

## A Day In The Life

By Manlio Argueta

Translated by Nora Pullen

5:30 a.m.

Not a day goes by when I'm not up at five in the morning. When the rooster has crowed a dozen times, I'm already on my way, when the sky is still dark and only interrupted by the birds chirping, I get up.

The *clarinero* flies over the hut, saying clarinero-clarinero. I don't need anybody to come and wake me up, the clarineros are just such early risers, shouters, and waker-uppers.

In any case, I figure out when to get up on my own.

I have a trick for being on time: the little holes between the poles that make up the wall. The poles of my hut are *tihuilote*, it's a tree that's all over the place around here that bears large fruit. The only thing is that they are quite brittle and have to be changed frequently. We like the *tihuilote* because it doesn't attract the ants. The ants eat the wood, totally demolish it, and they're hard to get rid of, you kill one here and tomorrow they're somewhere else; so they keep fucking up the poles of the walls until they're full.

Through the openings in the wall I can see the night.

After so much time sleeping in the same place, we fall in love with all the spaces, with the spot of bull shit, with a figure in the thatched roof. What I like most is watching the sky as the night is slipping away. An everyday thing. Through one little hole the morning star begins to

appear. I know it by its size. It goes dark and lights up, twinkling. At first I don't see it. Not until it gets to the little hole, as the stars travel through the sky like the sun and the moon.

And when the star gets to that hole that I know by heart it's already four in the morning, and I'm already awake, although I don't get up yet; I'm pretending not to notice it, facing Jose when it's cold and with my back to him when it's hot. And through the spaces in the wall I watch the drawings in the sky: the scorpion, the plow, the eyes of Santa Lucia, and everything else.

The clarinero flies by, I know because it betrays itself: clarinero-clarinero. Even more by its wings, iridescent in the light of the dawn.

The clarinero is a phosphorescent bird.

They say that by passing cemeteries all the time it has acquired the habits of the dead.

I like to see it flying and chirping. Every morning there are plenty of birds, but the clarinero stands out by its harsh black color.

The sky is the color of the blood of a dead bird. Daybreak hits the top of the hill and works its way down, the color of the embers on the end of a stick burning in the dark. Sparks that make you say, "How beautiful!" like it was the mantle of the virgin. And then it becomes clear, like puddle water in the noon light. Little stained glass windows. Bits of a broken bottle. And in the water float the clouds. The clouds, God's comforter. The sky is a colorful Guatemalan wool blanket. This is part of my life. I remember it from when I was a girl, maybe since I was eight, ten years old, I don't remember. That was when I met Jose. The poles of the hut change, but the spaces don't, the gaps in the wall. Neither does the morning star that passes, keep watch. Neither do I.

*Doña Rubenia, Lupe is already becoming a pretty girl.* And me behind the barn, watching with breasts like clarinero beaks. He knew me when I was just an innocent kid. *Say*

*hello to don Jose, don't be rude, cat got your tongue?* Ever since then I've been getting up early, already thinking of Jose, watching as the frightening nights pass. And I'm very happy when morning comes, looking as though the leaves of the trees have been lit on fire. I'm a happy person, it's true, I've never really been sad. But don't talk to me about darkness and night, I'm already peeing. *I've been thinking that you won't regret it if you give me to Lupe to help me out, I'm already tired of being alone.* And my face fell in shame, because as he was saying "give me to Lupe," I was walking in. *Get out of here, kid, can't you see the grownups are talking.* I went out to the hallway and caught a few more words. *I know that she's only a girl, but that's precisely why I like her, because she's well-behaved and I'm going to be worthy of her.*

And my eyes are covered in reflections of a patterned wool blanket. And if I look up my eyes are filled, as with sparks from rooster feathers. Clouds with purple wounds. A wound is a wound.

And I shiver from the cold of the night that doesn't want to die.

It's the cold of the tamarind leaves, shaking, wet with dew. They know when a cold is unnatural, comes from somewhere else, comes with certain fear, or as though it isn't from this life. Teeth chattering, goosebumps, chills, hair standing on end. Trembling that never ends.

Holy Mother, conceived without sin.

It's the only way to find value and be able to move forward without quivering out of pure cowardice. *Back then you got up first. I felt it when you would leave to pee on the mango tree, the water falling on the dry leaves and the sound of your machete coming out of its case, passing the blade along your hand, wet with spit.* Maybe my family's influence made me a coward because I grew up with all boys and they were always instilling fear in me; controlling me and watching out for me and telling me to be careful, don't go that way, don't walk in the dark; all

the ways they spoil a girl, especially when she's the only one. I couldn't even look at a worm because my hair stood on end just seeing one, the ones with pieces of bull in their head and green twigs. Couldn't watch the farms at night, the ghosts appear among the leaves in the fields. I'm happy when it's time to wake up because I really like the light, especially the light that's like a cat crouching behind the bushes at six in the morning; the light that rises like litter out of a heap that leaps and flies through the air, illuminating each lime and tamarind leaf like a candle.

Hello, day.

With God I go to sleep and with God I arise, to the blessed and holy spirit.

I put on the half-mourning skirt, I always wear my half-mourning skirt, ever since my mother died. I love the different types of dots and florets on a white background, with black pictures, as I promised my mother when she was dying. I only have three dresses, but the half-mourning skirt can cover up the dirt that gets on them from the pigs rubbing against me, especially when I give them their corn-water; you wouldn't believe it but pigs are the most gluttonous animals I know.

When I get up I go directly to the well, pull out ten buckets of water: to bathe, for the corn-water and the corn, and to water some achiote plants I have growing in the yard.

We've had a lot of luck in finding water almost at ground-level, we're the only ones here who have a well, everyone else goes to the river or to the ravine, because they don't want to spend the money to dig a well; we wouldn't have done it if Jose hadn't made the discovery. Look how this spot is always wet, with lemon grass growing year-round.

*There's water here, Lupe, I know what I'm talking about.* I thought that the water didn't do any good if we didn't have anything to pay a digger with.

