

# **Love is on Page 52**

**Franziska Surber**

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*Love Is on Page 52*, Franziska Surber

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Documentación y Estudios de Mujeres, A.C.  
José de Teresa 253,  
Col. Campestre  
01040, México, D.F.  
Tel. 5663 3745 Fax 5662 5208  
e-mail: [demaclibros@demac.com.mx](mailto:demaclibros@demac.com.mx)  
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## **Author's Note**

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# CHAPTER 1

## THE PRAISE OF NONSENSE

In my other life I want to be a bird.  
—An eagle?  
—No, it's too big.  
—A hummingbird?  
—No, I don't want to be always the smallest one.  
—A peacock?  
—No, because peacock females are less beautiful, and I want to have a fair life.  
—A seagull on the beach?  
—No, you know I don't like fish.  
—An ostrich?  
—I don't want to be so scary.  
—A chicken?  
—I don't want to be so fat, or to serve males.  
—A stork?  
—No, because they are always drunk!  
—Why do you say that?  
—Yes, because they celebrate each child they bring!  
—Then, a parakeet?  
—No, they're too chatty. Well, I'm also very chatty, but not that much in my other life  
—A toucan?  
—No, because they have a very big nose and everyone wants to capture them and keep them in zoos. I want to be a bird to be free.

Natalia, 7 years old

I set foot for the first time on the soil of my true homeland, of the eagle and the prickly pear, at age 17.

Due to a mistake or a didactic determination, the stork had delivered me in a home of the conservative Switzerland, lady of finance, order, neatness, accuracy, all of them attributes perfectly alien to me. However, several mistakes later, the initial nonsense would be amended and I would enter Mexico through its exit door, Tijuana, asking for asylum to the creative chaos.

My parents come from Protestant families who, according to their religious ethics, were able to obtain material goods through work, keeping a modest life and a daily routine, following the path of the meritocracy. My father studied medicine and worked as a researcher for pharmacology transnational companies.

When I landed on the blue planet, he was involved in the development of generic drugs and basic chemicals. In pharmacies, tablets, syrups and capsules are still handmade according to a medical prescription customized for each patient. That's what my mom learned to do during her Pharmacology studies. In a second stage, my dad work consisted in searching remedies for cancer, using rats afflicted by that disease for inhaling the smoke of cigarettes that were burned continuously in their cages. During the last fifteen years of his working life, he was employed by Ciba Geigy and moved to Basel where he carried out tests on real patients with newly devised drugs to study their effects. When the cure was worse than the

disease, and they could not market the drug, they recuperated the research costs in the South, which at that time was called Third World. In Mexico, that multinational corporation used to sell drugs forbidden in the First World for being toxic and cause serious side effects. But the marketing strategy was not my dad's accountability and I am certain that he would have never approved it. One of the many things that I didn't have the time to ask him is that one. From the 1970s, this and other dirty laundry of the multinational corporations and the Swiss banks were publicly exposed and denounced by the Swiss sociologist Jean Ziegler. But when I gave one of his books to my husband, my mother gruffly reproached me that I was spreading a distorted image of Switzerland among Mexicans.

My mom drop out her studies when my older sister made the mischief of appearing on the stage before my parents got married. Recently she told me that her pregnancy had been the perfect excuse to drop out her studies because the exams frightened her to such an extent that she got sick with stomach pains, chills and headaches. But she never stopped harping upon us that she had sacrificed everything for us, nor criticizing us, the women of our generation, for being selfish and prefer to have a professional life instead of looking after a family.

Of all that, of a predictable life-course devoid of surprises, committed to prepare a financially stable retirement, going through a unalterable succession of stages and, particularly, through a perpetual home-detention-sentence due to maternity, I ran away aghast at the age of twenty.

When I came to be part of the Eisen's family, my older sister was already three years old. She became my role model, my accomplice in the worst ruckus, my shaman, the one who introduced me to the *latino* milieu and took me to an extraordinary journey of initiation into the 1974 Revolution of the Carnations, in Portugal. That journey would change my destiny, causing it to bifurcate towards the navel of the Moon<sup>1</sup>... where it should have started.

Olivia was the leader of the neighborhood. She gave orders and the whole bunch of kids of the buildings' block obeyed her without any objection. She was very smart; she had learned to read alone before entering kindergarten and she could quote from memory many poems, eliciting my paternal grandmother's pride, who exhibited her as a circus-bear before the elegant guests of the luxury hotels where she used to stay on holidays.

And there was also my brother Daniel, two years older than me, who I didn't try to imitate, but who was just me, as I saw myself. At the beginning it was obvious that we were only one, split to have four hands in order to better operate the electric train and assemble the Lego blocks. When I realized both that we were two and that I had been endowed with the wrong sex, I felt ripped off. He was already by nature what I wanted to be: a boy. I spent all my childhood striving to achieve that objective. I succeeded quite well; the mere doubt made me happy:

—Are you a boy or a girl?

But still better:

—Are you twins?

Or:

—How is it that your name is Franziska? I don't believe you. Lift up your shirt!

And my flat bust confirmed the conviction of the examiner. I was one of his mates and, he thought, I pretended to have a woman's name just for fun.

The matter is that I thought that the qualities required to achieve social recognition as a boy were very simple: being brave and not crying, while those of girls were mysterious. The most popular were beautiful, something I wasn't; they wore dresses, and I would rather



wear my brother's trousers; they laughed soprano, rocking their long hair; whereas my laughter was common and my haircut was the same as my brother's. They were fearful and in need of a protector, whereas me, with Zorro, d'Artagnan and Robin Hood as my idols, just as them I wanted to protect the widow and the orphan, to go after the bad guys and to restore justice. Besides Joan of Arc I didn't know another woman who was valued by this kind of great deeds. And the fate of Joan is not enviable. As for Wonder Woman, she wasn't yet operating in this planet.

To show that I had all the qualities required to be a real boy, I climbed on the highest pines of the forest outside my house; I smoked rattan without coughing, I mounted on the ten meters high gymnastic bars, walking by their leaning side as monkey, in balance on a single bar. I dived from the highest springboard, although I didn't know how to swim yet. And I didn't cry when I made myself a deep cut in my hand and the ER doctor had to suture the wound without anesthesia because he had run out of it.

Perhaps I also felt, confusingly, that on the sexual plane, women—recipient, opened, slit—could be more vulnerable than men. Although the technical aspect of the sexual relationship was only disclosed to me until I was eleven.

The legend says that, in her youth, Cenide is raped by Poseidon who, in return, grants her a wish. As a result, her request is to be converted into a man: "My affront makes me express this unique desire: to never suffer again a similar outrage make that I stop being a woman and you've awarded me everything." Thus, Poseidon converts her into a man: Caeneus, invulnerable.

When my first daughter was born I felt disappointed: she was only a woman. So I wished that Poseidon or whoever was her fairy godmother could grant her the male invulnerability. Of course, very soon, when I saw her so vivacious, like a figurehead flapping from the baby sling, I became convinced that this small woman was the most beautiful gift life had given me.

A few days ago she asked me:

—Listen, ma', why do you always seemed so strong, as if you were not affect by all the difficulties you've endured, of being a single mother and everything else? Why you never let that your vulnerabilities could be seen?

—And what did you expect me to do? That I sit on a cactus and start crying?

She reclaims the right to be and to look vulnerable.

When I met a man who opened himself spontaneously and completely before me, as a boy still devoid of shyness, and who allowed me to strip him off until I got intimate with his worst monsters and his deepest sensibilities, I realized that courage doesn't lie in looking strong, but in recognizing our fears, sharing them and having confidence that the other person will not misuse that knowledge.

I spent the first three years of my life in a Swiss-German village to which we returned recently to celebrate my mom's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. We were able to see that everything was unchanged: our building, the austere Church where I was baptized, the dome adorned with simple rustic-flower garlands, the plaza fountain watched over by the statue of a local hero, most notorious for having a big butt than for his exploits. Life was very sweet. At home, thanks to my brother and, on the next floor, to my friend Heriberto, eye-patched as a pirate, with whom I use to spend hours building megalopolis with wooden cubes. One day everything changed. We moved to Geneva and my sister Sofia was born. My mother enjoyed a social promotion. Her neighbors were envious of her new rank as citizen of the international organizations' capital.

With my younger sister we lived two parallel lives. We enacted everything that hap-

pened in real life, either as two actual-size characters, or by means of a host of dolls. We went to school twice, we replicated the courses, although in our games gymnastics was the main subject, we set up small-scale scout camps under the laurel of the garden, we ski on Sofia's bed sideboard, we spread playdough over pieces of wood for our breakfast. We spent hours in front of the small house that my dad had built for us, talking as ventriloquists through our dolls. There were memorable episodes which still nurture our relationship.

I was fascinated by the transformation achieved by the hairstylist. The conversion of a female mane into a short male helmet caused me an ineffable pleasure; so when someone gave me a haired doll, soon after "she had to go to the hairstylist to get tidied up". Not having more clients to shear, I convinced Sofia that her Skooter (in Mattel genealogy, she is Barbie's younger sister friend) could be much more beautiful without her childish pigtailed. She agreed. The fact is important because in her reprisals she would be very fair, and she would also have my agreement. Regrettably, Skooter's hair implant was only suitable for pigtailed; the rest of her skull was bald. So, after her visit to the hairstylist she was left with a neck-to-forehead apache-type mane, with clown-looking locks in her temples. I tried in vain to convince Sofia that her doll looked much better, more mature. Her resentment would last a whole life.

Many, many years later, Sofia bought an electric haircutter so that she could cut the hair of her six-year-old son, Maxime. The instructions indicated that the blades could be adjusted to the desired length. As I needed a trim, I liked the idea that my sister could perform it, with me comfortably sat on the armchair of the balcony, in bikini. I feel the buzz of the haircutter going up along my head... and suddenly the burst of guffaws of Sofia and Maxime, who is watching the process. The boulevard trimmed in the middle of the long strands on the sides is the exact negative of Skooter's apache-style haircut. It turns out that the distance of the blades could be "adjusted" between five millimeters and five centimeters as a maximum, a detail that my sister had neglected to tell me, and I to investigate. There's no other solution but to level all of my hair at those disgusting five centimeters. And with that we were even on the issue of the hairdo.

I climbed unnoticed each step of the classic and boring school path prescribed by Charlemagne, and which adults administer since then to their children, with the firm conviction that committing to memory mathematical formulae, dates of battles and the names of the capitals is a right and proper way of fitting them out to overcome life hard trials. In my case, as I used to get good grades, my mother deemed useful to add to my survival kit the latin subject, which, for some inexplicable reason, was taught to children with learning abilities, but that I hated from the first day because it occupied space needlessly on the hard disk of my brain. At age seven, my daughter Natalia would explain this phenomenon like this: "You forget things because new ideas come and delete those that were already there."

After meekly gobble up eleven years of schooling and a dead language, I became chocked up. I need urgently polychromatic stories on a 360-degree plasma display with three dimensions plus the unknown and stereophonic acoustic one. Explorations. Adventures. That's enough of the quiet and secure purr of a machine with a well-oiled mechanism and perfectly predictable results. From the top of my seventeen years I decide to take the reins of my existence.

In my dream, actual life has a look of rebellion... the audacity of the Che, the bright spirit of Luther King and the guitar of Donovan, the demonstrations against the Viet Nam war, Woodstock, Angela Davis and the vindication of civil rights, Bob Dylan and the banjo of Woody Guthrie, Joan Baez vibrating in memory of Sacco and Vanzetti... and is located in California, cradle of the counterculture as a lifestyle, and more specifically in a small

blue house on top of a hill in San Francisco, where one arrives walking and enter without knocking at the door because their residents threw away the key...<sup>2</sup>

So, when those accountable for the “Youth for Understanding” came to our school to present to us their exchange program, it was a sign of fate. And when the coordinator asked who were interested in living one year with an American family to learn English and become acquainted with another lifestyle, I did not hesitate a moment.

—I do, I said, happy to set my life on the course I wanted.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE GOOD THING ABOUT THE UNITED STATES IS THAT IT BORDERS MEXICO

Six months later, on August 14, 1972, I land on the arid soil of San Diego, California. I locate my adoptive family by the signboard *Welcome Françoise* carried up high by the clan leader, *mom*, an overweight Barbie doll, peroxide blonde with a bulbous hairstyle abundantly sprayed to keep it in place, a pout mouth and eyes like marbles. Lifting his neck, shorter than her, a Ronald Reagan's twin, he holds little Lisa by her hand, his pupils enlarged by the strong graduation of his shortsighted glasses. For the older siblings, Larry and Linda—two coat racks identical to their corresponding gender parent—my arrival is irrelevant. Moreover, very soon I would realize that my intrusion into Linda's life and bedroom caused her a deep disappointment, undoubtedly because I was a major competitor in her painful struggle to get some attention and affection on the part of her parents.

I never imagined so flat a place, but I like its exotic air, the tall palm trees, the wide streets lined with hamburger shops, take-aways and cottages with gardens and pools. However, that vacation serenity totally differs from my vision of a boisterous and rebellious California. My mistake even begins with the daily life of my adoptive family: a stifling routine and plainness. The days go by and look alike, as well as all the neighbors that I meet, who have the same family resemblance. It is difficult to distinguish one from the other. They are interchangeable.

Never in my life had I imagined that one day I would be waiting so anxiously for the start of classes! You have to be the classroom nerd or vegetate at the Smucker's.

One night, Linda introduces me to a few youngsters from the neighborhood. We talk sitting in a circle on the lawn of her house, while a powerful light-beam scans the sky East to West, North to South... in search of potential enemies, I suppose. All of a sudden, everyone lowers its voice and Linda looks towards the living room window, where her parents are engaged in their favorite inactivity: watch TV. We talk of drugs, a taboo subject. Linda's mother scolds her just for talking about it. Marijuana and hashish are very cheap here; they cost almost the same as cigarettes. Apparently, youths make the most of the bargain price.

Over the course of chats at swimming pool parties and breakfasts at the park with dad's dispatcher-peers, I find out that, San Diego being a naval base, practically all men are, were or are preparing to be Navy members. No useless questions are asked. The Navy offers many benefits: free food, lodging, clothing and studies, cheap movies and, furthermore, a good salary guaranteed. Why look for more? "I'm going to learn how to kill, I know, but it will be to defend my country and democracy, and we will be among friends." Terrific! Those are all reasons to be military. Although at a party I met a guy who had joined the Air Force instead of the Navy, "because there you don't have to cut your hair so short"... That's some motivation!

Finally classes begin at the Montgomery High School. It's great! Subjects can be chosen according to everyone's taste. Among the main courses of my menu is visual arts, an essential element for me because it lets me give birth to some of the thousand and one inventions that the uncontrollable fertility of my mind begets day and night, as soon as I get connected with it: drawings, pottery pieces, sculptures, macramé murals, puppets, jewels, clothes, accessories, furniture... I play the "photographic camera" game, so in every snapshot I see a new image, a new creation, never linked with the previous one. I infer that my whole life won't be enough to materialize all those inventions; that most of them come out of the blue only to return there after having honored me with a courtesy visit. I feel real sorry to disappoint the spirit who offers me his ideas, as I fail to comply with the mission he entrusts me: to carry them out. Each year, between appointments and telephone calls, my calendar gets filled with notes, color indications and sketches in search of a suitable date to meet the

real-world...

But today the calendar reveals me that I'll face a very important event, one of those milestones signaling life stages; the before and the after. I cross for the first time the southern border, with my English teacher, her husband and two other exchange students. Tijuana seems to me an American Rome: hasty drivers, relying on their claxon sound vibration to clear their way, crowded sidewalks with people crammed in front of clothing and *souvenir* shops. Most of the houses have only one floor, as in downtown San Diego, although these are really poorer, their walls plastered with unpainted cement and full of cracks. I like downtown Tijuana: a large fair with street stalls, smell of tortilla, vivid colors, marimbas and mariachis. "Come in *güerita*<sup>3</sup>, take your time. We have more variety inside." I buy a beautiful white-cotton dress, the chest and the sleeves embroidered with multi-colored flowers, and that much later I would see again at the market in Oaxaca and that my daughters will continue wearing. At the restaurant where we have dinner, I discover the real hot taco, totally different to the *tex-mex* courses that I had tasted at Taco Bell. Instead of bread, the food is served with some kind of fried potato small cubes, although thick and crunchy. After having tasted them, the teacher tells us that they are made from pork fat. In the end, I prefer the Smucker's white fluffy bread. Who would say that forty years later I was going to gorge myself with pork rinds at a Seville breakfast restaurant (my stomach would remind me of it all day long) and that it would taste heavenly. And that's because in Switzerland they don't know the pork rinds. Maybe insurance companies forbid butchers to produce them so as to avoid having to reimburse medical charges due to cholesterol problems...

Once the tummy satiated, the teacher and her husband take us on a tour through the underworld of Tijuana's periphery. Distressing! I had never seen a shanty town. Rows of shacks, rather like chicken houses, border the unpaved streets, covered with tin roofing sheets that let drain distressed threads of grey drizzle.

On the left side, a barbed-wire fence separates poverty from opulence, the dark skinned people from the *güeros*<sup>4</sup>, the third world from the first one. I feel like a general visiting a detention camp. I'm very conscious that I don't have to cut steel barriers to cross to "the good side". Along the fence there are holes: small, medium, and later a huge one. Mr. Mason, our teacher's husband, tells us that a couple of weeks ago some Mexicans had tried to cross the border with a VW minivan loaded with pot. They must have been stupid, because the surveillance posts can be seen on a hill on the other side: long green houses connected to the fence with electric wires and signaling the illegal alien hunters the location and size of the holes. At a signal, the hunting starts with lamps, dogs and guns.

We cross the city once again and my retina captures some images that still linger in my dark-room. A girl, sitting in a chair in the middle of a naked room, looks at us as we drive by, while another one, standing behind her, coils her hair around huge curlers; outside, a sign indicates: "Hair stylist". A tiny bar, fifteen by fifteen feet, all the customers standing, singing along with a guitar trio. A motorcycle dealership where two young men look at the machines, caress them, even sit on one of them, knowing that it will never be theirs. A barefoot girl asking for alms to *gringo*<sup>5</sup> tourists, while her brother hangs from her hips.

Another crucial subject for a teenager in search of her identity is Psychology. There, in the "independent studies workshop", where we must conceive a research topic of our own, Lalo, Arturo, Ronda, José, three or four other *chicanos*<sup>6</sup> and myself get together around a table. We play guessing games, we tell jokes and trivialities, and at the end we all fall under the chairs, laughing to death, under the unflinching gaze of Dr. Elliott who must be making her own analysis on the social behavior of her students afflicted by a puberty ailment. For my part, at the "independent studies" I discover an essential aspect that will be recurring throughout my life: the ability to fall in love head over heels for the wrong person. His name is Rafael and he seems come out of Boticelli's atelier: he has the fine features of a brunette Aphrodite and the eyes of a bandit; he plays the piano delightfully, he is a *chicano*, he sways as a sailor when he walks and he is shy. In fact, it was Gilda who told me that he liked me, and she even gave me a French-Spanish dictionary, "because, you know, there are many Mexicans around here and you may find a French-speaking one". At its peak, our relationship would be composed of fleeting glances, an occasional phone call (for which my Archangel had to gather his courage gulping a pack of beers), pranks in the hallways and a piano concert for me alone

during a recess.

Any interchange, however trivial it is, takes me to an unknown dimension of intense happiness. I've never felt so much alive, happy for no reason, just for the hell of it. I laugh alone under the shower. I visualize the nuance of his gaze based on the clothes that I'll wear. I set off "casual" encounters in the hallways. I practice mentally our next dialog. For Valentine's day, I concoct a subtle indirect invitation:

—Hi, Rafa. Will you go with the gang to the Sweethearts party?

—Nope.

—Why not?

—I'm broke.

—Well, isn't the girl the one who invites to the party?

—Yes, but the guy pays the dinner.

—Skip that part.

—Skip? Come on. Where do you expect me to take her? To McDonald's?

Thus ends my veiled proposal. I imagine both of us at a McDo, dressed to the nines, in front of a Coke and fries... Great!

With the aim of understanding its culture, I sign up to the "History of Mexico" class, attended only by *chicanos*. And—oh surprise!—the teacher gives his course in Spanish. Interestingly, despite not having studied that language ever, I understand almost everything he says; it is as if I *recognized* a language that I understood and spoke in a previous life. And very soon I start to feel myself as the daughter of a Revolution whose exploits I keep discovering with teacher Morales.

Devoted to teach outside the school premises, one day he takes us to meet students in Tijuana. For some of my *chicano* schoolmates, such an experience has a bitter taste, because their families had crossed the border enduring a thousand difficulties, leaving on the other side relatives, friends and their setting with the hope of widening their children's horizon. To go back is a setback. The school we visit is almost new and thus it still smells of paint and plaster. Some classrooms look like cages, with tiny windows placed six feet high. But the education system is more similar to that of Switzerland than to the American: the students cannot choose their subjects, it is more literary and scientific, and they progress faster. All the primary and secondary pupils wear uniforms, something rather surprising for me because never in my life I had to use one. Our visit culminates in a small classroom where the students perform for us a play in which they sing folk songs. I must not forget to buy a record!

The following Wednesday, during the lunch break, we all line up along the highway to see a group of Mexican students in a protest march. Those fools didn't even told us they were going to manifest for things concerning all of us: a ten minutes break after the second hour, the dismissal of the director because he wasn't the least interested in the specific problems of Mexican students, more bilingual courses and teachers, and better textbooks. The anti-imperialist struggle reaches our high school, but no one among the public seems to understand what's happening or which the protesters' purpose is. After a while, the banter and the joking start. Two days later, after they were suspended for a week, the protesters come back to the campus to distribute leaflets and this time they do put their demands in writing, but it is too late. The dust cloud they had managed to raise settles down without any noise.

After the Christmas holidays, the descent into hell begins. The first day, Rafael doesn't understand a word of what I tell him: he is drunk as a skunk. The following days he shuns me, he looks down when he runs into me, and I suffer from linguistic and relational regressions. I don't know how to behave with others; I feel ridiculous, out of place, inappropriate, as the leading character of a horror film in which I had been grafted another brain. I feel like bursting. How am I going to withstand all of that until July? My homesickness overwhelms me.

That Sunday I wake up feeling like hell. Everything spins around me and I have a zombie look. The night before, Jim had invited me to have dinner with his buddies: homemade bread-based lasagna, wine, hashish tea, brownies with hash oil and pot *churritos*. The problem with all that shit in the food is that it doesn't have an immediate effect, but a few hours later. Past that time, when I am sleeping like a log, well nested within my sheets, a thick fever begins to fully invade me and I feel

heavy and soft like gelatin. I see my body unfold in a multitude of identical cloned bodies, all made of a transparent paste and that I can't put back in one single packing; my many bodies drip between my fingers and they all run away from some ill-defined danger. Decades later, that nightmare still haunts my subconscious.

I want to celebrate my coming of age in the country where I feel closest to my genuine self. That March 16, we arrive at eleven in the morning to Tijuana: the same hour in which I was born for the first time in Zurich. But my real birth occurs today, at age eighteen, here in Mexico. It's still early for tourists and thus the poverty of people and the city is more noticeable: unpaved streets, ramshackle old cars, ruined shacks; many beggars; small children who hardly can walk, beside women carrying on their back a lump tied with a shawl from which comes out an unattended weeping. Normally, men have things to swap: chewing gums, necklaces, shoeshine, music. The first seller to whom I buy a ring receives with some sort of devotion the five-dollar bill that I give him. He kisses it and he crosses himself with it. He shows me the value of my money; here it's an object of worship. Tijuana is a parasitic city of the United States; it could not live in autarky; it relies on the U.S. dollars.

I like the narrow walkways lined with stalls on both sides. I learn to haggle, I pretend I'm not interested and then I offer half the price, sometimes even less. I buy a blouse for three dollars instead of the eleven that the owner had asked me initially. Then I see the same one for less than three dollars. The fifty dollars that my dad sent me scald my hand. There are so many things I would like to take with me and show to my folks, back in Geneva.

Of course, what for me is a game synthesizes history of underdevelopment for others. How much money do the women who spend hours, days, embroidering these wonders earn? Do they have an idea of their selling price here, in this bazaar for *gringos*?

A few days later, the school wakes up covered with graffiti, similar to those at my *École Rousseau*, in Geneva: "Down with school", "Down with capitalism", "Brothers-sisters united for the revolution", "Down with repression of humanity", "Ecological devastation". During its newscast, TV News calls the authors "revolutionary Marxists"; some rare bugs in this bunker of self-satisfied Yankee militarism...

The following Saturday we are back in TJ, with Linda and another family who hosted a German girl, but this time to have fun at dens. My new adult status opens doors to unexplored pleasures like vodka with orange juice and margaritas. We cruise from bar to bar, dancing to the beat of Dubbie Brothers, the Beach Boys and Chicago tunes. At some point, when we return to our table I notice that my jacket is missing. Dammed! My Swiss passport was in it! What if they don't let me cross the border? Without hesitation, I tell the immigration officer that I am "a US citizen born in San Diego" and he lets us pass. Phew! But I suspect that I will not be that lucky at home. The Smuckers don't like the least bit the report (even without details) that Linda and I submit them on our nocturnal expedition. I deserve a scolding by *dad*, filled with all kind of contradictions.

—First of all, you're already an adult and as such you are accountable for Linda who's only sixteen. You should not have taken her with you.

—... (contrite silence).

—And do you think that your eighteen years entitle you to establish your own rules, to live your private life? Don't you think that we have the authority to tell you what is right and what is wrong?

Silly question. I know that if I answer him that I am adult and accountable for my actions, he will immediately send me to Geneva. So I show myself compliant. As he is functionally illiterate, like most of the Marines, the poor man cannot read between lines or catch the sarcasm.

—You don't let me choose between being an adult or not. I suppose that for being your daughter—at least during this year—you are accountable for me and my acts.

When he realizes that he's still the king, he calms down and the punishment is reduced to two-week of restrictions.

Sometimes we have to go along with those who believe they control us; while they enjoy their flattered ego, we can unobtrusively widen our fields of freedom. My mother calls that tactic "the unattainable side of pisces". She prefers the open confrontation approach, although she usually winds up defeated due to her lack of arguments. She doesn't realize that sometimes I avoid con-

fronting her for compassion, because I dislike to see her angry and because I know that, as a housewife practically secluded all the time, she lacks any training in the field of verbal debate.

The other day, my matchmaker Gilda came all excited because she had managed to get me a partner for the prom. She didn't even know him, and me neither, but she had gone straight to him:

—Hi. What's your name? I'm Gilda. I would like to introduce you to a girl who's crazy about going to the prom with you.

Thus she introduces me to Jaime who, twenty years later, would fly to Geneva and look for me at my parent's home only to discover that I had lived in Mexico all that time. So, he came back, he found me, and I guided him and his two daughters to those places that make the DFactive a monster with charm. The girls, a little sniveler, rejected their Mexican roots and it was the first time they visited their country.

