

Elena Poniatowska, *Here's to you, Jesusa!*
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After he divided them up by height, General Juan Espinosa y Córdoba trained them. Some only knew how to use a machete. They had to be taught how to load a gun before they could go into combat. When would they have ever used a weapon, much less known how to clean it, gauge distances, aim and try to hit the target they were shooting at and not just shoot for the sake of shooting? General Espinosa y Córdoba would get exasperated:

—Do you think we have ammunition to waste?

Each morning he'd lead the training himself. They had to learn to march, present arms, break the guns down, and aim the way they teach recruits nowadays. Most of them didn't even know the different bugle calls: to mount, dismount, or hit the ground.

—What kind of a militia is this?

Juan Espinosa y Córdoba was a dark-skinned Indian. The old guy was ugly, very tall and fat. He looked like he'd been carved with the blunt end of an ax. He did have a pretty blond wife that he brought with him from Chilpancingo, quite a young girl. Espinosa y Córdoba had a pointed mouth and we also called him El Trompudo, or Big Snout. He was a yeller:

—Get into squads of five or ten soldiers. Let's see if you can at least grasp how to do that!

Every morning during training he gave orders.

—Put the dumbest into squads of five so that they can understand better, and watch them carefully, because they don't even know what to shoot . . .

Everyone came to training, even my husband, who'd been fighting for who knows how long and was a captain and always got sent up to the front. He complained to the general:

—But I'm a captain . . .

—Everyone has to attend the training sessions . . . You too, even if you're a captain . . . Even if you were a general you'd have to! You have to learn how to give orders the right way. If you, as a captain, don't know, how're we going to teach the militia? Here everyone gets trained! I don't want to hear any more shit about it!

He was right. Listen, in the Revolution there was a regiment that had a lot more casualties before they even met up with the enemy than after. They almost finished off the entire outfit before they even got to the fighting. Friends killed each other more than they killed the enemy. One time, we didn't have uniforms, so you couldn't tell who was who, and we wiped out a whole division that was coming to reinforce us . . . Fresh troops were coming and we shot the hell out of them . . . Everything was done ass backwards . . .

—What about the uniforms, General?

—There are only enough for those ranked corporal or higher . . .

After all that, over and over, the brigadier general, Juan Espinosa y Córdoba, formed the Northwest Fifth Division, his own unit of fifteen hundred men. A lot of people were killed out of stupidity. I think it was a misunderstood war because people simply killed each other, fathers against sons, brother against brother; Carrancistas, Villistas, Zapatistas, we were all the same ragged people, starving to death. But that's something that, as they say, you keep to yourself.

The day after the unit was formed we left for the north.

I saw a passenger train in Tehuantepec once, but those aren't like military trains. The military train is for freight and the cars are enclosed, they're all black without windows to look out of. Ours was a small, wood-burning train that moved slowly; it would run for half an hour and stop for half an hour, when it wasn't stopped at a station for several days. It went slow because there were a lot of cars, carrying horses and all the things troops need; the Indians were on the roofs and the horses were inside. Otherwise, how would a train be big enough to haul such a herd of humanity and beasts? We ate up on top of the train, we had a stove and it never went out, because we closed the lids so air wouldn't get in from underneath and sparks wouldn't fly out the top. Otherwise, it would have been a blazing fire.

Life was really hard back then. We covered our things the best

we could with oilcloth ponchos so they wouldn't get wet in the rain. I always got soaked anyway. I wore a big Texan hat and made myself as comfortable as I could. We had to ride crouched on top because the horses had to be sheltered and fed all the time. When we got somewhere, if they gave orders to disembark, they'd let the animals out to be watered; the animals came first. Not a single one died on us on the train, although it didn't do us any good to be thirsty and cramped up on the roof, because the Villistas still kicked the shit out of us. The Villistas spent all their time derailling trains. That was their tactic, but we got used to it. From the time we left the capital heading north, they loosened the tracks and the engine buried itself because of the weight we were carrying. When that happened, the cars broke open and a lot of horses died and many people too. Each time the train derailed, it took who knows how many days to get it back on track or to bring in engines and cars from other places. We had to take all the horses out and bury the dead people.

In Santa Rosalia we had a derailment that even crammed people's backbones together like an accordion. That was the worst one because the engine rolled over and so did six or seven cars; the front ones had the most damage. We had to set up camp until they sent us the parts we needed. That's why it took us so many months to reach the north. Nothing happened to the passenger cars. They were well made; they've probably rotted by now, but they were made of solid pine.

I remember once when we woke up in Chihuahua at four in the morning. The soldiers were yelling:

—Look, look at all the Apaches, look at all the Indians without huaraches.

It wasn't true. People said that there weren't any Christians in Chihuahua, just Apache Indians. We were scared but we wanted to see them, we didn't really understand what it was all about. The people there looked just like the people here, it's a bunch of lies, tall tales, and it causes a lot of confusion and stirs things up. I never saw an Apache.

We traveled at a snail's pace between one explosion and the next. We'd camp at one place and then another and we never got

to any station on time. We never met up with the other group of Carrancistas. Villa was a bandit, he didn't fight like a man. Instead, he'd dynamite the tracks when the trains were passing through. It would blow, and the cars, the horses, and the Indians would fly everywhere. Is that a courageous man? He blew up passenger trains, too, and stole their money, and the young women. He'd tie the girls to the saddle or drag them around in the cactus. That's not decent. I hate Villa more than anyone.

