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What The Border Taught Norma Elia Cantú About Being Free

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(Joel Salcido)

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Norma Elia Cantú: *It's a way that we grew up on the border with the skills of negotiating different worlds, all of that. You don't get that anywhere else, or I couldn't get it anywhere else. So I really appreciated where I came from. At the same time, it freed me to know that I could go anywhere. That the border was who I was, it's who I am, but it's not a limiting space, it's a freeing space.*

[music]

Anna Sale: This is *Death, Sex & Money*, the show from WNYC about the things we think about a lot and need to talk about more. I'm Anna Sale.

A lot of her essays and poetry are about that small wood-frame house...which was set up on stilts to protect it from annual floodwaters. But as she moved the last of her family's belongings out, she told me, she wasn't really mourning the building itself.

Norma: *Now that we're all gone and there's no one there, it's just a house.*

Anna: *When you think of home right now, what does that make you think of?*

Norma: *Three things: My childhood, that was home. Where I am now, that's home. Wherever we get together, we create home, even if it's virtually on the Zoom. My sisters and I, we share what's going on with our lives, we share jokes, what's the latest movie or the latest book or whatever you want to share. And that creates home.*

Norma is the oldest of the 11 kids in her family. She's described herself as having "insufferable older sister syndrome"--her words. But now, at 74, she's trying to let go of some of that.

Norma: *I am not the one scheduling the Zooms. It's one of my sisters, Elsa, but she does a beautiful job. She prepares a theme for each one. We dress in a different way. Last week it was the beach because we're all missing the beach. You can't go. We all wore our beach hats and sunglasses. Several of them that were wearing bathing suits. I wasn't. And so they teased me. We just have a lot of fun!*

Like a lot of us, Norma's life takes place primarily on Zoom now. She's the president of the American Folklore Society, and she teaches literature at Trinity University in San Antonio, where she now lives. That's about two and a half hours away from Laredo, where a lot of her family still is today.

Her parents immigrated there from Nueva Laredo, Mexico, when Norma was a baby.

Norma: *My dad was a laborer, and my mother stayed home with us, and she was a seamstress. She would make dresses, summer dresses especially, and sell them to the neighborhood kids. She earned money that way, but it was very tight, and we didn't have a lot of money. The funny thing is, and you hear people say this all the time, but it's true, I never knew we were poor. I just thought that's how everybody was.*

Anna: *How did it work? How did you share space together?*

Norma: Well, when I was very little, when there were not 11 of us, only four or five, it was a four-roomed house, the kitchen, and the living room was tiny, and two bedrooms. One bedroom was for my parents and the baby, whoever that baby happened to be at the time.

[laughter]

All of the rest of us were in the other bedroom with my grandmother. My brother usually slept in the living room on the sofa. We used to joke that was his room.

Anna: I want to picture-- I loved how you wrote about your quinceanera. I just want to know thinking back on that self of yours when you were 15, so you weren't yet the oldest of 11, they were still coming. But when you think about that moment for you, did it feel like a clear before and after?

Norma: It did. It did, mostly because there were certain things I was not allowed to do before, and then I was allowed to do them after. It also created a bond with my mom that was more like friends after, than before. Then there were other things. I was allowed to wear heels, and I was allowed to wear makeup, shaves...all of those things had been forbidden because they were for adults. There was a marked difference. It was a very low key quinceanera, but it was very special. We did go to the church. So that was the first time I was the center of attention, if you will. So that was different.

Anna: When you said your relationship with your mother changed, do you think it was because you started thinking of yourself as more grown up, or she started seeing you as more grown up? Or what in particular shifted?

Norma: I think it was a little bit of both. When I turned 15, she did start relying on me more as a co-parent, I think. For example, one of my younger siblings got in trouble at school and they called me. They don't call the parents, because my father was working and my mother, who

didn't speak English, was not able to go. I was the one who had to go and deal with my younger sister not wanting to say the pledge of allegiance.

Anna: *Was it a political stand, or what was?*

Norma: *I wish.*

X *[laughter]*

No, she may disagree with me, but what had happened, she was a cheerleader, and the cheerleaders had been out there for some ceremony, and they had already said the pledge of allegiance. In her mind, she didn't have to do it again. [laughs] I was hoping it was political, but no.