While we wander around the *Zócalo*<sup>7</sup>, dodging the street vendors, I bombard Jaime with questions about the fate of our friends of the Montgomery High School. I'm especially interested in one of them.

—And what happened to Rafael? Have you seen him?

—Yes. We meet once in a while; we chat with the gang. He manages to scrape out a living. He's a little stalled, going from one job to another. The last time I saw him he was working at an ice cream shop.

—Is he married? — And in half a second I run through the secret film of my life's first great love story, inexplicably aborted even before it could see the light.

—No. He has never married...

My warning lights turn on. At that time I had been divorced for years and I had never felt such a strong flutter of butterflies in my stomach... as I used to feel it when I saw Rafael.

—... 'cause he's gay.

The bunch of butterflies disbands in droves.

—Of course. It was obvious—I lie—. He never took part in social events such as the Sweetheart parties and things like that...

Before returning to San Diego where he was living, Jaime bequeathed me his bedside book: *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*, by philosopher and ayurvedic physician Deepak Chopra, an author who would accompany me along my search of the inner balance.

End of June. Shortened school schedules. Everyone goes through the hallways in search of their buddies to have their Yearbook signed. We do daily rehearsals on the football field in preparation for the graduation ceremony, because they don't want surprises: everybody must know exactly when we have to stand up, sit down, after which sentence we must applaud, and locate the crucial moment, emblem of the graduation: move the tassel from left to right! After that solemn act, we are ready to go out into the wide world outside.

Last farewell to male and female buddies, last exchange of addresses and goodbye Montgomery High School, vacation center for lonely hearts.

But my real ceremony of passage to adulthood would take place a few hours later, at Mr. Hughes home, the local person in charge of Youth for Understanding.

He had arranged an appointment with me and my hosts, the Smuckers, to talk about the minor family discussions we had during this year of coexistence. They finally realized that we don't have much in common, but they criticize me for not having tried to get closer to Larry and Linda, and they assume that I am no longer happy in their family. They also tell me that I had attempted to make them adopt my lifestyle instead of adapting myself to theirs, though they acknowledge that I never openly criticized their habits or ideas, or asked them to do or change something for me. But they didn't like that I criticized the way they treat little Lisa.

They are right. I consider it cold and tough, and I can't stand their constant spanking for trifles, their "Shut up!" and "Don't argue!", their scolding for everything she does. I never heard them tell her a word of encouragement or approval. And it is true that for me the life they lead is more related with the plant kingdom than to the descendants of the *Homo sapiens*. Their daily life is so monotonous and they have money as their sole objective! They work eleven months a year and they keep bored at home during their three weeks of vacation. Their only entertainment is to watch television



after work and on weekends. They never eat together nor communicate among themselves (well, they don't have much to say) and they don't establish any family tie. Linda vents her anger and frustrations on Lisa. Larry simply ignores her sisters. Mom Letha finds difficult to get dad interested in her personal problems: "His sight is always thousands of miles away when I talk to him". And dad's philosophy is: "You must live first for yourself; take the best of life for you, and enjoy it!" And nobody gives a hoot about their prudish grandmother who attempts unsuccessfully to bring Linda and Larry into a more religious life.

On reflection, the fact that some middle class former marines—whose culture setting is confined to talk shows, police series and Hollywood films—criticize an eighteen years old girl for not accepting to adopt their lifestyle, for me it's a compliment.

In front of those adults bogged down in their comfortable certainties, who neither accept my uniqueness nor are capable of questioning themselves in the least, for the first time I see myself as a different being in the process of becoming I. At this stage of the discrepancies, I have nothing to lose or a façade to watch over anymore. I can express my ideas free from all bondage. The school year had ended and I had learned what I didn't want to be or do as an adult, ever. At that very moment of my end-of-adolescence graduation, I realized that if there are occasions to quietly observe and learn, there are also occasions when it's necessary to defend our ideals and values, even if that implies a war declaration and hard battles to confront.

I tell them that I could never live as they do; that I won't need four television sets, air-conditioning and three cars to be happy, but rather a spiritual, affective and emotional life; that if I had a house, I would decorate it to my taste and not with featureless furniture such as the one present in each and every house of the neighborhood; that, unlike them, I don't consider a proof of affection the endless number of restrictions imposed on their children, but rather the freedom of decision and action that is enjoyed when confidence prevails. Dad Smucker answer:

You're an idealist and, somehow, more conformist than us. You see, I don't care about the color of my chair or my carpet, but rather that they are comfortable. We Americans are like that: we take into account comfort and price first!

Well, the Simpsons cartoon falls short.

My comments were interpreted as a personal accusation and as an attempt to "reform them" and force them to adopt my ideas. And, what did they do when they prevented me to wear jeans to go to school (a restriction that my parents applied with suspicion to my older sister during all her schooling but that I transgressed since fifth grade) and when they criticized my friends for being *latinos*? Three days later I came to know that that afternoon the Smuckers and Mr. Hughes had agreed to lodge me with another family for the remaining of my stay in the United States.

Rituals always include a banquet. My graduation to adulthood also had to have one. The person in charge of the exchange program invites me to join him, his wife and his daughter Irene, Doris the German student and some friends, to have dinner in Tijuana. Yesssssss! When I come back home, I probe mom, chief of outings. I haven't yet finish telling her the matter, when the answer blows up:

—It's out of the question. There's no way you're returning to Tijuana without a visa. Never!

With patience, I explain her that it is possible to get a visa for one day and that the Hughes have already done so with their student and that we are only going to dine at a very fancy and lavish restaurant. She calls Mr. Hughes who once more explains what I just told her. Finally she agrees. Phew!

When we enter the restaurant, the family friends—all of them bullfighters—are already waiting for us. The table is so long that we send postcards on napkins to ask if they're having a good time at the other end. The bullfighters don't speak English very well, but with the help of wine we are able to understand each other by means of the universal body language. Let's eat, drink, dance and enjoy, because the world is it going to end! We continue the party at the Blue Note. As we are only four women, we're not able to cope with all the men, so we stamp without a break until two o'clock in the morning. The Hughes parents are tireless: they only come to the table to sip another margarita and they return to the dance floor.

We are almost falling on our knees when they sound the retreat. The Smuckers had made me promise them that I wouldn't return home in any other car but that of the Hughes. However, at that

moment I would have felt safer with any other driver, because this one is almost bombed. We get lost in dirt alleys and suddenly we all bound up to the ceiling due to a huge pothole that we cross over at full speed. In the trunk, behind the seats, I land in the middle of Irene's graduation cake. Except for my trousers and the cake, everyone is fine and we crack up laughing, including Mrs. Hughes, who carries her wig down to the eyes.

The front door of my house is closed. Thus, I enter through the kitchen, walking on tiptoes. Huge surprise! Dad is on the sofa, at three o'clock in the morning, and the TV set is off. He must have prepared me a small reception. I discover it quite soon.

—Sit down! I want to have a little chat with you. Tell me, have you ever tried something like marijuana, hashish or poppers?

Wow, I already expected this for some time, but not at that moment, at three o'clock in the morning! However, I'm pleased to finally clear up this issue with him and try to calm him down because the issue had become delicate lately.

—Yes, sure, I smoked a few joints, as everyone else, but I don't take pills.

Then he starts his usual drag: that if I am busted they send me immediately back to my Alps; that it is bad for my health; that he never liked my friends... All of this in three editions, plus—watch out!—the final cherry:

—I'm sure that you smoke pot daily; that you take poppers and you have tried acid!

He leaves me speechless. He continues with a pitch very posed, as a chaplain, recounting the sinner's weaknesses, before announcing the deserved punishment:

—The more I think about it, the more I am convinced that this small traffic of yours already has been going on for some time. You often look stoned, like today when you came back from the graduation ceremony.

One must never underestimate the smog layer that can take shape in the mind of obtuse people. It may become impenetrable.

—Yes, of course—I scoff at him. In the midst of the crowd, I pull out my joint and I get high calmly, as if I were in the middle of the Sahara!

In fact, during the awarding of the diplomas we felt right in the desert; the heat was stifling and we all look a bit dizzy. But dad does not give up. He doesn't let me go to bed until an hour later, with much uncertainty about my stay in his house.

Two days later, I am ready to go to a concert with Jim, after having asked for mom's permit, when dad pounces on me, furiously.

—It's over! That's enough!

He calls the Hughes and asks them to come and pick me immediately. He wants them to send me back to Switzerland that same day. And as look at him puzzled, he points a finger at me and shouts:

—You're not going to any fucking concert, young lady! You stay here and wait till Mr. Hughes comes pick you!

While dad receives him with a 45 minutes speech in which he repeats endlessly the same things, I go to my room to gather my stuff and pack my suitcase. All of a sudden, dad comes in and we hug, crying. I feel a knot in my stomach: it's the first time that I see a man crying.

—You didn't fail, dad! — I comfort him.

—No, but we couldn't make you as happy as we would have liked...

Five minutes later, it's mom who hugs me in her arms, with a real, genuine emotion, that I hadn't seen in her before. She tells me that dad had spent the whole previous day in bed, crying, so distressed he felt, saying that it was like losing his own daughter.

We share a last supper, together! Ironically, all of them sit around the same table the day of my arrival and the day of my departure.

I am moved by the affection that these simple people—limited in so many ways—nurtured without expressing it. They show to have more feelings towards me than those that I saw all year long between the family members. Perhaps inadvertently they created ties stronger than what it seemed, precisely because I question issues that others take for granted. I make them think, consider different points of view. They didn't know how to react in the face of new situations that were cre-

ated and they made the decision to separate me from the family for my own sake, because “they had failed to make me happy”; perhaps this included a “we failed to protect you from the evils of our society: alcohol, drugs, bad companies”, which, they assumed, were already controlling me. And I am amazed by such a pointless pain, resulting from an idea and nothing more, namely, to assume that I was doing improper things, every day, without corroborating it. Later I would face other ruptures such as these, based on imaginary behaviors. So far I cannot make it out how someone gets into this diabolical machinery where imagination becomes reality and reality becomes unable to impose its truth to imagination.

The organization called my parents to notify them that the Smuckers had expelled me for being a drug addict. Horrified, humiliated, my mother would never take that label off my back. When I was already a respectable fiftyish woman, she told a Mexican mother that we had just known and that had come to Geneva to take her eighteen year old daughter back, because she was afraid that she could be heading down the wrong path that “she understood her, because they also had to go to the United States to bring back their daughter—and she pointed at me—who was taking drugs”. I must mention that, when it comes to screw things up, my mother piles up so many trophies that I cannot even count them all.

On Monday, my dad calls the Hughes to inform them that he will be arriving next Friday. Weeeeeeee! My lovely dad is coming here just to see me; that’s great! If it weren’t for that monstrosity, figment of dad Smucker’s imagination, I would have missed the opportunity of enjoying my father’s company during the fantastic trip we made to Baja California in a splendid orange convertible sports car, bzim! Every cloud has a silver lining!

My dad asked me no questions. And I don’t think it was only because he feels a visceral aversion to debate. He trusts me. He knows I am not a saint, but also that I wasn’t going to destroy myself only to experiment with the unknown. He had come to confirm that I was well, and to show me that I could count on him, under any circumstances. There’s a beautiful complicity between us and we understand each other with just a few words.

Perhaps he recognized in me his own teenage taste for pranks; a clown’s soul who doesn’t lose an opportunity to see the burlesque side of any situation and to laugh at everything, starting with himself. One day he dreamt that he was an orangutan living on the savannah in Africa. In the distance he saw some tourists on a safari, looking for exotic animals to focus with their cameras zoom. Stealthily, swinging from vine to vine, my dad approached the group until he got above them. To play a hoax on them, he jumped screaming, banging his hairy torso, in the midst of the tourists who started running in all directions, terrified. He woke up laughing his butts off. My mother didn’t find it funny: his screams had been so real, that she had leaped on the telephone to call 911, thinking that my dad was suffering an attack.

Early, that Sunday, we undertake our exploratory trip, map in hand, heading for Ensenada, without imagining that it was going to be one of the longest and most unforgettable days of our lives.

The coastline is so foggy that the romantic sea that Mrs. Hughes had told us about can barely be seen. We stop to have breakfast in front of the waves, at a restaurant that, considering the prices, must be for Americans. The road continues along a coast that grimaces at us, ignoring us except for some appearances near Ensenada. We drive through the city without realizing it because everything seems a large suburb. We turn around, towards downtown, so that at least we can set a foot on the ground at Ensenadita which, by the way, is not one of the cleanest and looks too much like any modest neighborhood of a Gringo city.

As its name implies, at Ensenada<sup>8</sup> there’s nothing. The stores sell products made in the USA or Japan, as those of any Woolworth. We decide to drive a little further towards the South, in search of a beautiful beach which, we assume, must be at the end of a nearby peninsula. But we arrive at a trailer park; rows of mobile homes with the desert behind and the sea ahead. My dad goes to swim despite the clouds and the water low temperature. We go back to Ensenada to take the two lanes dusty road to Ojos Negros, indicated as “freeway”. The landscape is lunar; a stacking of stones. I imagine a giant prison, each prisoner sitting on his mound breaking stones until converting them into dust, while they’re watched by that skinny flea-bitten dog we just bump into, there, in the mid-

dle of nowhere. After having traveled miles of rocky land, we arrive at a crossroads; a one lane road leads into the wider road on which we are traveling. I would have kept going right, but my dad turns left, behind a black car and, paf!, with his flawless luck he lands in front of the only gas station that must be in that desert, and that we needed urgently.

My dad is so. He has a built-in luck. The good news is that he has willed it to me. When I drive his car—something that doesn't happen often, because usually I get around on a bike—there may be a crowd and horrible traffic jams but I always find a parking spot in the right place where I want to stop. It is magical.

The bar next to the gas station, of the kind under-construction-for-a-long-time with rusty rods inserted in the building like Voodoo needles, has half a dozen drunken parishioners dozing at its grubby tables. Not exactly an ideal place to go on vacation. We drive back to the highway which gradually loses its pavement after several warning signs indicating that “public works” are being carried out, and we get stuck several times on the sandy detours we are constrained to take. At a certain moment we are overtaken by a sort of beach cart with a tarpaulin, one of those that can be seen at luxury hotels or golf courses, carrying on board a gang of happy singers. They leave us speechless. Scenes like this can only be seen in Fellini's films; they don't happen in real life! We crack up. We thought we were alone on this road to hell and there go those crackpots, blithesome, as on the way to a party at a nearby beach.

Y had never perceived eternity, or a similar void, as in this monotonous landscape of rocks and dry herbs that stretches before us for hours and hours. My dad represses his concern and merely asks:

—It's too much already, don't you think?

—Depends on where we finally get to —I cheer him up. —Perhaps we'll say that it was worthwhile.

I'm aware that the burden that he bears must scare him a little. What if we have to spend the night in the middle of the desert?

An unexpected bus stop cheers us up a little. We are not completely lost. There's a “bar”; a tiny shack inhabited by two girls in rags, their already aging parents and a boy who finally understands, after multiple signs and gestures, words in Italian, French and English, that we want to know where the road leads to.

—To San Felipe, — he says, frugal in words as he's aware that we don't understand.

Gulp! It's far away and, most of all, it's on the other direction. We are crossing the whole Baja California peninsula. We thought we were going North, half way of it, back to the border.

To soften the blow of that news, we take a couple of warm beers out of an unplugged fridge—no light pole is at sight that could have provided electricity sometime—and we eat some barely rancid *Marias* cookies.

We have no other choice but to keep going despite the late hour. It's already dark. The road starts winding down. It gets narrower and I look with anguish at the bottomless ravine which starts there, very close to the tires. I don't even want to envision what we would do if we come across another car! Fortunately, no one has the bright idea of driving up the slope at this late hour. At around eleven o'clock we finally reach San Felipe.

A warm air surrounds us and—what a delight!—our eyes hungry of vegetation are satisfied with palm trees and sugar cane fields. We approach a lodge where there's still activity: a group of men are hearing the TV. Yes, hearing it, because the image is not visible. The waiter tells us that the municipality promised them that very soon they will also be getting the image. The invisible soccer game ends and on one corner a few musicians take out violins and trumpets and the orchestra starts. What a reception! Full tummies and happy hearts, we set off towards the only hotel in town where two bedrooms with an ocean view are waiting for us.

I slept like a princess. Next morning, when I go out to the terrace, the Sun had already toured half his orbit. I find my dad having breakfast under a palm umbrella, ready to join me in my christening with the Mexican waters of the delightfully warm Gulf of California.

The best thing about San Diego is that it borders on Mexico, I conclude. And how good that I was sent to San Diego and not to San Francisco!

## CHAPTER 3

### WITH A HINT OF FREEDOM

I still don't figure out how I could get the high school certificate, even with the mention "Well". During the thirtieth anniversary celebration party of our generation, a classmate recalled that the few times they could see me in the classroom, I was gawking, lost in my delusions.

I always arrived at the last minute to the final exams sliding and so scatterbrained that I had gone over the wrong subject. But I spent most of the time at the ceramic workshop. I could pass full days sitting in front of the potter's wheel, looking how the piece of clay raised, its slippery walls getting slim and hollowed as they were upstretched, guided and pressed between my middle fingers. It fascinated me to squeeze, twist and knead the clay to engender creatures modeled in my own image: ovoid, maternal forms; double-headed containers of doubtful practical utility, as if they were disoriented, or multipurpose, with multiple possibilities to turn into something different.

The previous summer, my older sister had taken me with her to Lisbon, to experience from within the Revolution of the Carnations, a formidable mass movement, with an exhausted colonial war as a backdrop. The first May 1st after the collapse of Caetano's dictatorship, in 1974, the Lisbon demonstration brought together more than 600 000 people. That was the result of fifty years of "suppression of communism". Soldiers and sailors paraded, weapons in hand, next to the workers. Huge estates were expropriated by the peasants. The land was not allocated as private property, but work and production were organized collectively. Olivia returned about six times to the Torrebella cooperative to lend a hand at the nursery or the popular kitchen and to work on the fields, until the Socialist Prime Minister Mario Soares returned the lands to their former owners and everything went back to his imbecile normality.

Solidarity, tenderness actions of villages are conceived at the internationalist camp where we stay. The ideas of the Portuguese Communist Party and the Socialist Party are discussed and the support for the strikes, occupations and demonstrations is organized. During a march, my sister runs into Enzo, an Argentine friend, perched on top of a truck, capturing the historic hotbed of political activity in photographic images. He had to go back to Geneva, and I had one more year of high school to tackle, and classes had already begun. We undertake the return trip in his VW minivan, *Sancha Pancha* and Don Quixote motorized, crossing the whole Francoist Spain full of religious atavisms, rotten, and incapable of reacting to come to the aid of his colleague, the dictator overthrown at the bordering country. Endless flatlands, squads of warped olive trees, castles and windmills on top of hills, Sun-stunned villages with immaculate walls bordered by blue or ochre stripes up to the windows height; generous fig trees providing us shade and food; cobbled squares and, on their benches, rows of toothless elderly, watching at us with suspicion.

The stately Madrid with tree-lined boulevards leading to enormous squares, snobbery, palaces, royalty, churches, many churches, drowsiness, conservatism.

We make a detour through Barcelona. What the heck! Anyhow, I had already skipped a week of school, so, one more day wasn't much difference. In its old downtown, I get lost in mazes of damp, dark and foul-smelling alleys. There's the sea, yes, window open to other ways of being and doing, but its iridescent waters reveal the layers of oil and petroleum polluting it. At the harbor, a mound of people is moving, carrying shiploads up and down narrow gangways, sometimes simple boards. A male city, ungracious flirtatious remarks, prostitutes and ladies dressed in black from head to toe, a crucifix swinging on their chest.

We stay at the home of a couple of Enzo's friends, violinists and guitarists, on the cool La Florida heights. That morning, Manuel and Adelina are in a *Vivaldian* kind of mood. Through the large windows open to the garden comes in a scent of camellias along with the strummed allegro of the

Guitar Concerto in C major. The touchies under the bed sheets chase each other scherzando. The pace lengthens, unhurried randy prelude going on all over my skin under Enzo's fingertips. Senses in harmony, compelling beat of brushes... an adagio of powerful, unknown emotions reaches the bottom of my heart; a blinding light dazes me completely, invading everything. I feel like dying and I mentally say goodbye to my family and the world...

Back in Geneva, I resume painfully my life as a student. Now that I know what real life is able to be in its entire multifaceted splendor, the school teachings to which we are subjected, eight hours a day, five days a week, seem to me even duller. The only subject that I don't miss out is Philosophy: we study Freud, Marx and Hegel.

Enzo is a bohemian and we only get together from time to time, between a trip to Paris, where an assignment as a theater photographer waits for him; to Holland, where he buys VW minivans that *gringos* globetrotters sell at bargain prices, urged to the return to their country, and to Spain, where he resells the vans.

During the Easter Week, I accompany him to Amsterdam, to be his interpreter during the transactions and to help him repatriate his car, while he takes care of the new acquisition. We stop in Paris to visit his friends Colette and Jean, producers of smiles, puppeteers and magicians. During their show, I observe the mesmerized faces of children while they see Aladdin hypnotizing snakes: neckties raising out of their baskets, tied to the flute by invisible nylon threads. What fascinates me is to see that in Paris you can live making neckties dance, reaping laughter and applause just by making fly the imagination.

In Amsterdam I discover other economic sectors: the free sale of drugs—there are dealers everywhere—and sex tourism. On shop windows of entire streets, young and elder women are exposed in bikinis, sitting in chairs or rockers, chatting, reading, knitting, waiting for a customer. A short, bald and tubby Englishman, sitting at a table next to mine at a restaurant, tells me his disappointment. He had come in search of true love that he was even willing to pay for, and they only gave him fifteen minutes of timed sex, devoid of feelings. He feels cheated.

We toured the aquatic city in search of the best van deal, while we placed ads in hostels for youngsters, offering them a trip to Paris in exchange for a modest aid for gas. Having gathered half a dozen travelers and found a van in more or less good condition, we undertake our return trip; Enzo on the van and I in charge of the car, with three globetrotters on board, one of whom, Marcel, has to drive because he is the only one with a driver's license.

—Before we leave, —asks Marcel—, I want to smoke my last joint.

—It's alright, —I tell him—. I'll drive and give you back the wheel when you're finished.

I had learned to drive on the deserted roads of Spain, with Enzo, who I made grow green grey hair because on more than one occasion we were about to crash when crossing a village. As I had not many opportunities to use the brake pedal on the long straight roads, the brake, clutch and accelerator pedals confused me when I had to urgently operate one of them. But my instructor had been very patient with me and had allowed me to keep practicing despite my clumsiness. Thus, I was able to drive the car without any hassle up to the Belgium border. And that happened so because the other passengers also felt like having a smoke and so they passed around some joints. Moreover, after smoking a second one, our licensed driver had fallen asleep.

—Wake up! We are about to reach the border. We have to air out the car because it stinks, and I want you to drive across the border, Marcel, because I don't have a license.

The guys stretch out and shake their clothes. We open the four doors and Marcel takes the wheel.

When he gets his head in the vehicle to check its passengers, the Customs Officer's nose writhes. A pungent stench escapes out of the window. He orders us get down and to take our suitcases out of the trunk. He starts a thorough search of the car, of each package, each crease in our clothes. I am searched by a female bulldog who forces me to get undressed, except for my underwear. I imagine that Marcel carries more pot than the two joints he smoked on the road, the bastard! I already see myself behind bars, calling my parents to inform them that I am arrested in Brussels, accused of drug trafficking. How convincing can be my explanations if I tell them that I was traveling with strangers in a car that was not mine, that I had no way to call its owner because he had no

phone, no address and that I didn't even know where he was at the time. And that I didn't have the slightest idea of how the hash had appeared inside the car. What a telling-off!

But miraculously, they found nothing. We get dressed, put the suitcases back in the car and they let us go.

—Phew! —gasps Marcel. —What a luck! The only think they didn't search was my blue bag where I have a pound of pot!

—You're a real son of a bitch! How could you put us in such a predicament! What's wrong with you! You're an asshole! Honestly, Marcel, I'm sorry but I can't go on with you. Get off and get by in as you can.

The other two members of the team back up my request and we leave him, with his grass, close to the French border. Shortly before reaching Paris, my last passengers get down and I stay alone, piloting the ship without a direction in mind, in the middle of the frightening Parisian traffic. I have no idea of how to reach Colette and Jean's neighborhood; I don't even know if Enzo has already arrived. I only recall that it's near the Stalingrad metro station. That's something I can't forget; it amazes me that the French commemorate the bloody Stalin in such a way. Finally, caught in the stream of cars which drags me from one traffic light to the next, I look desperately for a place to park the hindering piece of junk and continue on foot. At last, I discover an empty place and I plummet towards it. I don't know how to park. When I wanted some figs on the flatlands of Extremadura, I just had to pull over and stop the engine. That's what I do now. I get down relieved and I bump into a police officer who has been watching with curiosity my rural maneuver.

—Listen, Miss! You cannot leave your car like that, with its back out of the lane!

—I'm sorry, Officer, but I don't know how to park when there's not enough space.

—Then, look for a larger parking space!

—The fact is that I don't know either how to drive in the city.

—So, how did you manage to drive up to here? Show me your driving license. Who's the owner of the car?

Here we go with the awkward questions! I give him the keys of the car so he can park it for me and he requires me to accompany him to the police station where I tell them everything, excluding the Customs incident, of course: the Amsterdam mission, the two cars we had to drive back, the scarce solidarity of my companions who got off where they wanted and left me alone in the middle of the Paris traffic, my ignorance of Enzo's whereabouts, my need to go back to Geneva as soon as possible because I had classes... In the end, I am surrounded by half a dozen cops who listen carefully to my story—outraged by the rudeness of that Enzo who had left his eighteen-year-old girlfriend alone with a gang of inconsiderate strangers—and who seem supportive and protective. The one that had found me blocking the street even volunteers, gallantly, to accompany me to Geneva. One hour later I leave the police station, saying goodbye to the *dixième arrondissement* brigade. I find Enzo at Colette's and we return on the van to Geneva, where I resume the school, while he proceeds to Barcelona, to sell the van.

And one day finally the grades' slavery comes to an end. I go to the diplomas' delivery ceremony dressed as a pirate, with trimmed black corduroy trousers of my brother and a flowery red fabric strip stitched at the height of the calf, and a blue top covered by a boy-scout brown shirt. When I get up to receive the famous master-key-that-will-open-all-doors-for-me document, the trousers' zipper breaks open. They call me a second time at the podium... So there I go, with one hand trying to hide discreetly the fly and the other extended to receive the diploma. I lack a third one to shake the hands of the row of authorities whose role is to solemnize the moment. I'm sorry: between ignoring the protocol or the propriety, I choose the former.

By order of appearance, the next dilemma that I have to solve is: and now what do I do with my freedom?

