

ONE DAY OF LIFE

MANLIO ARGUETA

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH

BY BILL BROW

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ONE DAY OF LIFE

5:30 A.M.

Not a God-given day goes by when I'm not up by five. Already when the cock has crowed several times, I'm up. When the sky is still dark and is pierced only by the shriek of a bird, I'm alert.

The *clarinero* flies over our hut, saying clarinero-clarinero. I don't need anyone to wake me up; it's just that the *clarinero* is an early riser, loud and disturbing.

In any case, I alone decide when it's time to get up. I have a trick to be punctual: the cracks between the sticks that make up the wall. The sticks of my hut are of *tihuilote*; it's a tree that's common around here, and it gives big sticks. The only problem is that they're brittle, and you always have to keep replacing them. We like *tihuilote* because it doesn't attract termites. Termites eat wood, and before you know it, everything is ruined.

I peek at the night through the cracks in the wall.

After lying for so long in the same spot, we become attached to spaces, to a stain left by the dung of a bull, to a little figure on the straw roof. What I like most is to watch the sky as the night disappears. An everyday event. I can see the morning star through a little hole. I know it because it's so big. It flickers, on and off, on and off. At first I can't see it; then it arrives at the little hole as the stars and the moon and the sun walk across the sky.

When the big star gets to the little hole (I know exactly where it is), it's four in the morning, and by then I'm awake but I don't get up; I lie there pretending to be asleep, snuggling up to José if it's cold or lying with my backside to him if it's hot. And through the cracks in the wall I can see the pictures of the sky: the scorpion, the plow, Santa Lucía's eyes and all the others.

The bird that flies overhead is the *clarinero*; I know it because it heralds itself: *clarinero-clarinero*. And as dawn approaches you can see the ever-changing colors of its feathers.

The *clarinero* glows.

They say it behaves like the dead because it spends so much time near cemeteries.

I like to watch it flying and singing. Dawn is nothing but a flock of birds: among them the *clarinero* is supreme because of its chilling blackness.

The sky turns the color of the blood of a dead bird.

Where the hill begins to rise, the dawn's first rays appear. The color of a firebrand in the night. A burst of sparks that makes me say: How beautiful! As beautiful as the Virgin's mantle. Then the sky becomes as clear as well

water at high noon. Little bits of colored glass. Chips from a broken bottle. And clouds floating under water. Clouds are the blankets of God. The sky is a Guatemalan weave of many colors. This is part of life. This is something I remember from when I was little, maybe eight or ten, I don't remember. That's when I met José. The sticks of the hut's walls have changed, but not the spaces, the cracks in the wall. Nor has the morning star that peeks in as it goes by. Nor have I.

Doña Rubenia, Lupe is already getting pretty on you. And from behind the cupboard I looked at my breasts, which stuck out like the beaks of *clarineros*. He knew me when I was just an innocent little girl. *Say good morning to Don José; don't be silly, go on. Has the cat got your tongue?* Ever since then, when I wake up, I'm already thinking about José, as I stare at the darkness that frightens me. And I feel so happy at dawn—it is as if the leaves of the trees were aflame. I'm very happy; it's true, I've never been sad. But please don't talk to me about the darkness and the night because they make me piss on myself. *I've been thinking: if you give me Lupe you won't have to worry; she can help me, I'm tired of being alone.* And I got embarrassed as I was entering and heard "Give me Lupe." *Girl, get out; can't you see that grownups are talking?* I ran into the passageway, but I could still hear a few words. *I know she's still a kid but that's exactly why I like her, because at her age she's nice and proper and I'm going to be worthy of her.*

My eyes contain reflections of the Guatemalan weave. If I look to the sky, my eyes become full of sparks, like lights that shoot from the feathers of roosters. Skyscapes of

bloody wounds. Skyscapes of bloody wounds. A wound is a wound.

I begin to tremble—it's the coldness of the night that refuses to die. The memory of Justino, perhaps.

It's the same coldness of *tamarindo* leaves, trembling, dewy. One knows when it's the coldness of death; it comes from another place, it comes with a certain fear, or as if one were no longer of this world. Teeth chatter, click-click-click, goose bumps, chills, hair standing on end. The never-ending shakes.

Holy Mother of Jesus, conceived without sin.

That's the only way to regain courage and endure—well, we're not going to keep trembling out of cowardice. Back then you used to wake up first. You would get up and go to the mango tree to piss, and I would hear the sound of the machete as you unsheathed it and wiped the blade with the palm of your hand moist with spit. Perhaps it was my family's influence that made me somewhat cowardly, because I was raised only with brothers and they were always scaring me: controlling me, looking after me, and telling me to be careful, not to go that way, not to walk in the dark; you know all the pampering you get if you're a girl (and even more if you're the only girl). I couldn't even look at caterpillars. Just the thought of seeing one scared me, those with tiny horns on their heads and little green tufts; I wouldn't even look at banana plants at night. *Siguanabas* and *Cipitios* are painted on the banana leaves. Dawn is a very happy time for me because I like light so much, and I like it even more when the sun rises out of the bush at six in the morning; light rises like a kite over the mountains.