Here in Kilometro you don't need to have water in your house, there's plenty in the river and if you don't want to go to the river you can go to the ravine. *This way you wouldn't have to bother going so far to get the water.* You have to walk more than a kilometer. The ravine is closer, but sometimes it's dirty, especially when it's rained a lot, and the current of water running down the hill can be dangerous. *You know how to pay the digger.* And Jose opened the well himself. The water was a little bit above the ground, so that's how the lemon grass stayed green all year. *The pigs are going to fall through trying to get enough water not to die from the heat in the summer.*

Speaking of water, another thing I need is pork soap; soap is sacred like corn, not only because it gets rid of dandruff and kills lice but it also keeps hair soft and easier to comb. *Sunday I'm going to help you get water from the ravine.* And we put it in a vat we had set in the ground by the hearth. Now I'm the one who get the water from the well, it's not a big deal because a bucket takes four pulls. You don't need to kill yourself over ten little buckets of water.

*This is man's work.* When he got back from the river with the water jug on his back. This is why it's so lucky we found water close to ground level. *Hey, and you were the one who didn't want to dig the well.* It wasn't me who didn't want to.

When the clarinero passing saying cuio-cuio, it draws a black streak against the golden sky. Because it's already five thirty, when the stars are dismissed from their posts and only the biggest and brightest remain.

I always cross myself when I see the morning star. *With God I go to sleep and with God I arise.* One does this out of habit. I don't know why, but when the sun is coming up I feel a terrible sorrow, it's just a matter of when it happens, a deep despair. Maybe it's the day's magnetic force, supported by a jet of red water.

*Hurry up with the coffee, it's getting thin.*

The hens have stopped hopping on the sticks and are coming to ask for sorghum. Pi-pi-pi-pi, they come close to peck at the ground after throwing away the jocote sticks. Eating pebbles and crushed egg shells

The chicks are stuffing themselves. It's a noisy, red-sky dawn.

And from inside the kids are saying mama mama, getting out of bed. *And everyone remembers you because you wake them up with a pair of spankings.*

And then they come here with machetes, ready to go to the farm.

"Hurry up, the hens are already getting down from the sticks." Singing a ranchero song. "Coming, Mom." And they put on the nice hat Jose gave them for Christmas.

Coffee and toasted tortillas with salt for breakfast.

This is our life and we don't know any other. This is why they say we're happy. I don't know. In any case, that word "happy" doesn't make sense to me. Nor do I really know what it means.

Sometimes we're joyful, that's different.

I'm going from bush to bush, watering the chili, the lemon, and a few little seeds of guisquil and pipian and a stalk of sapote which started growing by accident. After I make the corn-water for the pigs which follow me around, hitting me in the shins, and won't leave me alone from the moment they wake up. I kick them away so I can prepare the food. *You know, Lupe, more than anything these pigs are just work, they don't even yield as much as they cost in sorghum.* The pigs have been our savings for the kids for Christmas, so I always have something that is certain to work out, I can sell them to don Sebastian for his tamales. *And they'll leave the yard with a hole in it, full of shit and bugs, but you continue to be stubborn, Lupe.* And what I

don't tell him is that if they got into the hut they could break the bag of grain, these pigs are gluttons, but they're our little bit of hope that for one day when the kids ask for something we can't say no, at least one time a year we have to buy them a shirt or pants for them to show off. Everyone has something new to wear on Christmas and the kids await something from Christ. *Tell me, I'm the one who takes care of them, and I'll deal with them if I have to, even if you buy the little ones a clay whistle.* The only toy he buys them is a whistle, they're cheap and entertaining enough. They just keep blowing them for the whole holiday, cu-cu-cu.

*If you think the pigs are good for something, that's up to you.* It's my business. By November they'll sell for a good price.

Part of the sale goes toward odds and ends, and another part goes to buy notebooks, pencils, and textbooks for those who are in school, and for the older ones I buy their suits so they can dress nicely on Sundays, because they're growing up and I can't let them go in tatters, especially because they're already earning a little money and giving it to me.

Once the pigs have drunk the corn-water, they go to sleep in the mud by the well and start snoring. But that's in the afternoon because now in the morning you really only need to show them an ear of corn and they're satisfied.

Sometimes when the sun's lit everything, I go buy things at the junction, be they salt, corn coffee, or whatever, maybe sweets or canned coconut or molasses, the kids like it, especially when they come home tired from chores in the field.

Corn is the only thing we don't have to buy because we plant enough to last us the year and still have enough left over to sell a few pounds to our neighbors.

The junction is a kilometer from the hut, that's where don Sebastian has his shop, where he lets us buy things on credit at prices that aren't very high compared to what they are in town.

Once a month Jose goes to the town to buy the little necessities that don Sebastian's shop doesn't have, like lime to cook the corn with, or medicine for stomach pain, or whatever else we need or that's better to get in town. Before I go I put the beans on the fire and get more water from the well for whatever I might need it for that day.

I do all of this while the little kids are in school and the older ones have gone with their dad to cut or plant in the fields. Now that it's summer they're doing the cutting, and preparing the land for planting in the winter. They didn't used to cut, it was enough just to set the field on fire, but then some people from the city came and recommended that it was better to cut because burning ruins the earth, which is a major expense for employers to have their fields cleared by machete alone. It's better for us because it gives us another way in, I mean, by now the harvest is over and the only work you can find is clearing land. And this is good because it takes just under an hour to walk to the field and the employer is paying a good price for the work, or so Jose tells me. *I would like all our children to learn to read so they don't have to live on day labor like we do and suffer like we have, especially when we don't have anything to give to our kids, in the slow times, barely earning enough for beans and a shirt for Holy Week.* The kids are our hope for when we're old, at least to give us a hand, because an old person is just a nuisance who can't work. Nothing to do but die. If they have kids it's different because they always do the right thing and help the elderly.

I agree about sacrificing and sending the little ones to school, so they won't be ignorant and no one will deceive them, the truth is that their parents can scribble, we can sign our names so our ID cards won't make us look illiterate. Read, yeah. Write, yeah. But we can only read by spelling and maybe not even then, I go years without seeing letters, and the ones I see on the signs at the shop at the junction I already know by heart, but sometimes I look at the numbers

and scribbles that the kids do for their school work. As for Jose, he at least doesn't know the vowels, I've never asked him if he's forgotten how to read yet. He has no need to. For him the machete is everything. It's his life.

My parents could only send me to first grade. Not because they didn't want to but because there were a lot of us in the house and I was the only female, I was the one responsible for cooking and grinding the corn and later taking the tortillas to my brothers in the fields.

