Alicia Mendoza awoke with pain in her neck and back. What a long trip! Endless hours on the bus. And the delay because they had to stop and change a tire. Throughout the entire trip the motor had rumbled on with great difficulty.

The view was not particularly interesting. Arid lands, desert plants. They passed Oaxaca after night had already fallen, yet Alicia struggled to see it through the window. She wanted to be able to write her friend Carmela that she had at least caught a glimpse of the most important city along the route. But she wasn’t able to see much more than the hustle and bustle of the station.

Alicia tried to sleep the rest of the night. The seat was uncomfortable, and an overweight traveling companion was taking up some of her space. And yet she somehow managed to get settled and didn’t wake up until the sun was already rising.

“How cold it is!” Alicia mumbled, warming her hands with her breath. The bus was slowly making its way through a dense fog. Through occasional breaks in the mist one could catch glimpses of mountain crests, pine branches.

Alicia was about to close her eyes once more when her neighbor warned, “You’d better be watching. We’re about there.”

She was smiling, wrapped in a woolen shawl, and seemed inclined to engage in conversation. But Alicia had other things on her mind. Could this town with its houses scattered all over the hillsides be Ciudad Real? She had not imagined it like this. When they told her she would be going to Chiapas, she had immediately envisioned a jungle, bungalows with fans, like in the movies, and cool drinks served over ice. But this chill, this fog, these humble cabins with shingled roofs. . . . What a pity! All the clothes she had bought would be totally useless.

“I’ll have to spend my first paycheck on a coat,” she thought, savoring the words: “my first paycheck.” Alicia’s godmother had died worrying because her goddaughter was not yet established in a career.

“What are you going to do when I’m not around,” she would lament. “If only I could live to see you settled down. . . .”

As if it were that easy! She felt no calling to become a nun, nor did she have any prospects for marriage.

Her godmother just let her be. Poor Alicia! Orphaned and with a stepmother who hated her from the start and refused to take responsibility for her.

“But, for me—widowed and childless—Alicia has been a comfort. So gentle, so affectionate. She would make someone a fine wife. But men nowadays only notice the figure and the face.”

In an attempt to compensate for all this, her godmother would buy her clothes and jewelry. That’s the way she spent her savings. Until she became ill.

The diagnosis was clear, direct, and final: terminal cancer in its final stages. But Alicia had faith in miracles and trusted, until the end, that her godmother would be healed. “Is there anything that Saint Rita of Cassa, advocate of the impossible, can’t do? If I pray, she will be healed,” she thought. And in the meantime she would cheerfully care for her ailing benefactor. During the agonizing months that followed, Alicia learned to give injections, look at wounds without getting nauseous, change dressings, identify the many medicine bottles, and know when each was needed.

Every cloud has a silver lining, they say. All of Alicia’s experience was put to good use when she later took a job as a nurse.

Everything happened in a way that Alicia liked to call providential. Her friend Carmela, who had shared her grief and who was concerned about her future (besides being well-placed in society), had approached her about a position at the Indian Relief Mission in Chiapas.

“Does this have anything to do with the Church?” Alicia asked, with emotions too confused to analyze.

“Don’t be silly!” was Carmela’s retort. “You know very well that the Church is too poor. And in these heretical times!”

Alicia sighed as if a great load had been lifted from her shoulders. She had always feared winding up in a nun’s habit on the icebergs of Alaska.

“Then it’s operated by the government,” Alicia deduced, somewhat apprehensively.

“Not that either. It’s privately run—by kind-hearted people, people with means. You might say they are good stewards of God’s bounty here on earth.”

“Oh, yes, those elegant ladies who organize charity teas and fashion shows.”

An angry look flashed in Carmela’s eyes.
"Not them exactly, but their husbands. Businessmen, the kind that belong to clubs and get together every month at banquets. They're special people. You probably don't even know their names."

"Then they must be very demanding. And I don't even have a degree."

"That's no problem. If we use a bit of influence . . . . Anyway you have experience, and that's more important. Don't worry. The Mission is just getting started. They pay poorly; you'll have to be content with that, OK? Anyway, since they send people out in the middle of nowhere, they haven't the luxury of being very particular."

"Yes, of course. Do you know where they might send me?"

"To a clinic in Chiapas. Well, a kind of clinic. Besides, it's the only one there. The Mission has run into a lot of trouble. It seems that the building is very small. And there's just one doctor."