I never saw him up close, never, and it's a good thing, because I'd have spit in his face. Now I make myself happy spitting at the radio. I heard that they were going to engrave his name in gold letters in the Congressional Building. Whoever planned that must either be bandits like him or idiots! I couldn't believe it either, when they said on the radio that he had a wife and kids. What a bunch of lies! What family? I won't believe that even if they drag me around by my tongue . . . He never had a wife. He grabbed the youngest girl around, took her, brought her back when he was bored with her and tossed her away and took another one. Now they come out with a "wife," and they say sons and daughters. Bullshit! They want to make him look like something he never was. He was a bandit without a soul! Of all the *guerrilleros* I detest Villa the most. He had no mother. That Villa was an ape who made fun of the world and you can still hear him laughing about it.

Since my husband didn't talk to me, no one else did either. All the officers were his friends, but none of them spoke to me. When we stopped at a station where they took the horses off, three or four officers would go into the empty cars with their wives; they each grabbed a spot, but Pedro didn't like the others to see us doing it and he never called me for that.

When I was under my husband's thumb I never bathed. Who would I want to look nice for? I couldn't look at anyone or change my clothes or comb my hair. I didn't even have a comb; the two I had broke, even the lice comb I had from before I was married. If I was filthy and full of lice as a child, my head was even more lice-infested when I was with my husband. He hit me, split my head open, and I lost my long wavy hair because of all the sores and blood. There was filth encrusted on my head and it stayed there.

because I couldn't bathe or change. So I suffered like St. Mary in the desert. How could I make myself love him? I had a grudge against him, I hated him. I could scrape the dirt off my dress, it was so thick. I wore the same one all the time even though he bought me clothes. But I couldn't put them on. He bought them for me wherever we stopped, to impress the other soldiers and their wives.

—See how well I take care of her!

That's what he was like. What can you do about a man like that? He wasn't stupid, just selfish, because he said that no one would bother with me if I was that foul-smelling. He'd entertain himself real nice elsewhere, not with me. That's why I asked the whole celestial court to kill him. If there was a campaign and he went out with an advance party, I'd yell: "San Julano, San Perengano, free me from this Christian plague! Let them kill him or capture him, but just don't make me see him again!" And I'd kneel down and cross myself and fold my hands. I asked them to kill him even if it would condemn my soul to Hell forever. I preferred to wander outcast like a leper. Even when I was alone I wasn't allowed to have my head uncovered, because he'd come and order: "Cover yourself." I slept with my rebozo over my face, all covered up like a mummy. I was a martyr. But not now, I'm no martyr anymore. I suffer like everyone else but it's nothing compared to when I had a husband.

Pedro beat me from the time he took me out of the dive in Chilpancingo. He yelled: "You'll be sorry." "Now you'll pay!" And he never let up at all.

He never forgot it, because he was like that, real jealous, real temperamental. I didn't say anything to him, what was there to say if I never even looked up at him? I almost didn't know what his face looked like. I was afraid of him, always crouched over in front of the fire, covered with my rebozo. So how could I stand up to him? I couldn't. He didn't care if I was dead or alive. Now that I take care of myself, I think he did it to try to get rid of me, but I was real dumb then and I went wherever he said without complaining. Pedro beat me for everything, like most of the men in the company, who spoke to their women through the snap of their whip: "Walk, you cunt, move it!" The point was to make their

lives miserable. Pedro would grab me and hit me on the head with the butt of his gun and my blood would boil, but I never said anything; I didn't even flinch, so he wouldn't see that it hurt me.

One day when we were camped at a station in Chihuahua—I don't remember which one—where we stayed several days or weeks—I don't know how long—he came to me and said: "Listen, *Vale*." I never heard him use my name; who knows what that *Vale* was all about.

—Listen, *Vale*, grab your soap and let's go so you can wash my handkerchiefs.

I knew he was going to beat me even though everyone said that he was a such good man. That's what he pretended on the outside, but inside it was a different story. He seemed to be one thing, when he was something very different.

I said:

—*Bueno*.

We walked from the station until he found a little clearing where the burros roll around to scratch themselves. The place was really clean and he said:

—Stand here.

He hit me until he'd had enough. I remember I counted up to fifty blows from his machete. He hit me on the back. But I didn't bend over. I just sat on the ground with my legs crossed and covered my head with my arms and hands. I was used to it, since my stepmother treated me that way when I was a kid. I don't know why I'm still here. I don't remember if it was this hand that I held up but I have a scar, my left one; the machete went into my back. Look, he cut me open. You can see the scar here because that cut went all the way to the bone. It bled but I didn't feel it; after so many blows I didn't feel anything; I hadn't gotten over one blow when there was another one on the same spot. I never did anything to take care of the wounds, I didn't put anything on them, not even water. The wounds healed on their own.

When I came to, I was in the railroad car where we lived and my back was all cut up. The girls asked me:

—What's wrong? Are you sick?

—Yes.

—What is it?

—Nothing.

—Then why'd you say you're sick?

—I am, but what business is it of yours?

What did I have to gain by spilling my guts? Nothing. It's not as if telling them my life story would take the pain away. I don't explain anything to anyone. And since I didn't say anything, it went on that way for a long time. And Pedro would look for any excuse to beat me. He'd order me to get the soap to wash handkerchiefs.