In every classroom there's always a clown, that foolish boy whose role is to make others laugh. I remember Rodolfo. One day, he came to the school with a gelatin eyeball stuck behind his glasses, very realistic with its tiny red veins, perfectly repulsive. He looked at us with his normal eye and the other taken from a Halloween film. Those surrounding him we were cracking up, completely oblivious to the past perfect conjugation rules that the teacher was writing on the blackboard. Suspecting

that some powerful distraction was sabotaging his course, Mister Cunigan turned around and inspected his parishioners one by one. When his gaze hit squarely in Rodolfo's bulging eye, he raised his eyebrows, he frowned, turned red, opened and closed his mouth as a puffer fish, and eventually, out of control, he rushed howling towards the rascal. In anticipation of an imminent confiscation of his false eye, Rodolfo threw it presto to the ceiling where it got stuck. More laughter, now from the whole class. That was more than enough for Mister Cunigan who required Rodolfo to hand him the toy immediate-ly. Compliant, he stood on his desk and started jumping, stretching his arm to reach the sticky mess. But, despite his jumps, he couldn't reach the ceiling. So, the teacher realized that it was impossible to meet his request, but he also realized that he had been ridiculed by a gang of spoiled kids and he couldn't stand that. Thus, he convened a meeting of parents and complained bitterly of our rudeness toward him and, in addition, of our lack of interest in learning. Rodolfo was punished with a one week expulsion from school and, in the end, he had to repeat the year.

Well then, those children of winding paths and non-academic intelligences are those who I consider more interesting because they have capabilities that classical education fails to uncover and, even less, to promote. On the contrary, it represses them. What I want is to learn how to improve the development of those special kids with intellectual disabilities, physical impairments and psychological disorders, or who are just outstanding, so that they can fully live their peculiar and unique being. In the catalogue of professions, this is called "specialized educator" and it can be studied at the Social School.

Amongst the entry exams that we are subjected to for two days, one is the interpretation of the Rorschach test series of ink-stains. They look like the drawing of a catsup gush on an unfolded napkin with a nearly symmetrical stroke on both sides, of an x-ray picture of a skull, of an atomic mushroom cloud or of a poppy field. The fact is that each person discovers whatever his/her imagination or subconscious suggests him/her it is. And I don't know exactly what method they resort to, but based on the ink-stains' descriptions provided by the candidates, the assessors decide who's suitable for the profession and who's not. And so, as my purveyors of fantasies don't get tired of bombarding me with their eccentric ideas, in each image I see a whole story. Rotten luck! The assessors conclude that I cannot be a specialized educator because my interests are "too diversified" and that, obviously, is not compatible with being "specialized".

That was the second door someone closed on my face. The first had been that of my house. One day, my mother found a couple of mattresses on the floor of the apartment she rents on the ground floor, and that was vacant in those days. So, I'm called to the dock. She infers that if I had wanted to play the camper on the ground floor apartment by myself, I wouldn't need two mattresses. Therefore, she deducts that I was with someone! I confess my crime. Indeed, Enzo had spent the night there. The decision is unappealable: I am expelled from Eden. Lady Judge considers that if I had had the impudence of committing the original sin, then I had to assume the responsibilities corresponding to such evidence: work, do my laundry, cook and pay a rent to a landlord.

When she was nine, my daughter Natalia explained to me that part of the theology like this:

—Nowadays women we must go to work, as men do, by inheritance.

—How's that?

—Yes, you know that the slaves used to inherit the debts of their parents. As we, women, are descendants of Eve, and because she listened to the serpent and disobeyed and she was punished, when Eve died—because she's dead, isn't she?—we women, as her daughters, we inherited the punishment of having to work.

Thus, with an early shove, I was thrown into Knowledge.

I am very obliged to my mother for that. At the age of nineteen, I had already swelled the ranks of women, of real life cases, and finally I was living Natural Size adventures and not only those that literature reveals to us, the passive voyeurs.

I share with two Social School students—who, of course, had spelled accurately the Rorschach stains—a three bedrooms, kitchenette and living room loft under the sloping roof of a Nineteenth Century old building, near the *Plaine de Plainpalais*. Forty years later, my daughters would live in a commune at the *Rhino*, the oldest squat<sup>9</sup> in Geneva, close to my first dwelling as self-sufficient. One foul fall morning, squads of armed policemen would expel them from there, along with the other 70



squatters of the property, so that the Attorney could return that estate to its filthy rich owner.

One of the first lessons of Knowledge is that our close ancestors of the working class did not have a private shower or toilet. The toilet was at the end of the hallway and shared by all the apartments of the floor, fortunately for us indoors, for many on a balcony, outdoors! You think it twice before going out in midwinter to relieve an urgent call of nature! A friend of mine, whose dad was a construction worker, told me that he preferred to pee in bed and receive a thrashing the next day, rather than let his noble parts freeze. To take a bath, you must heat the water on a stove and then douse and wash with it your body using a small bowl while you stand on the wide flat basin. Learning this technique would be very useful for me years later in my house at Contreras.

Another lesson that I learn is that the world of labor is ruled by a strange law: the longer the work day, and the more boring, rough and mechanical the tasks, the lesser they're paid.

My first formal job (when we were 12 years old, my friend Elisa and I earned a few cents as golf caddies, collecting poorly hit balls and handling the player the desired club) is as a supermarket cashier. Since the bar code is not yet invented and my shortsightedness doesn't allow me to read the price on the label unless I bring it close to my eyes, I must memorize the prices of some sixteen thousand products. When the amount is determined by the weight, I must lean over the automatic conveyor belt or pick up the package. Usually, the customers who verify the receipt breakdown come back with a complaint. If so, I must turn on a red light above my head, shameful and startling signal that I committed a mistake that the boss must come to fix. But I also practice voluntary omissions: when my client is an elderly man or wears worn-out rags and he pulls out one by one his coins from a ramshackle change purse, I bill him the piece of meat and the cheese slice for only one franc, as my contribution to social justice.

Most of the beneficiaries don't even notice it. Those more honest draw to my attention that I may have forgot to charge them something. I assure them that I haven't, that they shouldn't worry, that their receipt is quite alright. I get paid with a grateful smile. Some come back with a sweetie; I melt with tenderness.

Someone must have gone with the gossip to boss, because my next two weeks on the job he transfers me to the butcher's section. The good thing is that the Portuguese and Spanish workers of the team are very nice. They receive me as a daughter and invite me to their improvised lunches of well-done meat broiled on the metal plate used to seal the plastic trays. The bad thing is that now my check-in time is at six in the morning to take out of the walk-in freezer the parts of livestock and pork that the butchers cut into pieces, to pack up the trays and to place them on the counters before the opening of the store. Sometimes, the person in charge assigns me a special mission: I must replace all the expiration-date labels which already have expired dates on the chicken packages with new labels indicating that they can be consumed up to a week later. In return for my complicity in that felony, he supplies me with meat to feed "my attic commune".

My 'assistant-butcher and health-keeper' contract concludes just when the summer ends and the vacationers return, and when my new telephone-operator career starts at the taxi headquarters. It consists in knowing the location of all the streets of the city and, after receiving a request, to call the nearest taxi stand and give the address to the first driver waiting for a customer. That, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Tonight I'm alone on duty. A call wakes me up at four in the morning. They want a taxi, urgently, 32 End-of-the-World Street. Dammed! Where does the world end? And besides, which is the nearest taxi stand? As I imagine them as somnolent as I am, I decide to make a call through the radio. I worsen the issue. Five drivers answer my call at the same time, each of them pretending he is the closest to the end of the world, and a sixth shouting at me that it belongs to his taxi stand, because at night the area of taxi stands I have to call is larger before resorting to the radio to request a taxi. And thus, half a dozen angry drivers bark at me insults and 'best regards' to my mother in a cacophony of languages. Never before anyone had treated me so; totally helpless, the only thing that comes to my mind is to shut off the microphones and cry with humiliation, alone in the silence of the night. The phone rings. It's the client once again, fuming because he will lose his plane and blaming me for that. Who on Earth would think of living where the wind turns around and the devil removes his underwear! He cries out for the taxi. I suppose that the drivers have come to an agreement between them, unless they were the six of them, or that the customer

called another taxi headquarters, I don't know...

In those days I started in parallel a more exciting activity: I take part in a cooperative of craftsmen to whom the Mayor's office had made available a whole industrial unit of the old hydroelectric power station, superbly located on one bank of the Rhone River. I had become partner of one of them and at his stand I sell my ceramic objects, silver, copper and zinc jewelry creations, and even *papier maché* puppets that I had produced after a night of especially luxuriant dreams.

As I don't feel ready for other nightmare dirty-trick as the one I had lived, I go to see the boss and I submit him my resignation. I explain him that I will devote myself to the handicraft production.

The biggest income that we got in that business was the reimbursement of the "civil liability" insurance for a dishware that I dropped accidentally. Perhaps my mother was not totally wrong when she prevented me from studying at the school of Visual Arts because "you don't live off of that". She wanted me to study a decent profession that would allow me to earn a good salary. She never imagined that I was going to study precisely the mechanism by which labor force is always paid less than the value it produces, so that the upper class keeps getting richer without producing anything.

Without a job, without an income and without training, I have no other choice but to hire my workforce for whatever. Now it's my turn of the factory. I'm a driller operator at a company producing luxury cigarette lighters. I have to drill a hole in the cover of the lighter so that another worker can weld the striking device. The procedure consists of taking with the left hand a very small tube out of a box containing hundreds of them, place it under the drill—caution, the narrower side up!—pull a lever with the right hand to lower the bit and, simultaneously, press down the pedal with the right foot to start the machine. And don't leave your fingers under the bit of the drill, which now revolves voraciously towards the metal, drilling it in a fraction of a second.

Fordism in its heyday: production is divided into multiple stages as simple as possible to reduce the time they require. The worker is limited to perform the same monotonous task, as a simple appendage of the machine that marks him the pace.

I find it difficult to concentrate on the absurd drill. Come on, I don't even smoke, what do I want a lighter for? And my thoughts wander in search for bohemian experiences, with Enzo, from whom I don't have news since four months ago, when he left to Spain to sell a silver flute I don't want to know how it landed on his van.

Inevitably, sometimes I put the thicker side of the tube under the drill, and the bit, too thin, breaks. Supportive, my coworkers send me to the toilet while they change it discreetly. Each bit is worth seventy francs and they are kept under lock and key. If the foreman has not yet noticed that the stock of bits is decreasing sharply, instead he is well aware of the low productivity statistics of station forty-six, my own. Then he stands behind me, stopwatch in hand, to assess my performance per minute.

A strong rage invades me. Who the hell that jackass believes he is to dictate me the pace at which I have to do that stupid work? Not even the factory is his; its owner collects the product of our work, not him, vile pawn, just as us. He should be happy that I progress in something, perhaps not as fast as others, but anyway they are going to benefit from my work.

I didn't know it yet but I was becoming aware of the "class consciousness itself" from my own experience, as opposed to the "class consciousness for oneself" one learns through the analyses of revolutionary intellectuals.

I stand up and tell the foreman that I have to go out to buy some sanitary pads. In fact, I needed mental hygiene, fresh air, freedom of movements and thoughts. I only came back three hours later, avoiding to bump into the vassal measurer of lost times.

The next day it wasn't pads what I needed, but headache pills. And I go get them at the park. That afternoon Enzo surprises me as he was waiting for me after work. I run, I laugh, I jump into his arms. "It's great you're back! Take me with you! Let's get out of here, this is hell! We celebrate our reencounter as it should be and at dawn we fine-tune our plans: we are going to travel around Latin America until we reach Buenos Aires. Where shall we start? In Mexico! It's the destination with the cheapest airline tickets..."

That's how I came back to this land that seemed so familiar to me the first time I visited it.

## CHAPTER 4

### MY BELOVED MEXICO

The taxi that we take at the Benito Juarez airport drops us at a Tabacalera district hostelry which receives guests of dubious activities (our basic criterion was that it had to be cheap). The room has the dimensions of a train compartment. The bed has springs perfectly palpable through the thin fluff mat, and the plywood walls, painted with a gloomy funeral-parlor green, allow us to get wind of the details of dialogues—and goings-on—of our neighbors on both sides.

We spend the first few days exploring the surrounding area. Walking along the Paseo de la Reforma and Insurgentes (whose gigantic ads remind me of San Diego avenues), we look for defective phones enabling to make free long-distance calls. We read the ads in El Universal newspaper in search for a house, and a job, fast. I notice that the young women trim themselves a lot, wear attires that I wouldn't wear even to go to church. Well, if I were to church, but I don't. As I recall, I was never led nor wanted to go to church, except for the ceremony of my grandpa funeral and the confirmation of my sister Olivia.

The good thing about the Protestants is that they respect the will of the individual. So, they wait until their children are capable of reasoning by themselves to ask them if they want or refuse to ratify their faith. When I was fifteen and I had to answer the question, I attended a couple of preparation sessions to know what it was all about and when I saw that they only expounded Christianity matters, I wrote a long letter to the pastor, explaining him that I was not going to attend his catechism classes anymore because I didn't understand why he didn't talk also about Buddhism, Taoism and Islamism, as all religions pretend to hold THE truth without being able to prove it. Which were the bases of Christianity to assert its superiority over other religions? Why they didn't teach us the foundations and values of all religions so that we could decide by ourselves which of them we considered the best? And I didn't accept to participate in a ceremony that didn't make sense to me. In fact, Protestantism runs through my veins even without endorsement. Protest has been one of the engines of my life, causing me more than one setback and leaving me many teachings.

But my older sister is made out of another material. She accepted without objection the confirmation ceremony, although she hasn't exhibited any single religious attitude neither before nor after that. Perhaps she was only carrying out the wishes of the elderly, in her anxious search for respect and acceptance, to amend the troubles endured by my mother as Olivia came to the world so precipitously. My grandmother had expelled from her home my pregnant mother, forbidding her to come back during more than two years, worried about what the neighbors might say. So far, Olivia finds very difficult to differentiate her own will of that of others, and even more, to make it be respected.

One day, when we were walking with my brother-in-law and a friend of his around the wealthy suburb overlooking the lake, Olivia and I we recall the time when a boss of my father, a millionaire, invited us to have lunch at his place in one of those residences on the hill of the affluent, one Saturday at noon. My mom, wanting us to “look decent” in front of the high society, took us to buy coats that same morning. Due to our comings and goings from one store to another, comparing prices and qualities, time went by and thus we arrived very late to the lunch. How embarrassing! The cook didn't know what to do after heating and reheating the food. And to think that my mom was sent to a school for high-class girls and was raised with aristocratic manners in the event that she could marry someone of the aristocracy... I can't figure out how such a thing could happen; what kind of *lapsus* she committed to embarrass dad and the entire family in such a way... An untimely insurrection for being forced to mimic this world that was not her own, perhaps...

So, two thousand one hundred eighty-four Saturdays later, Olivia distressed reproaches herself:

—I think I was the one who caused the delay because I couldn't decide which coat I wanted and

we had to go back to a store we had already visited. But in the end mom didn't buy me the coat I wanted but instead a horrible one, red with a plush collar, for a little girl. And mom considered that it fitted my personality! I had to wear it several winters until, finally, it was small for me.

I recall very well that coat. When I was tall enough to wear it, I flatly refused. They bought me the one I wanted, brown and long, as it was in fashion. The red one ended up at the Caritas Charity Bazaar.

—It wasn't your fault that we were late, —I cheer up Olivia—, because in the end it was mom who took the decision for you!

My sister has deeply internalized guilt feelings which prevent her from resorting to the healthy rebellion when she faces anything not being right for her or things which she doesn't agree with.

Well, here in Mexico women care a lot about their appearance; they put on makeup (what for?) and wear stockings despite the April heat (how uncomfortable!). But when one is the absolute minority, practicing the 'healthy rebellion' often creates insurmountable obstacles. When I show up with my *hippitec* dresses and my leather flip flop at the reception desk of hotels to ask them if they have a job for me, I see in the reproachfully gaze of persons in charge that I won't obtain anything if I don't adapt myself to the local style.

My mom claims that I got on the plane with just two supermarket bags as my whole luggage. I say that she caricatures me. But the truth is that I have not a single garment suitable to go to a job interview. In Geneva, people don't pay so much attention to clothing; very few men wear a tie and women dress comfortably, rather than elegant, even to go to work in offices. Whatever, I must start with a little shopping: shoes at *El Taconazo Popis* shoe shop and a few blouses at the department store *Paris-Londres*.

Now I know how to move around in buses: the so called *Ballenas* ('whales'), which are always crammed, with clusters of passengers hanging from doors at peak hours, and stop at each corner or even in front of the house heralded by the passenger to the driver with a resounding *Bajaaaann* ('going down'), and the *Delfines* ('dolphins'), more classy, in which, supposedly, all passengers should travel seated; so, when the driver spots a *tamarindo*<sup>10</sup>, he slows down, he spins around and yells to those passengers standing up: Beeeend dooown! And, staggering, all bend down among laughter and jokes. If you are in a hurry, there's also the *peseros*, old American big cars whose passengers ask each other where they're going to get off so that they seat in the right order to get down. Nevertheless, usually you must get out and re-enter several times in the car because there's always someone who jumps inside to make sure that he's not being left standing on the sidewalk.

An ad posted inside a bus invites monolinguals to learn English at Berlitz so they can talk with ease with the *gringuita* sitting at their side in the same ghost train at Disneyland. Eureka! That's it! Teaching languages: that I can do! And soon I am taking a crash course in the Berlitz method—which consists in talking only in the language that you teach—to become an English, French and German teacher. The pay is miserable: ten pesos an hour, and I'm not assigned more than two or three classes a day. But that's a good starting point and I am happy to announce Enzo that, at least, we already have the rent payment guaranteed.

In the meantime we had moved to a Velasquez de Leon Street roof-top room in the Santa Maria la Ribera district, a block from the nightclub *Las Fabulosas*. Our neighbors are Norma and her little girl Alejandra, three youngsters from the state of Oaxaca, students of the IPN<sup>11</sup>, and a gentleman that we barely see. Together, we share a stove and a table under a grooved tin roof leaned against our room, two meters wide by three meters long, with concrete walls up to the height of the openings left to the install the window-frames sometime in the future. We also share a little bathroom with a shower whose water we heat with wads of newsprint or sawdust bags when there's enough money.

I owe to little Ale, who's only three years old, my first Spanish vocabulary. With her I can talk uninhibited about all the topics that I'm interested in and we have long chats, sitting on the bench of the common kitchen. Ale also teaches me the meaning of many sound signals: the long and sad steam-whistle of the sweet potatoes street-seller; that other one whose tone first goes up and quickly returns to its initial note of the knife sharpener; the bell of the garbage truck and that of the gas truck; the junkman call, the popsicles' cart chime.

One of the first places I go to visit is the Anthropology Museum, whose items I had already read something about, specially the ceramic, with its diverse patterns, according to their region of origin. What I discover amazes me. The Mayan, Toltec or Olmec sculptures, jewels, decorations display a dazzling fineness, subtleness, capable of representing with pure and stylized features all the characteristics of an animal, of a God. It seems to me that they come from an avant-garde current, works by artists originators of a sublime kind of visual and plastic expression still unknown to us, lackluster men of the 20th century.

I return to the museum several times. I stay to draw, to take a glance at the books in the store. I stick to the guides to listen to their explanations and I explore secluded areas. Today I climb stairs which, I suppose, lead to galleries I have not yet visited. But no, what I find is a swarm of boys and girls arguing, joking and reading in a playground surrounded by several classrooms.

—What is this? —I ask a girl sitting on the floor in front of a sample of small handcraft jewels made with clay pearls

—It's the School of Anthropology, —she tells me, with an unmistakable Swiss-German accent.

—Where are you from?

—From Basle, and you?

She's not only my compatriot, but also my namesake. She tells me that her boyfriend studies there and that she sometimes accompanies him, that the courses are very interesting and that I can ask permission to sit in a class. The teachers are cool. She shows me a curriculum. It's great! Never in my wildest dreams I had imagine that I could study here those same ancient civilizations whose religious and artistic manifestations I had admired on the ground floor and relate them to contemporary indigenous cultures. I don't think it twice. I join the social anthropology class and I receive my baptism of integral Marxism.

I would study at the ENAH<sup>12</sup> for two and a half years. I am deeply grateful to it for having introduced me to the most diverse aspects of the mexicanity, from politics and economics, history, or rather, the many histories of its peoples, music and linguistics, archaeology and the varied organizational systems, the indianism and the class struggle. At the ENAH I would find my partner and we would marry, with Benvenuti, an anthropologist friend, as our witness who, by the way, arrived two hours late at the Peace Court.

Some twenty years later, while on vacation at the Maruata beach, my daughter Ayari strikes up a conversation with a blond-haired and hazel-eyed girl. After a preamble, the bewilderment starts.

—Your mother was born in Swiss? Mine too.

—Your father is Mexican? Mine too.

—They met at the INAH<sup>13</sup>? Mine too.

—And they're also separated and now your mom lives in Switzerland and your dad in Mexico?

But when the discomfiture became alarm was when the girls discovered that both their mothers name was Franziska. They were about to hug as sisters, when they thought of clearing up a last issue.

—And what's your father's name?

There now! They were not sisters, but the bullet went really close.

Our plane ticket was valid for one year. We hadn't travel throughout Latin America or visited Enzo's family in Buenos Aires; but we had lived a few months intense in new skills and friendships, and we had visited almost the whole republic and even Guatemala. Enzo used to get timed photography jobs, mainly of cultural events. I kept giving language classes, and stealing students from Berlitz when I could, to give them private classes and thus collect the difference. I studied and I also participated in a Trotskyist political group. When Enzo told me that he had to return to Geneva to bring some cameras he had left there, I didn't want to accompany him. I had no business pending in Switzerland and, on the other hand, I had many things to do in Mexico. So I sold my return ticket.

The night of his departure I cried until I emptied myself out of him. I sensed that a chapter of my history had come to an end with a hinge man who made me travel in an extraordinary manner from adolescence to adulthood, opening for me fantastic worlds of adventure and bringing me to this my land of corn and cocoa.

Months go by and my photographer doesn't come back. He only sends me a letter once in a

while. On the other hand, other pleasant presences become very tangible. There's two guys in the classroom who intrigue me particularly due to their application in their studies, because they never accept invitations to parties (although every Friday and Saturday someone organizes a bash at his house) and because they always carry under their arms a pair of books with the blue and white cover of the USSR Academy of Sciences: *Historical Materialism* and *Dialectical Materialism*. Both of them are very nice and I don't know which of them I would choose as a boyfriend. They look like "twins" due to the similarity of their interests and their behavior; both come from the North of the country and are equally attractive, although physically different: blond with smiling eyes one of them; dark-skinned with Yaqui fine features the other one.

The tenth anniversary of the Tlatelolco massacre approaches and, I'm sure, both of them will be there. October 2, 1968 can't be forgotten. Ramon arrives alone to the site of the meeting, a revolutionary spark in his lignite eyes. His 'twin' had to go to a meeting of his political organization in Monterrey. We are tens, hundreds of thousands marching and shouting slogans against the repressive government, from the Monument to the Revolution up to the Plaza of the Three Cultures. Among the speakers there are former political prisoners who speak on behalf of other companions who are still in jail. They imbue us with their combative fervor; I admire their courage. My skin gets goose bumps as I hear the account of the tragic events and, along with two hundred fifty thousand demonstrators more, I vibrate to the beat of an aria extolling revolt, fraternity and the revolutionary struggle. The recognition to those murdered has become a powerful tribute to life. Little by little, as night falls, the groups melt away. The Plaza of Tlatelolco gets empty and we walk slowly on a carpet of flyers, dulled by collective emotions.

—What if we get ahead on the Linguistics assignment? —proposes Ramon.

—Well, yes, —I recall I answered him, because at that moment my rational brain tells me that it's absurd to even think doing any homework after what we've just lived, even less at this time, and when we don't carry our notebooks.

On the other hand, my intuitive left lobe whispers: "Stop being silly! Everything that's happening has to be; there's no reason for all of this; IT IS and that's it."

I know that he lives with an aunt and I imagine that she wouldn't be very happy if we wake her up because we pretend make some homework. Therefore we decide to go to my place. We dine *pozole*<sup>14</sup> at the Chinese restaurant, one of those with back to back benches on the Ribera de San Cosme Avenue. And to think that only a generation ago this was actually a river! And we get home tired at about midnight. Let's sleep. I turn off the light.

—Pancha<sup>15</sup>, are you sleeping?

—...

—Do you mind if I get into your bed?

We kept working on Linguistics that and every following night, for ten years. From that relationship would be born two wonderful little women, Ayari and Tania, both brunettes with ivory black eyes as their dad.

First of all, ours was a relationship of comrades linked by their same values; of affectionate brothers in the fight. *Chuculy* (which means "black" in the language of the Yaqui midwife who brought him into the world) didn't wait too long to put in plain words the superiority of Marxism-Leninism over Trotskyism—which had failed to concretize one single revolution—and to convert me to his creed.

Now I also study the application of dialectical and historical materialism to Mexico's situation, and I thoroughly analyze Hegel and Feuerbach's philosophy at the circle of studies. We discuss the present relevance of Lenin's "one step forward, two back" during four sessions, then we go quickly to Rosa Luxembour's "The Russian Revolution", which the comrades don't appreciate too much due to its criticism towards Bolshevism. For my part, I like that woman due to her courage, her political clarity, and her conception of those who are different: "Freedom has always been and freedom is for those who think differently" —says Rosa.

We are in the middle of Marx's *Holy Family* when the comrades from Monterrey warn us that our organization is undergoing a deadly collapse because most of its members have decided to split. Hard blow. The Revolution has stopped.

Apart of that concern, I have another one despicably bureaucratic: One of these days I could be detained if I fail to renew my visa. It's possible that in Berlitz they have already noticed that several of the students they had assigned me were deserting the course before completing all of its cycles, without a force majeure, and that they also suspect that they might be getting those last lessons at home. On the other hand, I had become more demanding in terms of hours and thus I didn't accept anymore a 45 minutes course at 7 in the morning, another at 10:30 and a third one at five in the afternoon. My trip to their Polanco office takes me three quarters of an hour and two buses; I couldn't waste the whole day coming and going, and for just a few dirty bucks. The only noteworthy part of our agreement was that the company had processed my work permit for one year. Now that it's about to expire, within fifteen days, their accountant gives me the bad news that they're not going to renew it. "What to do?" would ask Lenin, with the response already broken down into five chapters. My strategy is no less clear. But that doesn't have too much merit: I don't have as many possible alternatives as the Bolsheviks.

—Do you have any objection to marry me? —I ask my comrade Ramon that same night.