Good morning.

With the Lord I go to sleep, with the Lord I awake to the blessings of God and the Holy Spirit.

I put on my semi-mournful skirt; this is how I've dressed ever since my mother died. I especially like the kind with little flowers and dots against a white background—any design so long as it's black because that's what I promised my mother when she was dying. I have only three dresses, but semi-mournful clothes don't show up that much the filth of pigs that is splashed on you, especially around feeding time, when the pigs crowd in on you. You might not believe this, but pigs are the most gluttonous animals I know.

When I get up, I go straight to the well; I draw ten buckets of water—for bathing, for pig feed and corn, and to water some plants in the yard. Chepe and Justino planted them.

We were lucky to find water almost at the surface of the earth; we're the only ones around here who have a well. Most people have to go to the river or the brook—they prefer not to spend money for digging a well. We wouldn't have had one had José not found the water. He noticed how that little patch of earth was always wet, with the lemon-grass tree green year round.

Lupe, there's water here, I know what I'm talking about. I thought his discovery was pointless since we couldn't afford a well digger.

Here in Chalate it isn't necessary to have water in the house, since there's so much river water, and if you don't want to go to the river you can go to the brook. So you won't have to worry about going so far to fetch water. One

has to walk more than half a mile to reach the river. The brook is closer but sometimes it is dirty, especially when it rains a lot and there's the danger of flash floods. *You know what you need to do to pay a well digger.* But José dug the well himself. The water was right on top; that's why the lemon tree stayed green. *The pigs will love it, José, because they'll have enough water so they won't die in the summer heat.*

And as far as water is concerned, another thing I always have is lard soap. The soap is sacred like corn: not only does it kill lice and eliminate dandruff, but it keeps hair soft as silk and you wear out fewer combs because they go through the hair easier. *On Sunday I'll help you bring water from the brook.* And we used to pour it into a big earthenware jar which we had buried near the fireplace. Now I'm the one who draws water from the well; it's simple because the water comes up with only four tugs of the rope. You don't have to kill yourself to get ten bucketfuls.

This is man's work, he'd say when I returned from the river with the water jug on my back. That's why we're so lucky to find water so easily. *And you were the one who didn't want to dig a well.* It wasn't that I didn't want to.

Suddenly the *clarinero* bird flies overhead, making *cuio-cuio*. It describes a black line in the golden sky, because it's almost five-thirty, and that's when the stars in the firmament all say goodbye, and only the roundest and largest ones remain.

I always cross myself in the presence of the morning star. With the Lord I go to sleep, with the Lord I awake. You do it by habit. I don't know why, but when sunlight begins to fade, I start to get anxious; it just takes hold of

me, all of a sudden, this sense of desperation. Maybe it's the magnetism of the day gathering force like a stream of red water.

Hurry up with the coffee, 'cause already it's getting late.

The chickens have already jumped down from their perch and are begging for corn. They come close and begin to pick at the ground, eating pebbles and bits of eggshell.

The chicks puff up their craws. It's a cacophony in the dawn with its rosy sky.

Inside, the children jump out of bed calling, "Mama, Mama." And everyone remembering you because at this hour you are waking them up with a few swats on their rear ends.

Then they're up and about, with machetes, ready to go to the coffee plantation.

"Hurry up—the chickens are already jumping down from their perch," goes a peasant song. "We're going, Mama." And they put on the pretty hats José gave them for Christmas.

Coffee and hot salted tortillas for breakfast.

This is our life; we don't know any other. That's why they say we're happy. I don't know. In any event, that word "happy" doesn't say anything to me. I don't even know what it really means. After what happened to my son Justino, I prefer to stay closed up inside myself. It's not that I get sad. It's something I can't explain.

Sometimes we have a good time, that's true. There's no reason for my people to suffer my pain with me, though we've always known how to share equally the good and the bad.

I go from plant to plant, watering the little chili peppers,

watering the lime tree and some seedlings of *guisquil* and *pipian* and a *zapote* tree that sprouted on its own. Next I prepare mash for the pigs, which from the moment they get up won't leave me alone, following me and banging into my shins. I throw a few kicks their way so they'll let me prepare their food in peace. *You know, Lupe, these pigs are a lot of grief and the money we get for them doesn't even cover their feed.* The pigs have been our savings for gifts for the children at Christmas. That's why I always keep a little herd, so even though they're a lot of work, we always make a little something selling them to Don Sebastián, who makes tamales. And as they stomp around they dig holes everywhere and leave the patio full of turds and *nigua* bugs. *But, Lupe, you keep being stubborn as ever.* And I won't even tell you how they get in the house to see how much damage they can do. These pigs sure are enough to drive you crazy, but they're our only little hope for when the children ask for something that we can't deny them—at least once a year one has to buy them a new shirt or pants for a special occasion. Everyone wears new clothes at Christmas and the children expect to get something from baby Jesus. *Leave that to me. I'm the one who's supposed to provide for them, and even if I have to struggle, I'll get them something, be it only one of those clay whistles you buy for kids.* The only toys we buy for them are whistles—they're cheap and the kids have a lot of fun with them. They go around blowing them all the blessed day, tweet-tweet.