And I'd know: "He's going to beat me." He never hit me in front of anyone and that's why he was never caught red-handed.

—Jesusa, you have such a good husband!

They never saw him angry.

—What'd you say?

—How lucky you are to have such a good husband. God bless him!

I never corrected them. Those are personal things you keep to yourself, inside, like memories. Memories don't belong to anyone else. They're just yours; like the years you live through that make you who you are. You can't pass your bag of bones off to anyone else to carry around. "Here, you carry them." You can't, right? That day I grabbed the gun. I was wearing a long blouse with two pockets and I put bullets and a gun in them. "Soap, yeah right, no way, let him kill me once and for all, or I'll kill him!" I was determined. I followed him. We got to a field far from the station and he said to me:

—This seems like as good a place as any to me. I'm going to kill you here or we'll see what you're made of . . .

I stood looking at him. I didn't cower and I answered:

—Really? Then we'll kill each other. I'm not going to die alone. You take your gun out, I have mine.

I don't know where I got so much courage, I think I was just desperate, and I took out the gun. Then he got scared, I could see real clear that he was afraid. I thought: "Well, he's real brave, let him take his gun out too and we'll shoot each other right here and now. One of us may end up alive." But then he said:

—Who's been putting ideas in your head?

—Who? You should know who. The same person who tells you to hit me, that same woman has warned me.

It was a lie. No one had said anything to me, but since he asked I answered. I'd never raised my voice to him before:

—Who told you to talk back to me?

—The same person who told you to make my life miserable . . .

Then he said to me:

—Drop the gun.

—No, you brought me here to kill me. We'll kill each other here. Take out your gun.

He didn't . . .

—I'm not going to do anything to you. Drop the gun.

—No. You can take me out of here dead, but take your gun out, too.

—No.

—Then why'd you bring me here? For a walk? For a walk in the woods? You brought me to kill me, right? *Pues*, kill me.

Then he started to talk to me real nice:

—Don't be silly . . . I . . . people tell me you do things . . .

—Why don't you spy on me if you think you know what I'm doing?

—I can't be everywhere at the same time.

—Then why do you believe what they tell you? Here's how it is . . . You're going to prove it to me right now . . . Let's go, *ándele*. You walk in front . . .

—You go ahead.

—No. Things have changed now. You don't tell me what to do anymore. I order you, and this time you go first. Let's go, and if you don't like it, I'll shoot you here.

I got braver since he didn't take his gun out. I thought: "He doesn't have a weapon . . ." So I started to talk louder.

He walked in front. I said:

—Walk over there to the paymaster's car, *ándele*.

Someone had told my husband that I was the paymaster's lover. I wasn't, but some woman told him that, they're all like that: when they aren't shaking their asses in someone's face, they're

flapping their lips, to see who they can destroy with their gossip:

—Call the woman to come out. They can arrest me, but you're going to prove it to me right here or we both die.

When my husband saw he'd lost control, he called her:

—Listen, come out here; you've seen her with the paymaster. I want you to repeat what you told me now in front of her.

And the woman denied it:

—Ay no, *manito*, I didn't tell you anything.

I yelled at her:

—Yes, you did, and he beat me because of it. He hasn't killed me because it hasn't been God's will, but he took me to the woods with every intention of doing just that. Now you both have to prove it to me . . .

—No, *manito*, she said, I haven't told you anything. Don't be like that. How can you believe it? Who told you that, it wasn't me . . .

—It was you, I yelled, and I fired a shot at her feet.

At that very instant her husband came out and grabbed her and started to beat her right there.

—You've tried to make that woman's life miserable and now you're going to pay for it by listening to her . . . You explain what you said. Why did you tell Pedro that she was with the paymaster? Were you their mattress? If you weren't with them, you have no business talking . . .

And while he yelled he hit her.

Hearing the shot so close to the car, the paymaster came out, and so did the major and the lieutenant colonel. They sent for General Espinosa y Córdoba. He took my husband's sword from him and struck him with it fifty times.

—So you know how it feels.

And he gave the other husband fifty whacks for allowing his wife to behave that way. He gave her twenty-five to stop her from gossiping. I'd never met the paymaster until I saw him that day, and he didn't even know who I was. He came out of his car because he heard the fight. Big Snout yelled at both of them:

—I'm beating you for believing all the stories you hear, and you for pimping, because you let your wife go around causing trouble.

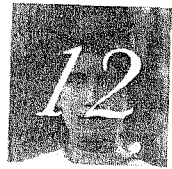
The troublemaker had curly hair. Her name was Severina. Her so-called husband brought her from a whorehouse in Morelia. My husband went there too and had a thing going with another woman for a little while, because he couldn't bring her back. But Severina would have liked Pedro to leave me for the other woman, and be with Jacinta—that's what her name was—because the two so-and-sos were real good friends, both were from Morelia.

According to what I found out later, my husband had this problem of letting women fall in love with him, and once he'd had his fun he'd say:

—You really love me? Too bad, I'm not available, I'm married.