He doesn't have any. He has been on his own since he was fifteen years old, when he decided to emigrate from Vicam, the village where he was born in the State of Sonora, to get his high school degree at the Chapingo School of Agronomy, which provides with accommodation and food those students arriving from the province. Poor among the poor, his mother raised twelve children thanks to the restaurant she owned on the highway where all the truck trailers to and from the United States roll by. Ramon spent several summer and even Christmas holidays alone at the boarding school, because no one from home sent him money for his ticket. He developed a worthy and early practical autonomy, together with a deep emotional dependence. In Chapingo he met the Twin and together they fought at the barricades of the democratizing revolt of the school, brutally placated by the army. Both were expelled and recorded on a black list of those excluded from universities. The only school that accepted them was the ENAH, and only two years later the School of Laws of the UNAM<sup>16</sup>, where both of them eventually studied.

The day of the wedding we waited in vain in front of the Contreras Delegation for our best man Benvenuti, and our maid of honor my childhood friend Nicole who had taken advantage of Benvenuti's Italian girlfriend absence to sneak into his life and into our house.

We live in a commune, in a house on the so-called Hill of the Jew, together with six friends from Vicam that Chuculy (who had started working at Telmex<sup>17</sup>) supports to give them the opportunity to study at the UNAM. At their village, education seldom exceeds the junior high school level; there's not a high school nearby. They were: *Teco*, who put into practice his new veterinary medicine knowledge euthanizing with an electric shock the cat that got sick for eating jam; *Huilo*, who convinced me to give up Anthropology, science of petty bourgeois, and to engage in Economy, the base of any society; and *Uzas* the creative, who drew the missing half of the portrait he had to hand over at the UNAM because it was incomplete; *Miguelito Feuerbach*, who one day accompanied us up the slope of the Popocatepetl volcano, wearing elegant fine leather shoes and carrying his briefcase in case we returned on time to go back to the office; *Zorramin*, who would later set himself to legalize some plots for himself, taking advantage of the post he was holding at the Land Regularization Commission; *Moncho*, the intellectual of the group, so skeptical that before he could decide whether he wanted or not to participate in the Revolution, he had to study each and every one of the authors addressing the issue. And there's me, renamed *Pancho*, as one more member of our group of men. We integrate three brigades for cleaning and cooking, and in shifts we take care of preparing three meals a day for eight people at our "experimental cooking workshop" with a 100 pesos budget. Huilo's *chafaldongos* in green sauce have always a lot of success. My "cat" (gratin) of baked potatoes drives them crazy; but nothing beats the Vicam Switch traditional *colachi*.

Insolated on the Delegation's esplanade, after several failed attempts to convince passers-by to act as improvised witnesses of our wedding, Chuculy decided to resort to the tactic, infallible he said, of discreetly introducing a 50 pesos bill inside our dossier to convince the judge of the civil registry to sign omitting the witnesses. Furious, she objurgates us that she is very honest; that no one has ever and will ever bribe her. Thus, she cancels the wedding documents and shouting at us she throws us out of the Delegation. The employees look at us sympathetic and a woman whispers



at me:

—I'm sorry. The Notary is very committed to the law.

Apparently, her concept of bribery comprises all domains of life. We discover that the Notary is single and that she has zealously preserved her virtue until her current more than fifty years.

We must find another Delegation to start over all the process. We get an appointment at the Coyoacan Delegation fifteen days later. The validity of our chest x-rays and blood tests, prerequisites for obtaining the official consent to our union, expires on that date. We must return to the lab to get new ones. Emphatic, the physician just changes de dates on the plates and the analysis in exchange for a bribe. The big day arrives. Many people enter and leave the Civil Registry Office, but we're not called. Several times I go in to ask if they haven't forgotten us.

—The Notary is very busy, but don't you worry, we'll call you in a little while.

I never understood the extent of the term "a little while". It's very elastic and very often the diminutive exceeds the original "time". Three hours after the appointment, we're still sprawled on the stairs outside the door of Mr. Notary's office. The working day is almost over and the employees are about to leave.

—That's love! —says one of them, who had already passed by us several times.

But no, this has nothing to do with love. We are getting married for State reasons, to prevent my mandatory expatriation. Love doesn't require an administrative authorization or a blood test: it's a sovereign and unachievable chemistry. Just before nightfall, we finally come out on top, the famous document in hand, signed by the judge and two of his employees as witnesses.

At Santa Catarina Square we share a cotton candy to celebrate my final and officially recognized Mexican nationality.

That's according to the Civil Code: any person who marries a Mexican acquires the Mexican nationality. However, at Gobernacion<sup>18</sup> they don't know this article. Otherwise I can't understand why they took seven years to hand me in the green passport with the coat of arms with the Eagle on the cactus.

Initially, I used to go every month to find out how the procedure was progressing.

—No, madam, your document is not yet ready. Come back later.

Thereafter, each three months:

—No, we haven't been able to process your certificate because we need a supporting document of your current address.

I bring it.

—You must also bring a letter attesting that you still live with your husband at the address indicated on the supporting document, and signed by a neighbor, a business where they know you.

I bring them the letter signed by don Fortunato, the owner of the shop at the corner, who sells us oats, moths included. By dint of stapling and unstapling my dossier every time I go, my photo has contracted rubella: it's all punctured.

—I'm sorry, madam, but this photo is no longer useful; just look at its condition. Bring me another one.

I get a photograph from the photo booth at the metro station and I bring it.

—Did you get this photo on a machine? Noooo, madam, all machine photos become blurry. I need a studio shot.

There's one close to home, with a shop window full of women portraits in each of the stages being a milestone in their evolution: christening, first communion, fifteen years, wedding, always dressed in white, always in a complicated and uncomfortable bundle of long robes, laces and tulles. I bring the professional portrait.

—Wow! You're already expecting a baby! —exclaims Mr. Attorney, very observant, —How nice! Congratulations, Madam! Let's see. What can I do for you? The photo, oh, yes. Well, I regret to tell you that this photo is not valid. Didn't you read the list of requirements? Forehead and ears uncovered.

Seven years later:

—Please sit down, madam. Tell your child not to touch the typewriter, please. Look how tall she is. She already walks! And how old is your baby? How it is possible! They haven't yet deliv-

ered you your Mexican passport? Let's see. Complete this form for me. Here is a list of documents that you must gather. Come back when you have everything ready. I'm going to fix it for you.

It's almost possible to hear what he must have added mentally: by dint of a small tip of one thousand pesos. An Argentinian teacher at the School of Economics had told me that when he came to Mexico they gave him the passport in less than a month, and even though he wasn't married to a Mexican. Of course, it had cost him thirty thousand pesos, but with that he could be hired without problems to teach at the UNAM. To cap it all, that sidewalk parvenu was teaching economics although he was an engineer, but at the school it was enough to have good connections to be included in the teaching staff.

At that time, the daughter of aunt Amada—the one who was lodging Chuculy when I met him—began to work at Gobernacion to fulfill her community service. One week later she had my papers ready and I was called to take a test to confirm that I am a good Mexican.

The test starts with a casual conversation about my daughters, my husband, if we were still married, my studies.

—I see that you speak Spanish very well. The National Anthem. Do you know it?

—Of course I know it! I sing it twice at each school ceremony, once for each of my daughters.

—Do you agree to renounce any subordination or obedience to any other Government that is not the Mexican? If so, sign here below this document renouncing your former nationality.

I sign. And in my heart I hope that Switzerland never declares war on Mexico, or the other way around, because if so I would face a terrible dilemma.

I still have to take the last test of my integration into the Mexican idiosyncrasy.

—What do you want a Mexican passport for?

—So that I can work legally.

—And why do you want to work? Is your husband a slacker? Doesn't he maintain you?

I have to bite my tongue to avoid answering him, as it would have been, inevitably, in an inappropriate and counterproductive language.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE HOUSE ON THE ROAD TO CONTRERAS

A neighbor of the Hill of the Jew sells us a parcel on a hillside of Contreras; it's part of a steep slope. It doesn't have a direct access from the street but through a path; it lacks public water supply and electricity, but both services can be obtained, he assures us; and it is not signed because it is in dispute between the village of San Nicolas and the Magdalena Contreras delegation.

But to us that sounds like pure glory: a plot of our own to build a house custom-made to our desires, in the midst of a forest, with a singing river at the bottom of the ravine. What else could we ask for?

The construction of our nest starts with the news that the stork had already set a date to make a stop in it. A few months before I had replaced the pills with an intrauterine device, to cleanse my body and prepare it for maybe, perhaps, within some time... But the little person I carry in my belly is impatient, on the way and it's not a copper IUD which was going to stop her. So is she: whenever she sets her mind on something, she always gets it, be it an egg, a job, a house or a guy. She amazes me every time.

Chuculy becomes a bricklayer, a blacksmith, a carpenter, a painter, an electrician, a plumber... I admire his determination, his ability to develop new skills as they are needed.

To begin with, some part of the slope must be converted into a flat area; so, he digs the tilted land until he obtains a flat platform ten meters long by four meters width. Those would be the dimensions of our initial house: a kitchen made of plywood panels and a room made of bricks.

A few weeks before the birth expected date, we get inside aunt Amada's old VW Beetle to go touring around the villages of the State of Hidalgo mountain range and discover in each of them other Easter traditions: staging of the trial of Christ, processions, Moors and Christians masked dances. I am enraptured, pondering which could be the origin and the deeper meaning of those hardly Catholic rites. At night, we stop on the outskirts of a village and we assemble the tent. Farsighted, I brought newborn clothes, as well as a pair of scissors and thread to cut the baby's umbilical cord and tie it. We drive through many dirt roads that shake and throw us from one side of the seats to the other. My poor baby, head down through all this shaking! There are so many potholes that sometimes I prefer to get out and walk behind the car.

In the end, everything went well. We came back, the three of us, in good health; I still have a round tummy. One week later I go to the IMSS<sup>19</sup> clinic because my feet and hands swell a lot and the likely birth date has passed. It's Sunday and they're understaffed. The gynecologist who sounds me says that the baby is in a breech presentation and that they will have to take me in so I can be operated next day.

—It's not possible! —I claim. —I've come regularly and you've always told me that everything was alright.

To convince me, they send me to have an X-ray and, yes, the head is looking at us straight ahead. And the next day, Monday, I welcome the beautiful full-moon face that they extract me with a C-section. But I cannot hug her until I'm discharged, eight days later. The IMSS policy regarding Caesarian born babies is to keep them apart in a nursery crib and bottle-feed them. We can only see them through a window. On Wednesday, moms make a big fuss. Their demand is unanimous: that they give us our babies. They gather us in the Auditorium and they scold us. They are the professionals and they know best what suits the children and the women who have just given birth. Leaving the babies for some days in the nursery crib will help them be more independent, and us, their moms, who have tendencies to be over-protective, to distance ourselves a bit from them.

Some minutes before leaving the maternity, we have the first contact with our baby. We must

change their diapers and dress them. Not a few young women suffer a panic attack and burst into tears. In my case, they lend me a piece of adhesive tape to hold in place the flannel diaper because they forbid me to use the safety pin that I found in the diaper bag brought by my mother-in-law.

We are staying in the maid's room of aunt Amada, in the backyard of her house. But our relationship with her is somewhat tense. Amada, single mother of a fifteen year old girl, doesn't miss one single opportunity to make my life miserable. She criticizes the way I cook, the way I take care of my girl, I wash her diapers. She assigns me general domestic cleaning tasks as if I was her maid and she defends staunchly her daughter, even when it was obvious that she was the one who had dirtied again the floor I had just mopped with her muddy boots. We must leave that place urgently, therefore Chuculy speeds up the construction of the house when he gets out of work as a telephone operator. He stays over in the tent set up in the middle of the future kitchen.

One afternoon, he calls me:

—You can come to live here now. I'm done with the walls and I installed a tin roof. It even has a carpet!

And there we go. I carry the baby, the diaper bag and the bottle sterilizer.

I walk towards Miramontes, then we take a bus up to Taxqueña and there another one to Contreras. I walk up the trail and we arrive at our new house. What he has achieved in such a short time and practically alone is incredible! He has built a wooden kitchen and a room of bricks all covered with a tin roof. A barrel lets us keep a water reserve carried in buckets from the public spout, and we have electricity thanks to a wire hanging from the light pole that is 100 meters away, on the banks of the Magdalena River. But it still lacks the windows. The clear plastic sheets nailed at the openings are a poor protection against the night cold and thus we sleep in the tent, covered with jackets and trousers, along with an electric heater.

I love the Alpine landscape of our village: lively mountain ranges flaunting a thousand shades of different greens, firs, ocote pines and oaks. In autumn, I collect acorns for the Christmas decorations and hawthorns for the punch. We splash about in the Magdalena River and sometimes we venture in a long and beautiful trekking as far as La Marquesa, on the Ajusto Range, but not before enjoying a cured *pulque*<sup>20</sup> at the first Dynamo.

One night we are suddenly awakened by a frightening noise coming from the kitchen: banging pots and pans, breaking dishes and something live such as gasps. Chuculy gets up, grabs his machete hanging from the wall and goes out, courageous, in search of the intruder. I hear a racket of hassles, steps, voices. A while later, he returns, hangs the tool and gets into bed again.

—What happened?

—Nothing. Don Nico's horse fell down into the kitchen. We left him outside, tied to the oak, because he refused to go down the stairway at night.

A horse! Of course! I should have imagined it!

It turns out that as our house leans against Don Nico's lot, where his hack normally grazes, our roof is at the same level of his floor. There are no fences between our two lots. The animal approached the edge, slipped and fell in the two feet width space existing between the retaining wall and the plywood sheet wall of the kitchen, pushing it inside.

My birdie sleeps very little. She wants to see, taste, touch everything. She warbles until I take her to play with the little girls next door or until I tell her a story. She likes stories about animals and she knows the sound of the cow and the sheep (they come to graze outside our door), the dogs and the flies. She also recognizes the hummingbirds that visit us to suck the tulips' honey. I find difficult to concentrate on studying and I cannot write a task but during the night stillness, so very often I am awake when I write the last dot. I'm in the fourth semester of Economics and I am quite determined not to fall behind.

When my neighbor, Dona Cande, is not available, I take my baby to classes with me. She gives her opinion on everything the teacher says with a few resounding *agouuuuus*. When I have an exam, I leave her at the library of the school. There, between the shelves containing books of Keynes, Milton Friedmann and Marx, my daughter learned to walk, under the custody of the staff representative, Rosario Robles, my future boss in the Government of the Federal District.

After the breakup with our former political organization, we had rejoined another one, also of a

Marxist Leninist tendency. My role here is to write articles on various topics of Economics, explaining in the simplest way possible the causes of the Mexican agrarian crisis, the devaluation, the unemployment and the decline of the purchasing power.

We meet on Saturdays to evaluate the drafts. Each member of the editorial circle submits its text. Sometimes, I teach courses or give lectures on those same topics at trade unions, peasant or popular organizations in Mexico City or province. This weekend I am going with my friend Ines and her four children to Tepoztlan, land of ancient gods: of corn, of rain, of death, of the earth-sky relationship. Three days away of reality, in a world of myths and fantasies mixed with chances?, coincidences?, that make us doubt over our Western rational convictions.

The night of our arrival we go to listen to the Youth Symphony Orchestra of Tepozotlan. They play lively compositions of Mexican composers that Ayari dances seated on my legs.

—Look Ayari, that boy plays the drum, just like you.

She listens attentively and extends her arms towards the musicians, exclaiming:

—I am missing!

On Friday, early in the morning, we set off to Amatlan, a village with natural statues—each one with its own legend—and surrounded by strange pinnacles with the shape of an animal or a gate open to a dark afterlife. Following our guide Cristo (Cristobal) and two friends of his, we walk for two hours in a field of butterflies and flowers, at the foot of the sacred mountain inhabited by gods, goblins, and souls in search of their own perfection. We make a stop at the ruins of the temple dedicated to Cinteotl, goddess of corn, where every May 5 the inhabitants of the village come to dance and deposit offerings. We go down a path zigzagging between high cliffs where Cristo's friends expect to find the cave where they want to leave sacred food for the feathered serpent. We reach Quetzalcoatl's dwelling, a small swamp fed by a waterfall and surrounded by the roots of huge trees, forming a colossal winged serpent. Along the exhausting walk (I carried Ayari almost the whole tour) Cristo had promised us that we would eat *quesadillas*. But when we arrive starving, close to midday, without having eaten breakfast (they had assured us that we would be back for lunch), Ines and I started to complain. The backpacks look very lean now that they took out their offerings, and we doubt that there's something left to satisfy our human hunger.

—You should have warned us it was that far; the children need to eat something.

Moreover, Ines hates to walk and complains of a wild headache. Cristobal—a.k.a. Christ of the Mountain because he lived for several years in the rain forest of Chiapas highlands—soothes us:

—Take a deep breath. Receive Quetzalcoatl's energy. Purify yourselves in its waters and you'll forget all of your problems.

Well, anyway there is nothing we can do. Lost in this natural temple, three hours away from all civilization, we'd better save our energies to climb back the valley. The bath refreshes us. We enjoy the peacefulness of the site and Ines a relaxing massage by Cristo. We light a campfire, we sit around it and we heat a few tortillas on a stone. We are five adults and six children; two very young. Cristo takes a bottle out of his backpack and spreads natural yogurt over the tortillas:

—You see, there's everything you want, even tortilla with *fondue*.

We gobble up the *fondue* greedily; there is nothing else. Ines ends up laughing at the situation; everything is so unreal and absurd. Moreover, her headache had disappeared mysteriously after the dip.

—Do you happen to have a *chile*? —she asks.

—Of course. —And Cristo takes a garlic out of his backpack.

—That's a garlic, not a *chile*!

—Bite it and you'll see that it burns your mouth as you want. I tell you that there's everything.

All of a sudden, as coming out of nowhere, two lost guys stroll up and sit with us by the campfire. They carry guitars and a tent for camping that night. They are *neomexicanists*, of those who yearn for a return to the sources and who practice ancient rituals. They bring out cheese, apples and raisins, therefore eventually we have a tasty meal as promised and more.

Virgilio, who had climbed the hill to hand over his offering, is back. Calmly, he tells us that he was unable to reach the cave because he stepped on a rattlesnake and that some steps away another one was watching at him, but that they didn't intended to bite him, they only barred him the way.

Thus he turned around and came back. The news doesn't surprise Cristo.

—Depositing an offering isn't just anything, it's strong, and not everybody can do it—he explains—. The two snakes are there to watch over the caves and don't let just anyone enter; you're not yet ready for that. But Quetzalcoatl saved you.

Are they high? Do they talk so to impress us? Is it a coded message? Might it be true?

Back in Tepoztlan, we spend the night listening to Cristo's incredible adventures in Mayan sites lost in the jungle; how he got married at seventeen with a multi-million dollar Jewish girl from New York who used to lock him in her apartment while she was out working; how he fell in love with the sturdy legs of his 6.4 feet tall current New Zealander wife who came to Mexico for having hit the winning cover in a Corona beer contest; and how he met the shaman Don Juan.

On Sunday, Day of the Dead, we go swimming in the bubbles of a natural Jacuzzi, a rocky tub carved by a waterfall, and at night we go out to the traditional party. The Church is embellished with candles and *cempasuchitl* flowers. The residents light fires before their houses to heat the walkers to whom they offer guava punch with brandy. Children have fun throwing firecrackers at their legs and go in small groups knocking at the doors and asking '*una limosnita para mi calaverita*'<sup>21</sup>, while lighting their way with a pumpkin lantern. In the main square they have arranged a huge table with offerings: sugar and chocolate skulls, flowers, chicken with *mole* sauce, tamales, fruits, peanuts, candles, beers... And, in the middle of all, the picture of the honoree: Zapata.

Before returning to Mexico City with the earthlings, I want to take a picture of Ines's children, Cristobal and his son, Ehecatl.

—You cannot take my picture—asserts Cristo—. My aura doesn't let itself be captured in film. No one has ever been able to capture my image.

—Come on, I don't believe you! Everybody quiet! Look at the birdie! Clic!

When I went to pick the roll developed, the only photo with a white patch was that one, and the only part that couldn't be seen was Cristo's face...

My baby and I are still extremely codependents from one another in terms of breastfeeding. When I go to classes without her, I have to carry the breast pump to relieve my distended breasts and when I get home, she runs towards me, or rather her pair of canteens. When Ayari turns one year and two months, I consider that it's time to put into practice the teachings of the IMSS's nurses: to become independent. Precisely, her aunt Viviana arrives from Guadalajara for a visit. She adores Ayari and she begs me to let her take her for some time, while my breasts get dried of milk. Viviana is the eldest of Chuculy's sisters. When she was five, the couple of telegraph operators from Vicam took her with them when they were transferred to Puerto Vallarta, because they loved the girl very much. They had no children, whereas Viviana's family had already extended with three other siblings. The fact that the telegraph employees took her daughter with them to Puerto Vallarta was a relief for Dona Blasa, a burden less for her. But Viviana will hold a grudge against her all her life, unable to understand how a mother could give away her eldest daughter just like that. When I accompany them to the bus terminal and I say goodbye to Ayari, I understand her lack of understanding and I feel the urgent need that my body stops secreting that sweet liquid that binds us in such a way that it has come to separate us.

I've read that Bushmen women (or are they Bushwomen?) breastfeed until they want to get pregnant again. I've confirmed it: it works.

My moon girl Tania comes to bless our lives one week after Ayari turns two years old. She doesn't know how to cry or complain. When she's hungry, she emits a discrete eh, eh, eh, as saying: "If it's not too much trouble, mom, could you give me my milk please?" Her great gentleness and timidity do not allow her to express her disagreements. She swallows them up to indigestion.

During her whole adolescence she suffered intense abdominal pains that no doctor, healer or psychic succeeded to relieve. One day she went to buy the remedies the homeopath had prescribed her. After a while, as she didn't come back to the car, I went looking for her at the pharmacy.

—Haven't you seen my daughter? She's dressed in blue and came to buy a homeopathic drug—  
—I asked the employee, surrounded by half a dozen customers.

—The one who wanted opium pills?—corroborates offhandedly the man in a white coat. All the heads turn towards the mother procurer of artificial paradises. —Yes, she was here, but as I am

out of stock I sent her to the other pharmacy.

I had no idea that such a sacred substance could be obtained just like that, as in any popular *souk* in Jalalabad. I thank the medical spokesman for the information and leave under the disapproving stares of those other ignoramus.

But neither the opium candies nor any other remedy could provide my daughter the relief that she needed. Life itself would take care of giving her the necessary homeopathic doses of self-confidence, with their healthy side effects.

Through some posters stuck on poles near the University subway station, I find out about a project of education through art. They are looking for parents eager to get involved in the project; children to socialize up to five years, premises, material, and benevolent students. It's something appealing to me doubly. It sounds fantastic that my daughters could hone their creative skills through acting, music, and painting, and I like the idea of resuming my initial project—aborted due to the unsuccessful test of the stains—of stimulating the development of non-schooling skills in children. Under the leadership of Pepe Tono, singer for children, and with the support of a preschool female teacher, two pedagogy students, a cook and some thirty children—mainly offsprings of UNAM teachers—we set up the Miguel Hernandez Education Center in a magnificent house with a garden that we rent near the Fuentes Brotantes. I invent teaching material, I organize handcraft creating workshops and games for the older and, in return, I can leave at the nursery my two girls, two-year-old Ayari, and four months old Tania, while I go to classes at the school.

I dance my life to a crazy carnival-rhythm. I made a deal with the cook to meet half-way between the nursery and the UNAM, and from that point on she takes my puppies with her to the nursery while I go at top speed on the other direction to be present at the remaining part of the first course, from seven to nine o'clock in the morning.

I'm already studying the eighth semester; we are gradually reaching the end and we are all preparing our thesis topic. My research revolves around the issue "subsidies and transfers from the public to the private sector in Mexico": How the State increases the profits of the monopolist bourgeoisie, associated with the international financial capital, through preferential rates on utilities such as electricity, telecommunications and oil products, while it keeps extremely low wages thanks to Conasupo's<sup>22</sup> subsidized commodities, and through subsidies granted on credit and exchange rates. I conclude that those subsidies led to a fiscal deficit and a public indebtedness so huge that they not only curbed abruptly the economic growth since 1982, but they also call into question a possible recovery in the coming years. In addition, a few years later president Salinas would give a new breath to that big sponsored bourgeoisie handing them over directly more than one thousand five hundred profitable public companies, allowing them to make extraordinary profits thanks to monopolist prices and saving the State the task of turning over to capitalists their own income through complex subterfuges.

Around eleven I'm back at the university of my toddlers who are waiting for me at the top of the staircase.

—Did you buy us candies? —I hand them a sachet of 'sweet tears' that Ximena, the leader, distributes among her troop.

Today I organize a "movie show" with a "movie" performed by the children, based on their own script: on a long paper strip I glue the postcard-size drawings that they finished the day before; I roll the ends around two carton tubes stuck in a shoe box; I make a hole the size of postcard on the cover and, when I rotate the tubes, the images pass by the hole. One has just to comment the scenes of our mini silent film.

I am the last one to leave. I hope that all the parents have already come to pick up their children, what doesn't always happen because sometimes they get mixed up, each of them thinking that it's the other's turn, and then I become the deliverer of children who are received by the maids outside their homes. At about five o'clock we set out on the journey back to Contreras, which lasts about an hour, between *peseros* and buses.

For a while, Chuculy came to pick us, but then he couldn't do anything after work. And from this week on, he's going to collaborate with the National Front of Democratic Lawyers which defends the rights of trade unions and workers. Although he's not paid, that's precisely what he want-

ed: to practice labor law.

The three little women we dine something and I play with them in the room upstairs (it's too cold in the kitchen) until they fall asleep, exhausted by the hustle and bustle of the day.

Tonight, thanks to a good bath in an aluminum tub—such as the one my grandmother used to soak her clothes—Ayari falls asleep soon, but the baby, on the contrary, revives and seethes, standing, leaning on her bed. I still have to wash her diapers, prepare their school bags for tomorrow, and finish my essay on the loss of purchasing power during the Lopez-Portillo Administration.

This Christmas, my parents offer me a fantastic gift that will greatly ease my life: a car. They warned me that they would send the money in successive envelopes, so as not to risk all of it in one single one. Now that it is over I can say it: the opening of the mailbox door had become a psychological torture. Will my dad's letter with a fifty dollar bill, part of a series of six equal deliveries, will be there or not? They arrived in disorder: the second and the fourth first, a dose of adrenalin, and five weeks later came two other envelopes. Only the third never appeared. For Chuculy that's equal to one week of salary; maybe more for the guy who stole it. May it profit him! It's my membership fee to this society of inequalities.

Our Christmas gift would become an old green grass 1974 Brasilia that would allow me to take the babies back and forth to the nursery without fearing that they go to sleep, as it happened in the bus almost inevitably.