Anna: *No, it was just redundant.*

Norma: *Exactly.*

[laughter]

[music]

Anna: *Did you know anyone when you were growing up who worked in higher education?*

Norma: *No one, absolutely not. I didn't know any. I didn't know what a PhD was, I didn't know any of that. My high school counselor counseled me against going to college, and wanted me to get a job right away. The only reason I got a scholarship was because one of my friends, instead of picking up one application, picked up two, and so I filled that out.*

Anna: *Wow, that's amazing.*

Norma: *It was incredible. Because I really wanted to go to college, but the counselor was pretty much dead set against it. So my friend lifted one and we both filled them out and she turned them in and I got it.*

Anna: Wow.

Norma: It was a rotary club scholarship, and it was for \$144 in 1965. I went for one year on that scholarship, and I also got a job at the library, sorting books and re-shelving books, but that only lasted the one year. Then the second year, I worked in the summer and paid my tuition for the Fall, but I couldn't pay the Spring. It was in December, and I was finishing my studies, and I didn't have anything for January. I didn't have the tuition money. I didn't know what I was going to do. I got a job working at Central Power and Light Company, which was a utilities company, where I worked for seven years and continued going to night school. At that point, my dad also had arthritis and had to retire. He was disabled with the arthritis and couldn't work anymore. Pretty much, I was the sole breadwinner for quite a while.

Anna: Your younger siblings were still little kids.

Norma: Exactly. They were little kids. My father didn't want me to go alone to night school. So I started convincing some of my coworkers to sign up for classes.

Anna: Oh, really? Wow.

Norma: Yes, so I wouldn't be alone.

Anna: What was your job at the utility company? What'd you do?

Norma: Oh, I did everything. The first job was at the window, the drive-through window where people would come and pay their bills. Then I graduated all the way up to handling major contracts with oil companies and stuff like that.

Anna: Wow.

Norma: I did everything. It was a learning experience. I learned a lot about all kinds of stuff, including, I think I became a feminist working there, because I saw the inequality and the way women were treated,

the sexual harassment that was going on. I was lucky enough to be perceived as being too prudish to the approach. I didn't have the same issues that some of my coworkers did.

One of the things we did, while I was working there, is questioned why somebody would get paid more because he was a man. I remember the manager tells me, "He's the head of household." I say, "Well, so is Emma." Emma was my coworker who was divorced and had two kids. She was head of household, and they had never even thought of that.

Anna: *When you had to leave school, was it painful? Were you afraid you would never return?*

Norma: *Yes, very, I would cry every night, because that's not what I wanted to be doing. I didn't want to be working in an office, typing up contracts for businesses to let people have their lights. No matter how I justified it as it being an essential job, that people need their electricity, it didn't mitigate the feeling of I don't belong here. The sadness, I was very sad. I was also kind of learning to be an adult. At that point, most of my friends from high school, they had gone on to college, were coming back 20, 21, 22 with degrees and teaching, having jobs. I was still at the office going to night school until the University from South Texas opened the branch in Laredo in 1970. I was able to go ahead and finish my degree.*

Anna: *When you first told me about the job at the utility company, you said, "I worked for seven years." I am thinking how you can say that in retrospect now, that it was this discreet period of time, but when you were living it, you didn't know when it would end?*

Norma: *It felt like forever. I never knew. In fact, some of my colleagues, my coworkers stayed there until they retired 25 years later. When that was happening, I would think, "Gosh, if I had stayed, I would be retiring now. I would be done." It was amazing to realize that it's one of those change points in my life where a decision makes all the difference. It was*

my choice. I chose to quit my education and go to work. I chose to get that education. It was a sacrifice. It was not easy.

Norma: *When you chose to leave, was it your choice or was it something your parents suggested and you knew you needed to?*

Anna: *No, it was my choice. And to this day, I don't know what would have happened had I not been so dutiful daughter, not the ultra responsibility. Because obviously, I could have applied for loans. We didn't have federal assistance at that point, but I think I could have. Other friends did apply for loans to go to college. I don't think my father really wanted me to at that point. My mother was all for me going on and getting an education. My father was always fearful that I was going to grow away and not come back. Especially after my brother's death, I think he became even more overprotective.*

[music]

Norma's brother Tino enlisted in the Army in 1966...when he was still in high school. He was deployed to Vietnam, where he was killed. He was 19.