If you think the pigs are good for something, then that's up to you. It is my business. In November I'll sell them at a good price.

Part of the money is for sweets and the rest is for notebooks, pencils and textbooks for those going to school. I buy a change of clothes for the older ones so they can get dressed up on Sundays like real people; they aren't babies anymore and I can't have them walking around in rags, especially because now they're earning a few cents and they give me all their money.

Once the pigs have eaten their corn mash, they go to the mudhole near the well and begin to grunt. But that's in the afternoon, because in the morning all you have to do is throw them an ear of corn once in a while and they'll be satisfied.

Sometimes, at high noon, I'll go shopping at the Detour: for salt, coffee or some treat like canned coconut or preserves, which the kids like, especially when they return in the afternoon tired from doing chores at the farm.

The only thing we don't need to buy is corn, because we grow enough for a year and have even a few pounds left over to sell to the neighbors.

The Detour is a half a kilometer from our place. Don Sebastián's store is there; he gives us credit, and his prices aren't high compared to those in town. Once a month José goes to town to buy those few little necessities that Don Sebastián doesn't sell—lime for cooking corn, some kind of medicine for stomachaches or whatever is necessary or is better to buy there. Before leaving I will have put the beans on the fire and drawn more water from the well for use during the rest of the day.

I do all this while the youngest children are at school and the older ones are at work with their father in the fields. The kind of work available at this time of the summer is

preparing the ground for sowing, because the rainy season is approaching. Before, the fields were not cleared with machetes—it was enough to set fire to them. But then some people from the city came and said that it was better to clear the fields by hand because fire ruined the lands, and now even though it's more expensive, the owners prefer that the thickets and weeds be destroyed only with machetes. It's better for us, too—we get a little more income. By this time of the year all harvesting is over and the only work that one can find is clearing the fields. And it works out well since the coffee plantation is only a few miles away and the owner pays well, José has told me. I would like all our children to learn to read so that they won't have to live as hired hands and suffer as much as we have. Especially since we don't have anything else to give them to do in the off-season, when we earn hardly enough for beans or maybe a shirt for Holy Week. The children are our only hope—at least they may give us a hand in our old age. When you're old, you're a bother and don't have enough strength to work. There's nothing to do but die. If you have children, they'll always turn out good and somehow manage to help the old folks.

I agree that we should sacrifice and send the little ones to school, so they won't be ignorant and so no one will cheat them. The truth is we can barely scrawl our signatures on our IDs so as not to appear illiterate. Do you know how to read? Yes. To write? Yes. But we only know how to read letter by letter and perhaps not even that well, because it's been years since I've seen a printed page, and the letters I see are on signs or labels in the store at the Detour that I know by heart, though every now and then I glance

at the numbers and doodles traced by the children when they're doing their homework. As for José, I doubt if he even knows what the vowels are. I haven't asked him if he's forgotten how to read. He doesn't need it. Only his machete and his friends. That's his life.

My parents could send me only to the first grade. Not because they didn't want to but because we were so many at home and I was the only girl, in charge of grinding corn and cooking it and then taking tortillas to my brothers in the cornfields.

My brothers used to kill themselves chopping and hoeing. My father, too.

My mother and I would take care of the house. All together there were fourteen of us—I and my folks and eleven brothers—even after three children had died. They died of dehydration. I remember how my father held the last one by his feet so that blood would run to his head, but nothing happened. He died with his head caved in. All their heads sunk in after serious bouts of diarrhea; once diarrhea begins there's no salvation. They all died before their first birthday.

Children die of dehydration only when they're very little, since their bones are very soft, and if you're not careful, they get diarrhea and the forehead sinks in.

Children go to heaven. That's what the priest used to say. And we never worried. We always believed that.

Our only concern was that they might die suddenly, without having been baptized. Then it would really be bad because children have original sin. If they die with original sin, they go directly to purgatory. Purgatory is not a place where one suffers much, but it's still a site of punishment;

there are always flames even though they don't burn much.

That's what the priests told us when they came on their missions. So as soon as we see children with a little diarrhea, we rush to have some holy water sprinkled on them. And look for their godfather.

5:45 A. M.

One day I was going to throw a stone at a frog. It was then that I first heard the voice of conscience.

I raised my hand. I had just turned twelve. I remember the time because I had become a woman—I got my first period.

I was about to throw the stone, when I heard the voice of conscience, a voice that told me not to throw the stone at the frog. "What is the poor thing doing to you?"

I was petrified. That's how I became aware of that voice that comes from within. The voice is not ours. I felt a little afraid. And I associated the voice with punishment.

"Don't you see it's a sin?" it said. The stone fell behind me, almost hitting me on the neck, and went down my dress. Hearing the voice, I stood with my hand raised, holding the stone, and I had to let it go as my fingers were loosening their grip.

That voice lives within us. It talks to us even in our sleep. It always watches over us.