"His wife and I can keep each other company."

"I don't know if he's married," Carmela answered.

That doubt dispelled all of the objections Alicia was about to raise at the offer of the job. "That Chiapas is too far away and I won't have anyone to depend on; that the salary is a pittance . . . ." It doesn't matter, she told herself impatiently. There are other advantages. If someone had made her name them, she couldn't have. But in reality, she imagined herself living a great jungle adventure, with a handsome, unmarried, professional man, in love. It could only lead to marriage. And Alicia, the doctor's wife, would spend her days hanging bright cotton curtains on the clinic windows and raising their children (many, all God sends our way) in the healthful country air.

Alicia spent the inheritance her godmother had left her, made herself clothes (low-neck dresses on account of the heat, but modest), and bought a bus ticket. Carmela went with her to the station to see her off.

"Is this your first time in Ciudad Real?" her fat traveling companion asked.

"Yes."

"Do you have any family or business in this area?"

"No. I've just come to work here."

"With the government?"

There was a certain suspicion in her voice.

"In the Indian Relief Mission."

"Oh."

The monosyllable was pronounced with a sarcastic tone that Alicia did not understand. She wanted to continue the conversation, but her neighbor suddenly became preoccupied counting her luggage and got off the bus without saying good-bye.

The fog had already lifted, but the day was overcast and disagreeable. Women crossed the street covered with huge black shawls.

"May I carry your bag, ma'am?"

It was a small ten-year-old boy speaking to Alicia. He was barefoot and had bristly hair. Many others had gathered around to try and take his job. He managed to scare them away with his fists and threats. Once he had won, he repeated his question. Alicia hesitated a moment, but had no choice but to accept.

"Is there a hotel that's not too expensive and fairly decent?"

The boy nodded affirmatively and they both began walking. The plaza, the arched arcades. The clock on the cathedral struck eight. At every step Alicia had to avoid running into Indians, who, carrying their heavy loads, moved quickly, panting as they went. Others were sitting on benches searching themselves for fleas or checking their supplies of provisions. As the little boy passed next to one of them, he gave the Indian a thump on the head. Alicia repressed a shout of alarm; she feared that this would result in a long, unpleasant scene. But the Indian did not even turn around to see who had hit him, and Alicia and the boy continued on their way.

"Why did you hit him?" she asked at last.

The boy scratched his head with a perplexed look on his face.

"Well, . . . just because."

Alicia's innate shyness and natural rectitude struggled within her. Trying to keep her words from seeming harsh or demanding, she urged the boy to refrain from such actions, since he might not always be able to get away with them so easily.

"Someone could hit you back . . . and they are older, stronger than you . . . ."

The boy smiled slyly.

"Am I an Indian for them to consider themselves my equals?"

They had arrived at the hotel. Its appearance was dismal. A big, old, rambling house with crude-looking numbers on the doors to the rooms.

A fat, placid woman hurried out to meet them. Alicia announced that her stay would be brief: only long enough to rest and freshen up a bit. If she were to show up as she was, she indicated by pointing at her wrinkled clothes, her tousled hair, she would make a very poor impression on her superiors.

"I came to work at the Indian Relief Mission," she went on, observing the effect that her words had on the proprietress.

The woman showed no sign of disapproval, but when it was time to pay the bill, its total had been altered upwards.

"You," she said to Alicia in answer to her protests, "come to Ciudad Real to
make life more expensive. When the Indians are stirred up, they don’t want to work on the farms anymore for what they were making; they’re no longer willing to sell their wares at the former prices. We’re the ones who suffer. It’s only fair that you pay for the harm you cause us.”

Alicia did not understand the reasoning behind this, but the tone of voice of her hostess had inhibited her. Hours later she mentioned the incident to the Mission director, a middle-aged man with no title, but according to some, with great administrative gifts.

“Well, now you’ve had your initiation, Alicia. As soon as they find out that you work with us, the shopkeepers and pharmacists, the shoe store owners, everyone, will charge you twice the price for these goods.”

“But why? The Mission does them no harm.”

“For those people there is nothing worse than someone who treats Indians like people; they have always considered them animals. Or when they become excessively humane, slaves.”

“Is there no way to convince them that they’re wrong?”