And then I have to carry my two small parcels, one on each hip, up the Old Road to San Nicolas. That night, the bus gets stranded for more than an hour due to a flooded underpass of the ring road. Rivers and waterfalls rush over to the ground from the ceilings, the avenues, the sewers; everything with a slope. The deluge keeps falling when we finally arrive at the main square of Magdalena Atlitic. I start the painful climb, trying to protect my girls under the umbrella that a charitable soul had given me when I got off the bus. My shoes sink in the sticky mud. I grasp a tree branch to pull myself out. My foot comes out, but the tennis shoe keeps buried. In front of Dona Concha's, the road has totally disappeared under a magma of soil. I pull off the mud, as in a nightmare, one leg after the other, sinking to my knees every step I take.

Finally, the three of us we arrive safe and sound at home. But at dawn an apocalyptic landscape emerges from the mist. The mud covering the path comes from don Hilario's house that fall off when the sandbags piled up as a retaining base collapsed. Two of his six children could not escape on time: they were dragged down by the soil split off the hill and thrown forty yards below, over the house of *Camello*<sup>23</sup>, who was buried alive, along with his wife.

Poor *Camello*. He was called so because he always raised a series of humps across the road, so that rainwater didn't run off directly into his house. Worthless were his camel-like humps to stop such a cataclysm.

Men organize themselves to clear the way. Life recoups its rights. Reviving the ancient tradition of the community service, on Sunday the men of the five families living in this branch of the path team up to dig the trench for the future sewer. Children play hide and seek amid the pipes dumped at the bottom of the trench.

In the afternoon, after arriving from a meeting of the Drafting Committee, I prepare *colachi*, Chuculy's favorite dish: zucchini, corn, onion and tomatoes; some white cheese before serving and that's it. I convene the tribe.

—And Tania?

No one had seen her for some time. Worried, we go out looking for her. The dog goes with me.

—Come on, Aliosha, where's Tania!

We go round the whole hillside, we ask our neighbors, at the small store down the street. Nothing. On our way back, Aliosha jumps in the ditch and stays seated in front of one of the pipes. Our Twiggy, curled up, is sleeping in there. She says that she was so well hidden that although the children jumped on the top of the pipes, they never found her, and as she couldn't climb the earthen walls, she stayed there until she fall asleep.

So is she: tiny and quiet as a mouse. She has different ways of communicating, she speaks a fairy language and she lives different time cycles, things difficult to decode when one runs wildly from one place to another, as the majority of humans do. We tend to overlook the fluttering of a



little Tania without stopping to share and enjoy her mellow rainbow dance.

One night, she went to a party. She was seventeen and she forgot the door keys at home. She spent the night outside, on the entrance doormat. I still don't know if she rang at the door and I didn't wake up or if, not to disturb me, she didn't dare to ring. The fact is that even today I feel stabbing pains when I recall my daughter shivering, exhausted, on the ground, a cold autumn dawn.

Ayari learned to impose her will since she was very young. After many petitions, procedures, check-ups and psychosocial interviews, we had managed to enroll her in a DIF's nursery<sup>24</sup>, fifty meters from the very expensive private nursery where we had to enroll Tania, because there was no place for her at the public one. The Miguel Hernandez Education Center went broke one year after its founding because the landlord increased the rent which eventually exceeded the payment capacity of families.

After just one week, Ayari declares that she is not going back to the nursery because her companions were telling her that she only makes dirty things (she likes to play with mud, raw material that she has more than enough around the house), and the teacher had threatened to inject her if she didn't eat all what she was served. Thus, every morning I find more difficult to convince her to go to school. I think that the less she tolerates is the discipline and the stern system, as well as the great importance they give to cleanliness, above anything else. One day the teacher calls me for an urgent appointment. When I get there, a court composed of the secretaries, a teacher, the nurse and the social worker passes judgment on my daughter's socks washing quality. It seems to be a matter of extraordinary relevance in their education.

—Madam, do you realize that you put greyish, dirty socks on your daughter? —the social worker asks me.

—Look, I put on her clean socks every day. The problem is that they are somewhat greyish because my sister-in-law gives me those clothes when they don't fit her daughter anymore.

—When someone knows how to wash, even second hand garments come out white. You don't wash your clothes well! And, if you don't know how, I can teach you! Then you'll see that they can become white again!

I don't want to start a debate regarding the role of color and age of socks in the national educational process, because here they take care of my daughter for a reasonable sum, thus allowing us to maintain a normal diet: Conasupo's supplies, but with a bit of everything, until the next pay day. So, I address the matter from the technical point of view which, apparently, the teacher knows best.

—Let me explain. We live in a house not yet finished, which can be reached walking up a path of land, on a hillside where the inhabitants share a single public water faucet, which is 150 yards from my house. As you must understand, I cannot wash when I want to, but when I have the chance of tighten my hose to the faucet, and only for a short period, as the other families also need water. As I don't have enough time to heat the water, I must wash with cold water in the sink. But surely there is a better way than my own of scrubbing clothes, so I gladly expect your visit, any day you like, to teach me.

I never knew which was the social worker's method to wash and leave like new greyish clothes. A few days later, my three-year-old daughter runs off to escape the nagging teacher. While I was dressing Tania, she grabbed her schoolbag and went to ask for political asylum to my godmother Dona Cande. I didn't have the heart to take her to the nursery that day. And since then it's impossible: she doesn't want to go and she doesn't go, period.

Dona Cande is quite a character. She lives in the old two-floored stone house, down from ours. Long ago, her husband abandoned her and since then she is the only chief officer of her large troop; but her motherly heart is so large that besides her two sons and six daughters, she loves as her own three more girls: two girls she used to take care for and whose mom some dreadful day never return to pick them back, and a girl who is the daughter of her ex-husband and his new wife. To top it all, Lupita, her eldest daughter, a professional dressmaker, is the only one who supports them all.

We became godmothers as of Laura's sixth grade graduation ceremony. At the religious ceremony, the children must wear the school uniform, but the Candes didn't have a complete uniform in good condition. Those girls having more or less the same height wear their different clothes by turns: one lacks the skirt, the second the sweater and the third can't do sports because she has no

tennis. So, when I accepted the role of sixth grade godmother, Dona Cande requested me the corresponding school uniform. In short, I had to buy a new uniform for a ceremony that lasted one hour and for a girl who was about to enter junior high school and was never going to use it again. I refused. I have a high level of tolerance towards all the possible rituals invented by men to honor their gods or to mark the passage to a new life stage, but that was beyond my understanding. First, due to the mishmash of something totally secular (elementary school, the child's right and obligation of the State) with a religious event, and second, because if resources are scarce, one has to spend them in the most rational way possible, I think. Thus, we agreed that Lupita was going to make the skirt and the white blouse, and that they were going to borrow the blue sweater; only the socks were missing. That is how I became 'socks godmother' of my goddaughter Laurita.

When her sister—Licho—got married, at seventeen, for Lupita that was a small relief: one less mouth to feed. Her dressmaker salary shrinks every day. Except that the couple has no place to go. And Lupita doesn't bear very well Rodrigo, the husband, a loafer. So we fix the small room downstairs, our first dwelling, and they move there, gradually installing their trousseau. Rodrigo shows it to me: a bike which has only the stirrup and the frame completely rusted; a bag full of stale bread and dried tortillas ("I only lack the hens", he explains); another bag full of glass containers; a box for storing cassettes (they have no cassette-recorder but they want to anticipate); a picture with fish that move, depending on the angle from which you see them; a stove that must have lost the door of its oven, as well as all of its plates since a very long time; and a large number of cardboard boxes of unknown content. They even have a bed, but without a mattress, so it's dumped with all the rest of their things in our living room. In return, Licho lends me a hand taking care of Ayari, until she can get into kindergarten.

I'm half-working at the National College of Economists, where I fulfilled my social service; only "half" because I'm already over, but I want to get paid the four months of salary that they promised us—but that they still own us—to work out an *analysis of the employment situation of the economists*, based on surveys and statistics that we had carried out. We discovered—what a surprise!—that the vast majority of our colleagues are underemployed and underpaid, relative to the knowledge they acquired at the School of Economics and their work experience. But what's really unbelievable is that the College of Economists commits the same outrage revealed by its own poll!

In fact, I am working as an assistant of a Colegio de Mexico<sup>25</sup> researcher. I prepare notes on the urbanization and the settlers' associations of the Ajusco regarding their demands for services.

I decide to start my master's degree right there. I pass the ColMex entry exams: three hours of exhausting tests. The State detects economists of the new generation among those who know best to assemble series of dominos, guess the missing parts of geometric patterns and cross out the word not corresponding to a family of terms.

During the preparatory studies, they teach us to calculate the surface of an astral sheet and to integrate into a sphere dices reduced *ad infinitum*, until there's no gap between these and the sphere; literally, they keep us looking for the squaring of the circle. Several students rebel due to the absurdity of the task, given that the ultimate goal of the career is to teach us to alleviate the country's economic problems, not become astrophysicists or mathematicians. They give us to understand that if we don't like it, the exit door is fully open. My resistance is passive. I understand that it's a proof of subordination to incomprehensible orders, thus I simply expect that the teacher gives us the result, instead of keeping awake in search of an unlikely solution as my classmates do. But I cannot help but perceive the fact that all the theories that we study are based on situations completely unrelated to the Mexican one; that they were prepared by the *Chicago Boys* in a first world economic and financial environment.

At the end of the preparatory courses, I'm called by Carlos Rocés, one of my teachers and director of the economic section of the ColMex, at eleven at night, and he informs me that I am excluded from the master's degree program "because my ideas do not correspond to the orientation of the ColMex" and he recommends me to study the master's degree at the UNAM. Damn! Carlos is the son of Wenceslao Rocés, the first translator into Spanish of Karl Marx life's work (undoubtedly origin of the son's name) published by the FCE<sup>26</sup> in 1946 in Mexico. Poor Wenceslao, he must be rolling over in his grave!

So, well, here I am, back at my *alma mater* for another round.

At home, the construction progressed. We replaced the kitchen's plywood walls with lemon-yellow painted brick walls, except the back wall because it's too wet. As the original sloping lot had to be dug, the kitchen back wall touches the ground of the back edge. During the rainy season, the porous lava rock sweats mud and through certain cracks real waterfalls flow down, searching for an exit after having crossed the kitchen and the living-room. It was the only running water we had for several years.

We must start thinking which primary school Ayari will attend. I don't like the idea of enrolling her at the school of La Magdalena where she's formally allocated. Remigio, Dona Maclovia's son, is already in fourth grade but cannot read without stammering. Domitila is in first grade. Once, her teacher didn't let her go to the restroom and later she mocked her when she saw the puddle under her chair. Then, she forced her to take off her shoes, socks and underwear as a punishment. Another day she tied her to the chair because "she wasn't being good". The sixth grade teacher leaves his pupils alone while he goes to drink *pulque*<sup>27</sup> at Los Dinamos; in the meantime, they must write all the numbers from 1 to 100 in ten pages of their notebook. When he saw that Laura had not filled more than one page of numbers, he sent her to the corner, kneeling on beans so that it hurt her more. It's pointless for parents to complain. The teachers belong to a turncoat union controlled by the State, where only friends of members are accepted. And if some rebel parent approaches the teacher to complain about a situation he doesn't agree with, the teacher takes it out on the child or he simply doesn't pass him to the next grade.

Just about that time, I receive an invitation from the Swiss School to attend the Basel Carnival organized by the school and to enroll my daughters to the next school year starting in September. I disguise myself as a set table, complete with tablecloth, plates, cutlery and even a doll sitting on it, and my daughters as Hawaiian. As Chuculy feels ashamed, he goes disguised as himself. We had a ball, within an environment of a successful symbiosis of Latin rhythms and sensuality (the math schoolmistress flamenco dance was greatly applauded), humor, traditions and Swiss cuisine.

We discover the school premises, the spacious well-lit classrooms, the cozy kindergarten with its corners of games and walls covered with masks, birds and other original creations, the swimming pool, the sports grounds, and warm teachers, who do not see children as simple devices that record and repeat the course. There they promote creativity, the integral development of body, mind and imagination. During the information session, a father voices his concern:

—I don't consider appropriate that the two years of kindergarten be only to socialize the kids with games and handicrafts. My four-years-old son will lose his time. He already knows how to read and write!

He wanted tangible outcomes in exchange for the high tuition he was going to disburse.

—Don't you worry, —the schoolmistress reassures him. —He'll forget it soon.

Teacher Margret considers that nothing favors more the acquisition of knowledge than a funny first childhood in which children behave as such, playing, and not as mini-adults compelled to store school knowledge since an early age. And she knows that these pampered children with a strong ego will need some time to learn how to listen to the other instead of demanding, how to wait their turn, how to respect an instruction instead of giving orders. Many have already assimilated from their privileged parents the conviction that the sea is not large enough for them to have a mouthful of water.

In September, both start the school thanks to subsidies granted by the canton of Zurich: Ayari in preschool and Tania in first year of kindergarten. Ayari gets along very well with the niece of the President. From time to time they invite her to eat and stay overnight at the residence with a butler, a cook, a nanny and all the fuss, and guarded by soldiers with huge dogs. She describes me the sauna, the gym, the games room, a tub as large as a pool. I imagine the culture shock for her girlfriend if we invited her to our house.

Chuculy installed a large window which allows me to admire the huge oaks while I wash the dishes. The floor is now covered with imitation wood linoleum and the windows are decorated with curtains that I made with the old "Charger" sewing machine—y with the shape and weight of a horse—y that my mother-in-law gave me. The partition to divide the living-room, whose walls are

extremely high, as well as the bathroom with a tub are still in the draft stage.

During the first three years we slept on the floor, on a carpet. It was not until 1985 that we were able to buy a double bed mattress. By then our marriage was already in bad shape.

Old demons bred during a childhood void of paternal and maternal love and care took hold of Chuculy. Him, so independent since his first adolescence, now that he's on his thirties he feels that he's losing ground, that he doesn't deserve to receive love and, first and foremost, from me, a European blonde who comes from a world of wealth and comfort that he, in his whole life, would never be able to provide me. And it wasn't because I demanded him that: the sweet and warm stability that bathed my childhood had stocked me with an endless supply of expeditionary resources. And what the explorer wishes is precisely to discover unknown territories; he likes experiences seasoned with unusual species, perhaps because deep down he knows that it's a chosen adventure whose course can be changed at any time. But it is very difficult for anyone who has experienced a life organized around the basic sustenance to get rid of imminence and see himself as an actor in a theatre of improvisation where there is, at all times, many potential choices. While I enjoyed a colorful, fun and exciting existence, he exhausted himself in his struggle against the many pitfalls that, he felt, prevented him to even out his horizon. According to his ideal vision, I had to be a good housewife and take care of the girls, instead of persist in finishing a career and go out to work in the vast world full of dangers. In particular, he fears the lustful gaze of men, all *machos*, and he thinks that I can't or I don't want to shield myself against their dishonest proposals. Accordingly, the only effective protection for me would be to stay at home. I feel as if I was hearing my mother! In fact, both her and Chuculy were born one same September 21 and share several Virgo traits.

In just a few months, the man who had been my comrade of utopias and struggle, my partner who had invited six friends of his to live with us, who had encouraged me one Christmas holidays to go alone with them to their village while he kept working in Mexico City, became unrecognizable. Our mutual trust was complete, free of the least germ of suspicion, beautiful. We were consolidating the new Socialist couple, bound together by a love extended to the people as a whole. How could he transfigure himself like that, into Munch's character of "The Scream", an emaciated figure, eaten away by a dreadful jealousy?

One night, back from the school, he waits for me in the kitchen, watch in hand.

—You're twenty minutes late. Why? What did you do after classes?

—We had to make photocopies. It took a while because we were many.

—Yes? Who were you with?

In the subway, I seated, he standing. At the Villa de Cortes station, a young guy walks in and holds the rail over my head.

—You're looking at him. You like him? You want me to introduce him to you?

Our neighbor, Don Genaro, is sitting on the wall in front of our house, watching over his three sheep. I go out to greet him and to comment on the progress of the procedure to legalize the lots on the hillside. From the roof, Chuculy is watching us.

—You were flirting, don't you dare to deny it! I saw you together!

This has become a living hell. He has the nerve to wake me up in the middle of the night and ask me who I'm dreaming with. I'm totally helpless in the face of this ongoing psychological violence and I sink slowly into the despair of powerlessness. I am a prisoner of economic bonds. I have neither a place to go nor enough income to pay a rent.

We reach the crisis climax one summer night, when he grabs the gun that had replaced the machete next to the bed, and he points it at my temple, stating that he must eliminate me because I am the cause of his problems. I don't move.

—Stop playing. Leave that. Let's talk —I suggest him, breathing deeply.

We keep talking for a time that seemed to me like an eternity, and finally he hands me the gun. I grab it and I run downstairs, towards Dona Cande's house. I pound away at her door, panting.

—Open up, please, he wants to kill me! —I shout, gone mad with fear.

When I'm finally safe behind the thick inner door blocked with an iron bar, I check the barrel: it has two bullets.

I don't tell the matter to my parents, out of shame, to not upset them, because I don't want them

to ask me to go back. But they know that things are going poorly. And they come to my rescue their generous way: they offer to buy me a house. They had found out that they could be bought for the equivalent of twenty thousand dollars, the price of my freedom for that of their new car.

Indeed, I had just seen an “On Sale” sign in a small metal door, at the San Marcos Avenue downward slope, very close to the Periferico<sup>28</sup>. The very same day of my visit we reach an agreement and I remove the sign. This will be my house.

At the end of a long corridor there’s a central courtyard with rooms distributed around it and built by his sons according to the provincial design of the old retired worker who sells the house. Don Cirilo had worked for forty years at La Hormiga, one of the numerous weaving factories that flourished in the formerly Contreras village since the second half of the 19th century, thanks to the railway crossing it and the hydroelectricity generated nearby. In 1967, Don Cirilo lost his job, along with his coworkers, when the union La Lucha went on strike claiming infringements of the textile industry collective contract. The strike lasted six years and in the end the real estate and personal property of the factory were put up for auction.

The workers received a parcel to build their own house and Don Cirilo was granted a ravine. There were many comings and goings of wheelbarrows from the Lomas Quebradas down to the lot to fill it with soil and gravel. Later, with the passage of time and the increase of the progeny, more rooms were built with dissimilar materials around the loquat next to the wash basin. I feel very lucky of having as my home a proletarian house that summarizes so much effort and will to give the family a better future.

## CHAPTER 6

### ON THE GO ONCE AGAIN

Three months earlier I had received the last monthly payment of the master's scholarship and since then the days previous to each payday are always a little distressing. Since two years ago, I work as an entitled University Professor and I collect the fabulous sum of thirty dollars a month, equivalent to eleven pounds of meat or two pairs of trousers or a daily liter of milk.

When Chuculy is in a good mood, he brings me twenty dollars a week, which is really not enough for the girls to have breakfast, lunch and dinner seven days a week. Now he hardly comes to take them out on weekends.

God tempers the wind for the shorn lamb. Lucky as I am, things get coming as I need them, taking their place in the Big Puzzle: A friend of the school gets me a job at the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (S.R.E.)<sup>29</sup>. Perfect timing!

My job is to turn into statistics and reports whatever we live day after day: the oil price fluctuations, the flight of capitals, the U.S. restrictions on Mexico's exports adducing one thousand and one excuses. On one occasion, because they found one single rotted apple in the whole load that was transported in one trailer: it might be a *Drosophila* fly that would contaminate the entire U.S. production; on another occasion they blocked Mexican exports of steel and cement claiming *dumping*, as in Mexico they are produced and sold at lower prices, which is intolerable for a healthy competition with the U.S. National Steel and Portland Cement companies; or they put a stop to Mexican tuna exports because some *Gringo* experts detected dolphin meat in cans of tuna, and not even with the installation of special mechanisms to prevent the capture of dolphins that swim recklessly within the tuna shoals the Mexican fishermen could revert the sanction.

Due to the openness to foreign trade, we are flooded with imported products condemning thousands of Mexican workers to unemployment: television sets, radios, pots, toys, everything is made in Taiwan, Singapore and China. Shoddy trinkets lasting three months or less. Selfishly, I find in it a benefit: I get authentic Kirschstengeli (cherry liquor-filled chocolate straws; a delight!), rhubarb compote, *reblochon* cheese and ravioli, which let me satisfy my gustatory longings.

In the same rehabilitation process of my longings, I build myself an authentic Swiss wood chalet on the roof, including its red and white squares curtains.

One of Don Cirilo's sons and his family kept living with us in the house. Rita, the wife, takes care of my girls in the afternoon and it's a great relief to have a maternal presence, a true second mother to make up for my absences. But melancholies woo Mistress Rita. She tells me her story, the forced wedding, her physical disgust for that man. She almost shouts at me—as to exorcise the moment—that when he wanted a kiss, she used to tell him that she hated kissing; when he wanted to caress her, she pushed him away as fondling disgusted her. Ow, women, Mexican women so repressed, so submissive, humiliated, only sure of not being sure of anything, who know nothing, who are not good for anything. That's what their husbands repeat them since the day of their wedding. And it's also instilled in them by the heavy male ideology that we find so difficult to get rid of. We load ourselves with culpabilities for faults we haven't committed; or in any case that of having pronounced a "yes" in front of a priest. Anyway, it's my cross.

My friend Consuelo explains me the cause of such inertia:

—Here, women conduct their life as those cubes on which you have to bring into alignment the color on each side. When they face a problem they rotate their cube in all directions, trying to find a way to leave everything as it was before. But they never depart from their scheme. They don't know that there are other ways to fix their life besides the cube.

At Easter I have to go pick up the girls to Monterrey, where they spent holidays with Berenice,

their favorite aunt, because Chuculy didn't accede to make the trip, despite being on vacation, arguing that if he goes I would be completely free and take advantage to spend the night away from my house. He has become an obsession. He spies me at all times. I even fear he might go mad.

I keep writing analytical articles on the Mexican economy for our political magazine, now fed with first-hand information thanks to my new job at the S.R.E. Besides, I travel to different parts of the Republic to give workshops to divulge the political economy among workers and peasants.

Vero, one of the members of the drafting circle, invites me to accompany her to the mountains of Oaxaca, with eight guys more, to give lectures in several villages. I feel thrilled as a child on Christmas Eve. This is pure adventure wrapped in gift-paper with a bow! Miraculously, Chuculy accedes to take care of the girls during these two weeks, although he's not a bit as enthusiastic as I am. At the S.R.E., I request and get a leave from work to carry out "field work for the school".

But a week before departure, Chuculy changes his mind. He will not take care of his daughters and, anyway, "what I am going to do there has no relevance whatsoever". Of course, the activities of a man are always transcendent; he has just returned from a two weeks trip to Veracruz with his union group.

Terribly disappointed, I tell Vero that I won't be able to go because of my girls. But she is a veteran regarding the issue of sharing parental responsibilities.

—You're not going to let yourself be blackmailed all your life by your girls! Anyhow, you'll not always be with them; sometimes you'll have activities not letting you to keep them close to you, thus it's better that you get used to it and get them used to a certain independence.

Many life-years later, in the midst of vapors in an Arab bath of ancient Granada, Vero confessed me that she was always assigned supporting roles. They had made her understand that she was "limited" and that's why she was assigned practical tasks. At a final political economy test that I gave to my students of the workshop, she got a pretty mediocre result. That surprised me because, as she had already been part of the organization for some time, I thought she should know by heart the Marxist theories of the relative surplus value and the fetishism of the commodities. But no! She had problems to follow the explanations. And it was hard for me to be fair. I hesitated between extolling her, because she was our boss, and being fair with the rest of the group. Finally, I put her test the mark corresponding to her answers.

Then, our tissues and our minds relaxed by the deliciously warm waters of those thermal baths built six hundred years before by the Moors, Vero tells me that her low mark was due to the fact that they didn't give her time to study. She worked in the organization as janitor, chauffeur, cook (look out if food wasn't ready at two o'clock sharp!). She made frequent removals alone (overstretching her spine) while her peer performed his natural male role in intellectual tasks, investigations, writing articles and projects, the coordination and supervision of the network of sympathizers, or trips in which he asked other female militants to accompany him, never her. Vero's daughter from a previous marriage lived with her father. One day, sick and tired of fighting in vain to erase the prejudices that kept her subordinate, she pulled the gun from under the mattress and looked at death in its hollow tubular eye.

—My daughter's life saved me. I thought about her and how she would feel when knowing it.

If you could see her now—as a brilliant university professor, an awarded researcher invited to give lectures abroad—you wouldn't understand how someone could ever think that she was "limited", and even worse, that the perpetrators of such an infamy were her own comrades-in-arms. She worked against the flow in an environment of chauvinist misunderstanding and malicious criticisms, wearing herself out in humiliating self-defense efforts, until she exploded. After some time, she got vindicated by her first students, peasants who she had teach literacy and who wrote her: "Dear Veronica... you were very demanding with us, but we learned many things with you, we miss you." It was the balm she needed and that restored her peace of mind.

More difficult and more complex to repair was the premise that we had to foster an early detachment of children so that we, the militants, could better perform our part in the social transformation. At the first Israeli socialist kibbutz in the 1950s, the social organization was like that: the children spent their childhood in a boarding school in order to put into practice the equality of opportunities for women and men in creating a society without private property, or patriarchal authori-

ty. Based on that new ethic, community education envisaged to favor cooperation in children through the elimination of coercion, conflict and competition. But, as we didn't have the level of organizational progress required to outline such an educational alternative, I didn't adhere to the recommendation of leaving my daughters in the care of others, with the exception of special and short-term situations, such as the trip to Oaxaca.

In this case, determined to defend the equality of genders among the militancy and the responsibilities as parents, I reach an agreement with Mistress Rita so that she feeds my daughters and, eventually, that she goes to pick them at the school at one o'clock. But she wasn't able to take them in the morning. The whole week, I try in vain to get in touch with Chuculy. He pretends to be away. But I'm already too motivated to write myself off; I go to The Next Station, resignation is an ongoing suicide, would say Manu Chao.

On Friday, we are on the road two VW Beetles, ten passengers and the luggage. After ten hours and three punctures we finally arrive at Oaxaca, where more fellows join us. We climb into a stake truck (we are already twenty-five) for the last stretch of dirt road, bouncing like balls in muddy potholes the size of a bathtub. Sometimes we must get down and push the stuck truck. The landscape could well be Alpine, cows included, if it weren't for the villages, the one single room huts with straw roof, and the embroidered blouses and wide skirts of their female residents.

In the afternoon we reach the first village and we give a try to what would be our daily food during the next fifteen days (and which is the daily food all year round for the locals): rice, black beans, tortillas and coffee. Some members of our team stay here. In this village, the organization had established an ecological school in which children learn, along with reading, writing and calculation, new crop methods developed by agronomists from Chapingo that replenish the soil with the calcium it needs and prevent the deforestation caused by the traditional friction-and-burn system that has become very harmful due to the population explosion. Decades of the bean monoculture for personal consumption had not only depleted the soil, but had also caused serious malnutrition problems due to the lack of vitamins. An agronomist of our team had asked us to bring him seeds of vegetables, tools, and a special fertilizer for this very acidic montane soil, and now he is happy to be able to fertilize Pacha Mama with new life forms. The children and the youngsters eat and sleep in the school because they come from villages that are four to seven hours of walking distance away. Rice, beans, and hammocks. A life somewhat different to that of the Geneva agronomy boarding school where my sister Sofia had studied!

