’re not finished yet!” In my nervous state, I had not fully erased my drawings. Also, the tears filling my eyes prevented me from seeing clearly. Once again, unable to restrain her anger, she hit me across my back. When I thought I had finished erasing, I stood there facing the bared blackboard, crying

Thinking back after all these years, I can say that those blackboard drawings that day, were my first mural.



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