“I tried to do that at first. It was futile. Because here what’s important is not reason but self-interest: the rancher who refuses to pay his Indian workers a living wage, the pharmacist who keeps supplying them with the poisonous concoctions they like to drink. . . . How can you argue? And now the battle lines have been drawn. You will soon discover through your own experiences just how underhanded the coletos . . .”

“The coletos?”

“That’s what the whites of Ciudad Real are called. As I was saying, how many ways the coletos have of being hostile.”

“And how can we defend ourselves?”

The director shrugged.

“That remains to be seen.”

Alicia listened to his words in amazement. As of that moment her spirit, up to then motivated only by selfish concerns, became one with a body of people—the Mission—whose cause she now joined in its struggle to combat the coletos of Ciudad Real.

Alicia installed herself in the house that the Mission rented for its employees. She would be there only temporarily, since her final destination was the clinic in Oxchuc. But the roads were now impassable due to the rains. There was nothing to do but wait for drier days when the conditions would be favorable for leaving. In the meanwhile, Alicia had no particular task. She wandered through the offices, whose function she was never able to decipher. There were stacks of papers, files, typewriters, secretaries. A bell would ring peremptorily, followed by a small flutter with unpredictable consequences, and then

the calm would settle in again. Yawns, impatient looks, furtive glances at the clock, a stimulating crossword puzzle, a secret piece of needlework. And at the end of the day, all the employees would smile, satisfied that they had fulfilled their responsibilities.

Alicia tried to be friendly, but her shy overtures were answered with the innuendos typical of the provincial coletos. They often wheedled her, hoping to elicit some personal tidbit they could later mock. But she ventured no further comments.

Feeling very disappointed, Alicia would go outside. In the hall (of a huge house that had been built with the marvelous idea of using it as a seminary or convent) were the Indians: all lined up, foul-smelling and identical, waiting to present their complaints. Problems with ranchers over land, outings at the broken promises of middlemen who hired them to work. They talked animately among themselves. Alicia would smile and try to be sympathetic. But they never understood the feelings she tried to convey.

Finally she asked to see the director. Her inactivity was beginning to gnaw at her conscience, and she learned for a meaningful assignment. The director smiled pleasantly.

“Don’t worry. Your turn will come. We don’t have a clinic here, so a nurse can’t do much. What we need are lawyers.”

“They say that there is a surplus of them in Ciudad Real.”

“But none has wanted to help us. For them that would mean betraying their race, their people.”

“And why not bring one from Mexico City?”

“Our resources are very limited. We can’t afford to hire a professional with prestigious credentials. We have to take what we can get.”

Alicia blushed violently.

“Mr. Director, I . . .”

“No, no, I didn’t mean to offend you. I’m feeling my way along, myself. Of course, I have had some experience in business management. But what goes on here is so different. . . . Anyway, at least we mean well. And that is what the Association that gives us money expects of us.”

The director stood to indicate that the meeting had ended.

“As for you, don’t worry. Go on to your room and rest. You have to learn one thing from the Indians: that time means nothing.”

It was raining incessantly. The clouds rolled in all morning and by noon a violent downpour was beating on the roof. In her room Alicia was brushing her clothes, trying to remove the green fungus that the humidity had caused to grow on them.

“When will I get out of here?”
The impossibility of leaving Ciudad Real distressed her greatly. One day it occurred to her that the doctor was also stranded at the clinic. And from that point on her anguish became more intense.

"Don't complain," Angelina, the director's secretary, told her. "It's better to be here than in Oxchuc."

"Is it such a sad little town?"

"It's not even a town. Two or three white people's houses and the rest Indians. Often there's nothing to eat."

"And what does the doctor do? Who takes care of him?"

"Salazar? I imagine that he's making deals with the devil. He spends months and months without coming to Ciudad Real. And when he comes he doesn't talk to anybody, doesn't even flit with the girls. He gets very drunk and then spends the rest of his money on watches. They say he has quite a few."

Alicia decided that he had obviously suffered a broken heart. That must be why Dr. Salazar was so unsociable. The hypothesis encouraged her. After such an experience, a man really begins to appreciate a good-hearted woman. And a good heart was Alicia's specialty. She began to look at herself in the mirror less anxiously.

"And what is Dr. Salazar like? Handsome?"

Angelina thought for awhile. She had never considered him from that perspective.

"I don't know... He's... he's distinguished."

For her, for all the single women of Ciudad Real, that was of utmost importance. A good catch. Someone to whom the well-to-do ladies, the landowners' and businessmen's daughters could aspire. Not a simple typist. Why should such an insignificant girl waste her time thinking seriously about him?