Norma: *It was pretty traumatic. He was the first one in our family to go into the military. My paternal grandfather was such a pacifist that he moved the family back and forth across the border whenever there was a war. The family moved to the US side when the Mexican revolution was happening, but then they went right back a few years after when world war one broke out. He was adamant about not going to war.*

Anna: *How long was your brother in Vietnam?*

Norma: *Not very long. He died in '68 in February. He was gone into the service longer than he was in Vietnam. In Vietnam, he wasn't there very long. It was during the Tet Offensive of 1968, and it was a sniper. And I was getting ready for work, and so was my dad, when the Army green Volkswagen drove up, and my mother knew immediately what had happened. She started crying. When the soldier who spoke only English came to the door and I was translating, I didn't need to because my*

father understood, and my mom were crying. The younger kids had been asleep. They woke up. My dad was so angry with the man. He kept saying no, no, it can't be possible. Then of course he calmed down, but it was really a tragic turning point in our family, and for so many others. I saw my dad lose his faith. He had always been a really devout Catholic. For a while, he just was angry at God.

X

Anna: Were you?

Norma: Not necessarily at God. I was angry at the government, because I really believed that it was a unnecessary war.

Anna: How did your brother get into the service? How did he get to Vietnam?

Norma: He had not even graduated from high school. I graduated in '65, and he was right after me, a year after. He saw what happened. I went to community college on a scholarship for one year, but then I had to quit and go to work. He had hopes. He was brilliant. He wanted to be a scientist. We've been talking about it since we were kids. I think he saw that was not going to happened, and the service, the Army, was recruiting heavily. They promised, of course, the GI Bill. And so he saw a way out. In fact, we had a conversation at one time, and he said, "When I get back, I'm going to enroll and go to university." And of course, he didn't come back.

Anna: I want to ask you just to move ahead while we're thinking about your brother. I noticed you traveled to Vietnam many, many years later.

Norma: Yes, I did. About 22 years ago, I had an opportunity to travel to Vietnam with a Vietnamese American friend of mine. It was a really interesting trip on many levels. One of which was to be within five kilometers of where my brother was killed. I went to the Buddhist temple in the town asking for a blessing. I burned some incense, both for my brother's soul, and also for the man who killed him, the sniper. The guy who was there, the, I guess you call him a priest, was incredibly

understanding and gentle and kind. I can still see his eyes looking into mine as he says the prayers. He didn't understand English. My friend was translating for me. And the prayer, I didn't understand the words, but I understood the feeling, and it was a very deep emotional release for me. On some level, I felt that this had come full circle, that that's what my brother would have wanted.

Xmusic]

Coming up...I talk to Norma about moving away from the border...and what she learned about home in the process.

Norma: *It was living in DC that gave me the perspective that I was not necessarily bound to the border.*

Anna: *The "bound" word is such a strong word. You weren't bound there.*

Norma: *Yes, and I still feel it's a really difficult lesson in detachment, about being bound and being rooted at the same time, and finding that rootedness also frees you to be bigger than that.*

[music]

All this month on *Death, Sex & Money*, we are talking about getting older. A couple of weeks ago, Jo Ann Allen guest-hosted an episode for us about all the different ways aging can look. That episode has inspired you to send in some reflections of your own about life after 60.

Gail: *Talking about getting old is really complicated. I think about how it's kind of the good, the bad, and the ugly.*

This listener, Gail, called in from just outside Washington, DC. She's 63.

Gail: *The good for me is that I don't sweat all the small stuff anymore. The bad is that even though I feel like I'm 18, I don't look like I'm 18, and so when I look in the mirror, that's a cold realization, I don't recognize that person. The ugly is that my husband learned that he has cancer.*

Since that diagnosis, I've been forced to think about a life that's going to look maybe different as I get older than what I thought it was going to look like.