Pedro got nicer after I threatened to shoot him. But then I got mean. From the time I was little I was mean, I was born that way, terrible, but Pedro never gave me a chance to be nasty. The blessed Revolution gave me self-confidence. When Pedro pushed me over the edge, I thought: "I'm going to defend myself or he can just kill me and be done with it." If I hadn't been mean, I would have let Pedro abuse me until he killed me. But there came a moment when God must have said to me: "Defend yourself." Because God says: "The Lord helps those who help themselves." I heard Him tell me: "Defend yourself, you've taken enough. Now you start giving it back." And I took out the gun. After that I said I wouldn't be abused and I've kept my word. I've done such a good job I'm still here to tell you about it. But did I ever suffer when I let myself be mistreated. I think there must be a special place in Hell for the women who have let men abuse them. They're probably sitting around with their asses on burning logs!

Pedro kept cheating, of course, he was a man; he was a man and he was on the prowl. He still had other women, but he was different with me because I became a real fighter, a real bitch. And through the years I developed the instinct to give it before I got it. If someone throws a punch at me, it's because I've already landed a couple first. Pedro and I would get into fistfights every now and then and it was an even fight. That stuff about squatting down and taking the blows was over. I knew how to defend myself from the day I hid the gun in my blouse. And I thank the Lord I did.



OF THE EIGHTEEN WOMEN, only me and the one going to Chilpancingo were left. We walked along the Tacuba highway from the old Buenavista station. She went her way, and there I was in Alameda Park, not knowing where to go. The cold chilled my hands to the bone. I was left without a centavo, no clothes, nothing, stripped of everything. Did I notice what the city looked like? Why would I care? I'd just realized it was a city of thieves.

People began to steal during the Revolution. Before that, Porfirio Díaz wouldn't allow that to go on. If someone stole, they were killed; if they murdered, they were killed; if they raped a girl, they were killed; if they deserted, they were killed. Díaz wasn't one to say: "Give me so many thousand pesos and get on with your business!" No. There was respect and a lot of fear. People thought: "If I commit a crime they'll kill me, so I better not."

I crouched down against the wall. That's where the police found me when it got dark, and asked me where I was going. I told them number 15 Parcialidad Street. There was a sentry with a lantern on every corner. Nowadays the streets are empty, and there's no protection, but there was back then. They walked me block by

block, passing me from one to the next, and the next, and the next, until I got to number 15 Parcialidad Street. All that's left of those streets now are whispers.

Up north, when all the women got together to give me money for a ticket, I made friends with Adelina Román, General Abacu's wife, and she told me to look up her sister Raquel, who was married to General Juan Ponce. But instead of going to the door and asking for her, I sat on the curb and waited there until ten o'clock that night. It started to drizzle, and the porter came out to close up, and since I was in the middle of the doorway she asked me:

—Girl, aren't you coming in?

—No, I'm waiting for Raquelito . . .

—Raquelito's inside.

I didn't know how things worked since I was from the countryside. Mexico City is quite different; everyone tries to take advantage of you . . . The porter brought me into the tenement house and called out: "Señora Raquelito! Señora Raquelito! There's someone here to see you." She came out and I told her that her sister Adelina had sent me and said that they'd put me up.

I spent many days on the curb on Parcialidad Street while they were eating because I was an uninvited guest. When they ate, I'd go out to the curb because I was embarrassed to sit there and stare. When they were finished, I went back in and drank some water. They didn't see that I was hungry. It wasn't their problem to worry about me. I've had it really rough at times. Sometimes I ate only a tortilla.

It wasn't Raquelito's responsibility to feed me. I was just there. That's not mistreatment. Why would it be if everything is preordained by God's omnipotent hand? It was unavoidable. I didn't work for them, so I didn't have a place there. They were doing a lot for me by letting me sleep in a corner of the hallway. I slept on the floor without a *petate* or anything. If there isn't any more wax than what's burning, you have to make do. I didn't have a centavo, and Raquelito wasn't rich either. She was a general's wife, but in those days generals didn't have much money. The generals nowadays are thieves; they're rich because they steal the country's treasures! Besides, the general had died, so Raquel had only the

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pension from the government and it hardly covered the expense of going to collect it. She lived with some relatives on *Parcialidad* and the money from that pension provided for everyone. The first thing she asked me was:

—Did the government give you a pension?

—Yes, but they're sending it to my home in Tehuantepec.

—Are you going home?

—How can I?

How was I going to go home if I didn't have even a centavo in my pocket? I had only what was on my back because all my documents had been stolen. What proof did I have? Then Raquelito told me not to be in a hurry; she'd arrange for them to send my money here to the capital.

During that time, Goat Beard, President Carranza, Venustiano, was running the government. Raquel took me to the National Palace, the government house; it was filled with women, a world of women, so many you couldn't even see where to get in. All the doors were jam-packed with petticoats, widows trying to arrange to receive pensions. We went into the Presidential Hall one at a time, taking turns, into a big ballroom, where Goat Beard was sitting on a throne. I recognized him. I'd seen him up close in the taking of Celaya, where they cut off Obregón's arm. He didn't remember me, because generals see so many troops. When I went in he said to me:

—If you were old, the government would give you a pension, but since you're young, I can't give the order for them to continue paying you. You could remarry and there's no reason for the dead man to support your new husband.

I grabbed the papers that Raquel had gotten for me, and I ripped them up and threw them in his face.

—Ay, such rudeness!

—You're even ruder, worse than rude, you're a thief, because you steal from the dead. And you'll do to all the rest of the women you don't like just what you've done to me.