In June the rains began to let up.

"The roads aren't dry yet," the director said. "But we can't wait any longer. We'll send medicine and supplies to Oxchuc. This is a good time for you to go."

Alicia packed her suitcase, her heart pounding with joy. At last! With her own money she bought some canned goods. And for the greatest luxury, she bought some asparagus. She was certain the doctor would like them. They left very early the following morning. The streets of Ciudad Real were almost deserted, but the few people who were out stopped, scandalized and amused at seeing the spectacle of 'a woman riding a horse like a man.' Their stares made Alicia uncomfortable, since it was her first time on a horse and she feared falling off at any moment.

The mule drivers and the cargo rode up front. Alicia brought up the rear. The horse understood immediately that its rider was a novice and took advantage of the fact to walk reluctantly, to run inopportune, and to snort with the slightest provocation.

Alicia was numb from fear. The mule drivers secretly joked at her ineptness.

That was just the beginning. First, there were the mountains. Steep, rocky, with unlikely paths. The beasts slipped on the enormous slabs, stumbled on the loose sides. Or they got stuck in the mud up to their bellies, struggling desperately to move ahead.

Alicia looked at her watch. Only two hours had gone by. "How much longer would it be?" she asked. Each muleteer gave a different answer.

"There's not far to go, and it's completely flat."

"All rock, you mean," retorted another.

"It's more like four leagues." "It's hopeless! We won't arrive before nightfall."

Meanwhile, the road kept unrolling, indifferent to all the predictions, varying its obstacles indefinitely, offering new dangers at every turn.

"It's already getting dark," Alicia noted with surprise. She checked her watch once again. It was only three o'clock in the afternoon.

"It's the fog," explained the mule driver.

"Over this way it's always overcast. They say it's because of Saint Thomas, the patron saint of Oxchuc."

"And why?"

"He's a saint you should strive to be. Beginning with his not believing in Our Lord Jesus Christ. . . ."

"Son of a gun!"

"And so?"

"Well, here's how it was. One day Saint Thomas threw a huge stone up in the sky."

"Come on, now! You're not gonna tell me that the sky fell."

"And what did you want it to do? Our Lord Jesus Christ didn't want to pick it up. 'Let it teach that so-and-so a lesson,' he said. 'Let the one who knocked it down pick it up.' And ever since then Saint Thomas throws every day. But he'll never be able to do it! He lifts it a little, and later the sky gets too heavy and it falls on him again. That's what we call mist."

"Aren't you going to light the lamps?" Alicia asked.

"It's not necessary, ma'am; the horses know the way."

One of the mule drivers had been left with a big theological doubt.

"Hey, this Lord Jesus Christ you just mentioned, is that the same one that Saint Joseph holds?"

No one bothered to answer him. There was only mocking laughter.
The rest of the trip was made in the dark. To the known terrors Alicia added a thousand more imaginary ones: abysses, cliffs, snakes. All her muscles were tense. And then it began to rain.

It rained all night. The rain filtered through the rubber sleeves, the straw hats, until it penetrated the numbed bodies of the travelers. Alicia groaned silently with each move the horse made, at each turn in the road. Warm salty tears mixed with the water poured down her cheeks.

"Don't break down on me, ma'am, we're almost there!"

Alicia didn't believe these consolations. Since when had they been "almost there"? They would never get there or anywhere else. They were condemned to wander forever in the darkness.

First there was a yellowish, twinkling light far away. Then another, and then others, closer by. Oxchuc was in sight.

The prospect of arrival made the last few miles even more intolerable. Each step the horse took should have been its last, but was not. To endure the next one, Alicia had to call forth superhuman effort.

Dogs barking from hunger rather than anger came out of the huts, and one or two windows opened shily. Alicia couldn't even turn her head to look because her neck was completely stiff. A few precarious adobe structures began appearing, and all of a sudden, unbelievably, they stood before the solid mass of a church and real town hall.

"There's the clinic," a mule driver pointed out.

As hard as she tried, Alicia couldn't make out a thing in the shadowy darkness. In a moment they were all stopping in front of a house, the same size and shape as all the others in town. Its only distinguishing features were the enormous letters that formed the initials of the Mission.

"Is this the clinic?" Alicia asked, a little faintheartedly.

"It has a fireplace!" announced one of the mule drivers.