Our team includes two architecture female students who had drawn plans and had bought the materials needed to build latrines, non-existent until then. Other members, teachers, had brought school supplies and had prepared special classes on recent history, humanity and Mexico, as a first step to put forward the need of revolutionize the current economic and social system that keeps them in those miserable conditions and build, together with workers and settlers, a new society whose engine and purpose will be the full development and welfare of the human being. Other colleagues had prepared a stage play and a corporal expression workshop. The organization promotes a lot artistic expressions, even, or specially, in those so precarious life conditions, where the priority seems to be always, and only, survival.

I had been taught to use a video camera. I must make a film and take pictures of the daily life and activities (school, sewing, carpentry and shoe repair shops that we had established some years before, as well as the opening of the famous latrines), with the purpose of raising funds among national and international organizations.

Half of the group keeps moving ahead on foot and horseback up the mountain. The path is awfully muddy; sometimes a boot gets trapped and the whole team stops to help pull it out. Our guides have an incredible resistance; they almost run, uphill, and with a heavy load on their back: batteries, appliances, sugar. They open a way through the thick vegetation, as Moses did with the waters of the Red Sea. Mosquitoes keep buzzing around us. We must look at the ground not to step on a snake and take care of poisonous spiders. We regress to the origins of the world, when man held his place in the creation—one more among all the creatures—and he had not yet decided to tame it with full arrogance, with the aim of exploiting its fruits commercially.

After crossing mountains, valleys and rivers, we finally arrive to our destination: El Porvenir, a



village of wooden huts with dirt floors, where the word home acquires all its etymological sense: a dwelling to gather the family around the wood burning stove, raised to facilitate the task of the cook and prevent burns in the children. Pots hang from the ceiling and against the wall leans the machete, which is used as much to reel off the cobs as to remove a thorn or cut firewood.

The three layers of clothes that I wear do not prevent the damp cold to seep unto my bones. And even more at night, because the horizontal wooden boards constituting the walls, and cut with a machete, are uneven and have large slits and holes above and below. I'm amazed by the calorific power of women who wear lightweight nylon dresses (cotton cloth rots away fast due that permanent humidity) and we laugh at my climate maladjustment. I already know some of the companions, because they had attended our literacy school where I teach.

The day after our arrival is San Pablo de la Cruz festivity, patron saint of the region. The village is filled with visitors who walked hours or even days to be present. A web of hammocks hanging everywhere is created. Each community prepares its own food. A swim is organized at the nearby creek that flows from a cave. Chivalry also imposes its rules here, because women get in first. We communicate with gestures, they respond with a luminous smile. And how beautiful dark-skinned mermaids! Pins on their long obsidian-black hair, a lace shawl over the sunny yellow or Mexican pink dress, barefoot, because one dances better like that than with boots. The festivity starts with a display of horse riding skills, followed by a procession, speeches, hymns and the ball, waited impatiently. Of course, in this remote village there is no electricity to light the basketball field turned into a dance floor, but they have a gasoline generator that provides energy to the four light-bulbs installed at the corners. The orchestra plays traditional music, joyful, and each song lasts so long, that you can tell your whole life to your partner.

We stayed there the whole week, each of us performing its intended activity. At nightfall, we sang around a campfire. They know from memory an impressive number of songs and I feel extremely lucky surrounded by the mountains, the chirp of crickets, the sparkling stars and these warm people. At the moment of departing, it is impossible to withhold the tears. Calixta says that whenever someone leaves, her heart hurts. Tenderness makes mine swell.

Back to the monster, the smog, the traffic jams. At work, everything is fine. They even paid me those two weeks. But I feel strange, sitting in my office and thinking about the smells of the forest and the life of these villages, where everything implies such a tremendous effort...

Chuculy had called home one day after my departure, surprised by my stubbornness and by the fact that I had been able to entrust the girls with someone. Conscious of the uselessness of his coercion methods, he had no choice but to take care of his daughters. Normally, he drops by the house in the morning and takes the girls to school. But sometimes he calls me ten minutes before seven to tell me that he won't come and then it's sure that we get late because the buses and the *peseros* are scarce: the buses because the government claims that it has no money to repair them when they break down, and the *peseros*, because the price of gas went up and they haven't allow them to increase the rate yet.

Other things are also scarce: sugar (not an ounce can be find anywhere; that's unbelievable in a country that until recently exported sugar!), milk and eggs. It's always the same: when they want to increase prices, they hide the commodities until consumers get resigned to pay any price to obtain the missing product. Privatizations and the reduction of the role of the State as a provider of basic goods at controlled prices led to a brutal inflation: water, 1393 percent; telephone services, 257 percent; electricity, 140 percent. Everything goes up except salaries; mine is seventeen thousand pesos a week, that is, thirty five Swiss francs. Chuculy refuses to contribute one single peso to the expenses of our daughters. Perhaps he thinks that the economic strangling will force me to come back with him; or accumulating money is his means of personal valuation, as it is for many men, or perhaps he thinks that I deserted him for another man and thus that other man has to pay my expenses and those of my daughters: he who wants the cabbage, its leaves must take as well. Either way, I am forced to turn to the State so that he is sentenced to grant child support for his daughters. The private lawyer who I went to see charged me a whole month of my salary for processing the child support and two months more for the divorce. I resort to the DIF's legal assistance.

The sentence was passed a few months later. Based on it, Telmex will deduct the child support

from its salary and deposit it directly into my bank account.

My relief lasts just one month. The following month I don't get one single cent. Chuculy had requested a sabbatical year to study at the USSR Lomonosov University, turning into reality a common dream that I hadn't been able to realize, first due to my pregnancies and afterwards due to the collapse of the Soviet Union. While he was there, he lived firsthand the historical moment of the Communist State downfall.

Nature knows about similar phenomena with the detachment of ice blocks bigger than the Empire State building that fall precipitously from the snowy Arctic reefs to reconvert to an unshaped, diluted state of soft and fragmented particles that slip through the weaker side of all cracks. Such is the wild capitalism that settled down in the territories of the onetime Soviet Union. The profit motive leaked immediately in every life domain, irrespective of any ethics or human need, and shattering the existing social ties.

Those were moments of great astonishment. So much hubbub to end back at the starting point! The socialist countries were, in our eyes, models of a society that guaranteed full employment, healthy food for everyone, widespread and first quality health care, universal education up to the desired level, for men and women, and not restricted by the income of parents. We were aware that there were serious flaws in the barely democratic way of making decisions, in the cultural, artistic and spiritual stubbornness, but there the baby was thrown out along with the bathing water. Sadness, disappointment, anger. When I visited the Berlin wall and the GDR memorials in 2008, those feelings emerged again. But now I know that the ethical, social and moral values that we had as a guiding thread, and for which we fought politically, are still in force; we have integrated them into our way of being and they can be approached from very different fields: human rights, art, spirituality and, simply, our everyday dealings with life.

The inability to realize the objectives doesn't have so much importance, what's important, what remains—says my friend philosopher Thameur—are our intentions and the actions we carry out to be consistent with our convictions. But the results of our actions do not depend only of us, but of circumstances, of external and opposing wills, because each of us pursues its own objectives.

However, some lost their soul in a deep bitterness for having put so much effort in the construction of a utopia that was inexorably vanishing into nothingness. Our environment imbued with the betrayal of those closest and with a cynical corruption was desolating. The scorn and a boundless hatred were eating away the heart of those who had sacrificed their career and their family in the process of understanding the mechanisms of injustice and of organizing the establishment of an equitable society. It would take them years to learn once again how to merely enjoy the present, which (also) consist of friendships and complicities, of tenderness towards and from the loved ones, of incredible landscapes, seas, suns, mountains, of flowers and of marvelous sunrises.

For me, the transition was not so brutal, as I had always performed in several scenarios at the same time, as a mother, a student, a worker, an activist and a designer of inventions. Nonetheless, I feel somehow alone before all the issues to be solved, and is not so much the scale of the problems that daunts me, but to educate and maintain alone my daughters, to pay all the house expenses—because mistress Rita's husband is unemployed—and to organize everything. Having to take care of myself and to fix all of these situations always alone I something that weighs on me.

“You ask me, I'll give you,” says my blissful djinn.

It happened during a protest. It's raining cats and dogs. We try to take cover under the banners whose demands are now pointed (horizontally) at the stormy skies: “Death to the political police”, “Killer rats”, “Out of Contreras, Gobernacion”, “For a rehabilitation center, not a detention center”, “Delegate of Contreras: Resign!”, “Water and electricity for the Ajusco settlements”. But nothing; up there they ignore us. We are soaking wet. And the political police would settle down in the land donated by the textile workers of Magdalena Contreras to build a re-education center for youngsters and the popular Heroes of Padierna settlements still lack streetlight, drinking water, garbage collection service or any other utilities.

In front of the Sanborns restaurant, I jump over a puddle to take cover under a gate and, literally, I land in the arms of Gabriel. I hadn't seen him since the fourth or fifth semester of school. He hadn't been able to graduate because he works full time to maintain his siblings and provide them

the possibility of studying. We kept recounting our stories, while sipping cup of hot chocolate, until it stopped raining, at about midnight. He makes me laugh; he's clever, poet, witty, flirty. We discuss ideological issues (he was also collaborating in a political organization) and he makes me feel valued as nobody had made me feel since so many, many years ago, that I had forgotten how it is.

He's neither married nor has children. His brothers ("morros"<sup>30</sup>, he calls them) are enough for him, but he's kind of going out and breaking up with a girl, scheming also. Our relationship has a nine months gestation of inversely proportional phases: with moments of great complicity and other of painful silences.

I love him very much, but, how hard it is to consolidate this relationship! Gabriel's life is complex. In his family they regard him as the father as he is the most responsible and generous, and they expect him to resolve their existence. He has pecuniary problems because he gives half of his salary to his mother; he has arguments in his political organization where does union work, and, to make matters worse, he doesn't consider necessary or desirable to pick one of its two women. His theory is that one single person doesn't bring together all the qualities that he appreciates.

He suffers from insomnia and when he can sleep, at times, it seems that his fights monsters: it's an agitated sleep with abrupt gestures and starts. With him I understand the great wisdom of the Nahuas, who worshipped four hundred deities of drunkards. They're not too many to take care of parishioners of the more than forty thousand pubs and bars existing in Mexico City, because if they shared the task among Panecatl, Papaztac, Teatlahuiani and their three hundred and ninety-seven colleagues, they would get 100 pubs each.

For Gabriel and his office peers, the bar is a "place of meetings and memories, euphoria and lamentation, hugging and rejection, shouts and silence, contact with others and oneself, evasion and search, meditation and fate..." Refuge of emotions, haven for the public offices or private homes fugitives, of lost feelings or found emotions", as the Secretariat of Culture of the Federal District describes it poetically in its information leaflet, while looking in another direction considering that its counterpart of Health declares that "is vitally important to identify the alcohol consumers in their early stages in order to reduce the negative impact caused by the abuse and dependence of alcoholic beverages in the living conditions of Mexico City inhabitants."

Sometimes I lose patience and we stop seeing each other for long periods of time. Although I understand that due to all the tragedies that most of the children have witnessed here, they acquire a somewhat tormented personality.

In the end, he breaks off definitively with his ex and he comes to live at home.

Tania and Ayari adopt him rather quickly and they go together to performing classes at the Centre of Dramatic Art in Coyoacan. We live a happy, playful, era of parties with Maldita Vecindad and Cafe Tacuba, balls at the Salon Mexico and family Sundays at Gabriel's parents' house.

In my belly is growing its new tenant. The Three Graces. Ayari-land-of-fire, Tania-deep-water and mental-air was about to appear.

The eve of her birth a total eclipse takes place, an extremely rare and impressive phenomenon. On the roof of the house, we get together Mrs. Rita, her children Anselmito and Edith, my friends Tere, Bety, Vero and the girls. According to old beliefs, a pregnant woman has to protect her baby tying a red thread on her waist, with a pin attached to it and carrying a silver spoon in her pocket. I don't know exactly what each of these preventive measures is for, but it doesn't matter anyway, because they're just superstitions whose efficacy no one in his right mind can believe in. Well, if I tied my thread with its pin and carried the spoon, it was not because I believed that something could happen to my baby if I didn't: it was only just in case.

The nine pairs of eyes we look towards the Sun, protected by special glasses that street vendors offered at ten pesos at the subway station exits. The black Moon progresses over the solar sphere, causing it a concave pregnancy. When the star disappears completely, a strange night made of absence surrounds us. Life interrupts her breathing. And if it remains in that position and we don't to see the Sun anymore? A chilly cosmic wind rises. Dogs howl, roosters crow, their biologic clock disturbed. After this encounter of two universes, the nocturnal and the diurnal, I give birth to my third princess, Natalia.

But during the defeated night, evil forces get prepared, envious of so much brightness. Happi-

ness is too large for Gabriel. He rejects it, he mocks it. He sees it as his enemy, as something that a true social critic cannot accept. It would be too easy; it would be as turning away from all the misery still surrounding us. And, as a result of offending through denigration and belittlement, he manages to defeat it. On December 31<sup>st</sup> he packs his meager belongings and starts the New Year as a Lone Ranger, en route to another sunrise. Natalia had turned two the previous summer.

Someone stole my car. Comings and goings become dreadful, first to the school in Colonia del Valle to leave the elderly, then to the nursery back south in Copilco, and finally from there to Tlatelolco, on the northern part of the city. I get to the office already exhausted. Mao said that if the mountain won't come to you, you must go to the mountain. So, we move closer to the school.

It's the first time in my life that I carry out a moving with such jumble. In addition to the moving van, I fill some twenty times the VW Beetle lent by Chuculy with tons of books, clothes and a stunning quantity of trifles collected throughout these eighteen years of life in Mexico City. I wish I were a girl again, so that someone could take care of everything, organize the packaging, make sure that nothing was missing upon arrival and unpack everything in the new house. I don't want to be the sole responsible for all that; it overwhelms me.

—Have you see my fabric doll? —asks Nati—. I left it in the room but you see that order doesn't always serve as order, sometimes it serves as a disorder.

This girl has Mafalda's<sup>31</sup> look and her expressions. Her long and curly hair put an aura around her face and her assertions are simply baffling:

—Mom, did you know that Earth is in space? I thought it was on earth.

Or:

—Today we are living the future of yesterday.

I drill holes on the wall to install dowels; I hang mirrors and pictures; I put curtain rods that insist on falling to the ground and I protest:

—I need a man at home; these are not women tasks!

—Wow! It's going to be difficult for you to find one, mom... —Ayari hammers the nail a little deeper—. Aren't you proud of being the man in the house?

Yes, of course, it gives some satisfaction to be the man that I would have wanted to have. Nati agrees with Ayari that it's better to be on your own than with people you don't like.

—Who gave you that ring? —she says, while looking at my ring finger.

—A friend called Mario.

—And my father gave you a ring?

—No.

—What did he give you?

—Mmmmm, nothing. I don't remember he ever gave me something.

—Well, but he did give you something...

—Of course: the most wonderful of all girls. My sunshine and my every day present.

—And he also gave you affection and love while he lived with you. But ma', don't you ever get married again so you don't get abandoned once more.

Nati is going through a difficult stage. Gabriel has another daughter with the young woman he's living with since he left our house, and Nati thinks that if her dad abandons her for so long it's because he prefers to take care of that baby. As she starts wetting again her panties, I frown and tell her that I like big girls as her, with whom I can play at the *matrioshkas* who go to the Zoo, and craft Hansel and Gretel houses and ugly witches with modeling clay... but I can't fully convince her. I don't know what to do to restore her confidence.

I didn't have to take her to a psychologist or anything. The girl next door, who would move to our same floor, quickly discouraged her to continue pretending to be a little baby when they became partners of their thousand mischiefs.

—Ayari, can you buy me a soda with a lot of gas? —asks Rebe.

—Why do you want it with a lot of gas?

—Because we are going to sell burps.

Dialogue in the tub:

—My daughter is dying, bless her, please! —begs Rebe.

—What for if she's already going to die?  
 —Alright. Then baptize her, —she suggests.  
 —How many times have you baptized her? —enquires Nati.  
 —None.  
 —Well, then it's not necessary —she soothes her.  
 —Yes, I baptized her once —clarifies Rebe.  
 —Then, why do you want to baptize her again? Once is enough, —asserts Nati the priestess, who's decidedly not willing to lift a finger for any kind of ceremony, today.  
 I enter to see how their bath is going on.  
 —Shampoo your hair, girls!  
 —We already did it; smell my hair.  
 —You'd better! You looked terrible with you hair all floured and sticky! But, why do you use my shampoo? I bought you the Johnson's.  
 —We use both to smell better —explains Rebe—. Don't you think that it's to please the boys! Well, it would be great, but it's not for that.  
 —Yes, it would be fantastic —agrees Nati.  
 They come out of the tub, leaving the water brown-colored.  
 —Ma', look! The color of water looks like the one at the hot springs of Ixtapan de la Sal!  
 And Rebe concludes:  
 —Before I creaked from dirt. Now I creak from cleanliness!<sup>32</sup>

I don't know exactly what made me decide to return to Switzerland. Somehow, the feeling that I had already accomplished what I had to accomplish in Mexico (improve my race, declares Tere); but also the fact that the Berlin Wall had fallen and, with it, our hope to establish a more rational society in the image of the existing Communism. We had scattered, each one attending its personal life and nothing else. I had put an end to a love relationship with the only man who had managed to make me dance tango, bolero, danzon, rock'n roll and waltz, and whom I loved as a no one else, but who unfailingly reserved the weekends for his dear wife. I was tired of the job instability and I knew that my post at the GDF would not outlive the next change of Governor. Finally, the news that my dad was already very ill with Parkinson's disease and diabetes had also some influence. I didn't wanted to be notified one day on the phone that I wasn't going to see him ever more.

—But, what are you going to do in Switzerland? —asks Ema —, you're going to get bored. Nothing ever happens there; there's never news about Switzerland in the newspapers!

—What happens, —says Consuelo, standing up for the Helvetians— is that the Swiss behave so well that the newspapers have nothing to say about them.

Ayari's preferred pastime is to niggle her little sister.

—You're not going to live in Switzerland, —she tells her.

—You don't live my life! You live your life and I live mine! —retorts Nati.

Natalia has a very clear insight of how we're going to live.

—We're going to have a house with a swimming pool, but I don't want a butler.

—Why's that?

—Because butlers stick their nose in everything

—...?

—You know that almost all of my schoolmates had maids who prepared them their midday snack and fixed everything for them. But when they forgot the swimsuit or anything, they blamed the maid for not having put it for them in the schoolbag. Then teacher Hilda used to get angry because the maid wasn't to be blamed, but them for being neglectful, isn't it? They got used to not do anything by themselves. That's why I don't want a butler!

Terrific! I'm eager to lead such a brigade until the end of the world!

## CHAPTER 7

### ***LET ME KNOW IF YOU HAVE ANY IDEA REGARDING WHAT I SHOULD DO WITH THE REST OF MY LIFE<sup>33</sup>***

Rachel Corrie

Back to what I recall vaguely was the starting point. But this is rather the vile banishment. Landing in Geneva in the year 2000 after all that I have lived, is like falling from another Galaxy.

Good heir of Calvinism which, since the sixteenth century, teaches citizens to be responsible as individuals, both in their direct dealings with God (without any mediation of the religious hierarchy) as at work, Geneva is a lonely *grande dame*. I've never seen so much loneliness in the midst of so much diversity.

At first glance, the newcomer gets the impression that all aspects of the daily life are well defined by regulations, guidelines and directives. There is the Housing and Employment Offices to provide, as their names indicate, shelter and work; there are yellow marked tracks for cyclists and special classes for non-francophone children.

But very soon such an apparent structural rationality reveals its flaws. To have access to a private sector apartment, you must provide the real estate agency with copies of an unlimited work contract and wage receipts. In the case of the subsidized housing, you must have lived at least two years in Geneva. To get job you must have diplomas and the UNAM is not a recognized institution. I should have finished a second master's degree; another two years of studies! And here, even the most crippled is a tightrope walker. Any Moldovan Soviet-era maid speaks three languages and can discuss about the Max Planck Theory and quantum chemistry. The special classes for foreign children are friendly indeed, and Tania feels at ease with her new Colombian friends, whom she goes out with to dance *vallenato* and *cumbia*. Nevertheless, this mode doesn't allow them to study high school afterwards; its purpose is to direct youth immigrants to professions such as water carrier that can be learned in one single class. It's also mandatory to take out a private insurance against health and accident, but they are expensive, and without a job or an income they are simply unaffordable. And to have the right to collect the unemployment insurance you must have worked for at least a year here.

The Genevan social system is like a cycling track: you think that you're well protected and guided by the institutions—two parallel yellow stripes painted on the floor—but before you can you realize it, they took you to the middle of the street, without protection, between the tram and the cars, where the stripes disappear suddenly, leaving you alone in the middle of chaos. And what do you do? You go back to the pavement where the tram rings it bell at you, or you stay in the middle where the cars honk their horns at you.

Thus, very quickly I am clear about what I must do: pull up to the curb, close to the sewer, stop putting on airs, and forget my college degrees and my twenty years of experience as an economist; start working in whatsoever, but immediately. I enroll in all employment agencies that I find in the phone book and after a month I'm hired as a secretary by a transnational company devoted to gobble down every independent small clinical analyses laboratory to strengthen its monopoly which already imposes its fares in all Switzerland and has even succeeded in making that the State prohibits the medical clinics to perform their own analyses.

Isabel, the human resources manager of the company, had favored my bizarre candidacy because she identified herself immediately with my conditions of single mother (she was also a single mother), of a Pisces connoisseur of all waters (we were born the same day), of a nomad (she moves every two years to a new house) and because he sensed that we both could easily leave in the lobby certain skills and aspirations in order to fulfill some other priorities.

Among the persons who interview me to check if I match the desired profile, is a psychologist,

mentor of the CEO with whom I would be working. I get very nervous. One thing is that they evaluate my languages knowledge and my computer or organizational skills, and quite another that they measure my personality. Never before had I spoken with a psychologist. With a healer yes, a master who was able to heal the amenorrhea and the insomnia that I suffered after my separation from that married dancer. He leans over my pupils, he auscultates my nightmares and he discovers that I am lovesick and that I can heal the moment I stop resisting uselessly and accept what had happened; and in the interim he brings me back my periods and my sleep with plant extracts. But this corporate psychologist doesn't interview me to help me but to discover any potential personality flaw making me incompatible with the boss. I'm terrified by the idea that he may be able to penetrate my subconscious and bring to light my insecurities, because in this very moment my stability and that of my daughters depend on getting that job. He asks me:

—How do you react when your daughters make you angry?

My mind gets in the mode "Window search", with a flashlight scanning the files from left to right. It doesn't find anything. Getting angry with my daughters doesn't apply to any situation which we have lived. They can surprise me, anguish me, overwhelm me, grieve me, make me feel powerless, weary me, upset me, but make me angry, really make me angry, doesn't come to my mind. Puzzled by my silence, the psychologist thinks that I'm hiding him an unspeakable behavior and thus he suggests me:

—Do you spank them? Do you shout at them?

—NOOOOO! I never spank them and they never give me a reason to feel angry. Normally, it's very difficult that something makes me angry; unless it's a person acting in very bad faith.

I wonder what my behavior as a mother has to do with the tasks performed by a secretary, but perhaps in Geneva this is a typical test to get a job: another mystery in this strange planet.

With my newly signed contract, I rush to the real estate agency. Now that I am eligible for credit I lease an apartment in a dorm city in a neighborhood close to that of my parents, so that Natalia can stay at the same school where she has already began her fourth year of primary school. The dwelling had been empty for two years, something unexplainable due to the current house shortage, but when I open the door for the first time, I understand the reason. A foul-smelling stench of cat pee penetrates my olfactory channels and the plastic imitation marble floor begins to stagger due to my dizziness, while my eyes seek a support in the window frame painted, as well as doors and everything that is wood, with a pleasant prison-gray color. Urgently needing some fresh air, my glance goes through the window glass and ends its journey at the gas station across the street.

—It's not bad! —expresses my mother, falsely cheerful. —You are in the best building. It is not as tall as the others.

I wouldn't care if it were some floors higher, as long as it hadn't that pong, nor that tacky linoleum, nor such a gloomy paint and that depressing view.

Such was our first home. But a few months later my new sister Isabel invites me to share her home, because she wants to save on rent in preparation for her next leap: the purchase of a mill in the South of France. And thus we land in Nati's dream-house, without a butler but with everything else: a huge pavilion located in the middle of the old golf course where I used to earn my first pennies collecting poorly hit balls and that had been converted into a park with athletics tracks, tennis courts and soccer fields, close to a pool of baritone frogs. From the large windows of the living room we get subjugated by the beauty of the sunsets that seem to me due African to the magnificence of the spectacle; the bright red ball descends heading towards the Jura, wrapping everything in a vigorous orange halo, over which stand out, backlight, the outstretched arms of the elderly baobabs, which here are oaks. Welcome to the Toad Mansion, reads the sign that we placed at the entrance, next to the lion-knocker that I made, and whose brass tongue must be pulled to knock.

My yearning for justice leads me, quite naturally, to push in the heavy medieval gate of *Le Syndicat interprofessionnel de travailleuses et travailleurs*<sup>34</sup>, though I am aware that it's a poor alternate for those organizations of which I was a member in Mexico. Unions perform a necessary but superficial mission: as they don't envisage a change of system but only to tear out of the bourgeoisie some crumbs of the wealth generated by their own members, the efforts of years can be reduced to dust in one single day. Thus, one day in October 2007, the Swiss managers union of the construc-

tion industry decided to disregard the collective contract, the oldest in Switzerland, in force for sixty years. That allowed them to hire workers—usually foreigners—with wages below the minimum of the CCT, make them work even in bad weather and demand them overtime without pay, because with the opening of the borders there were millions of unemployed throughout Europe and beyond willing to do anything in order to earn an income.

I am a union representative, member of the Central Committee, but I'm exasperated by the infighting over positions that have not changed since the 1960s and that the old leaders defend by way of blackmail and maneuvers in assemblies. One day we had to vote on the position that we were going to take against the proposal for a new unemployment insurance act, which consisted in leaving the unemployed in the street, without subsidy, six months before the existing law, in exchange for vague promises of "training courses". If those courses are so effective, why they don't give them right the way and thus they reduce unemployment without the need to change the law? As if a six months course could be enough to find jobs for the thirteen thousand unemployed in Geneva! Result? We vote overwhelmingly against the new law. That enraged the five Secretaries General, because we hadn't adhered their recommendation of accepting it, and in front of the stunned assembly they stand up and declare that they demit in block! Who knows what they had negotiated beforehand with the State in exchange for their submission to such an unwelcome proposal. Apparently, the union, which already administers some part of the unemployment insurance, could get additional funding to cover the cost of the new so-called courses and even organize some of them. For a week, our union remained headless, until the leaders, magnanimous and conciliatory, returned to their thrones and declared that they certainly did not renounce to the union leadership because they did not want to cause any detriment to the union struggle.