The secretary was the only other person in the room. He didn't say a word. I was fighting for my rights, and he couldn't

have gotten involved even if he wanted to, because I was arguing with the President.

It made me real mad. I could feel the anger rising inside me and I started to sweat. What did he care if I was young or old? He had to pay me because it wasn't his money to keep; it was what the deceased had left me to support myself. But Carranza kept my money, the bastard. The revolutionaries who had gone on to Heaven were supporting him, their pay continued going to him; my husband's, my brother's, my father's, and the pay of all the rest who died because of him, because of the mess he made that sent so many people to the next world for no rhyme or reason. I hope all the generals are turned into salt and water and end up in Hell.

Since I didn't have anyone to look out for me, Goat Beard held my regular pay and my marching pay. He's the thief who screwed me. When I hear them talk about him on the radio I scream at it: "Damn thief!" His brother Jesús Carranza was a good man, but Venustiano was the worst there could ever be, evil disguised as good. Each government boasts about whoever suits them at the time. Now they call him Man of the Four Swamps, and I think it's because he had mud instead of a soul.

They forced Carranza on us like a straitjacket. He seized most of the gold Porfirio Díaz had left in the National Palace, filling boxes and boxes with gold and silver bars. Obregón's men blew up the train that ran from the villa in Santa Clara, took the money, and chased him into a trap at his ranch near Tlaxcala . . . But they don't tell you that on the radio. They talk about what suits their purpose, not what really went on, and they never mention that Goat Beard was always running from something, always fleeing . . .

Those revolutionaries make me feel like I've been kicked in the balls . . . I mean, if I had balls. They're just bandits, highway robbers who're protected by the law. When a soldier dies or deserts, they don't take his name off the list they send to headquarters in the capital. When they call the roll they pay someone a peseta to answer "Present!" for him. They sign the payroll and it's sent stating: "The troops are all present or accounted for." Some-

times they don't even have two half platoons. The colonel or the general who's in charge of that company keeps the missing soldiers' pay. They all do it, all of them, and it's the same with the horses. The allowance for a horse is more than for a soldier and the cavalry generals keep it for themselves. The soldiers walk from one place to another because there aren't any horses, they exist only on paper: "Three died and they have to be replaced . . ." That's why they all fight to be cavalry generals; in a year or two they're rich.

Why did Porfirio Díaz lose? Because he thought he had a lot of soldiers: he got the payrolls showing that his troops were all on hand, and he sent their pay, but most of them had already gone over to the enemy side. They all do it, because one is just as much a bandit as the next. Those revolutionary bastards!

Since I didn't have anyone to look out for me, I'd go out to find work, but I'd just walk up and down the streets, and then come back. I thought I was looking for work, but since I didn't talk to anyone or ask anything, because I wasn't used to talking to people—and to this day I'm still stubborn as a mule—I never got anywhere. I just talked to myself, real quiet to myself, and ideas would swirl around in my head like little balls and make me dizzy. I'd think about the past, all the huisaches I'd crossed, what was going to become of me, about how life had me hanging by a thread, and I kept racking my brain but I just didn't know what to do next. I've never thought as much as I did then; so much that my head hurt. Or maybe it was from hunger. I'd go straight up and down Santa Ana, up to where La Esmeralda, the jewelry store, is on the corner of Tacuba, and from there I'd come back again to Santa Ana Street. I wouldn't cross the street because I was afraid of getting lost, so that's what I did, over and over, one step at a time, thinking about sad things.

I walked for a long time, about ten months. I didn't eat anything. I don't know how God still has me on this earth. And later, when I was older, I'd think: "Blessed be God because I've suffered so much. I'm sure I was born for it. I've swallowed some real bitter pills, so many that I don't know how I'm still alive." It would be getting late. I'd come back to Parcialidad Street and I'd sit at the

door until dark. Once everyone had gone to bed I'd go in to where Raquelito had given me permission to sleep. I'd lay some newspapers on the floor and cover up with my shawl. I did that for months, I don't know how long, because I never learned how to read a calendar. I did learn how to tell time with a watch. But I accepted it: the world is the way it is and tomorrow will be another day.

The next day or month or the next year, I don't know which, nor do I care, after going up and down the streets, God sent me a guardian angel. That girl must have seen me before, that heavenly soul that God sent to help me, because one time she asked me:

—Where're you going?

—I don't know . . .

—What do you mean? I see that you go straight down this street and you come back the same way every day . . .

I simply stood there. She kept insisting so much that I said:

—I'm looking for work.

—Don't be dumb, she said. Every door where you see this sign . . . Listen, do you know how to read? 171

—No, I don't . . .

—Every place you see these signs saying "Maid wanted," you can find work . . .

And she showed me where they'd put up "Maid wanted" signs on the doors and balconies. That young woman took me through the streets of Mexico City, and at every window and at every doorway where she saw a sign, she'd stop:

—Look, there's work here . . . Let's go on ahead and find another one.

And we started walking again. We got to another window and she'd repeat the same thing so I'd understand. We crossed street after street after street; she took me by the Hospital and we came back through Ciudadela. She explained a lot of things to me, everything she knew . . . And then she said:

—It's late. Let's go and eat.

—You go ahead. I'll wait here . . .

—No, let's both eat.

—I don't have money to buy food.

—Listen, I'm not asking you if you're buying the food. Let's go and eat.