That's why when we're asleep, we sob, sob in the most genuine of ways.

The voice of conscience is a dream. Put better, it's not a dream; it only resembles one. In dreams we see things through rose-colored glasses, but the voice of conscience is severe, absolutely unpleasant. It is a voice for scolding: don't do that—do this. Don't do it because it's a sin. The loss of freedom, then.

And when the stone fell behind me, the frog took off hopping, jumping, splash—into a green puddle of water. His great leap frightened me.

"If you stone the frog," the voice of conscience told me, "he will squirt milk on you, and your skin will dry up. Your skin will become like the frog's, wrinkled and ugly." Well, the voice of conscience does us favors, but they're favors that no one asked for.

One good thing that happened to me with the voice of conscience was when it took the form of the *Cadejos*. I was coming from the Detour, having bought some rolls of twine. And because I'd stopped to talk, I was late and darkness fell. We had to restring the bed because the cords had broken. "Go buy them, you, I'm too tired." That's what José told me. "You'll have to hurry before it gets too late." And I grabbed my shawl and ran off to the Detour. "Oh, Don Sebas, night has caught up with me today." And to make matters worse, there wasn't any twine in the store. "Lupe, wait. Take this candle and return it to me tomorrow. Don't be silly and break a leg in the dark."

And I asked him how many candles he had, and whether he'd be left without light. "It doesn't matter. We're going

to bed anyway." "Ay, Don Sebas, you're like a mother hen." I said thanks and took off. "In any event, the candle will only go out."

It would have been better had I left earlier, but I struck up a conversation with Don Sebas's wife, and it got real late. "Okay, don't take the candle if you don't want to, but don't go around saying that I was stingy with light." And I started to run. "See you later, Niña Concha." "God be with you," she yelled when I'd reached the road.

I thought there wouldn't be any problem once I got used to the darkness. "Hope a devil doesn't jump out at you," Niña Concha yells at me. "Devils come out when it's light or dark," I manage to yell back.

And because I'm thinking about being afraid, my knees began to knock.

I walk on the rabbit-foot grass, stepping on the soft grass so as not to fall into a hole; where there's rabbit grass, there are no holes.

And all of a sudden I see a big animal standing before me. And the big animal tells me not to walk on the grass. I recognized in his voice the voice of conscience. But I thought it was the *Cadejos*, by its fragrance of orange blossoms, because the *Cadejos* likes to lie beneath orange trees and the fragrance clings to it. "Well, what does this dog want?" I said to embolden myself. I knew it wasn't a dog. And I wasn't a bit afraid. Well, it was the Good *Cadejos* because instead of scaring people he gives them a kind of confidence. They say that when the Bad *Cadejos* comes out, he makes you feel like pissing, by just looking at you, never mind about talking.

"Move over," he said.

And I moved over, away from the little path of rabbit

grass. And then he disappeared. After taking only a few steps along the dirt road I felt the first strike of the rattlesnake. Luckily I got out of the way in time and it couldn't get me. I heard it rattling near me. "I've got to get away," I said, and ran like mad. It wanted to come at me again, but I heard only its noise because I was far away. "Fucking snake," I said.

The voice of conscience saved me from the rattlesnake. What's more, that voice illuminated my way. Because it knows everything. That's why I say the voice of conscience belongs to one and doesn't belong to one. It comes from only God knows where.

6 A. M.

We're from Chalatenango. From the outskirts of Chalate, a place about ten blocks from town. That's why we call it the Kilometer. The people here like to sing. And laugh over nothing. Almost all of us are poor but we don't consider it a disgrace. Nor something to be proud of. It never mattered to us because for many years life has been the same. No major changes. We all know each other and treat each other as equals. Someone who owns a cart is considered the equal of someone who owns nothing more than a machete.

José plays his guitar and sings *rancheras*, popular political songs that are enough to drive you crazy, or love songs; "Look how I yearn for your love" is his favorite. Or maybe he knows that one best.

We like the *rancheras* because they have pretty lyrics that everyone can understand. It's only been a little while since another kind of song; it was when the boys arrived

at church, accompanying the priest. They sang so-called protest songs.

Yes, but lately everything has changed.

Once upon a time the priests would come and hold Mass in the Detour's chapel, giving us hope: "Hang on just a little longer." They'd tell us not to worry, that heaven was ours, that on earth we should live humbly but that in the kingdom of heaven we would be happy. That we shouldn't care about worldly things. And when we'd tell the priests that our children were dying from worms, they'd recommend resignation or claim we hadn't given them their yearly purge. But despite any purges we gave them, they'd die. So many worms eat the children from within and have to be expelled through their noses and mouths. The priest would tell us to be patient, to say our prayers and to bring our little offerings, when we took our children to him, when we brought the skeletons with eyes. One of my children died on me that way—from dehydration and from being eaten up by worms. Fortunately, we lost only one to that disease.

—Well, what's the matter with your baby?

—Ay, look dear Father. All of a sudden he began to poopoo water and more water.

—Maybe the milk you gave him was bad.