"You need a key to get in. It's locked. The doctor must have gone out."

"We're all exhausted!"

"We'll have to go look for him."

"Let Sabás go; he knows where the doc goes to drink."

"Well, have him go at once!" Alicia urged.

She covered her mouth quickly, shocked by the peremptory tone of her voice. The mule drivers had not paid any attention to that; instead they were hurrying to obey her.

Alicia could not dismount without everyone helping her. She was paralyzed from the cold, and terror had caused her muscles to become immovably rigid. Almost dragging her, the mule drivers leaned her against the wall of the clinic.

There, at least, she was sheltered by the overhanging shingles. Huddled up, in order to escape the splashing of the rain and to retain the scarce heat of her body, Alicia fell asleep. She didn't wake up until the sun was high in the sky. Someone was shaking her and saying, "Here's the doctor, ma'am."

Alicia rubbed her face in dismay. How could she meet him looking like this, so battered and bedraggled? My God, she couldn't even stand up! She made an attempt that only resulted in a ridiculous fall. When she lifted her eyes, she saw a man watching her with mocking curiosity.

"So this is the nurse that came to save me from my plight!"

Alicia watched him anxiously. How old was this man? His unkempt beard and the lividly brough on by drinking and insomnia made it difficult to guess his age. His appearance was just as deplorable as her own.

Salazar must have heard her thoughts, for he abruptly turned on his heels and walked away. He had the key to the clinic. From the back he appeared husky in his heavy sheepskin jacket.

Alicia caught up with him in the patio. The doctor was counting and checking the bundles that the mule drivers had brought. He grumbled.

"As usual, nothing we can use. Laboratory samples, leftover medicines that the rich no longer need. Sedatives, naturally. Not a vitamin or an antibiotic in the lot. Damn!"

Alicia breathed the slightest "oh! It didn't occur to Salazar to beg her pardon. He looked at her severely.

"I hope that at least you know how to cook. I'm sick of those canned sardines."

"Yes, Doctor. I also brought some provisions," Alicia said excitedly, glad to be able to show off her abilities. "But I'm so dirty that I would like to take a bath first."

"A bath?" repeated Salazar as if he had just requested something absurd. Then he made a gesture of indifference. "If you want a bath, you'll have to go to the river. On foot. Anyway, I warn you that at this time of day the water is ice cold."

The mule drivers burst into laughter. Shaking from humiliation, Alicia resorted to wiping her face with a damp towel. She changed her muddied pants and put on a wrinkled dress. In this attire she made her way to the kitchen.

If her cooking ever pleased the doctor, she never knew it. Though she had very little to work with, she tried to create miracles by giving her meals variation and a pleasing appearance. But Salazar ate in silence, with an old newspaper open in front of him.

"What are you reading?" Alicia ventured.
"World news," Salazar condescended to reply, as if to a child or an imbecile. Alicia cleared the table. In a copper-plated trough she washed the dishes, one by one, creating a deliberate and persistent noise.

"Whenever you want me to, Doctor, I am ready to help you in your office," Alicia announced a few days later.

Salazar raised his eyes, bothered by the interruption.

"Is there nothing to do at the house?"

Not that it bothered Alicia to do the work of a maid. Nevertheless, she felt certain that she was needed for more important tasks.

"I got a girl to come help me. Everything is in order. The only thing we haven't been able to do is to get the chimney to work. And with this cold . . ."

"The chimney is just a decoration. The draft doesn't work."

Alicia was not surprised. What else could one expect? She crossed her arms and awaited instructions. Salazar perceived her expectancy and in order to break it rustled, "So there's nothing left to be done. . . ."

"Only your room, and since you always lock it when you leave. . . ."

"I don't like anyone prying in my things."

Alicia had done just that, shamelessly and without results, since the beginning of her stay in Oxcuch. The only things she found were some scribbled papers, dirty clothes (some very ordinary women's clothing), and a fabulous box full of watches of all kinds.

"One day when I can watch you, I'll let you sweep my room. It's not possible right now. I'm going out."

"Some people are here to see you, Doctor."

"It's not time. The clinic is open from ten until two. We don't see anyone either before or after."

"Those poor people. They said they came from far away, they brought a sick man on a stretcher. I gave them a place in the hall."

"Well, you were wrong to do that! They're going to give us lice and who knows what else. Get them out of here at once."