She took me to the Juan Carbonero market that's near 2 de Abril Street, and she fed me. My stomach hurt, because after being hungry for so long your body doesn't want to take in food. I ate just a little. And then she said:

—Let's go to your house now.

—I live behind the Teipan . . .

The Teipan is a school for orphans close to the Santiago prison in front of Tlatelolco Park. She took me through there and I showed her Parcialidad Street:

—I have a friend who lives here!

She went into the tenement with me and started walking toward the same house where I was staying.

—Raquelito, Raquelito, she said. I have a friend here with me.

—Who's your friend?

That young woman who took me all over the streets of the city was Isabel Chamorro. She talked with Raquelito and told her that she had arranged work for me. That's when I got a good look at her, because I hadn't before. I was ashamed for her to see the hunger in my eyes. She wasn't young or old, tall or short, normal, not fat or skinny, she was a lovable little thing with short wavy hair, a nice personality, she was really good to me. I think she was poor, because I never saw her house. The next day she came early to take me to work.

The blond Spanish woman that I worked for first was the owner of a wine store across the street from the San Marcos market. She lived in a tenement house that was divided into two parts: the house on this side and the wine cellar on the other. The house was on a corner. The wine store and the warehouse faced the street, and all the rooms were in a row around the corner. The kitchen was very big.

I don't know what they filled the bottles with—it was supposed to be some kind of wine—but I never saw grapes or any other fruit. The husband managed the store, and we were over on the

other side of the building. He was with the barrels and the señora was in the house.

At that time of year, there were these slugs called *tlaconetes* in all the houses, long and slimy things, and Señora Pepita showed me how they shriveled up if you put salt on them. They terrified me, and since I didn't have anything to cover myself with when I slept, I put newspapers down in the kitchen and poured salt around everything so they wouldn't climb on me. I had to do all the chores for Señora Pepita—wash, iron, clean floors. Back then the floors were wood and had to be washed every week with a brush and lye and they were painted with yellow congo every Saturday. I liked it when they were freshly painted because they looked real nice, like the yolk of an egg. First I scrubbed them so that the wood was real clean, without any dirt that would absorb the color. Then I'd paint them with a brush, two coats. The yellow congo is dissolved in lemon water so it'll stick. It made me feel pretty, as if I was all yellow inside, even though the lye made my hands peel because it had so much soda ash in it.

Every now and then when the señora went to Tepito she bought me old used dresses so I could change my clothes, just the rags they sell at the market. I had to wear them because I didn't have anything else to put on. They cost anywhere from six or seven up to fifteen centavos, depending on what she was willing to pay, and everything there was used.

Those Spaniards agreed to pay me three pesos a month. I didn't understand about the money in Mexico City, and it's a good thing, because they never even paid me a centavo. This blond woman wasn't a screamer; she didn't have any reason to yell since she was alone in the house. But she brought her stinginess from her homeland. At that time bread rolls were three for five, not like now when they cost ten. She'd buy five rolls and give me one in the morning with a cup of black tea and another one at night with tea too. I've hated black tea ever since. I like lemon tea. At noon she'd send me to buy three centavos of dough, a kilo was six centavos, and she made it into balls for me to make tortillas. She'd count them to make sure none were missing. Later she'd count the tortillas, she'd leave me three and take the rest. Some-

times she gave me beans and sometimes just the broth. She always used the leftovers, so I never tasted her cooking. She made paella and put everything from the week in it. I've never seen anything sadder-looking.

I guess I lasted there about half a year or more until I got rheumatism. I'd take off my shoes, the ones I'd gotten up north, so they wouldn't wear out; I only wore them when I went out or to run an errand, but they were already very old. Since I washed down the doorway and the patio every day the dampness made me sick. And Pepita, the Spanish woman, ordered me to leave because she couldn't have me in her house if I was sick. I got real mad, and when she asked me real two-faced what I planned to do, I said:

—I'm going to set up a stall and sell *pepitas*, which are seeds.

She just stared at me and yelled:

—Get out of here before I belt you!

It took a lot of effort to get back to Parcialidad Street because my legs had cramped up on me. When Raquelito saw me she asked:

—What happened? Why are you dragging your feet?

—I was thrown out because I can't work.

—What's wrong?

—I got crippled working at the wine store . . .

When Raquelito and her relatives saw how bad I was and that I was almost naked because the rags I was wearing couldn't be mended anymore, she went and told Isabel Chamorro, the girl who had taken me to work for the Spanish woman. Raquelito figured out how much I should have gotten from the time I started working until I left, and they demanded that the Spanish woman pay me for the time I had lasted.

—If you don't pay Jesusa the three pesos a month, we're going to take this a step further, we're going to sue you.

So Señora Pepita took eighteen pesos out of her change purse. I have no idea how many months that would've been, I really don't. Raquelito added it up and they brought me the money and that's what I lived on. Raquelito and Isabel Chamorro tried to explain about the months to me, how many days in each month,

when it was one month and when it was the next, because I was clueless, really clueless . . .

I stayed with Raquelito while the eighteen pesos lasted, but at mealtime I'd leave the house and eat on my own. Since some of the people in the neighborhood spoke to me, I was getting used to it there, and I wasn't so ashamed. One day Raquelito told me that she was losing the house because she hadn't paid the rent. She left with her family and there was no way I could follow her . . .