—No, Father, he never drinks milk.

—Well?

—It's worms, Father.

—You need quickly to give him a purge and then feed him properly. What are you giving him to eat?

—During the day he has a little drink made from corn flour, and at night sugar water.

—And how old is your baby, Lupe?

—Nine months old already, Father.

—You ought to at least give him cheese; if you don't have milk, cheese is a good substitute.

—In the store at the Detour you can buy some milk, which is the same thing, but we can't afford such luxuries. Besides, José's boss has told him, and we know so already, that milk gives children bellyaches and that it isn't good to get them used to drinking milk or eating meat.

—Did the landowner tell you that?

—Yes, and it's something everyone knows.

—Well, what is there to do? May God's will be done.

—It would be good of you to sprinkle him with holy water, Father.

—But, my dear child, you forgot to bring his godfather.

—Tomorrow there'll be plenty of time to find him, Father.

I thought you could recommend some medicine; you see, I would have wanted to give him a purge made from the *altamiza* plant, but I'd have to go to the gully for it and José isn't here.

—My dear child, I'd go get the *altamiza* for you, but I know it isn't going to cure him. In cases like this only worm medicine helps.

—And where can we get the medicine, Father?

—That's your business, my child. But why don't you bring his godfather tomorrow and we'll baptize the baby, just in case . . .

And the priest would tell me to keep the faith, and that if the child were not saved, it would be because of someone's carelessness. Faith in the Church cannot be lost. And

that Christ had died this way, and that the priest would sprinkle holy water on him so that he'd go straight to heaven without having to pass through purgatory.

We couldn't do anything, only accept; it was God's will. Sometimes we didn't even cry over our children because we convinced ourselves that death was a prize God had given them. It was better to die than to suffer in this vale of tears.

Well, the priest had so enthralled us that even our hearts were turning to stone. I didn't even cry for my son when he died, because death had become so natural that we thanked God for taking him away—persuaded by what the priest who'd come every two weeks to our part of Chalate would say to comfort us.

- It's a good thing you brought it because this child is very ill.
- Yes, Father, please sprinkle water on him.
- Of course, that's why we're here—to save the souls of sinners. You should have brought him sooner. The child is more dead than alive; you've delayed a great deal in bringing him. Imagine if he'd died on the way.
- It's because two weeks ago when you were last here, he was well and healthy, and I never thought he'd be sick so suddenly.
- Still, you people always leave everything until the last minute.
- I even had his godfather ready, Father.
- Well, wait over there. I'll take care of you in a minute, after I say Mass. The child will last for a little while longer.
- Thank you, Father.

Then all of a sudden the priests began to change. They

started getting us into cooperatives. To help each other, to share profits. It's wonderful to help someone, to live in peace with everyone, to get to know each other, to wake up before sunrise and go to work with the children, herding pigs and selling eggs for a good price. We'd take the eggs to town instead of to Don Sebas' store because he pays next to nothing; he never fails to be a skinflint in this regard. Everything around here was getting better. They also changed the sermons and stopped saying Mass in a jargon that nobody understood; we no longer had to hear about *Dominus obispos*, which we used to make fun of, saying "*Dominus obispu*, I'll kick the ass in you." Now Mass is a serious affair, ever since the priests began to open our eyes and ears. One of them would always repeat to us: "To get to heaven, first we must struggle to create a paradise on earth." We began to understand that it was better this way. And we would ask them why the priests before them forced us to conform. "Forget the previous ones," these younger priests would say.

What's important is that our children don't die. To let a child die is the worst sin one can commit. At the first sign of illness we'd look for the priest; they used to be in Chalate more often. We started being less afraid of priests. Previously they used to instill fear in us; we believed they were like magicians who could annihilate us with the simplest gesture. Besides, we didn't trust them. They would speak in hoarse voices, as if from other worlds or from the profundities of God. It seemed as if they walked on air, from here to there, in their long black robes. They'd ask us for a few pounds of corn and some chickens. We couldn't say no because we considered it a sin to deny anything to a priest of the Church.

- Father, I'm fattening a nice little hen for you to have during Holy Week, if it pleases you.
- Thanks, Lupe, though it's better not to offer anything until you have it.
- I'm telling you so that you can start making preparations.
- No, no, that's not the way to do it; either bring me the chicken next time or forget the whole thing. Don't you know that Holy Week is four months away?
- Then I'll bring you a little pig for Christmas.
- Look, woman, what am I going to do with a pig if I can't keep it at the parish? The chicken is fine because you can give it to me all seasoned.
- Well, Father, I'll bring you the meat of the pig ready to roast.
- That's more like it, that's something else. But don't deprive yourself of meat by giving it to me.
- No, father. I'll keep the feet and the head and the intestines and the blood to make sausage.
- It's up to you, my dear; you are not obliged to give me anything.
- Of course, Father, the pleasure is ours.
- Tell José to feed the pigs generously so they'll flesh out a bit, because Christmas is only three weeks away.
- The presence of a priest, with all his seeming saintliness, produced nothing but fear and suspicion in us. They were meaner than a rattlesnake (and may God keep you from provoking their wrath or hatred), they'd smoothly retaliate by threatening you with hell. Of course, when they wanted to be nice, they were nice.
- Look, Lupe, tell José if he doesn't come to Mass, not to come around later for absolution.
- He's working.