My brothers were killed cutting in the fields, just like my dad.

My mother and I ran the house.

We were fourteen in all, my parents and eleven brothers. This is how three of them died. They died with their skulls caved in. I remember that my dad grabbed the last one by his feet to get the soft spot on his head to go back in place, but it didn't work, he died with that sunken spot, the soft spot always sinks after terrible diarrhea; once the diarrhea sets in there is no salvation. The each died before their first birthdays.

Kids skulls only cave in when they're really little. While their bones are soft, when you're not looking the diarrhea comes and the front of their heads sink in.

Children go to heaven. The priest told us that. So we didn't worry about it. We always agreed with him.

Our only concern was that they not die suddenly, without giving us time to baptize them; that way they would be cleansed, because children are born with original sin. If they die with original sin, they go directly to purgatory. Purgatory isn't a place where they punish you a lot, but it still is a place of punishment; there are always flames but they don't burn much.

This is what the priest told us when the missions came. So as soon as we see a sign of diarrhea in a kid, we immediately run to baptize them with holy water. To find a friend.

5:45 a.m.

One day I was going to throw a rock at a frog. Then I met the voice of my conscience.

I came and lifted my hand. I had just turned twelve. I remember because that's when I became a woman, I changed.

I got ready to throw the rock when I heard the voice of my conscience, a voice that told me not to throw the rock at the frog, what did the poor thing do to you?

I froze like I was paralyzed. I realized that the voice comes from within, but the voice is not ours. I was a little scared. And I connected the voice with punishment.

Don't you see that it's a sin, he said. And the rock fell behind me, almost falling on my neck, inside my dress, because as I heard the voice with my hand still raised holding the rock, my fingers loosened and I released it.

This voice goes with us. Even when we are asleep it speaks to us, it is beside us, watching us.

It's why when we're supposed to be sleeping we're heard sobbing, we really are sobbing.

The voice of conscience is the same as a dream. Or better yet, it's not a dream, it only seems like one, in dreams things are the color of chocolate, but the voice of conscience is harsh, there's nothing pleasant about it. The voice is to scold us: don't do this, do that, don't do it because it's a sin. A lack of freedom, that is.

And when the rock fell behind me, the frog went running, jumping, splash he fell in a puddle of green water. It's huge leap scared me.

If you throw that rock at that frog, the voice of my conscience told me, you will have no milk and your skin will dry out. Your skin will be like the frog's skin, wrinkled and disgusting. Well, the voice of conscience does you favors, but they're favors no one's asking for.

One of the good things that happened to me from the voice of my conscience was when it took the form of the Cadejo, the animal that sometimes appears to frighten us. I had gone to buy some cords from the junction. But because I hung around talking I was running late and it got dark. We had been tying the bed and the cords broke. *Go buy some more cords, then, I'm really tired.* That's what Jose said. *You have to hurry so it doesn't get too late.* So I took the towel and went running to the junction. "Ah, don Sebastian, the night is holding onto me." And the worst was that they didn't even have cords at the shop. "Wait, Lupe, take this candle and send it back to me tomorrow, don't be twisting and breaking a leg in the dark."

So I asked how many candles he had, because I didn't want to leave him in the dark. "Don't worry, we're going to bed anyway." "Oh, don Sebastian, you're like a mother hen." I thanked him and start leaving. "In any case, I would have put it out anyway."

It would have been better had I left earlier but I was gossiping with don Sebastian's wife and that made me late. "Fine, don't take the candle, but don't say I was stingy with the light." And I started leaving. "See you later, little Concha." "God be with you," I yelled back once I had gone out into the road.

I'm already accustomed to the dark, no problem, I think. You can see a devil isn't going with you, Concha yells to me. Those come with or without light, I shout.

And from thinking about fear my knees were already knocking.

I went walking through the rabbit grass, being careful on the squishy parts so I wouldn't fall in a hole, 'cause where there's rabbit grass there are rabbit holes.

And suddenly I saw a big animal that made me stop. And the animal told me not to go through the grass. I recognized the voice as the voice of my conscience. But I thought that it was the Cadejo, by the whiff of orange blossoms it gave off, since the Cadejo likes to lie beneath the orange trees and the smell sticks to it.

“And what does this mongrel want?” I thought to give myself strength, but I knew that it wasn’t a dog. And I wasn’t at all afraid. So it was the Good Cadejo, the one that didn’t make people afraid but instead gave them a feeling of confidence. They say that when the Bad Cadejo comes it makes you wet yourself just by looking at you, without talking.

“Go to the side,” it told me.

So I went to one side, getting out of the rabbit grass. And then it disappeared. I only took a few more steps on the dirt when I felt the first whip of the chinchintora snake. Luckily I moved in time and it wasn’t able to get me. I felt the rattling passing near me. “You saved me from that,” I said. And feet, I love you for that. Later I felt the whip again, but I only heard the rattling once I was far away. “Fucking snake,” I said.

The voice of my conscience saved me from the rattlesnake. Also, it lit up the road for me. Because it knows everything. This is why it’s said that the voice of the conscience is part of you and isn’t part of you. Who knows where it comes from.

6 a.m.

We’re from Kilometro. Near Chalatenango. People from here like to sing. And laugh for no reason. Almost all of us are poor, but we aren’t ashamed of it. Nor are we proud of it. It’s never been important to us because for many years, life has been the same, without much

change, we all know each other and treat each other like equals, the one with the wagon worth the same as the one who only has his machete to work.

Jose grabs his guitar and sings folk songs to rile us up, or some song about our struggle; a woman will come to him, he's what they really like. Or maybe she just knows the song.

We like the folk songs because they have beautiful lyrics that we understand. That was a little while after I heard another type of song, when the boys arrived at the church with the priest. They sing calls to protest.

Yeah, recently everything has changed.

Before when the priests would conduct mass in the chapel at the junction, they gave us nothing more than hope. Aside from that, nothing else. Saying that we were not to worry, that heaven was ours, that on earth we should live humbly but in the kingdom of heaven we would find happiness. That we shouldn't focus on the mundane things of this life. And when the priest told us that our children were dying from worms, they recommended that we resign ourselves to it, or that perhaps we should not give the children purgatives this year. And no matter how many times we did so, they always died. There were so many worms that they started eating on the inside but ended up coming out their mouths and noses. But the priest told us to have patience, pray, and bring offerings when we carried them, when we carried our skeletons with eyes. One of my children died this way, worm-eaten with a sunken skull, both at the same time; luckily we only lost one that way.