I met the wife of a navy lieutenant near Parcialidad Street and she took me in. Señora Coyame didn't have kids, she lived alone with her husband, like Pepita, the Spanish woman. I slept on the floor behind a stove. After all, I was a freeloader and had to sleep in the doorway with the dog. They say that the dead and freeloaders start to smell bad after twenty-four hours. I had no money, so how could I eat? Why would they give me food? I wasn't their responsibility. They were doing a lot by giving me a corner to sleep in, in the middle of their own poverty. No, there's no such thing as kindness, nobody's considerate, don't you believe it. Why should they give me a taco? I didn't eat. Look, I drank water. I keep going because it's God's will. He's helped me. Even though I'm bad, God hasn't let me down. Right now I haven't eaten since morning and I'm still not hungry. I was born that way, so what do you want me to do? There are debts that are owed and have to be paid. To make a long story short, I'm used to it now.

The sailor's wife was so jealous that she sent me to spy on her husband so he wouldn't go off with another woman. I had to follow the man, from a block away, from the Teipan to Luis Moya, to the sailors' barracks, then to the San Miguel church, where he worked. She wanted me to tell her who he talked to and where he stopped and I tracked him like a dog. The poor man would go straight to his house without turning around to look at anyone and there I was a block behind, like the secret police following him. Until I got bored: What is there to spy on? What did it matter to me?

17

The only thing Señora Coyame lived for was her jealousy and every day it got worse. She was afraid someone would take her husband away from her, but who'd want such an ugly, dark-skinned old man. Who even pays attention to a dark man? One day I thought: "This woman isn't paying me anything. Let her live with her imagination. I've had enough." She had a younger sister who wasn't married who lived in the same tenement and when she saw that I spent all my time on the patio she said:

—Don't give up. Let's go look for work at the box factory.

—Okay, but then your sister won't let me sleep in her house . . .

—It doesn't matter. You can stay here with us in the porter's place.

I was fed up and had already thought I'd be luckier somewhere else, so I moved in with the sister and it worked out much better.

Behind the Santiago prison there was a man who hired girls with experience making boxes.

—Have you done this type of work before? the man asked me.

—Yes.

Leocadia, the porter's daughter, and the other girls told me to say yes. They had warned me ahead of time and I had to tell the man yes, but I said it very softly. I started work as an apprentice making shoe boxes. I didn't even know what cardboard was, or what color the paper was, if it had a front and back; and the paper does have a front and back, and you have to be able to tell the difference. That was the problem, because it all looked the same to me. The man was awful nice. He showed me how to tell the difference; he marked a carton for me to use as a pattern to trace and cut the boxes. After two months they put me on a machine that cut boxes. That's when the owner realized that I didn't know what I was doing, but I must have grown on him by then, because he never mentioned it. I never heard a mean word from that man. Just the opposite. He paid me fifty centavos a day. Compared with the three pesos a month I'd earned as a maid, fifty centavos a day was like a million to me.

Don Panchito went bankrupt. But he didn't throw me out on the street. He tried to teach me his trade, but I was real dumb and he disgusted me.

Don Panchito said:

—Learn how to weave wigs. You can support yourself that way . . .

—The hair horrifies me. It's from dead people. They take it off their head in the cemetery . . .

—No, woman, no . . . ! Learn . . . You don't want to understand . . .

Now that I'm older, I understand, but then I was real slow. A lot of women wore fake braids and they'd comb them out real long. I have short braids now; if I wanted to wear them long I'd buy them. But why would I want to wear fake hair as long as I have at least three strands on my head? Raquelito wore hairpieces because she lost her hair, there was hardly any there, and so she bought two handfuls. And I could see that she lengthened her hair with those long curls. Girls walked around with long braids but they weren't theirs. The whole point is to show off what's yours and not someone else's. But she'd say:

—I just don't feel right without braids . . .

—But how can you wear that hair? God only knows who it belonged to . . .

—It's been disinfected . . .

—It doesn't matter to me if it's disinfected, it's someone else's!

On Sundays I went to the movies with Leocadia. Sometimes other girls from the factory would go along with us, and for ten centavos we watched movies until eleven at night. All old movies. I like the American ones the best, the Lon Chaney ones, and even now I understand them better, because they're complete stories. The ones from Mexico are all serials, once you start getting into it, it's "THE END," you're left hanging; they just get you warmed up and boom, it's all over. That's no good. I like a story that starts at the beginning and goes to the end. Back then it took three days to see all the episodes. Now all the movies are short ones, about an hour and a half, and they cost three pesos! I'd never pay that! The movies were about love stories or adventures, always an entire

story, right up to the very end. I'm not a big fan of that crap they make here in Mexico, because they aren't real movies, and the ones about the Revolution are the worst. I don't know how they can brag about the shit they come up with.

There were about ten of us who were with Don Panchito, and we left when his business went under. Since there wasn't all that union bullshit, you could get work almost anywhere, so we went to a box factory around Tepito. We made boxes for face powder. You had to cut small circles for the top and the bottom and then the strips for the sides. I didn't like it, because it was little tiny work and real slow and I liked the big, fast stuff. Besides, they paid us the same as Don Panchito: fifty centavos. But we had to make thousands of little boxes, like matchboxes but round. The girls asked me if I thought it was fair and I said:

—No, because the work is boring and we don't see the end product. This takes a lot more patience. They should pay us more for it.