All our recent episodes about aging are at deathsexmoney.org/aging... along with some of our favorite interviews I've done over the years with older guests.

We are turning our attention next to what it is like right now for those of you who are single...and don't want to be. We are collecting your stories and thoughts about being on the front lines of dating in this strange time. Tell us what you're noticing by writing an email or recording a voice memo and sending it to us at deathsexmoney@wnyc.org.

Now, we know a lot about dating right now is awkward and even harder than normal, so to get us into a positive mindset, we are also collecting your best one night stand stories. If you have a magical memory to share...of a connection that may have been fleeting but left an impression...record a voice memo and tell us that story. So far we've heard one night stand stories from mostly young women. So men, and those of you over 60, who we've been hearing from a lot lately? We want to hear your one night stand stories too. Again, send it to us at deathsexmoney@wnyc.org.

This is *Death, Sex & Money* from WNYC. I'm Anna Sale. By the early 1990s, Norma Elia Cantú had gotten her associate's degree, her bachelor's, her master's, and her PhD, and with the exception of a brief research stint in Spain, she done it mostly close to home in the Southwest.

Then when she was in her 40s, she got a chance to move to Washington DC to work with the National Endowment for the Arts.

Norma: *Being in DC was exciting, it was during the Clinton era, and all kinds of exciting things were happening in terms of for Chicanos and Chicanos or Latinos. There were others from Texas who were there, and we started a women's group of all women from Texas who were in DC at the time, We would meet once a month for brunch, and connect, but in DC is where I met Elvia, my partner.*

Anna: *Tell me about that! What were the circumstances of your meeting, and did you know it was significant in the moment?*

Norma: *I did not. I had no idea, I was surprised, but pleasantly surprised to find love in a very deep way. I arrived in DC in September of '93, and I was going to stay with a friend. I was in that apartment, but the connection was Alicia Gonzalez, another folklorist that I knew from before, and Elvia and Alicia were good friends. And so I met her in Alicia's home. And we joke because she doesn't remember me, she remembers my cat.*

X

[laughter]

Anna: *That cat did some work for you. That's good.*

[laughter]

Norma: *She was. She was Bonita or Boo Boo, and she was a white long hair Persian, beautiful cat that went with me everywhere. She walked in and saw the cat and fell in love with the cat, and later with me, I hope. Like I said, it was a surprise to me. We were friends, first, for a long time until we got together in '94, I think it was. Then I came back to Texas and she stayed in DC, she worked for the forest services. It was a long time before we could be together.*

Anna: *Did you use the term long-distance relationship, is that how you think of that time?*

Norma: *I don't, because there's a saying in Spanish, [chuckles] I don't know if I should say it. Amor de lejos, amor de pendejos?*

[laughter]

Anna: *I don't exactly know what that means, but I kind of know.*

Norma: *Yes, you know what it means! I don't use it, however, I guess that's what it was.*

[music]

Anna: *In the early 2000s, Elvia retired and finally moved to Texas to be closer to Norma. She also grew close with Norma's mother, Virginia.*

Norma: *She would refer to her as her young daughter, mija chiquita. And Elvia's very short, so kind of often plays around with that word.*

Elvia supported Norma through her dad's death in 2004. And she was also there when Virginia's health started declining not long after.

X **Norma:** *Once when she was very sick, she was in the hospital, and she asked me to forgive her and I didn't quite know why. I asked why. Then she said, "Well, because you were the oldest, you didn't have a childhood, you helped me co-parent all these children." I had never really put it from that perspective. I had always thought of it as just what I did. Of course, I started crying and I said, "Of course, I forgive you. There's nothing to forgive." All of this is in Spanish, of course.*

Anna: *What is the Spanish word for forgiveness, forgive, to forgive?*

Norma: *Perdonar. So she said perdone, mija. Even just saying it, I got emotional.*

Anna: *Yeah. It's nice she got to see you listen to that and hear that, and for you to say, "Of course, I forgive you."*

Norma: *I think so, because not too much later, she developed dementia and then Alzheimer's ultimately, and at that point, she was no longer able to acknowledge those things. On New Year's Eve in 2016, she was in the hospital. I came in and she held on to me and whispered, lucid as anything, [Spanish language] I want to die. Of course, I said, "Si mami. Cuando tu quieres." As much as it hurt, I knew I had to let her go.*