"Okay, what happened to your son?"

"Look, dear Father, he suddenly started to poop without stopping, losing a lot of water..."

"Maybe you gave him spoiled milk."

“No, Father, he hasn’t had milk.”

“Then what?”

“It’s worms, Father.”

“You must give him a purgative, quickly, and give him good food. What do you give him to eat?”

“During the day I give him corn water and at night I give him sugar water.”

“How many months old is your son?”

“Just over nine, Father.”

“You should give him cheese; if you can’t get milk, cheese is a good substitute.”

“At the shop at the junction they sell curds, which is the same, but we can’t afford those luxuries, and also Jose’s boss said, and we know, that milk gives kids stomachaches and it’s not good to get them accustomed to drinking milk or eating meat.”

“The boss told you this?”

“Yeah, and everyone knows it’s true.”

“Well, whatever you do, what God wills will be done.”

“The best thing would be to baptize him in holy water, Father.”

“Yes, child, but you came here without a godparent.”

“I figured I would have time to look for one tomorrow, Father, I thought that you could recommend some medicine, I had wanted to give him an altamisa enema but I’d have to go to the ravine and Jose isn’t around.”

“Yes daughter, I would look for altamisa for you but I know that it won’t cure him, for cases like these nothing but a worm purgative will work.”

“And where can we get this purgative, Father?”

“That’s your concern, child, it would be best if you came back tomorrow with a godparent so we can baptize him, just to be safe...”

And the priest told me that I should have faith, and if the kid wasn’t saved it was because of some sort of neglect. Don’t lose faith in the church. And that Christ also died, and that they need to be baptized so they can go directly to heaven without passing through purgatory.

We couldn’t do anything, just accept it, it was the justice of God. Sometimes we didn’t even cry for our children because we became convinced that death was a prize God gave to children, it was better to die than to suffer in this valley of tears.

Well, we were hooked by the priest who was turning our hearts to stone. I didn’t even cry for my son because death was no natural to me that we gave thanks to God for taking him, convinced by the reasoning of the priest who came to Kilometro every fifteen days to comfort us in our sorrow.

“It’s good that you brought him in because this child is very ill.”

“Yes, Father, could you do me the favor of baptizing him.”

“Of course, this is why we’re here, to save the souls of sinners. If only you had brought him in earlier, because this child is already farther to the other side than this one, you have taken so long to bring him imagine if he had died in the street.”

“It’s just that when you were here last, fifteen days ago, he was healthy, and I never thought that he would become ill so quickly.”

“Again, you all leave everything to the last minute.”

“I would have if a godparent had been ready, Father.”

“Well, wait here, I’ll be with you in a moment, after I perform the mass. The child is still hanging on.”

“Thank you, father.”

Until suddenly, the priests were changing. We were getting involved in cooperative movements, to do good for one another, share earnings. It is a great thing to do good for other people, everyone living in peace, knowing each other, getting up before the sun to go to work with the kids, taking the pigs out and selling them for a good price. Bringing the eggs to town and not selling them in the store because don Sebastian pays very little, he doesn't stop being stingy in that way. Everything was getting better around here. Also the sermons changed and they stopped saying mass in jargon we didn't understand, didn't have to hear any more about *dominus obipos*, which we would always joke about, saying “dominus obispu, in the ass I'll pinch you.” Now the mass is totally serious, with the priests starting to open our eyes and ears. One of them always says: to earn entrance to heaven, first we must work to make paradise on earth. We began to understand that things were better that way. And we asked them why the priests from before forced us to comply. Forget the priests from before, those young priests told us.

What's important is that our children don't die. Leaving a child to die is the worst sin you can commit. And at the first symptom we have to go looking for a priest, since they also came to Kilometro more often. Before they made us afraid, we believed they were some type of magician, who could destroy us with a thought. They also didn't give us confidence. They spoke in a threatening way, about another world or the profundity of God. They seemed to walk on air, from here to there in their long, black robes. They asked us for hens and a couple pounds of rice. We couldn't deny them, we considered it a sin to deny something to a man of the church.

“Father, I've been fattening a hen for you for Holy Week, a chicken, if you'd like it.”

“Thank you, Lupe, but it’s better not to go around offering things without having them ready.”

“I was just telling you that I’m preparing it.”

“You must not be or you would bring it to me next time or forget about it, don’t you know Holy Week is four months away?”

“Then for Christmas I’ll bring you a piglet.”

“But woman, what am I going to do with a pig if I can’t bring it to the rectory, at least with the chicken you could season it.”

“Okay, Father, I’m going to bring you the meat from a pig, ready to roast.”

“Yes, that’s different, but don’t leave yourself without meat because you’ve brought it to me.”

“No, Father, I’ll keep the feet and the head, as well as the innards and the blood to make blood sausage.”

“It’s up to you, child, I can’t make you give me anything.”

“Yes, Father, it’s our pleasure.”

“Tell Jose to give them enough food so they fatten up, Christmas is only three weeks away.”

What the presence of a priest gave us, with how holy they seemed and all, was fear and dread. They were fiercer than a chinchintora and God help you if you provoked their anger or hate because they would easily repay you with threats of hell. Of course, when they wanted to be good they were good.

“Look Lupe, tell Jose that if he doesn’t come to mass then he can’t come ask for indulgences.”

“It’s just that he’s still working.”

“Working on Sunday?”

“Yes, Father, ever since cutting started, he wants to make the most of the time there is while there’s work.”

“So he’s not at home?”

“No, Father, he went down to Santa Tecla and comes back every fifteen days.”

“And the rest of you are alone?”

“He only takes us with him in January, when the children can help pick the coffee. I go too, it’s the only opportunity to get a little more money.”

“Well, Lupe, take these sweets to the kids, but not all at once, give them one at a time, that way they’ll last until Christmas.”

“Thank you, Father.”

“And don’t forget to bring Chepe, tell him to come to mass and not to put his work before the Church.”

“Okay, Father.”

After a meeting that happened I don’t know where, according to the young priests who started coming to Kilometro, religion wasn’t the same anymore. The priests arrived in running pants and we saw that they were people of flesh and blood, only better dressed, and their voices were normal and they didn’t go around asking for chickens, instead they brought us things from the city, *Take this for your son*, when they came out to the house.

