

Growing up in a small Texas town in the seventies, a young boy navigates family, faith, culture, and a father battling alcoholism. A heartfelt memoir about resilience, identity, and the memories that shape who we become.

Guero's World
By David Lopez, Jr.

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GUERO'S WORLD

A Childhood Between Truth and Make Believe



David Lopez, Jr.

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Chapter Twenty-Three: Heads and Tales

There were some Mexican delicacies we enjoyed that, let's just say, weren't for everyone. One of those was *cabeza*—which literally means “head” in Spanish. Most people today refer to it as *barbacoa*. Specifically, we're talking about a cow's head—a prized cut we'd get from the local butcher, carefully processed and cleaned for cooking. Preparing *cabeza* was a tradition steeped in both flavor and family. The meat, incredibly tender and rich, came from parts of the head like the cheeks, tongue, and sometimes even the brain, depending on personal preference. We'd bake it slowly in the oven, letting it cook low and slow until the meat practically melted off the bone. The house would fill with a savory, smoky aroma that seemed to linger in the walls long after the meal was over. This was no ordinary dinner; it was a special event, usually reserved for Sundays when we had the time to do it justice. Sundays were slower, quieter, and marked by family gatherings, making it the perfect day to share such a labor of love.

The preparation of *cabeza* was a ritual in itself. On Saturday evening, Mom would begin by seasoning the head with a simple but perfect blend of salt and pepper, ensuring every inch was covered to bring out its natural flavors. She'd then place it on a broiler pan, cover it tightly with foil, and slide it into the oven. To accommodate the head's size, all but the lowest oven rack had to be removed, a step that always felt like clearing the stage for a performance. The oven was set low, and the baking began—a slow, patient process that stretched overnight, transforming the meat into something extraordinary.

Once the oven door shut, the whole household seemed to shift into a kind of quiet expectation. It wasn't just Mom's project anymore—it was everybody's. Dad would wander through the kitchen, checking the oven as if he could somehow speed things up by staring at it. Ella and

I had our part too: making sure the foil stayed snug on the pan and fetching extra sheets if Mom thought the seal wasn't tight enough. When everything was finally in place and up to Mom's satisfaction, she would clap her hands together like a judge calling the court to order, and that was the signal the head was officially "in session." From that moment on, every time we walked through the kitchen, someone would crack a joke or whisper a little update, as if the cabeza were a guest of honor slow-roasting in the next room. It made the whole night feel festive, almost ceremonial, like we were all guarding a treasure that would be revealed the next day.

By Sunday morning, the house was alive with the savory aroma of the cabeza. Waking up to that smell was one of life's simple joys, a prelude to the feast that awaited. It was the kind of scent that made you stop whatever you were doing and drift into the kitchen, as if pulled by an invisible string, just to inhale deeply and revel in the anticipation. But the real magic unfolded just before lunch time when Mom, ever the multitasker, began rolling out dough for fresh tortillas.

Ella and I knew that was our cue. As soon as Mom dusted the counter with flour and set the rolling pin to work, we'd circle in like hawks, waiting for that first tortilla to puff up on the comal. The kitchen was warm and noisy—Mom's rhythmic rolling, the hiss of the tortilla hitting hot iron, the shuffle of family drifting in and out, stealing whiffs of the simmering cabeza. That smell of meat and masa wrapped together was almost too much to bear. When the first tortilla came off, steaming and pliable, Mom didn't even look up. She just flicked it behind her like a dealer tossing a card, and one of us would snatch it midair. Sometimes she'd laugh and say, "¡Cuidado con las tortillas, todavía viene cabeza!" but she knew those stolen bites were part of the ritual. That first taste, folded plain or with a pinch of salt, was our unofficial starter course, a promise of the feast to come.