"But, Doctor," protested Alicia, disconcerted, not understanding, . . .

"Well, if you don't understand, just do as I say. And I'm warning you, don't make assumptions on your own. I'm the only one responsible for this clinic."

"All right, Doctor. But are you going to have those who've been waiting leave just like that?"

The doctor struck the table with his newspaper.

"What do you want? For me to see the patient? What for? To take his pulse? The medicine they sent is already gone. I don't have any more to give him. Do you understand? Nothing."

"At least talk to them. They'll leave a lot happier if you would at least say a word to them."

"A word that those Indians don't understand; a word that would discredit me as well as the Mission, because it would be false. If I don't say anything, you think I'm unjust, which, by the way, doesn't bother me. If I talk, I lose their trust. And I need it. You don't know them. In spite of their humble ways, they don't come here for a favor. They come expecting miracles. They don't think of us as people just like them. They want to worship us like gods or destroy us like demons."

Alicia couldn't comprehend his reasoning. She was ignorant and uneducated without the benefit of years of experience like the doctor in Oxcuch.

"He's a man," she would tell herself. "He knows what he's doing. I have no right to criticize him."

But she could not dismiss the disastre she felt when she considered Salazar's conduct.

December came and brought with it an intolerable cold. Shivering, Alicia would huddle next to the useless fireplace. Sometimes the doctor left his newspaper and came over to talk. He would talk excitedly, making grand gestures. Alicia followed his stories with some difficulty. They were confusing, but they all dealt with the same thing: the student riots from which Salazar still had scars, since the police had broken them up violently. Later, to erase the sad memories, he would recall the soccer matches against the team from the University.

"Those of us from Polytechnic would fight with all our might. We'd try to beat them because they were the rich boys. We could blame them for all the evil in the world. How easy! But now. . . ."

"What about now?" Alicia asked, since the doctor did not seem inclined to continue.

"Now I know the poor."

He paused briefly. The expression on his face was one of cruel amusement.

"How stupid! For years I thought I was one of them. And I had to come to Chiapas, to Oxcuch, to find out that I hadn't the slightest idea of what poor was. And now I can say that I don't like what I've seen."

Alicia did not understand his method of judging. It never occurred to her to think of the poor as people to be accepted or rejected for the trouble they caused. She always associated them with charity, alms, compassion. His attitude irritated her.

"Why?"

"The rich exploit us, they abuse us. Right. But they leave us with the pos-
sibility... or rather they make us defend ourselves. On the other hand, the poor beg, beg endlessly. They want bread, money, attention, sacrifice. They stand before us in their misery and make us feel guilty."

Salazar fell silent for a few moments. He seemed to be discovering something within himself.

"Could it be that I have become rich?"

Alicia smiled. "Forgive me, but it isn't noticeable."

"I mean, inside. As a student I lived on government grants. I slept wherever night fell. I ate whenever anyone invited me. I always judged, condemned the rest of the world. But now I have a place to live, not very comfortable, but secure. A job, not very sublime, but worthwhile. I earn a salary. I save. I buy myself things. You should see the watch collection I have."

"What are they good for here when time has no meaning?"

"That's precisely the key. When one can buy something completely useless, he's rich."

He began to pace the floor, taking great strides. Alicia watched him come and go and remembered that beside his watch collection was the pile of papers and the dirty clothes. "They belong to his lover," she was told by the girl that helped her with the housework. "How disgusting!"

"This complicates matters. Sometimes it's hard for me to distinguish between right and wrong. And here, you'll become aware, values aren't clear. Not clear at all. Whatever one does, it's always wrong."

Alicia was wrong a lot. Salazar never fulfilled her expectations. When, at last, she had reached the definite conclusion that the doctor was a man who had not the slightest concern for his chosen profession, she saw him come in, smiling from ear to ear.

"Good news! I just received a box of vaccine from Ciudad Real. Just let them throw those epidemics at us, we have something to fight them with now."

Alicia smiled half-heartedly. It was hard to regain her enthusiasm of earlier days.

"We'll set out with an interpreter and an assistant. You'll go with us; the presence of a woman lessens the suspicion. We'll go from village to village; there won't be a single child left vulnerable to whooping cough, diphtheria, or tetanus."

The committee left early the next morning. The paths were steep, and they advanced slowly through the rocks and quagmire. By noon they arrived at a village called Pawinal.