They came down to Kilometro to see how we lived, you know the priests from before never came to our huts, they just received everyone in the chapel, where they would hop out of their jeeps, and hop right back in after mass and disappear in the dust of the road.

These new priest friends also came in jeeps, but they left the junction and visited us, to see how we lived, how many kids we had, how much we made, and if we wanted to improve our lives. And we didn't understand their way of speaking, the words they used. Until they formed the first cooperatives and we could earn a little more money, they taught us how to administer our collective funds and how to get a good price for our eggs and chickens and pigs.

We knew these things before, it's not that we're dumb, we just never had anything left over, what funds could we administer? The pot passed before us and didn't pay us but went to things for everyone's benefit, alcohol for colic, bismuth compound for diarrhea, medicated powder for bladder infections, all those things. Also, at the end of the year we had enough left over for a little toy, like a toy car or a plastic ball or glass marbles. In the end, what more could I tell them. *Lupe, it's so they don't go around with their mouths open when they see other kids with real toys. I know that the fund isn't being frittered away on luxuries, on the contrary, they're going to entertain them so they don't go hunting and risk running into a snake.*

Then something happened that had never happened before: the national guard started coming into Kilometro, and when they arrived everyone scattered like marbles and had to be careful, because the guard is very strict, you can't go around, for example, with a machete tied to your wrist without getting a gun pointed at you or a huge fine that a poor person doesn't have enough to pay.

The soldiers said that it wasn't necessary to walk around with a machete upside down, but as men who are accustomed to always having a machete in hand, it's difficult to convince them that when they aren't going to work they don't need it. They feel alone without a machete in their hand, it's a necessary companion. Sometimes there are accidents, especially on Sundays when they start drinking. That's why the guard is harsh and won't hesitate to lower a machete

with the butt of a gun. “And if you walk with your machete tied to your wrist, we’ll cut off your hand.” And this is a well kept promise. That’s how the guard is, always true to their word, so those who oppose them always know what will follow. The guard is what has always kept order, getting anyone who doesn’t comply with the law with the butt of a machete or a rifle shot. They’ve never killed anyone around here, but whenever a body turns up, you know it could have been the guard. Also, the people in this region have always been peaceful, not riotous or troublemakers, drinking or going crazy. Jose used to drink every once in a while but he knows he can’t waste the money with so many mouths to feed. Also because of his responsibility in the cooperative. And his conscience. I’ve never had problems with that.

“Where are you going with that machete, Chepe?”

“To cut wood...”

“Be careful that you don’t run into the guard.”

“It seems like they’re not coming around here today.”

“You won’t run into them because it’s Sunday?”

“They won’t see me, Lupe, I’ve already escaped from them plenty of times, because I can smell them from a distance.”

“Don’t forget that it’s never all of them.”

And they started to tell us that the priests had been insolent, they had given us foreign ideas. And they never got enough of asking us for documentation and inspecting us if we had a machete, but the first thing they asked was if we went to church. What were the priests telling us in the mass? And in the beginning we didn’t understand any of it. Did they realize we were just going to say saints and miracles? Because the soldiers could just go to mass and hear that for themselves.

It was only to instill fear in us, so that we would draw back from the church. *Yes, we go to mass and see this agent of the Lord, it's good to see this priest, he's not like the others.* It's like these sons of bitches here, and those sons of bitches there, faggots in robes and if they've used the Bible to teach us to disobey, pointing with the barrel of their guns, then it would be better for us to head to the chapel and now when we went to the junction on Sundays they would be hiding in the bushes and would suddenly come out asking for personal documents and where we were going, were we going to mass. *Going to see the priest, they put on their fancy clothes, these sons of bitches. They can put on a white shirt, they have enough money for that, but not enough to feed their children.* We didn't argue, they didn't know us, they're fierce but if we stay silent the insults won't get to us. They were only to scare us and to get us to go back in the chapel. *And then they go around saying the landowners don't pay them enough.* And this Sunday we were going to have communist singers in church. And we didn't know anything about it, we went because we were practicing Catholics. The truth is that Chepe and I aren't devout Catholics, but it was a nice place to go on Sundays and we liked what the priest said, we felt like we were learning. *I think that these bastards come here to be faggots, knowing that bitches go visit the priest and maybe young men have fallen in love with him.* Saying things like that while guys pulled papers out of their shirts to show that they were from the area. *Or maybe they've seen the priest pee.* There was loud laughter, but it was laced with anger. When a soldier laughed in front of you you had to be ready for the first kick. We were quiet, obedient, and quick to show our papers. And no one failed to produce their papers or God help them! *I want to smash all these assholes, farm workers.* The hate they had for the priests got taken out on us. They didn't dare touch the priest because behind it all, they were scared. The soldiers had been Catholics like us and almost all were campesinos, all that happened was that they were educated and we

weren't. They had gone to school, you need preparation to be a soldier. What makes them arrogant and strong is that they've studied to be authority figures, so they can uphold the laws. Law has always endured. They say that they only do it to enforce the law, but some people don't just do it for good reasons. We only want to do bad, they say. Truth is, I don't know, I've never done bad to anyone, not Jose, not my kids. Evil appears suddenly. When you least expect it. They defend private property, this principle is sacred, because if we're found with blood-stained hands they can seize it, but this doesn't happen. We're honest through and through.

They're afraid of the priests because they don't stay silent, they criticize them, because they walk around spouting ingratitude in the street, they don't get paid a salary to be ungrateful. But it goes in one ear and out the other. After a couple days, they were already making raids and mistreating people. One day they dared the worst. Something that made us die: the priest was found half dead on the road to Kilometro, about an hour away. They had left him disfigured, with wounds everywhere. Someone was passing by and saw him naked, moaning in a ravine. They had put a stick in his anus and it was still there. He could hardly hear the priest's voice. A little farther away his robes were hanging, all torn up. We were warned to travel together when we went to the spot. We went to the road to wait for a car that would take us there. And I realized that we had become hardened, no one let out a wail or a cry, only *poor thing*, inside, with great anguish over what had happened to the priest, something none of us could have imagined. It was a nightmare. We discovered that the holy could fall from heaven. Since then nothing surprised us, short of rain turning to fire and cats chasing dogs. The priest's jeep was found farther away, burning in another ravine. To add insult to injury. The only thing in life that was missing. From now on, any sin would seem very small.