Those same manipulations happen within the Green Environmentalist Party that I've joined. We have two representatives at the Genevan Government: the Secretary of Finance and the Secretary of Urban Planning. The first had no qualm to lower taxes to the wealthiest people and to carry out budget cuts in all areas, including health, unemployment insurance and retirement funds. On his part, the second one handed over the territory to big developers only interested in building horrible rabbit-cage towers to obtain multimillionaire profits. There's a lack of green vision, of development based on the use of natural energies, of green and pedestrian areas, jobs close to the housing zones, nothing. So I also go the meetings only to challenge them and try to shake off their torpor of all that verdure. But it is exhausting and demoralizing.

After a year, I'm dismissed by the general director of that holding of laboratories. He was extremely disturbed when he announced me his decision and had needed a prior counseling session with his coach, the psychologist that had asked me how I reacted when someone made me angry. Now I understand that it was in anticipation of such an eventuality, to protect his patient from violent reactions. The poor man was extremely introverted (an attribute that made his leading role quite difficult for him) and he had realized that I was aware of his affair with a male colleague due to tender mail that this last one had send him and that I had opened, along with all his other emails, commissioned by my director who was on a business trip. Before making the decision of firing the unfortunate accidental witness, he was tortured during a whole week by the thought that I could reveal his secret to someone else. He hadn't yet perceived that the grapevine had taken care of spreading the episodes of his love affair from its beginning. Not a big deal, anyway. In Geneva, the genders, the races and the cultures get combined in the most different ways, and homosexuality, as any religion or philosophy, is simply considered one option more.

At the same time, the restaurant that Isabel's friend was managing—owned by the State of Geneva and on which depends our house, as it is the dwelling assigned for the manager—goes bankrupt. Lady mayoress evicts us remorselessly, insensible to my pleading as a single mother responsible for three daughters, just arrived from abroad and now unemployed. The issue is brought to a court where the judges rule in her favor. The absurdity of the case is that the new manager (bachelor and without children) didn't need the house and thus our Toad Mansion will remain uninhabited for two years. In fact, it was only a show of strength on the part of the canton authorities (mostly Socialists, to top it off) and the application of a principle, no matter if it implied a loss for them, as I would have continued paying the rent that I already was paying thoroughly.



So we're back at the starting point: without a roof or a job. No more noodle soup in the face of such a coup. My life is like a spiral and thus from time to time I have the slightly unpleasant feeling of living situations *déjà vues*. If we must draw lessons from all the things that occur to us, there are subjects that I repeat but whose hidden messages, it's obvious, not only I don't fully understand, but much less I'm able to process.

Very soon, my chaotic résumé gets enhanced by a new *mission*, ecumenical name to designate a job in the new vocabulary developed by the Office of Unemployment and conceived to be better accepted by a saturated job market.

I feel embarrassed to confess my apostasy. I flip over my jacket and I joined the World Economic Forum as an associate, to collaborate in the preparations for the Cancun Summit organized by Vicente Fox, Mexico's newly elected president, to introduce his new Cabinet to the world with all simplicity and modesty, within the setting of the World Forum, the meeting club of the richest and most powerful individuals of the planet. I've questioned myself a lot regarding my motivations to accept such a role, completely opposed to the convictions with which I try to imbue some coherence to my pilgrimages and adventures. Despicably, I conclude that it was because they were paying me the trip to Cancun, fifteen days at the beach and the opportunity for Nati to see her dad. A friend started her doctoral thesis in psychology on the subject of the transgression of moral and ethical boundaries, the life objectives and values that one believes to have established and that at a given moment are thrown overboard in exchange for a material bribe or a share of power. But in addition, I thought, if I am stuck in the Forum I will be able to know the monster from the inside and the knowledge of the enemy allows to fight it better. The turning point—analyzes Adri—is when the means get justified by the end. There begins the sliding to the other side.

While my almost three hundred colleagues attend the great annual mass of the Economic Forum in Davos, where the priests of power decide how they are going to distribute the financial, industrial and natural wealth of the world, affecting the daily lives of millions of human beings, I, in my office in Geneva, with a view to the lake, I apply myself to contact the speakers, the guests and the spectators of that other minor mass: the sharing out of Mexico among officials and businessmen, domestic and foreign. All had left, including the computer experts, together with the central server. Other than the bodyguards protecting the building—because there's always the threat of assaults by anti-globalists, as Mexico's president Zedillo baptized them—I'm all alone: kind of Whitney Huston and her bodyguards.

At the end of February we gather, Natalia, her half-sister and her father Gabriel, all expenses paid, in a luxurious hotel of the Kukulcan Boulevard: sophisticated meandering swimming pools with small islands-bars, a bedroom the size of living-room, imperial buffets, and we witness, powerless and horrified, the tremendous pounding the *robocops* give our people, the alter-globalists, here, in front of the hotel, with tear gas, truncheons, military tanks and helicopters, for the crime of asking for a more fair world order.

I return to Geneva enduring an existential nausea, sick of what I saw, of myself, of what I did not denounce, of my silent complicity. And my despicable mission comes to an end.

I promise to mend my ways in my next life, and quite soon I get the opportunity of doing it from the coordinator position in a human rights NGO training department.

—There are people who would kill their father and mother to get a job like this, —asserts Caro, who doesn't know where she might offer her services as a newly graduated from the School of International Studies.

During four years I would work organizing and teaching courses on the use of the UN human rights protection and violation reporting mechanisms.

At each session, creepy stories about the thousand and one ways the rulers have to abuse others, economically, socially or physically, can be heard. We help activists to denounce the crimes committed against their peers and their peoples, to the several forums of the Human Rights Commission.

We host a seminar in Tijuana, which brings together activists, lawyers, employees of the State Attorney's Office of Human Rights, and even some local police officers, to explain them the State obligations regarding the protection of human rights under the international conventions signed by

Mexico.

Ramiro, member of a local NGO, denounces that here, as in the whole country, journalists are subject to violence and intimidation which prevent them from working and limit their freedom of expression. There're even murder cases of journalists—never cleared up—who had revealed embarrassing issues for the authorities. Ramiro asks how the various United Nations mechanisms that could be used in this case function. But then, upon learning of the clauses that can sustain a complaint at the United Nations international forum, the nationalist backbone of agents and certain officials more interested in covering up their bosses than in protecting the rights of citizens emerges, and they objugate us, accusing us of being meddlers, of favoring “foreign ways”. They insist in the predominance of Mexican legislation over the international one (they don't care if Mexico has ratified the conventions) and that no one except the Mexicans themselves have the right to judge what is being done or not in the country. They defend the nation's right to hide behind its sovereignty to avoid the international scrutiny of its faults. And in an attempt to gain to its cause the rest of the audience, a spokesman of the nationalist declares with much solemnity the famous motto of former president Benito Juarez, declared *Benemerito de la Patria* or ‘home hero’: “Respect for the right of others is peace.” For God's sake, those guys were doing a complete reformulation of international jurisdiction!

During the G8 Meeting in Genoa (another meeting of the prominent), we receive the terrible news that the Italian police had shot a young protester, Carlo Giuliani, finished off by a military truck that was driven deliberately over the fallen body, after having prevented his peers and the paramedics to help him. Not satisfied with that blood quota, the police lashed out in the middle of the night against the Dias school, only place still considered safe by the protesters, center of the press offices and where some one hundred disobedient civilians were sleeping. And the boys laying down helpless were beaten with truncheons which pulled teeth and disfigured quite a few.

Tapes, photographs and videos were confiscated, the cameras were smashed. Tortures went on at the police headquarters; there was no medical care for the wounded, nor water for the thirsty, nor the possibility of having some sleep under the dazzling lights: the interrogations were carried out at regular intervals; they were forced to watch a series of images where pornography alternated with portraits of Mussolini and the Nazi army in action. I have goose pimples. My daughter Ayari, who has replaced me at the barricades of fair causes, is there, at the anti-G8 Genoa marches.

Upon her return, she tells me that before the Summit the whole city was already besieged by the army and the police; that they shoved the protesters toward the edge of the sea where on one side gunmen aimed at them with rifles from military ships and boats, and, on the other, canons of military tanks were pointed toward them. Helicopters stirred up the collective panic flying over the “fugitives” only a few meters above them; that the tactic was to encircle small groups of peaceful protesters and gas them profusely, sadistically, while from the military trucks masked men came down and set on fire the cars parked without being bothered in the least by the police; that on the night of the assault to the dorm where they had been staying, an intuitive voice urged Ayari to leave Genoa on one of the trains made available to protesters by railroad supporters of their cause, to break away from the besieged city. And thus she and her teammate made their way to the south of Italy.

In thousands of letters sent to the embassies of Italy, citizens around the world ask for justice and demand Berlusconi's resignation. The testimonies of victims arrive en masse to our NGO, which processes the accusations against Berlusconi's Government before the UN.

But our work is hindered by internal tensions. The tailor's wife is the worst clad. The founder and director of the organization runs it since its inception, twenty years ago, in a rather patriarchal manner: he makes a discretionary use of funds and various donations and he treats the staff, especially young women, with authoritarianism and disdain. The ONG had a high staff turnover history, and several employees had to resort to the psychologist to recoup their battered self-esteem after a particularly degrading abuse. So, that summer, counting on a well interrelated team, we stand up for the rights of a harassed colleague, offended by the director's hurtful comments, and we raised a stink to the Executive Committee, which over the years had washed its hands of everything, always passing on the problem reported by a victim to the accused director himself, so he solved it. To top it all, we already have a deficit equal to six months of the budget, and on that pretext the director

threatens us to close the business and lay off everybody.

We chose the International Human Rights Day, December 10<sup>th</sup>, to denounce publicly, at a press conference called by the union, the situation which had become even more complicated due to the decision of the Executive Committee of laying off more than fifty percent of the staff, after having pretended to listen to our complaints. I'm elected as spokesperson and that night I appear in the local news denouncing violations of the workers' rights of... a human rights organization! The next day we appear on the front page of the *Courrier*... And there I go, kicked out once again!

The fact that someone can get rid of me this way, steal once again my just recovered identity as a worker, partaking in society, and destabilize me so easily, makes me really angry and awakens my justice-seeking backbone. I start to study the statutes of personnel, the articles of labor law on the valid motives to dismiss a worker; I talk to labor law experts on the issue, with employees of other NGOs, with the President of ours. I request and I get an appointment with the Secretary of "Employment and Solidarity" of Geneva. This time I won't just send my job offers left and right. It's enough! My next step will be to go to Berne, the capital, to demand a solution for the long-time unemployed who are not entitled to a subsidy or anything. They can't throw us down the drain just like that!

I get together with other aged unemployed to work out a strategy of media and political measures. I take out of my drawer my *Iskra* (spark) editor pen and I study, compare, formulate statistics, analyze the issue from different viewpoints, to disclose the truth of what is happening in order to shake up our legislators and authorities and compel them to assume their responsibilities...

As every year, we celebrate the Day of the Dead just as 'the bonny one' requires it. I set up a long altar covered with flowers, chocolate and *alegría*<sup>35</sup> skulls with peanuts-made teeth, candles, portraits of our ancestors and people whose life and death have impacted me in some way, such as Digna Ochoa, defender of ecologist peasants accused of being subversive, and who "committed suicide" with a gunshot in the neck; Rachel Corrie, a young American pacifist, run over by an Israeli bulldozer when she tried to prevent the demolition of a house in Gaza; and also Gregory, who died at age 24 of muscoviscidosis, a degenerative disease of the lung, and who, with an angel voice and charisma, sang on the meaning of this life, which he knew was going to be so ephemeral... We listen to Mexican music (a friend from Radio Educacion had recorded for me a dozen cassettes with *sones*, *jarabes*, *huapangos* and folksongs of the Revolution). There were lots of laughs, *chamurrado*<sup>36</sup>, some drunkenness, *tinga*<sup>37</sup>, chicken with mole and candied pumpkin, and a whole dance party under strips of shredded paper and the hollow look of *Coatlícuē*<sup>38</sup>, presiding over the altar, Goddess of Earth who brings life and takes it back when she decides so.

Two weeks later, my dad was transferred to the state clinic, with a water-filled lung, literally drowning in himself. I called my brother, who lives in Berne, so that he could come and say him goodbye. I hadn't seen him for more than twenty years, when he left my parents (and later also us, his sisters) after a series of arguments between his wife and my mother, for reasons that, I guess, no one remembers well any more. But resentment is tenacious and neither of the two parties has ever taken the initiative to make peace.

It takes a long time to learn how to ask for forgiveness and to forgive. Pride and ego are tough obstacles. Elisa, my work companion in the collection of golf balls, tells me that only recently she found out that her mother left her, a week after she was born, in an orphanage where she used to visit her only on Sundays. The father, of Moroccan origin, felt that neither his responsibility as a father nor as a husband had anything to do with him. Elisa had always had a sense of abandonment whose cause she couldn't explain, because when her parents got divorced she was 8 years old and she lived with her mother until she came of age. But now, although she understands the origin of her feeling, and although this happened fifty years ago, she still cannot forgive her mother. Furthermore, she says that she finds worthless that her mother had apologized and explained her version to her: "I did it so you could receive the best attention, because I had to work and I couldn't take care of you." Each of them is entrenched behind her own truth and experience, and neither the mother can admit that she is somewhat accountable for her daughter discomfort, nor Elisa can digest her pain, very real but passed and uncorrelated with her current stage, so that they could live together and well the stretch they still have ahead.

Something similar occurs to Daniel. He claims that if they are the only couple, among us four, still being together since they met at the school, it's because they don't have any link with his family, though they don't visit her family either. That could be due to the old and well known psychological mechanism which rallies a nation threatened by a foreign enemy. After thirty years of marriage, apparently the subterfuge still works for him. Daniel and Eva live inside their bubble, a routine very similar to that of my grandfather, bank employee in the same establishment since he was a young until he retired. They had no children; they barely go out and always within a radius not going beyond the Swiss narrow borders. They never wander off so far as to not being able to return home at night.

—I'm going to ask for a day off next week, —he suggests.

—It will be too late. Come tomorrow.

In effect, he arrives next day, just as he can be seen in the picture where carries in his arms, stiff and surly, my newborn Tania. I take him to the room where my father lies. He comes out five minutes later, embarrassed, feeling awkward.

—I just don't know what to tell hi, —he apologizes.

—Anything. There's no need for big speeches. Listen to your heart: it will bring to your lips the words you're looking for and show you the gestures that you need.

This time he stays there half an hour. She comes out, we talk for a while, the last medical report, say hello to Eva on my part and call me once in a while, I would like it and he walks away, stiff in his federal officer dark suit. Reconciled with his son, my dad died the next day in my mother's arms. At noon, I had given him to eat a strawberry yogurt. "The cook is good!", he joked. His last food. His last joke. He was eating slowly, slowly, his eyes closed, extending the pauses between each spoonful. He's making the learning of eternity, I thought.

—We never talked a lot, —I told him softly—, but we understand each other.

And he assented: we understand each other.

When I come out of work, I stop at the mall. I want to stun myself with the lights and Christmas decorations, with the crowd hurried on febrile purchases. My brother-in-law calls to give me the news. The hustle and bustle around me stops, empty of any content. So this is nothingness: a noisy space, lights, voices and agitation, but where void fills everything. Never again will I hear your peaceful voice imbuing me confidence, telling me that everything will turn out fine; never more that restrained walk will come towards me, nor that upright, harmonious look of a moonstone-blue-grey infinite kindness, will smile at me.

I seek peacefulness in the serene patience of inorganic matter.

—Do you think rocks have life? —I ask Yves-Pierre<sup>39</sup>, assuming that, due to his name, he must be their relative.

—Of course! Life is transformation and rocks breathe, have memory; they move, multiply, and dissolve. We don't realize it because our life cycle is like a sigh compared to that of them; but they are made of energy, light, just as the human beings.

I surround myself with stones. Their caution transmits me peace, their humble beauty cheers me up. Pictures of rocks, granite bookshelves, cobblestone-looking carpet, sofa backing like stacked rocks, candles, stones of the road, of the many roads travelled by my acquaintances, who I ask to bring me a piece of that silent ore as a souvenir.

And this same year, without knowing it, I arrive by chance to the realm of rocks, on the island of Sardinia. Its wonderful landscapes radiate a great placidity, a sense of perfect balance between water, sky and land, outcome of a successful meditation. Sardinia shores are dotted with gigantic rocks chiseled by the wind and the sea, as cemeteries of monstrous prehistoric beings.

Sitting on the round back of a dinosaur, facing the Sun while it dilutes in orange and turquoise reflections, you know that everything is in its place, everything is perfect; you lack nothing.

And strange things happen, experiences of an unusual intensity. Standing up in the middle of a semicircle of menhirs, or in front of a sacred well, perfectly manufactured, dedicated to the goddess mother *Tanit* (also called *Oum* by the Carthaginians), where the Sun meets the water through a hole in the vault at the Equinox, or in a "house of fairies" (Neolithic tombs carved in rocks), one feels invaded by a great respect for the knowledge, the wisdom of our ancestors of seven thousand years

ago. And then I get the impression that nowadays we wear ourselves out running after absurd goals, considering that what we really want is something very simple, something so natural, so obvious that most people never see it for running too fast.

Near the end of our journey, along the *Costa Smeralda*, the most beautiful coastline of the island, we had an accident that reminded us that the boundary between life and death is very tenuous, that we must concentrate on the important things and not get lost in vanities.

I'm driving slowly, blinded by the Sun at dusk. Inside an S curve, suddenly I see a grey dazzling ball approaching at full speed towards me. Half second later, a thunderous crash, burning smell, the car moves ahead a few meters more and it stops in the middle of the road. I look at my hands, my body; apparently everything is intact, I don't feel any pain. I turn towards Nati at my side, who tells me that she is OK. We come out and I see a green snake curled up next to the car. We walk over it as if it were a harmless ivy shoot and it rises up, looks at me and sticks out its forked tongue.

I don't understand why its fear-reflex didn't work in the presence of danger. Could it be that the unscathed escape from a first danger had numbed it? The serpent. Messenger between Heaven and Earth. It helped the Little Prince return to his planet. During the whole trip I had felt in close contact with that other world, that of all those who have departed this life before us. And we were about to reach them, on the other side of the mirror.

The round thing that had completely destroyed the front of my car was the tire of a very long trailer for boats that hadn't followed the curve of the car pulling it and was running in my lane.

And what had never happened before in my life: After that accident I started to crash almost once a month. Never a serious one, as I only crumple the car body. And I know very well that it's due to a lack of attention, because I can't stop thinking about the two unpleasant things that haunt me since my arrival in Geneva: that I've been fired from my work and that I've been evicted from my house.

It seems a bad joke, but it is the truth.

I'm once again evicted, this time from the apartment that Ayari had found for us after the Toad Mansion saga. The fact is that without my eldest princess who went to live at the *Rhino* commune I've lost the right to the three bedroom apartment subsidized by the state but owned by DuPont de Nemours, an American chemical transnational corporation. The Housing Office had warned me that they were going to cancel my contract based on the clause of "under-occupation" which requires terminating it immediately when there are more rooms than persons so they can grant it to a larger family, which I consider a very praiseworthy and socially fair principle. I inform them that I can vacate the apartment at the end of December. My mom had offered me what had been their "Summer department" on the ground floor of the family big house and where my parents used to spend the day so that they could have a direct access to the garden. But in December the owner sues me, demanding me three months of rent for "having vacated it out of time" that, according to them, was in March, and for not having proposed them a new tenant (which is a State prerogative) because, supposedly, they had not found one themselves. This is preposterous, because the housing crisis is at its peak: there are more than three thousand applicants waiting for a roof, as I was told by the Housing Office employees responsible for selecting the families to which allocate the apartments based on certain social criteria.

And a totally absurd and Kafkaesque muddle starts. The owners of one of the world's most rich and powerful transnational corporation—which enjoys a quarterly net income of more than US\$ 1 billion according to Fortune magazine—will prosecute during five years, with the support of several lawyers and the State good offices, a citizen who had agreed to move out because she's a socially conscious person, an unemployed single mother, forcing five judges to gather on three occasions in order to recover for the chemical giant a laughable amount, ridiculous as opposed to the size of the efforts and resources deployed, and otherwise unfair as the eviction had been at the State request. The caricature of imperialism at a micro-organism level!

Feeling as the overthrown Queen Marie Antoinette, alone in front of the Judges of History, I ask the President of the jury:

—What am I guilty of? Why do you punish me?

—Madam, it's not a punishment, it's an arrangement. The owners of the apartment are being very conciliatory; in view of your situation, they have reduced their demands.

—This is a despicable hold-up! According to you, if a robber demands your portfolio with five thousand francs but since you don't have them and he only asks you three thousand that's not a theft but "an arrangement"?

In the absence of arguments, the judge changes his tactics—very obsequious towards the prominent and well-suited lawyers of the chemical giant—and he plays the card of compassion.

—Try to understand me, Madam. You must also make an effort; they already did theirs. And you've called them "robbers"; that's a very ugly, offensive word. If you don't accept the deal, I'm going to feel very sad when I go back home tonight.

I can't believe it. Could that be what the repentant socialists call "humanization of capitalism", that is, when the powerful express feelings of desolation, even with crocodile tears, when they face the reluctance of the exploited ones to let pick themselves clean?

Then, in a series of powerlessness lapses, I wreck several times the body of the elegant Toyota, legacy of my father.

One day, in a Paty's e-mail containing a mass philosophy text such as those that are forwarded to a whole list of addresses, I read: "If you stop nurturing them, your problems will die."

Thus, I decide to stop watching my bad movies in closed-circuit. One thing is to analyze a problem to find it a solution, and another to wallow in it until giddiness. From that moment on I fully assume my transience. Yes, I've been through many experiences rather varied. Yes, I've worked for many public entities, companies and NGOs, holding diverse positions in their hierarchy, sometimes with responsibilities, sometimes as a simple pawn, and performing tasks ranging from drilling holes, preparing perfumes or renting cars, to educating the elderly, making architectural drawings or being a diplomat. I even spread the Divine Word. I have moved house sixteen times, almost never due to a decision of mine. But then, one only needs to change roles: stop being a victim of the grim will of others and become an amused spectator, accomplice of other spectators, or plainly move to another scenario.

When I review the numerous stretches of my adventures, in each of them I find many positive things, but also in the mere fact that I am a professional bohemian. This has given me many opportunities to learn about different worlds and enrich myself with new friendships, to experience multiple ways of solving problems and acquire new knowledge of all kinds, to know how it feels to be on the top, on the bottom and on the sides of the social scale. And I see how lucky I am for having lived so many lives in only one.

We only pass through. It's the journey that matters, not the arrival. I am a missionary. I am the main character of my own play that I decided to make it always new, always surprising, as life itself. Perhaps I'm just the dream of someone else; perhaps its instrument. Anyway, I assume it fully, yes, I am a grasshopper jumping forward and backwards. My ship doesn't have a logical or a predictable route; I have multiple functions and dysfunctions, so what? *C'est moi*. Consequently, I have no other choice but wait for the new strokes of luck. Let's turn the page and greet the new adventures! Let's see what new commission my eccentric star assigns me.

To ease my transition into this new phase of non-resistance, I sign up for meditation classes with a group of Buddhist origin, which organizes worldwide meditation-sports events which were called "Peace runs" until the word "peace" was classified as subversive by the Bush administration, opposed to the democracy that American bombers were heroically implementing in Iraq. Then, the runs were renamed with a politically correct name: "Harmony runs".

Together with my meditation companions I discover amazing forms of overcoming mental and physical barriers. One day I rowed for seven hours, along with an English girl who, swimming, was crossing the Zurich Lake from one end to the other, twenty six miles in total. When we were about to reach the finish line of the competition, we got trapped by a very strong current, and regardless of our efforts, me with my oars and she with her arms, we were stuck at the same level of the belfry of a church, on the neighboring bank. Burned-out, the girl had to give up crying and lifted into the boat by her father and Sonia, of my same Geneva meditation center. We comforted her as we could, appraising her courage and willpower for having persisted, although she was already very tired for

the last three hours and that she knew she was among the last latecomers.

Some other day we went climbing one of Switzerland's highest summits: the Matterhorn in the Alps.

We reached the Zermatt refuge on Friday night, after a three-hour trip by car and train (the last half an hour by train because Zermatt is an entirely pedestrian village) that went by almost unnoticed amid speeches and songs. I was assigned to the car of my upcoming roommate, Adarini, which means "transformation". And, indeed, this woman doesn't leave unscathed whoever spends time with her, be it only a weekend; one changes after listening to her life stories, taken from a novel of true surrealism. Thus we began that day, with stories such as that of Adarini when she was twenty (thin girl with roguish eyes and coppery hair) and she came out ballistic from her apartment in Queens, New York, at two o'clock in the morning to go slap mouth bled her neighbor, a huge drunken guy, because he was playing music full up in the street and wouldn't let her sleep. The police hadn't arrived despite several calls, and after Adarini had asked them yelling on the phone if it was necessary to kill someone for them to intervene. So she went out to fix the problem by herself. She was about to launch her furious attack on the guy—surrounded by his cronies as plastered and ginormous as him—when the police finally appeared. She was arrested together with the responsible of the racket and she spent the night in jail, handcuffed next to her enemy. I was going to hear stories, some crazier than others, during the whole Saturday because we climbed together the 11500 feet height peak.

When I was about to get ready to climb the mountain the next day, I realized that I had left at home my climbing boots. The only footwear that I had was a pair of sandals designed by a craftsman from Oaxaca. Neither had I brought a sweater for the evening cold, nor lip balm, nor sun-screen-lotion, nor a towel. Nonetheless, at the bottom of my backpack I found a pump to inflate my bike tires.

I arrive in time at my Saturday morning appointment with the rest of the nearly fifty members of the group, coming from all Switzerland, all of them equipped with the latest thing in climbing outfit. Astonished and critical, they all look at my feet, wearing a rubber sole with twisted little threads similar to a Roman sandal. Adarini doesn't look at my feet, because she already knows. She looks at me in the eyes and asks:

—And your sunglasses?

—Guess.

—You also forgot them?

—Well... yes!

My ability to amaze myself surprises me. Clearly, I'm stark raving mad if I expect to practice mountain climbing as if it was a walk around the park. I give up. Too bad, I have to assume it. At least, that way I'm going to be light and get less tired.