Anna: *What you want, mommy, you said.*

Norma: *Yes. Yes. Whenever you want.*

Anna: *How did your father die?*

Norma: My father had a number of physical ailments. He had cancer, he had heart issues, and he knew exactly what was happening. He kept telling me, "I don't know how to die." He knew he was dying, and then he kept saying, "I don't know how to die, I want to die. I don't know how to die." He basically starved, because he stopped eating. He was about to come home with hospice when he passed that night, and we were all there.

X

My brothers and sisters were there during the day. At night, only four or five of us would stay. I can say I was there for his last breath. But it was a beautiful passing because he had made peace with everything and everyone. Each one of us had gone in, maybe a week before, and he had said goodbye to each one of us. I can't describe it. It was just an incredible gift to be there. That didn't happen with my mom, I wasn't there.

Anna: I want to go back to your father because I'm struck you said he both said, "I don't know how to die," and he also said goodbye to each of you. When he was saying, "I don't know what to do here," how did you understand that?

Norma: I think he was asking permission to die. He was asking for us to let him go. He didn't put it in those words. That's how I interpreted it. I also think he kept referring to my grandmother who lived with us. She was the one who had died and he kept saying, "I don't know how she did it. How did she die? I want to know."

Anna: When you think about what grief was like for you, with your brother and your father and your mother, you were able to be with your father, not with your mother at the point of her death, but before, and your brother, not at all, and before he was ready, or before anybody was ready to say goodbye. What did you observe about how that changed grief for you?

Norma: They were very different. I would say my brother, again, it was anger because of the potential and because of his plans and all the

other, in addition to obviously the sorrow of, I'm never going to see him again, all of that. With my dad, it was, Oh, God, he's not suffering anymore. At some level, it was gratitude. Also in a way, I forgave him for whatever he had done in his life, because he had been an obstacle in my life, in his desire to protect me.

But he also forgave me when we said goodbye, that was the exchange. With my mother, she was 91. She was going to be 92 in 10 days or something. It was, again, gratitude, not just that she's not suffering anymore, but gratitude for her life. What happened was when my youngest brother was born, she was at the point of death. She would tell me this story of how she had not died. She had told God, "I'm not ready," and it was because of me. Because had she died at 20, I would have become the mother of all these other children. She felt that she couldn't do that to me. I was very grateful that she did not leave me in charge of all the siblings, and had come back and allowed me to live my life. I think she fulfilled her mission, her contract with all of us. It was not easy. I didn't realize how deep it had affected her, the poverty and everything, until she had Alzheimer's, and she would start reliving some of those episodes in her life. For example, one time I came home and she was crying and she said, "Que te paso, mami?" She says, "I don't have money for the milk for the baby."

It was really hard.

Anna: *These are things she shielded you from.*

Norma: *Exactly. I'm so glad that she lived to see us in our homes with our partners. My sisters married, all of us living our own lives, and it's a testament to her life. She made it possible.*

[music]

That's Norma Elia Cantu. I highly recommend you check out some of her writing if you haven't. Start with Canicula, her 1995 collection of essays and photos from her childhood...and then her poetry collection published in 2019: Meditación Fronteriza: Poems of Love, Life, and Labor.

Norma graciously agreed to read a few of them for us...you can listen to them on the web page for this episode at deathsexmoney.org.

Death, Sex & Money is a listener supported production of WNYC studios in New York. This episode was produced by Anabel Bacon. The rest of our team includes Katie Bishop, Afi Yellow-Duke, Emily Botein and Andrew Dunn. Our intern is Emily Tafur. The Reverend John Dalore and Steve Lewis wrote our theme music.

I'm on Twitter @annasale. The show is @deathsexmoney on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Thank you to Mackenzie Meehan in Brooklyn, New York, who is a sustaining member of *Death, Sex & Money*. Join Mackenzie and support what we do here by going to deathsexmoney.org/donate.

I'm Anna Sale. This is *Death, Sex & Money* from WNYC.

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