6:10 a.m.

We've never gotten anything from the church. Only given. Little things, sure. And they went along with it. But we never came to think that the priests were to blame for our situation. If one of our children died we trusted that the priest would save him in the other life. At least our dead children were in heaven. We took comfort in that.

They were always chubby and red in the face.

We didn't ask them if they were happy on earth. Their alien life wasn't important to us, especially as priests.

If they offered us heaven for our children we didn't take it as a joke. We had faith.

And when they changed, we began to change, too. It was nicer that way. Knowing about something called rights. Rights to medicine, to food, to education for our children.

If it hadn't been for the priests we never would have know that these things that benefits us existed. They opened our eyes, nothing more. After that we were on our own. Left to our own devices.

We learned to look for ourselves. The young priest injured in the anus never came back, after that we realized that coming out here threatened death.

For us it was good. For others it was bad, especially for the farmers, who suffered the most when we demanded rights. Spend more and get less.

Also, once we learned about this rights thing we also learned not to lower our heads when the boss scolded us.

We learned to look them in the face.

We gained a few centimeters in height because when you bow your head you're shorter and if you lift your gaze you also lift your mood. Months passed and new young priests came and said the same thing. Eyes open wider. And Jose had been blessed, it didn't cost him anything to make friends with the priests. *We need to join the cooperatives, they'll do good things for us.* Hopes are green at first, but sometimes they mature. *And how are we going to join if we don't have anything?* With the pigs, he told me. Breed the chickens better, egg laid egg hatched, and don't eat the little pigs, leave them to grow up. That's how we came to have four dozen chickens and more eggs to sell in the cooperative.

Sometimes people would come from the city to sing in church, songs talking about the failures of the individual. We were learning that the opposite was true. We were misled. One must be good. But goodness must not be confused with submission.

And we thought about the priest who had been brutally murdered:

If they did that to priests, without more commitment to anything than the church, what could they do to us? Other than praying, it was best not to go out, especially not to the junction, because of how far away it is and because they stay there over night after seven p.m. when the last bus leaves for Chalatenango.

And there's no drinking late. See, Jose liked to have a couple drinks and the poor thing suffered from not being able to chat for a bit with his friends at the junction.

For Sebastian it was bad for business because the customers had diminished. Don Sebastian sent everyone home because it was already time to close.

For two weeks we didn't see the authorities in Kilometro.

It was like they knew what they had done.

Later they were there. They started with don Sebastian. *So no priest son of a bitch has come to give mass in the chapel.* Don Sebastian went with the flow. There was no other way. Don Sebastian, despite selling things expensively, would always be with the poor. *I figure that because of what happened to Father Luna they haven't come, so there's the chapel, dirty, and people haven't come either.* And they know he's our neighbor and we're all united. So they didn't believe him. They wanted to go in the onion patch. *And who do you think was riding that communist priest's dick?* Sebastian went to the counter in the back to throw out the bottle caps from the sodas he had opened. *Never found out who was responsible.* The men poking him and messing with him to see if he'd break. *The ones who put the stick in the priest's ass have to be pretty wicked.* Or pretending to yawn, because he didn't have any more bottle caps to take behind the counter and throw away, he just had to deal with the provocation. *It's possible.* Sipping ginger ale. *Cat got your tongue?* He laughed because there was no other option. *I've had a toothache all morning.* They offered him a beer and he told them he didn't drink while he was working. And them: *If we invite you, you do.* "At times like that you just have to play a sucker," don Sebastian told Chepe. *If not because of the cost, just because the owner of the store shouldn't drink, unless it profits me, so when you invite me, I accept.* "Of course, if I had shown them how nervous I was they would have known that I was playing with them, and Sebastian ended saying, and truthfully I can drink with you, but with those people I couldn't, I didn't want to be too familiar with them."

Jose told me all of this a little later. "Imagine, Lupe, how far their cynicism reaches."

"They abuse honest people," I told him.

And on another occasion, visiting the shop.

"I don't know if I told Chepe this."

“Tell me.”

“They said communism is going around putting ideas in people’s heads and that Father Luna was pure red.”

“Well people don’t think that anymore.”

“They said what’s bad are the communist ideas and bringing politics into the church.”

“What is all this about politics and communism, don Sebastian?”

“It’s saying that we must enjoy this life to earn access to heaven.”

“This is what the authorities resent most, Lupe, because in a mild way the priests stuck it to the landowners, and they know that the priests are to blame for the people beginning to protest. The authorities maintain that the priests have been won over by the red devil and that the pope in Rome is to blame, and that he was poisoned but if we’re not already all Catholics we will be communists.” Well before, I said, the priests only offered us heaven and it didn’t matter to them if our children died and if we had a clinic that was fine, but if we didn’t have one that was fine, too.

“And think about how before the priests didn’t come out to our homes, they came out and didn’t stay for any longer than the hour of mass.”

“That’s what I’m saying, Lupe, I’m not defending the authorities, it’s just that the priests now are the other extreme and that infuriates them, that the priests don’t just want to teach the Bible anymore. If they had stayed neutral, nothing would have happened to them.”

“Christianity talks about doing good for the poor.”

“And now the farmers have been overthrown, now they’re just like everybody else, because the priests have betrayed the ones who had always done well before.”

“Oh, don Sebastian, you sound like you’re saying the authorities are right.”

“No, look, Lupe, I’m only telling you what they told me when they came here for soda, you know I’m only their friend because I have to be.”

“I understand,” I said. What I didn’t understand yet was why these people were siding with the rich. Like Adolfinia told me. Ticha’s son, for example, is a soldier and we all know the misery of the poor, trying to eat or trying to feed their grandchildren that their daughters have left when they went to find a better life in the capital.

A person understands these things, for sure, they know, what they ignore is how to explain it. Don Sebastian knows, too. Maybe as well as Ticha, who walks around in rags because everything she and her husband earn goes to beans and corn for their children.

Jose understands it too and sometimes explains it in words.