We celebrate a brief commemorative ceremony in front of the plate affixed by the founder of the meditation center, Sri Chinmoy, which states: "With its vast silence, its beauty and its strength, the Matterhorn imbues us with a sense of overwhelming peace, reminding us of the source of creation... The quality of peace, based on love and on feeling part of the whole, will help humanity to create a world of harmony among all peoples. The inner peace, which begins in the heart of each one of us, will change the destiny of humanity. The main need of the human being is to feel inner peace."

Very well. I agree with that.

We walk up to the last refuge of the Matterhorn, from where there's a 360 degrees breathtaking view of a series of snow-covered peaks.

A Swiss composer, Christian Zehnder, knew how to communicate through sounds the glorious joy that one feels up there, amongst the eagles and the woodchucks, especially with the melody "*Schnee*" *minör or mjandrio* (on his website: <http://www.stimhorn.ch/deutsch/download.html>).

I recall Julius Caesar who crossed the Alps with his troops wearing sandals to invade the Helvetas. If he could do it, why not me? I feel like the plate says: part of the whole, next to earth, while weightless above. A wonderful feeling. We walk for nine hours. Then I can't go on, unless I crawl, I move on my back, or backwards. But that way would take us another two hours. At that moment,

and coming from nowhere, an electric cart stops a few feet from us. Its driver had a matter to resolve at a hotel and, if we could wait ten minutes, he would take us back to the village. We were saved! We arrived just in time to hear a harp, zither and flute concert by the group Silence of the Mountains, companions of the meditation center, young women who look like angels, not only by the white saris they wear but also by their voices, ethereal as the air we breathe.

On Sunday we go to soak up energy from the longest glacier in Europe. In front of that colossal flow of millions of cubic feet of ice that creeps between two mountain ranges, one absorbs a safe, invincible strength (with the *stimmhorn: triohatala* as a musical background).

*Et voilà.* Back to my almost normal ego. I say almost, because I've confirmed that I am not at all a normal person. No one else would think of climbing one of the highest peaks in the Alps with Roman sandals, without sunglasses, or sun-screen lotion, or anything, except a bike air pump.

They say that pains foster art and that happiness is sterile because one only lives it and that's all. But I believe that a creative birth may also occur without pain, when it originates from harmony and fullness.

Having plenty of time available, I open the door to all the inventions that have come to visit me, such as necklaces made with Christmas decorations of tiny ice cubes, cardboard furniture, bags made of painting reproductions, felt fairies, ideas that I can finally invite to become realities. All of this entails having the floor covered with pieces of fabric, wool, beads, and unusable buckets because they are full of paint or *papier maché*. Anyway, nobody asks me keep count of expenses, order or time, and that pleases my libertarian-cat soul. I also start a mural of mosaics in the garden, with broken glazed tiles and Mexican pottery smashed during an ill-fated trip. I get relaxed when I immerse myself in my puzzles of ceramic fragments, assembling them with colors of similar tones, and according to a pattern that gets its form as it progresses, placing the pieces according to the surroundings.

And I also socialize more. The tenant of the apartment next to mine is my sister Sofia, my caring companion of breakfasts, walks and common holidays, provider of practical advices and timely jokes.

During the February holidays, we travel to a mountain village of wooden chalets in the Oberland, "the upper country", well-known for its Protestant atmosphere. Everywhere they put Bibles at the disposal of Christians in urgent need of divine inspiration, including the restrooms of the cable car. The corollary in matters of civility is that a manifest trust prevails among everybody. It startles me that backpacks, skis and shoes are left unattended in an open place and nothing happens: you know for sure that you'll find them the next day, just where you left them.

We are at the top of the world. Glittering summits around us, sunlight, clear snow-tracks, rested bones ready for a sleigh race in the middle of a dream-like landscape. A splendid day. But before, my nephew Maxime wants a hamburger and fries. There are several vacant armchairs on the terrace of the restaurant. The three of us get seated and a little later Sofia and her son go pick up their order. An overgrown sturdy guy, ranger of Aryan race, sits in the last seat and dumps his helmet in Sofia's armchair.

—I'm sorry, —I tell him in German Swiss—, it's occupied.

—There's nobody, so it's not occupied, —he insists.

I pick up his helmet and put it on the floor.

—I'm telling you that my sister is about to come; that she just went pick her food.

Once more, Rambo throws his helmet in the chair next to mine and yells at me that he occupies it because it's empty. When Sofia comes back, I tell her that the guy sitting in the armchair next to hers comes as a warrior. Unperturbed, she picks the helmet from her seat, places it next to the gorilla and sits down, waving politely to her neighbor. The guy groans. Very friendly, Sofia strikes up the conversation:

—Nice day!

The snow baron's eyebrow frowns a little more. His mouth scowls.

—We can talk, —continues my sister, very casual—. You speak German Swiss and I speak French. We can both practice our languages.

To show my sister who she has the audacity to meddle with, the Lord tells her:



—I only speak French in bed. —Sofia looks at her watch.

—It's rather early to go to bed, don't you think?

There I notice that she has scored a point. The *French lover* cannot keep his bad-guy mask and the corners of his mouth rise against his will. Enraged with himself for such a betrayal of his facial muscles, he roars:

—Mother fucker, damned bitch!

Sofia looks at him with the perplexity of a lexicologist dealing with an idiomatic novelty.

—Those are thick words! —she exclaims, translating into German Swiss, that she doesn't speak too well, "coarse" by "thick".

A burst of laughter comes from the row of seats on the level above ours, where a whole gallery of amused spectators was watching the scene. At that moment, the colleagues of our centurion arrive, calling him from a table a few feet away. Completely defeated now, our neighbor answers them with a contrite "Sorry", for having failed to colonize the armchairs and, humiliated, he abandons the battlefield without being able to suppress the new smile my sister's eccentric vocabulary had caused him.

—If we run into him again, —I tell Sofia—, don't forget to ask him if the linguistic appointment of tonight is at his house or yours. You cannot miss such an opportunity to learn Swiss German!

Free from the obligations of a salaried job, now I can spend more time with Ayari. Certainly, we are very close, and not only in writing, at which she is very skillful. She asks me to accompany her to Ikea to buy a chair and a lamp for her desk. Then she confides me that the other day she went to the hookers' district to get the bikini epilated.

—The *bikini*? You mean *everything*? With wax? Aaaargg! Eeeeeee! You're crazy, babe! Even my eyelashes hurt just by thinking how... Oh, no!

We crack up in the middle of the Nordic neutrality of beige and cream armchairs.

—The business owner said that she didn't know how to do it but that the person in charge, a Brazilian girl, was going to do it. However, as that girl didn't have the slightest intention of doing it, the owner had to do it, and as she had never done it, you can imagine how it came out.

—For God's sake, babe. How could you do such a thing? Are a masochist or what?

Now the four-poster beds echo our guffaw. The customers turn around to look at us.

I tell her about the Web page that I found when I was trying to discover what erotic texts of the Bible my dad used to read to my mom; a site explaining that the Bible recommends women to epilate their pubic hair so that "the union of bodies is more direct and greater the pleasure".

—Yes, —confirms Ayari—, it was a tradition among the Egyptians to epilate the entire body, including the eyebrows, and to shave the hair. But, doesn't the Bible have a similar prescription for men? It's obvious that they didn't let women participate in its drafting!

On Sunday, Sofia, Maxime, my 'mom' and I we go out for a walk at a natural reserve near Geneva. I see the Jura and the other mountains surrounding us from an angle from which I had never seen them before. What a strange sensation of loss of reference points when one is in a place known but strange at the same time. Our picnic is enlivened by an orchestra of countryside birds; fearful hares run on tiptoes. We perceive the presence of foxes; we hear the croak of frogs among the reeds. Then we walked through the fields of rapeseed, yellow as only them, and we tell each other our stories.

Sofia says that her new friend Richard (who lives in a village on the other side of the border, in France) gets depressed because he doesn't stand that she's not with him every day and that she prefers to stay every two weekends in her maiden apartment when it's her turn to be with her son (who lives with his father since they divorced). As he's already inherently depressive, one of those guys who drowns his blues being intensively workaholic, he also becomes stressed, grumpy and grouchy. That decreases even more her desire to stay with him at night, and thus, in a painful downward spiral, he gets even more frustrated, envisaging that she already doesn't love him and that she will leave him, unbearable idea that he imposes on his imagined reality, until he makes it real...

My mother tells us that many years ago, when we lived in a German Swiss village, when we

were very little, our neighbor next floor, a governess, hinted at my mom that she had the despicable role of raw material supplier for schools (children), without doing anything else but being a housewife. And I recalled that my mother told me exactly that when I showed her my résumé, which consisted of several pages due to the many jobs that had filled my itinerant working life in Mexico. Without even take a look at it, she had exclaimed:

—Did you do anything else apart from give birth to daughters?

I was shocked and deeply hurt. Now I understand. For her, that paper in which a professional career was summed up was like a knife in her own wound. She was repeating to herself the affront of that teacher.

My mother also says that although it's true that she always acted as a simple housewife, ironing, cooking, mopping, my father—a doctor who carried out jobs of great responsibility—never offended or belittled her. He never made her feel that she was worth less or didn't deserve him.

I looked at the sky and thanked my dad for having loved my mom that way. They gave me the gift of seeing life with confidence, because I am daughter of love.

## CHAPTER 8

### LOVE IS ON PAGE 52

Let's make a long pause at times of disagreement,  
let's seek in us the cause of so many silences imposed  
on past moments of meetings and lived smiles.  
Let's stop to consider if the distance that we establish  
between the experiences lived and felt is really worth.  
Let's find that we are just persons in need of the glance  
of those who have been an essential part in our lives.  
Let's dare to be always different amidst the repetitious  
of an existence that compels us to be always recurrent  
in daily conducts loaded with vacuums and reoccurrences.  
Let's allow ourselves to meet again in silence each instant,  
even in the conscious and voluntary moments of distancing.  
Let's make a pause, however relatively short and casual,  
so that in a brief glance we can discover each other in silence,  
and exchange more frequent smiles and less lengthy absences.

OBED JUAN VIZCAINO NAJERA (Venezuela)

My older daughters completed their studies. And the day came that remaining as a bud was more painful than blooming. I am losing my daughters.

Tania didn't tolerate the cold climate and the humans living here, so she left globetrotter in search of light and heat with her eco-boyfriend, Sylvain, so cautious of not emitting more carbon oxide than the strictly necessary that he refused to fly on a plane across the Atlantic. They traveled hitchhiking to Mexico, on a sailboat, but cruising around the Mediterranean first.

When Tania broke ties and hoisted her ship's sails, she had to strive against unfavorable and paralyzing currents determined to instill her with fear of the unknown. In the process, she confronted difficult situations face on and she got the hang of adventure, its uncertainties included.

She rode unexpected waves and she discovered that doing what she likes, whatever the sequence and regardless of what others expected from her, was highly satisfying and rewarding.

And our Tropicana finally healed of her persistent stomach cramps when she realized that she has the necessary skills to be "self-sufficient", and that she does it well and with pleasure. What she needed was to be conscious that she could eat life with appetite and not just half of it.

And there we go, he tells, like small feathers traveling and traveling with the wind, undoing and redoing our nest and our ways of operating, according to the environment and circumstances.

This summer, my friend Veronica invited me to join them, her and her husband, on a trip through Andalusia, Portugal and Madrid. I corroborated that the geographical distance doesn't decrease the affections. The reunion with my friends confirmed me that if the communication connection is not broken, a relationship can keep going beautifully even at a distance. Veronica has become one of my closest soul mates thanks to the writing which, by the way, she now investigates from the point of view of its historical development.

It was a fantastic trip across time, with a walk through the Alhambra scented gardens, and visits to the elegant alcazars (palaces of the Moors) and harmonious mosques; a stop at the Plaza del Potro tavern, where Don Quixote and Sancho rested after having waged a fierce battle against some windmills. "Freedom, Sancho, is one of the most precious gifts that heaven has bestowed upon men; no treasures that the earth holds buried or the sea conceals can compare with it; for freedom, as for honor, life may and should be ventured," says the plaque in their memory. A tour around Salaman-

ca, where the first European university was founded in 1218, and through Avila's old downtown surrounded by an eleventh century wall disrupted by towers, the biggest after the China Wall. I loved it and I returned with my batteries recharged for a while.

My colleague Penny says that those who visit the Alhambra get a fiancé. I neither know much nor understand those things about fate and hunches. I only know that I met a guy Mateo-something who told me that "time fixes everything".

And I tell Penny that one night, while I was watching the Cathedral of Seville, with its absurd Catholic chapels stacked without order or meaning inside the grounds of the mosque, a man stood up at my side, assessed the architectural disaster and downplayed it, stating that time fixed everything, an assertion that left me perplexed and intrigued... After that, he walked away and had already started to miss him when he came back to invite me to dinner with his brother and his sister-in-law. That he didn't want to tell me his name or know mine, because that wasn't important at all. That what interested him most in that moment was to find a place to have a good diner. That the dry Spanish *tortilla* we were served put him in a bad mood, as if he blamed them for the poor treatment given to travellers in Andalusia. That he told me he wasn't the least interested in politics. That on our way back I spent the time talking to his sister-in-law. That he didn't ask me my telephone number but instead gave me his, thus making clear that the decision to meet again or not rested entirely in my hands (something weird, as it is usually the contrary, the man being the one who calls the woman; this was an interesting transposal of the situation). And then, at the end of our tour, Madrid, where he lives. I called him from the hotel but he didn't take the call immediately although he returned it a few minutes later. Of course, as he had considered not necessary to exchange our names, asking for my room number to the hotel receptionist was a whole challenge.

We went for a walk through the childhood of our children, at the Retiro Park, and I depicted my girls throwing popcorn at the Chapultepec ducks, and him, his two sons, here, in front of the House of Glass, rehearsing the balance on their first bike, between balloon sellers and pampering. He took me to El Prado museum and taught me how to look at the light of pictures and the expression of its denizens.

Thus began this story of ours. He told me that he would like to take me to Venice, city of an ethereal atmosphere, propitious to lift off.

The appointment was two weeks later. We spent four days getting lost among the canals and the palaces, our endless talks reflected in ocher over blue-green watercolor heart-beatings.

We toured our internal labyrinths, we chased his monsters, we crossed bridges, suddenly we found ourselves in some bend of the soul, while we walked totally disoriented on the outside. When I came back, I didn't know what to tell my family eager of anecdotes and tourist details. How can anyone describe an inner journey?

Neruda says that we must rejoice for being able to miss someone, because that reminds us how much we enjoyed the time spent together. I felt glad since I arrived at the lounge and much more on the plane. I got goose bumps and my heart rate accelerated imagining the meeting that we could have had that night and that won't be. I spent the two hours of the flight reading one single episode of my book, when the woman and her friends arrive at Timimoun, in the middle of the Algerian desert, and they dine couscous in the house of a wealthy Berber, owner of date palm plantations, while I remained lost in the infinite heat of some undulating dunes, my skin burning due to the rubbing of the sand, my attention focused in the freshness of an oasis in the heart of the palm grove, feeling how the magic carpet was taking off. I had to go back countless times to dine couscous, sitting in the lotus position, and hear the explanations of the distinguished host about the history of the various ethnic groups that had settle down in Timimoun for thousands of years.

One night, after meditation, Sonia of Slovakia, owner of a Soviet times sculpture body and heroine of all terrain ski (she draws perfect zigzags on unsoiled snow fields) asks me:

—How are you? You're very quiet lately!

—Everything's fine, perfect. I feel like on a small cloud.

—If that's so, then bring us down a few bits of happiness to share them!

Three weeks later, Matthew came to Geneva. He told me that I had pared him as an artichoke. We are complementary; I like to interrogate, to delve to know, and he is of an astonishing frank-

ness, he reveals his deeper secrets with the spontaneity and simplicity of a child.

And I recall our glorious communion of Sunday. Look, how pertinent, the day reserved for approaching the divine! We were all participating at the after-breakfast conversation: Matthew, my mom, my fertile friend Isabel, now mother of seven children and studying psychology, Natalia and me, and as Matthew tried to lure my mom, with the cautious mediation of Isabel, the stress I had racked up for fear that my mother could commit one of her accustomed impertinences against Matthew or Isabel was decreasing.

The more respect and understanding I perceived between all of them, my loved ones, the more I felt floating around us a quiet tenderness with that Sunday morning smell of coffee with milk that one savors at length, in the intimacy of pajamas. It was liberation.

I imagine that believers must feel that way after receiving communion; freed from sins.

The void left by the vanished monsters was filled with a huge desire to embrace him, feel him. I looked at him and I felt some terrible desires. We went out to visit premises on rent, so that Matthew could bring his easels, canvases and paints, and work here. And so we spent the afternoon, he, I and the Mystery that had brought us together, exploring possible futures in hangars rehabilitated as workshops for artists. After a day of random petting, the desire had become an overwhelming wave and when his chest finally flattened against my back, in the light of the streetlamp reflected on the pillow, a tsunami burst out, flooding me with pleasure. When I recall it, I feel heartbeats, stings on the womb edge, messengers of forthcoming budding pleasures, as on the afternoon of that day, which, I sensed, was of preparations for an unforgettable party of the aroused senses.

His preludes are so naturally pertinent, spontaneous, naïvely subversive of the microcellular order, that they acquire an unsuspected power of liberators of contentions and dykes.

In the evening, his heat melted against mine transported me immediately to dizzy heights, close to the intergalactic cosmonaut madness, in full weightlessness, for a long time, and suddenly the fusion with the unimaginable glow of the solar star dying in an Big Bang explosion and, sometime later, reborn downstream, amazed by the exploits our body is capable of performing.

And the mantra that is pronounced during the ceremonies of merger with the celestial, the Amen, suddenly acquires all its meaning. It enjoins us: love each other. It seems to me that we are divinely fulfilling the commandment.

Then it was my turn of visiting his birthplace: Madrid. I liked the city more than when we toured it the previous summer. To begin, it didn't smell of piss. And it was filled with friends: poets, painters and other nomadic life artists, friends of Mateo. Madrid inhabitants are like bats: they live at night. The quantity of people who crowd the bars and restaurants from nine o'clock in the evening until dawn is amazing! Mateo is greeted everywhere because he has been the owner of several busy bars and restaurants.

Our next meeting was in Berlin, where we spent four days, feeling amazed in every corner. It is a city of extremes, of yin and yang; the worse and the best of the human being imbricated one into the other. Ruins of a church bombed at the end of the Second World War next to a modern church, whose circular walls are made of mild night-blue stained-glass windows, with outbursts of orange and red sparks which break the night in some points. In the old church, a cross made with two huge wrought-iron nails which had sustained the ceiling of a London Church destroyed by the Germans a few days before their capitulation. In retaliation, the British had bombed Berlin intensely, methodically. And next to that cross, a charcoal drawing of a protector Virgin, wrapping lovingly her son, made in a military camp established in the Soviet Union by a German doctor, when men on both sides were tearing themselves apart with a desperate fierceness. At the entrance, a sign summons the visitor to reflect on the importance of forgiveness, to consider those objects from past times not as just museum objects but as proofs of what man is capable of doing when he forgets his essential mission: to love, to care for all the Creation with its different "nations", including the nation of the plankton, the birds or the baobabs, as says Thameur, the philosopher.

I'm particularly interested in the current opinion of Berliners regarding the German Democratic Republic: the Communist side of Berlin separated from the capitalist side by a wall built by the Soviets in 1961, after many highly qualified professionals, trained in the East, fled to the capitalist West, bleeding of resources to the Communist side. I went to the GDR Museum and to that of the

wall. I felt depressed when I recognized the distrust of the Communist leaders towards the people: they wanted to keep a close watch, spy and censor everyone and everything. It was a police state that imprisoned many dissidents in the same concentration camps where Nazis had exterminated reds, Jews, Gypsies and resistance members! What a sad thing! As it seems, imagination and creativity was not the done thing: the fabrics of garments were horrible; the paintings represented all the same theme: workers; the buildings were all the same: horrendous dorm cities of mere blocks like shoe boxes. What happened to them? How a nation capable of making a revolution against the dictatorship of a Czar let itself being manipulated this way? Or is it that all of this is a lie? That these museums only display the part of history that suits those in favor of capitalism? Perhaps someday there will be a Museum of capitalism with the history of the bankers and their corrupt political lackeys sucking all the society resources until its annihilation.

A few months later, when we were looking at the *favelas* of Rio, an East German would remind me that history is written by the vanquishers. Privileges? Look at that! Luxury hotels leaning against labyrinths of piled up shacks; people who spend in one day an amount of money that many others don't earn in one whole year. In East Germany, a "privilege" was to be able to go twice a week to a restaurant, rather than only one. But everybody had access to the same goods. You registered to buy a car and it was delivered to you when it was your turn, as the factory produced them. And as everybody was enlisted, even my grandma, when you didn't want your car there was always someone eager to swap your turn of the car for that of a fridge, so everyone had what they needed. The secret police? Seventy per cent of the population received extra money in exchange for "information". And everyone knew that his cousin, his friend, also benefited of this practice that had become a game. In a protest march to dismantle the wall, you could find someone who you knew was an informer, who in turn knew that you knew... and nothing happened.

And we carry on with our relationship by land, by air and by e-mails, phone and telepathy, building a beautiful Black Prince tale. He always wears a T shirt, a sweater and a black jacket, arguing that it's an easier way of choosing what you'll wear put on the morning and combining garments. Our dream is to own someday a house the size of Noah's ark capable of taking in aaaaall our loves, the guests, Isabel and her seven dwarves, the Guinea pig Müsli and Tania's dog Puchi, and the friends they could know in the next future. It would also have spaces for painting, ceramics, sculpture, decorations, sewing, jewelry and inventions not yet invented workshops

To celebrate my mother's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, we board a time machine and we go to have lunch at the small town of central Switzerland where I lived the first years of my life. With my brother Daniel we do on foot the streets from the small school where he and Olivia used to go, to the house where we lived, and everywhere memories and laughs emerge. Daniel savors the remembrance of military cookies that we were offered by the soldiers stationed at the school gym. Olivia celebrates the victory of her proletarian troop—the children of the building—over the rich of the top villas, in the memorable lipsticks battle. The lady head of the defeated bourgeois still lives in the same house! My mom sees Olivia shaking her little brother as mat full of dust to make him come down from the swing. I smell the perfume of the dry grass coiled round the bird nests, in which the chicks we cheeped so that mother bird brought us worms. In front of the Apotheke (the pharmacy) I recall the beautiful sewing-machine-shaped little sharpeners that the owner used to give us because sometimes my Mom worked there in the afternoons. But then Olivia and Daniel have retrospective goose bumps: at the time of the vaccination campaigns, children waited their turn outside and heard terrified the screams of the victim who was being injected. We climb the hill behind the house up to the forest, point of arrival of the Sunday promenade, where my brother almost poisons himself to death by eating very acid clovers and thus he had to be urgently taken to the hospital. And on that same path into the forest, my mom remembers herself under the Moon, wrapped in a cloud of snow, participating in a crazy sleds-race organized by the company where dad was a researcher. Perhaps they had left us already asleep at home, in the care of a benevolent neighbor.

All in all, we were two hours away from Geneva and half a century of today, happy to be together, gathered at the starting point, where our history had begun. And of course, we felt that dad was with us.

Then we call a taxi to go to the railroad station and a Toyota Camry arrives to pick us, one just

like the one my dad used to have. Among all the possible brands, it was precisely that one which appeared to take us to the station...

There's no doubt that magic works anywhere, any moment.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> According to Dr. Alfonso Caso, the word Mexico derives from the *nahuatl* words *metzli* (Moon), *xictli* (center, navel) and *co* (place), and it means being in the center or navel of the Moon.

<sup>2</sup> “San Francisco” song by Maxime Leforestie

C’était une maison bleue adossée à la colline / On y vient à pied, on ne frappe pas / Ceux qui vivent là, ont jeté la clé / On se retrouve ensemble / Après des années de route.

It was a blue house leaning against the hill / One arrives on foot, one doesn’t knock / Those who live there threw the key. / We meet again / After years of travelling.

<sup>3</sup> blondy

<sup>4</sup> whites, blonds

<sup>5</sup> American

<sup>6</sup> Mexican-American

<sup>7</sup> Main plaza of Mexico City commonly known with that name.

<sup>8</sup> The ‘nada’ part of the word Ensenada means ‘nothing’.

<sup>9</sup> Property occupied illegally.

<sup>10</sup> Traffic cop called ‘tamarind’ due to the brown color of his uniform.

<sup>11</sup> Initials of the National Polytechnic Institute

<sup>12</sup> Initials of the National School of Anthropology and History

<sup>13</sup> Initials of the National Institute of Anthropology and History

<sup>14</sup> Broth prepared with maize, chopped pork and/or chicken, laurel, bay and thyme, and accompanied with oregano, chopped up onion and lettuce.

<sup>15</sup> Mexican diminutive for Frances.

<sup>16</sup> National Autonomous University of Mexico initials

<sup>17</sup> At the time, government-owned Mexico’s telephone monopoly.

<sup>18</sup> Short for Secretaría de Gobernación, Mexican equivalent to a Ministry of the Interior.

<sup>19</sup> Social Security Mexican Institute initials.

<sup>20</sup> Traditional alcoholic drink from Mexico, brewed from the juice of the agave plant or maguey.

<sup>21</sup> Literally: a small alms for my little skull.

<sup>22</sup> Shortened name of the now extinct government buying and selling organization for subsidized food, clothes and furniture.

<sup>23</sup> Camel, in English.

<sup>24</sup> National System for the Integral Development of the Family shortened initials.

<sup>25</sup> The Colegio de Mexico, or ColMex, is a university level public institution dedicated to research and higher education

<sup>26</sup> Fondo de Cultura Económica (public publishing house) initials

<sup>27</sup> Alcoholic beverage made from the fermented sap of the maguey (agave) plant, traditional to central Mexico where it has been produced for millennia.

<sup>28</sup> Beltway surrounding the Federal District.

<sup>29</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs

<sup>30</sup> Literally, ‘snouts’.

<sup>31</sup> Little girl, character of a comic strip, and famous for her clever statements on family, social and political issues.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Creaking from cleanliness’ is a dishes cleaning product slogan.

<sup>33</sup> “Let me know if you have an idea regarding what I should do with the rest of my life”, was the last mail that Rachel Corrie, a 23 years old American pacifist, sent her father before being crushed twice by an Israelite bulldozer in the mud of Gaza, when, together with five other defenders of human rights, she was begging the Israelite soldiers not to demolish the house of a Palestine family. They didn’t do it in that moment, but would do afterwards: they destroyed her first.

<sup>34</sup> Interprofessional Union of Female and Male Workers

<sup>35</sup> Mexican candy bar made with amaranth seeds and honey.

<sup>36</sup> Drink prepared with water, brown sugar, corn dough and cocoa.

<sup>37</sup> Stew prepared basically with shred chicken, green tomatoes, onions and some hot pepper.

<sup>38</sup> Aztec goddess, symbol of the earth as both creator and destroyer, mother of gods and mortals.

<sup>39</sup> Pierre (Peter) in French means stone.