- On Sunday?
- Yes, Father. Since the picking season has begun, he wants to take advantage of every minute, now that there's work.
- Then he's not at home?
- No, Father. He went down to Santa Tecla and he returns every two weeks.
- And you stay by yourselves?
- Yes, except in January, when the kids can help pick coffee that has fallen to the ground. I go, too. It's a chance to earn a few cents more.
- Well, Lupe, give this candy to the kids, but don't let them eat all at once; give them one at a time. That way maybe they'll last until Christmas.
- Thanks so much, Father.
- And don't forget to bring Chepe. Tell him to come to Mass, to stop being such a freethinker.
- Yes, Father.

After a congress was held I don't know where, as we were told by the young priests who began coming to Chalate and who visited our own house, religion was no longer the same. The priests arrived in work pants and we saw that, like us, they were people of flesh and blood—only better dressed and their voices were normal and they didn't go around asking for chickens, but on the contrary they would give us little keepsakes from the city—here's something for your little boy—when they came to our place.

They'd descend to the Kilometer and would come to see how we were living. The previous priests never got as far as where we lived—they took care of everything in the chapel; they'd get out of their jeeps there—and then after Mass they'd get back into them and disappear in the dust from the road.

To be sure, these new, friendly priests also traveled in jeeps, but they would come to the Detour and visit us: how are you doing? How many children do you have? How much are you earning? And we didn't understand their way of talking, the words they used. They even formed the first cooperatives and we made a little profit. They taught us to manage money and how to get a good price for our eggs, chickens or pigs.

We used to know how to do that—we weren't dumb; but since we never had any surplus, we had no money to manage. The only money we ever saw went right past us; no sooner had we earned a few cents than they were spent on aspirin, rubbing alcohol for cholic, bismuth compound for diarrhea, medicinal powders for *maldeorin*—those kinds of things. Now at the end of the year we have something left over for toys: a car, a plastic ball or marbles. In sum, what could I tell them. "This is so they won't go around slack-jawed, Lupe, when the other children get real toys. It isn't throwing money away to buy them those luxuries. On the contrary, they will divert themselves and won't wander off, running the risk of being bitten by snakes."

Well, back then something happened that had never happened before: the Guard started appearing in our neighborhood, and when we saw them we'd spread the word and have to watch out, because the Guard is very strict; you can't walk around, for example, with a machete strapped to your wrist because for sure you'd get an ass-whipping or would be fined more than any poor person could ever pay.

The Guard would say that it wasn't necessary to carry machetes around all the time; but since men are accustomed not to part with their machetes, it's hard to convince them

that when they're not working it's unnecessary to carry them. They feel abandoned without their machetes; it's a necessary companion. The thing is, sometimes there are mishaps, especially on Sundays when they drink too much rum. That's why the Guard is so severe and doesn't fool around when it comes to taking a machete away from even the toughest guy with a few good kicks in the ass. "If you walk around with your machete tied to your wrist, we're going to chop off your hand." And they mean business. Well, that's one thing about the Guard: they always keep their word. Whoever messes with them knows what he's in for; the Guard has always maintained law and order, by beating up or shooting those who don't obey the law. Rarely has the Guard killed anyone around here, even though whenever someone turns up dead one knows it could have been the Guard. Besides, the people around here have always been peaceful; they're not troublemakers, they're not even heavy drinkers. Sure, they relax with a few drinks, but they don't go crazy. Even Chepe himself has a couple of drinks from time to time, but he knows he can't spend money because we've got so many mouths to feed. I haven't had any trouble with him that way.

—Where are you going with that machete, Chepe?

—To cut firewood . . .

—Be careful and don't let the Guard see you.

—It doesn't look as if they're coming this way today . . .

—Don't let them see you, because today is Sunday.

—They won't see me, Lupe. I've given them the slip several times already, because I can smell them coming from a mile away.

—Don't forget, there's a first time for everything.

And they began telling us that the priests had made us

insolent, had filled our heads with strange ideas. And now it wasn't enough for them to ask to see our identification if we were carrying a machete: they wanted to know if we were going to Mass. What did the priests tell us at Mass? And at first we didn't understand anything. For what reason should we recount every detail? Guardsmen could go to Mass and find out for themselves with their own ears.