Maria Romelia

Well, it’s true, I participated when we went to the Bank to get answers about the reduction of insecticides and fertilizers, but the Bank was closed. We had a small rally. Then we heard a scream, so we ran away from it. And we ran, yeah, we were running. Then eight radio patrol cars came up behind us. After that they started shooting and a bullet grazed my left arm. Then we went to where the buses were, but they weren’t there, the police had taken them. And we didn’t know San Salvador. I went with my cousin Arturo, we didn’t split up because he’s, or he was, very active even though he was only fifteen. He told me we would go to the nearby church, San Jacinto, I think. But the church was already surrounded by police, maybe because we were going to find refuge there. There we saw a 38 bus and my cousin shouted to me: look it

says Chalate! And we ran to the bus, accidentally running into the line that goes near our little town. I told him we should get on it. And other people were on it, people like us. When we saw each other, that's when we felt the helicopter coming up behind us. Then when the bus stopped the helicopter stopped, too. We could see it clearly through the windows. Then one girl came climbing through groups at each bus stop. And the helicopter stayed in the air. And the girl climbed through another group. Arturo and I tried to get through that one, too, like she told us to. Then behind us we saw a radio patrol car following us. Then we arrived at a roadblock of police from the farms. Then yeah, they told us to come out, that we were going to register. That we had to put our hands on the bus with our legs open, once we got off. But they didn't register us. Then they started shooting. So we got under the bus. So they started shooting under it. I could feel the buzzing of the bullets as they shot at us with their rifles. Then, in between the bullets, we got back on the bus. When we got back on they closed the door and killed the man who had been driving the bus. Everyone has gotten back on the bus. And only one policeman stayed outside by the door, pointing with his machine gun. There we were, shot, lying on the bus. And the police told us that if we moved we would die. Then they shot the windows just so they would break and the shards would fall on us. I remember that my cousin Arturo wouldn't move, and I started to think he was dead. Then, at that moment I felt them shoot my right hand. I bled a lot. Then they stopped shooting. I told the girl that I had been scraped in the arm. And that we should get off the bus. And there, in front of the police from the farms, I got up and got off the bus with the girl. Maybe they didn't shoot us because we were kids. Getting off the bus, we saw the patrol car behind it. And the police told the patrol car that they had called for another helicopter. What did they want with another helicopter? And after that the helicopter that was in the air started shooting the bus. Then I saw that on top of the cliffs there were other men in ambush, lying on

the ground and aiming at the bus. When we left we stopped to see them. So we asked a policeman for a buck since we had lost our purse so we could get on another bus. And the policeman gave us two coins. "And you, girl, they hurt your hand," he said to me. "And you got out without a scratch," he said to the girl who was getting through the groups on the bus and hadn't left me. "How old are you?" he asked me. "Thirteen," I said. "And you, how old?" he asked the girl. "Fifteen," she said. At this another policeman came over and grabbed the girl by the hair and took her toward the bus. A little after that, him and two other policemen grabbed her by the waist and threw her on the bus through the window. And luckily she didn't get hurt by a shard of glass, 'cause after a bit she got off the bus like it was nothing and I saw them start shooting from the cliff. That was when the police were throwing bombs through the windows. They were tear bombs. And they left a huge cloud of smoke. And then they threw another bomb and the bus started to burn with people inside, but through all this the men continued to lie on the floor of the bus because if they got off they would be shot and killed. Then, after throwing the tear bombs, the police went into the bus to see inside. Then they opened fire and I heard screams from inside. The bus was destroyed. Then I went over to the cliff where the girl had gone. I yelled for her up the mountain but she didn't answer. Then I came to a detour and I took it and there was a house and I used it to orient myself. By then it had been more than an hour. And there was a little, gray-haired, old woman who said to me, what happened child, because my dress was covered in blood. And inside there was another young girl. How strange, it was the girl from the bus who was sleeping on bags of corn. "I won't wake her up because she was crying until she fell asleep," the woman told me. "If you want you can take off your bloody dress and put this blanket around you while I wash it." So I wrapped myself in the Guatemalan blanket and lied down on the bags of corn. I had only slept for a little while when I awoke to the voice of an

old man who was speaking with the old woman. Then I heard the old man say that nearby they were digging ditches because two helicopters had shot at a Route 38 bus, by the Apopa exit, and the bus had caught on fire and that other people were breaking it open so it would burn better, and they gave them a Christian burial in the ditches. And the next day the girl told me I should stay in the hospital because I had a really bad wound. And that I shouldn't go home because walking like that could make me lose my hand. And I told her, "Whatever you say." Because I trusted her like she was my mother. And she checked me in, saying goodbye. Before that I asked her what town she was from and she didn't want to tell me; I asked about Arturo and she said that they had found the body of a 15-year-old boy. One of my brothers had also gone to the Bank but left on a later bus and saw the burning of the 38 bus and thought of me, but no one wanted to go down to look. And looking for each other from home was impossible, until they found me in the hospital. They asked my brother if he had seen me or Arturo. And he said no, he had gone separately, in another group, and it seemed like those from my group had gotten lost and had left the bus, but at least they were already on Route 38. And this made my mom very upset. Until they reached me. I was treated for ten days and if my family didn't come looking for me it was because all of the medical centers were monitored to see if relatives would come by looking for the wounded. After eight days they finally dared to approach the hospital. Only my cousin Arturo wasn't found dead or alive. Once I was better, my mom took me home. "Oh, darling," my mom said, coming near the bed where I was lying. "Oh, darling, what we must suffer from so much poverty, see how much we work and we don't get anything to eat, not even beans, not to mention clothing." And I told her, "Don't worry, Mom, if we fight we'll get something, at least they'll give us seeds to plant, they'll give us fertilizer so the earth can give us a good harvest." And she said, "But what will we have to sacrifice for just a little something, I don't think they're