The combination of smells, the savory richness of roasting cabeza and the warm, toasty scent of tortillas taking form on the comal, was

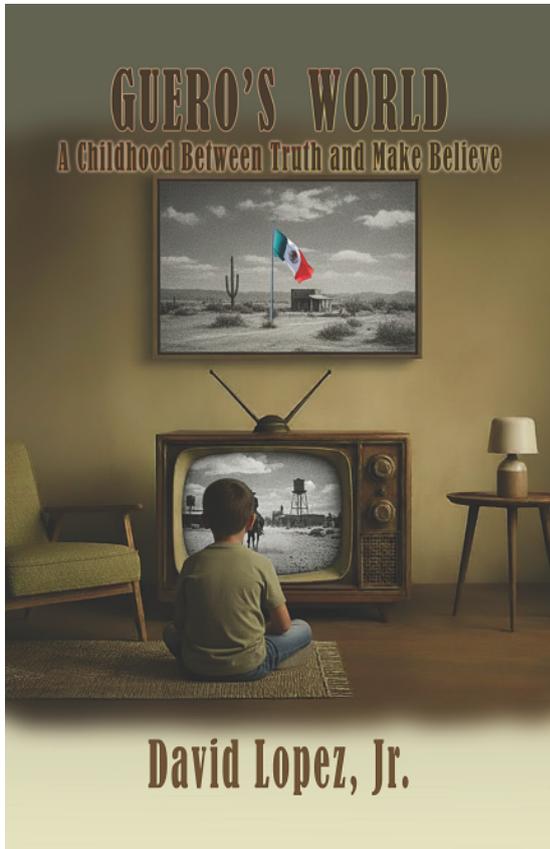
nothing short of heavenly. It was as if the two were destined to be together, a perfect pairing that defined the essence of our Sunday lunches. By this time, the kitchen was a hive of activity and excitement. The promise of those tacos was irresistible, drawing everyone in the house to gather around, eagerly waiting for the moment when the foil was lifted and the feast was unveiled. Those Sundays weren't just about the food, they were about the ritual, the anticipation, and the way the simple act of preparing and sharing a meal brought us all closer together.

Ella and I had our own little game during those Sundays. We'd hover near the table, pretending to help by setting out paper towels, silverware, or plates, but really we were keeping an eye on the foil-covered prize on the stove. Every time someone walked past it, we'd trade quick glances, daring each other to be the first to sneak a peek. Of course, Mom had eyes in the back of her head—she'd catch us inching closer and call out, “¡Eh! Don't even think about it.” That only made it harder to resist. Sometimes Ella would distract her by asking for another tortilla, giving me just enough time to lift the edge of the foil for a whiff of the steam that escaped. We never got away with much, but even that fleeting glimpse felt like a win. It was our secret thrill, a way of stretching the anticipation until the feast finally began.

Now, the *cabeza* is made up of a lot of different parts, but there were two main sections we looked forward to. First, there was the meat inside the jawbone—specifically the cheek meat, which is tender and full of flavor. Then there was the tongue, or *lengua*. When the *cabeza* was done, Mom would take it out of the oven, crack open the jawbone to get at the prized cheek meat, and carefully remove the tongue. You had to peel off this thick, outer layer from the tongue, but underneath was the tender, melt-in-your-mouth meat that made for some of the best tacos on earth. Both *cabeza* and *lengua* tacos were always homeruns in the Lopez household.

We had a couple of family jokes that went along with this cabeza tradition. The first was that this was the only meal where, if you peeked into the oven to check on it, it might just be looking back at you! It was a little unnerving if you weren't used to it, but for us, it was just part of the process. The second joke involved our dog, Whitey. After we were done with the meal, we'd give him the leftover jawbone to gnaw on. So, if any of our neighbors saw Whitey in the yard happily chomping away on a cow jawbone, they knew the Lopez family must've had cabeza that weekend.

What we were carrying on with those Sunday meals was bigger than just our family—it was a tradition with deep roots. Cabeza, like barbacoa itself, traces back to the days when every part of the animal was valued, nothing wasted, and families gathered around to share the work and the reward. For us, it wasn't only about savoring tender meat wrapped in a fresh tortilla. It was about honoring that heritage in the most natural way—together. By the time the foil was lifted and the first tacos were passed around the table, laughter rose and stories tumbled over each other, the kitchen alive with voices. The ritual was complete, and in that simple act of eating side by side, we weren't just sharing a meal—we were affirming who we were.



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