It was only to frighten us so that we'd back away from the Church. "Yes, we're going to Mass and you should see how good this priest is, Officer, he isn't like the others." And were those sons of bitches here and those sons of bitches there, faggots in robes, giving us religious instruction for the purpose of disobeying them? And they'd point the barrels of their guns at us, and we'd better stay away from the chapel, and even on Sunday when we were going to the Detour, they were hiding in the undergrowth and would suddenly jump out and ask for our personal documents and where we were walking to, and whether we were going to hear Mass. To go see the priests, these sons of bitches wear fancy clothes, even white shirts; for that they have money but not to feed their kids. We wouldn't pay them any mind. We knew them all too well: they get angry, but if we remain quiet they don't do anything more than insult us. Just to frighten us away from the chapel. And then they go around saying that the landowners don't pay them well. And would there be any Communist singers at church this Sunday. And we who knew nothing. We went because we were practicing Roman Catholics. The truth is that Chepe and I weren't very devout, but it was a pretty place to go on Sunday and we liked what the priest would say—we felt we were learning something. "I think these assholes from around here are homosexual. I wonder how many whores

the priest has screwed. Maybe because he's such an exotic and gallant type, they've fallen in love with him." And words to this effect, while the men take documents out of their shirt pockets to prove that they live around here. "Or perhaps you've all seen the priest take a piss." Guffaws, even though at heart they were furious. When a guardsman laughs at you, you'd better be ready to get kicked in the ass. We'd be real quiet, obedient and quick to show them our papers. And no one could afford not to have papers, God forbid! It's enough to make you want to bust up these pussy cowards. Their hatred of the priests they'd take out on us. They wouldn't dare touch a priest because deep down they were afraid of them. Like us, the guardsmen have been Catholics, and almost all of them are peasants; what happens is that they've gotten education and we haven't. They've had schooling, you know, because to be a guardsman requires training. What makes them haughty and strong is that they've studied to be authorities so that the law will be obeyed. The law has always been hard. They say that only by being that way can they force you to obey the law; there are people who won't be good otherwise. We're only interested in being bad, they say. I don't know, I've never done anything bad to anyone, not to José or to my children. Evil appears suddenly. Where it's least expected. They defend private property—that principle is sacred—because it is possible for our hands to be stained with blood; but to appropriate what isn't ours, that's out of the question. We're as pure as the driven snow. So things are put.

The guardsmen were afraid of the priests because they wouldn't stay quiet: they scolded them. Why did they go around doing mean things along the roads? They weren't

getting paid to give people a hard time. It went in one ear and out the other. A few days later they'd be up to their old tricks again, treating people badly. One day they dared the worst. Something that made us feel like dying: the priest was found half dead on the road to the Kilometer. They had disfigured his face, had brutalized him all over. Someone was passing that way and saw a naked man moaning in a ditch. They'd stuck a stick up his anus and it was there still. The priest's voice could barely be heard. A little farther up the road, his robe was hanging all ripped. When they came to tell us, we all went together. Right there we lifted him on to the road to wait for a vehicle that would take him. And there I realized we had become hardened, because no one grieved or cried—only "poor thing" said within and in anguish because he was a priest; something had happened that we had never imagined. It was a nightmare. We realized that saints could descend from heaven. After that, nothing shocked us; all that remained was for it to rain fire and for cats to chase dogs. They found the priest's jeep farther up the road, burned, in another ditch. As if it had ignited itself. That's all we needed in this life. From that moment on, any sin was going to seem petty.

6:10 A.M.

We had never gotten anything from the Church. Only given. Little things, it's true. It simply taught us resignation. But we never came to think that priests were responsible for our situation. If one of our children died, we would assume the priest would save him in the other life. Most likely our dead children are in heaven. At least we were consoled.

Always chubby and rosy-cheeked.

We didn't wonder whether they were happy. Life on the outside didn't matter to us. Nor did the life of a priest.

If they offered heaven to our children, we didn't think they were fooling us.

And when they changed, we also began to change. It was nicer that way. Knowing that something called rights existed. The right to health care, to food and to schooling for our children.

If it hadn't been for the priests, we wouldn't have found out about those things that are in our interest. They opened

our eyes, nothing more. Later we were on our own. We had to rely on our own resources.

We learned to look out for ourselves. The young priest who had been wounded in the anus didn't come back. Later we learned that he'd gone abroad because he had received threats on his life. For us things were good; for others they were bad. Especially for the landowners, who are the ones who suffered most when we demanded our rights. They spend more and earn less.

Besides, once we learned about the existence of rights we also learned not to bow our heads when the bosses scolds us.

We learned to look them in the face.

We grew a little in stature, because when you bow your head you become smaller and if you raise your head high your spirit also rises. Months passed and new young priests came and said the same things. Our eyes were opened even more. And José, who had once been pious, easily became friends with the priests. "We've got to join cooperatives, they'll help us out." One's hopes are green, but sometimes they mature. And how are we going to join if we don't have anything? And he would say, even if it has to be with the pigs. We have to be better about raising chickens, every egg laid must be hatched, and forget about eating the little pigs, let them grow. That's how we came to have four dozen chickens and more eggs to sell to the cooperative.

Sometimes people would come from the city to sing at the church, songs about poverty. Learning that the truth is something else. We were deceived. One should be good. Kindness should not be confused with submission.

And thinking about the young priest who had almost been killed.

If they do that to priests, without any regard for the

Church, what would they do to us? It was better not to go out after quitting time, especially to the Detour, because it was so far away and because guardsmen hung around there until after seven o'clock at night, when the last bus left for Chalatenango.