going to give us anything, it's all illusion, never in my life have they given us anything. If we don't work, we don't eat." And I said, "We're not asking for favors, but demanding our rights, and the government has said that the Bank is there to give us loans and that way we can buy seeds and fertilizer." And she said, "But see, you're so young, you're not even thirteen yet and you already have to go putting yourself at risk, it would have been better if I had gone to the protest in San Salvador, I'm already old and not worth a bullet to them, but you haven't lived yet, you still have the right to be in this world, which I think is the only right we must ask of the government, being able to live in this world, God put us here for something." And I told her, "Mom, you exaggerate." And angrily she said, "Exaggerate! How could I be exaggerating when we don't even know if you'll lose your hand!" And I said, "Don't worry, it was just a scratch, and if they discharged me from the hospital I must not be in danger." And she said, "Imagine if you had lost your hand, the only thing you have to keep from being hungry, to work, what would you have done without your right hand." So my mom became pessimistic. She's been like this since they took my dad. He had gone to live in Ilobasco looking for work, they have a lot of work there cutting pineapple and they pay well. My dad's always been away from home, he goes away to work, where there's work, he goes. We hardly see him because he's working to get food. Because we all work for nothing but food. It's a miracle we live. Sometimes he comes home every 15 days. Last time he told us he would be away for a month, when he was going to cut pineapple. "Be good and help your mother," he told me. "I'll see if I can get you some fabric so you can make a dress," he said. He'd never been gone for so long. They say that the guard took him because he had organized a group of campesinos who had gone to the protest at the Bank, to San Salvador. I didn't see him. Like so many people, I didn't see him. My dad is organizing in the Christian Federation. My dad said that even though I was young I could be part of the

federation because I was raising awareness. I enrolled too, but I didn't go to many meetings so I could help my mom take care of the kids, my brothers and sisters. She goes to work at the farm and irons and washes clothes for people. So there's no one to take care of my brothers and sisters, so I do the housework, look after everything. That's why when they invited me to Christian Federation things, I could never go, because Sundays were the days my mom worked the most. Sometimes they were friends and they told me that they would wash everything so I could go at least, and I carried the kids. That's how I went to the meetings, with the kids. Sometimes they were really disruptive, crying and crying. And I felt bad for everyone else. I told them I would leave. It was that the kids were sleepy and that's why they were crying. And they told me to lay them down on the floor. And they brought me a cloth for them to lie on. They had to have had worms because they were crying so much. So that's why I'm known for bringing three kids to the meetings. One of my little brothers was just over eight months old, like really young, and the other is two, only the little girl doesn't bother me because she's five and helps me wash the blankets at least. And I said to my mom, "I prefer you and Dad be alive, because if it weren't for you I wouldn't be able to maintain the house." We talk about all of this as I'm putting a mixture of guarumo leaves and hot water on my wounded hand. We're there when we hear a call at the door. And my mom tells me she's going to see who it is. And she goes. And then she says, "They're looking for Maria Romelia." "They can come in," I say. And there is the girl from the bus. And I ask, "What brings you around here?" And she tells me, "I came to visit my grandmother and she told me that there was someone here with a bullet wound in their hand, so I figured it was you." And I say, "It was so good that you were there, I might not have made it had it not been for you." And she says, "Oh, no, you were so clear-headed to get off the bus." And I say, "No, you're imagining things, so many bad things have happened to us." But it would

be better not to continue. So I don't say anything but, "My cousin, Arturo, has been given up for dead." "Poor thing," she says. And I don't even know her name. So I ask her, "What's your name?" And she's brought me some little oranges as a refreshment. And some animal crackers. "My name is Adolfinia, I'm Guadalupe Fuente's granddaughter." And my mom asks her, "Whose daughter are you?" My friend answers, "My mom is Maria Pia." I offer her an animal cracker. "Oh, no, how could I take one when I just brought the package to you," she says. And she continues, "My grandmother gave me this little package of animal crackers, but when I found out that you were the girl who was with me on the bus, I thought I could bring them to you, and later I got these oranges from the tree at my grandmother's house, they were the last ones left." And my mom says, "We've all suffered a little, if not one thing then another." "Look at what happened to your Uncle Justino," my mom goes on. "They have a special hate for those of us with our eyes open," Adolfinia says. "Your grandparents suffer a lot," I tell her. "Grandmother Lupe suffers the most," she says. "She has to be alone, while Grandfather Chepe sleeps in the mountains, since they threatened him," she continues. "It's terrible that this is happening in the town, we were already living without men," my mom says. "No need to be afraid," Adolfinia says. "That's right," I say, taking courage from my friend's words. "One day our troubles will end," my mom says. "We women stay alone, we want to do away with all men, look, as good as Jose is, he sleeps in the mountains." "And your father sleeps in the mountains, too?" Adolfinia asks me. "No, the guard took him and won't say where they have him, he's disappeared," I answer. "And what's your father's name?" she asks me. "Emilio Ramirez," I answer. "I've heard of him," she says. "Do you know anything?" my mom asks. "Yeah, he was captured with my dad near Ilobasco." "We've already tired of staying there asking, they insult us, they mock us, with all the suffering we already have to do," says my mom, pausing and continuing, "You know,

you're Maria Pia's daughter, and I know she hardly ever comes to see her mother because I would have seen her." "With all the kids it's hard to get out here, I just come everyone once in a while," my friend says. And continues, "When I was little they would bring me to spend a few months here, mostly because my parents would go to Santa Tecla for coffee cutting season and my grandmother would take care of me, that is to say I grew up with her, if I haven't been able to see her it feels like I need to." "Maybe I've seen you at don Sebastian's sometimes, but we've never talked," I say to Adolfinia. "I remember you, you were a lot younger then but you've never lost the face you were born with, your features haven't changed," Adolfinia says. That's what she said. "And to think that you saw each other under those difficult circumstances, on the bus, saved by God's mercy, look how my nephew Arturo died there, and they haven't even given us the body, and my brother couldn't even pray for nine days, because as father you have to maintain the hope that someday they'll come back, they could grieve with human suffering and let go of them, and them be alive the whole time," so my mom says, always groaning and hopeful, poor thing. And then, "I believe that this may be the end of the world, that's the only explanation for so much evil, look at what they did to your Uncle Justino, the barbarity, and to think that Lupe has so much courage, they said that she didn't even cry, I've always admired the strength of your grandmother, she's unique; but really, what can she do but hang on and hang on and trust that at least you will know tranquility, you will live in peace and your children will have enough food," she can't stop once she gets into it and if you contradict her she gets mad. We listen attentively. "Poor mom," I think, while my friend's eyes fill with tears. Soon there is silence, and Adolfinia takes advantage of it, saying, "I knew you were in the federation, it's the only way to organize ourselves so they can't strike us; I'm also an organizer for those who work in the fields." Shortly

after, we return to my hand. “Thank God you left the hospital healed,” my mom says. Adolfina leaves a little later. When I see her out, I get a lump in my throat.