The girls agreed that it was a pain in the neck, and we each took off to go our own ways. I went to work in a factory in San Antonio Abad where they offered me seventy-five centavos a day to make shoe boxes.

The San Antonio Abad factory was big. It was run by a Spaniard. There were seventy women and fifty men working there. He'd let us in in the morning and we went to our places and didn't have anything to do with each other until the next day when we came back to work. The first shift started at five in the morning and we got out at one in the afternoon, when the one-to-nine shift started. There were instructors who taught the factory workers and trained them until they could do the job alone, and foremen who watched us. They taught assembling, cutting, and lining, and there were others for tracing and cardboard covering, where you had to stretch it and cover it with paper.

Since I was the newest one there, the instructors told me that if I didn't buy drinks and drink with them, they'd ride me like a horse. I was afraid of those women. One of the boys warned me:

—Watch yourself because they're all going to catch you. There

are a lot of them, and they'll climb on you and break your back. Don't be a fool. Tell them you'll buy them drinks.

The boy's name was Nicanor Servín. He was a box liner and I lined cardboard. I'd take my cardboard out into the sun on a cart after wetting it, spread it out on the ground, and when it was dry I'd pick it up and carry it on my head to hand in at the warehouse. They'd give it to me at the warehouse and I had to return it covered. Nicanor Servín was in a row with all the liners, and I'd spread the cardboard out in the front row. We didn't talk to each other there, but we talked on the way out to the street. He was a real nice boy, he didn't try to take advantage of me. He'd do you a favor without expecting you to pay him back, you can guess how. Nicanor saw how all the women were harassing me because I'd only started two days earlier and they treated me like an idiot who had just come down from the hills, like a country bumpkin. When he realized that I didn't have anyone to look out for me he said:

—You have to buy these women drinks . . . I'll lend you what you need.

I told them to leave me alone, that I'd buy the drinks. I asked for a bottle of pulque and I started pouring until they all fell on the floor drunk. They stayed right there in the factory, and was the owner mad when he found them:

—What happened here?

—You can see for yourself, señor, Nicanor Servín said.

—Who got them drunk? The new girl?

—The women wanted to jump her, so she bought them drinks. You have to decide whether to stand up for the girl or punish all of us.

The man found the instructor under a table drunk. I'd ordered two bottles, not one, and then I made them drink it all. There was no way they could've ever handled it, and they all got totally smashed. The owner punished them and they didn't mess with me anymore after that. But then I took up drinking, and when I'd leave work I'd say to them:

—Let's go have a few drinks. *Ándeles*. You're going to buy me a lot of pulque because I'm going to teach you how to drink.

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I learned to drink in Chilpancingo, except then I didn't have money. When I started to get paid fifty centavos a day I still had a tough time living on it because I had to buy clothes and food. But with seventy-five centavos a day I could drink even if I didn't eat well. You could get a serving of beans and a serving of tortillas—six tortillas for three centavos, and they were big, handmade tortillas, not like that crap they sell now. So I'd buy myself tortillas and put rice and beans on top and I'd be well fed. In the morning I'd drink a mug of *atole* for a centavo and three tamales for a centavo also, big tamales, like the ones that cost twenty or thirty-five centavos now and barely have any meat in them. I rented a room that had a door facing the street and one into the patio, with a stove and a terrace. The room was number 77 San Antonio Abad, at the corner of Jesús María. They tore it down and built warehouses there. I still slept on the floor, but I had a place of my own. The *petate* cost me ten centavos and I covered myself with a new blanket that cost one-fifty. I could make myself coffee and cook beans; I took food to work. The same thing over and over! I was making progress. One time I even took beefsteaks, because you could get five big steaks for ten pesos.

I stayed at the box factory for about two years. From there some co-workers and I went to another factory over on Magdalena Mixhuca Street. At that time there was a lot of money in Mexico, and they paid in gold coins. They paid three or four of us with one coin and we'd go buy the groceries for the week at the company store, which belonged to the widow who owned the factory. We never had any money, because we gave it all back to the same business. So that shrewd widow knew how to keep her gold, we just held it for a little while. Everyone had to spend their part there to make change for the coin. You weren't free to buy anywhere else; the money went out and it came back in! And from then on, it was factories and factories and workshops and bars and taverns where they sold pulque and more taverns and cantinas and dance halls and more factories and workshops and laundries and annoying señoras and hard tortillas and more drinking; pulque, tequila, and spiked coffee in the morning for hangovers. And girlfriends and boyfriends who were worthless, and dogs that left me to follow

their bitches, and men who were worse than dogs, and thieving policemen and abusive bums. I was always alone, and the boy that I took in when he was little left me and I was even more alone, say goodbye and never come back, and it isn't that way, María, turn around, and me, imprisoned in my pots and pans, but I'm not much of a fighter anymore or as mean on the streets now, because I got old and now my blood doesn't boil and I've lost my strength and my hair fell out and I just have pegs for teeth, I'd scratch myself, but I don't have any fingernails left after so many got ingrown and came out in the laundry sink. And here I am now, just waiting for it to strike five in the morning because I can't sleep and it all comes back to me, everything I've been through since I was little and I walked around barefoot, fighting in the Revolution like playing blindman's buff, being beaten, more unwrapped each time in this fucked-up life.