And forget about having a few drinks after hours. You know how José liked to have his little taste of rum, and the poor man used to suffer from not being able to chat a while with his friends at the Detour.

Business began to fall off for Don Sebastián since his clientele had diminished. Don Sebastián would send them home because it was time to close up shop.

For two whole weeks no guardsmen were seen at the Kilometer.

As if they knew what they'd done.

Later they were back again. At first they started around Don Sebastián. "Have any of those sons of bitches come to say Mass at the chapel?" Don Sebastián would string them along. He had no other choice. Even though his prices are high, he'll always side with the poor. Imagine, ever since what happened to Father Luna they've stayed away; there's the chapel, completely dirty, no one will even come close to it. Especially since they know that he was our neighbor and we're united. And since they didn't believe him. They would have wanted him to take the bait. "And you, who do you think fucked that Commie priest in the ass?" Don Sebastián goes behind the counter to throw away the bottle caps from the soda pop they'd bought from him. No one ever found out who did it. And the guardsmen pestering him, trying to trick him to see if he'd slip up. "Those who shoved the stick up the priest's ass must be pretty fiendish fellows." And he pretending to yawn, because he doesn't

have any more bottle caps to throw away behind the counter and he has to face their provocation head on. That's possible. Enjoying the ginger ale bubbles . . . "What's the matter, cat got your tongue?" He laughs because there's nothing else he can do. "I've had a toothache all morning." They invite him to have a beer and he tells them that he doesn't drink when he's on the job. If we invite you. "In such cases one has to play dumb," Don Sebastián told Chepe. "It's not on account of the expense, but as the owner of the store it's not in my interest to drink because there go all my profits; that's why even if they invite me, I won't accept. Of course, if I showed any signs of nervousness, they'd notice that I was putting them on, and that would be the end of Sebastián. With you I can have a little taste, but with those people I couldn't because they'd expect me to take them into my confidence."

José told me all of this soon thereafter. "Just imagine, Lupe, how far their cynicism goes."

"They abuse honorable people," I said to José.

And at another time, while visiting the store:

—I don't know whether Chepe told you.

—He said something.

—They say that communism is going around filling people's heads with ideas and that Father Luna was nothing but a Red.

—So one isn't suppose to even think.

—They say that what's bad are Communist ideas, mixing politics and religion.

—And what is that about, politics and communism, Don Sebastián?

—Saying that one ought to enjoy life on earth so as not to have the right to go to heaven.

"That's what the guardsmen resent most, Lupe, because in a subtle way the priests stick it to the landowners and they know the priests are the ones who encouraged the people to protest. The guardsmen maintain that the priests have been won over by the Red demon and that the blame lies with one of those Roman popes and that in time they poisoned him; otherwise all Catholics would be Communists." "Well," I said, "there once was a time when the priests only offered us heaven and it didn't matter to them that our children were dying or whether the medical clinic was good, or whether we even had one, it was all the same to them."

—And to think that previously the priests never left their houses on the plantation; they used to spend all their time there, and they only came out when it was time to give Mass.

—That's what I say, Lupe. I'm not defending the guardsmen. What's happening is that the priests have gone to the other extreme and don't want to have anything to do with the customs of the Church. They ought to be neutral; that way nothing would happen to them.

—It's just that Christianity says to do good deeds for the poor.

—And that's why the landowners have gotten on them. Nowadays they can't stand the sight of them—you see, the priests have betrayed those who have always treated them well.

—Don Sebastián, why are you taking the Guard's side?

—No, look, Lupe, I'm only telling you what they tell me when they come here to drink ginger ale. You know I'm friendly with them only because I have to be.

"I understand," I say. What I still don't understand is

why the guardsmen side with the rich. Ticha's son, for example, is a guardsman, and we all know the misery she undergoes to feed herself and the grandchildren that her daughters left her when they went to the capital to better themselves.

One understands these things, it's true; one knows. What's difficult is to know how to explain them. Don Sebastián also knows. Maybe even Ticha herself; the poor woman goes around in rags because, you see, everything she and her husband earn goes for beans and corn for all the kids. There are five grandchildren.

José also understands, and sometimes he knows how to explain things with words.

MARIA ROMELIA

Well, yes, I was one of those who went down to the Bank to get an answer concerning a cheaper price for insecticides and fertilizer, but the Bank was closed. We staged a little demonstration. Then someone yelled at us to run. And we ran, you'd better believe, we ran. Well, eight radio patrol cars were coming after us. They started shooting and they hit me—a bullet made a shallow wound in my left arm. Then we arrived at the place where the buses were parked, but they weren't there; the police had driven them away. And we didn't know our way around San Salvador. I was with my cousin Arturo; I stayed close to him because he is, or was, smart for a fifteen-year-old. And he told me that we should go to the nearby church, the San Jacinto church, I believe. But the police had already occupied the church in case we had any intentions of seeking refuge there. At that moment we saw a number 38 bus, and my cousin yelled: "Look, it says Chalate." And we ran toward the bus. By