There were about thirty thatched huts scattered across the hillside. When the people of Pawinal saw strangers approaching, they ran to lock themselves inside.

"Why are they hiding?" Alicia asked.

"They're afraid. Their witch doctors have warned them not to receive us. And also the priest from Ochuc."

"Why?"

"For different reasons. The witch doctors won't tolerate competition. We bring healing, too. Or, if you prefer, we also help them die."

"And the priest?"

"He doesn't know what to think. First, he said we were Protestants. Now he says we're Communists."

"That's slander!"

"Do you know what being a Communist is all about?"

"Well... no, not really."

"Neither does the priest. He says it in good faith. He assumes we represent a danger, and it's natural for him to want to protect his flock."

Months before, Alicia would have exclaimed, "That's incredible!" But since arriving in Chiapas, the limits of her credulity had become very elastic.

"What are we, Doctor?"

"They didn't tell you before you came? We're well-meaning people."

"Then we must tell them."

"Tell whom?"

"Everyone. To start with, tell these Indians."

"That's what the interpreter has been doing since we got here. He's going from house to house explaining that we're not out to gain anything for ourselves. That we're not going to exploit them, like the other whites do. That our desire is to help, to rid them of the threat of disease."

"But they're not even listening to him! Why do they run off or close the door in his face or cover their ears?"

"Because they don't understand what he's talking about. 'Well-meaning!' Those words probably don't even exist in their language. And as for the diseases we want to free them from, they are remote possibilities. However, with the shot we're going to cause them immediate illness: fever and pain. In whose name must they suffer? A germ whose existence they can't believe in because they've never seen it."

"So?"

"So, let's go. There's nothing we can do here."

Alicia was too tired to argue. They began the trip back. The interpreter, a white man from Ochuc, was leading. He was whistling as if what happened actually made him happy. Behind came the doctor, lost in thought; the assistant, carrying the cargo; and Alicia, dejected.

At night, after having served the meal, Alicia came and sat down next to the
doctor. She needed to talk to him, listen to his arguments, the justification for his actions that were always incomprehensible. She asked:

“Why do you work here?”

“I can give you two answers. One is idealistic: because everywhere one can help others. The other, cynical: because they pay me.”

“Which is the real reason?”

“Both are, depending on what you choose to see. I studied very hard, made many sacrifices. I received very modest preparation studying to be a country doctor. I couldn’t open an office even in the most meager town. My family was worried. I was their last hope! I had to hurry to prove to them that I wasn’t a cheat. Then I heard about an association, a group of well-meaning people, as they like to call themselves, that was planning to send a doctor to a clinic in Chiapas. That was my chance.”

“Were you here in Oochuc from the beginning?”

“So far there’s no other clinic.”

“What did you expect to do?”

“Miracles. For others, a life of service. For me, the reward I needed: fame, fortune.”

Alicia stood up, ashamed. She thought of her own motives: the salary too, the hope of getting married. How ridiculous! What right did she have to judge him?

“There’s a great difference between what you hope for and what you get, right?”

“If we were honest, we’d resign.”

“Why?”

“Because this is enough to drive anyone crazy. A clinic that has no medicine, a doctor that patients slam the door on, even a fireplace that doesn’t work! It’s a farce, Doctor, and I can’t take it anymore! I want to get out of here!”

“Calm down, Sarah Bernhardt. It won’t do you any good to get all excited. The best thing to do is to analyze the situation. It’s not going well, I agree. But there must be a way to get to the root of the problem. If we find the error, we can work it out.”

Alicia looked up, her eyes wide with hope. The doctor had a malevolent smile on his face.

“Until then we can enjoy all our advantages: a salary, a house, food. And time to spare. What do you enjoy doing? A lot of women like to knit; others read novels or just enjoy their leisure. Nowhere else will life be as easy as it is here.”

“I know that. There would always be somebody watching me and making sure that I did as I was told, or they’d fire me.”

“Good point. I don’t owe you any explanations about my conduct since you’re just a subordinate. However, I’m going to put your conscience at ease. Neither of us is defrauding anyone. They sent us here to work miracles: to multiply the medicines, to enlighten the minds of the ignorant. They sent us here to endure cold, solitude, and impatience. To share the misery of the Indians, or at least observe it, since we seem unable to do anything about it. It’s enough for us to do this, in good conscience, to compensate for the salary they pay us. And by God, I swear that what they pay us isn’t nearly enough!”

The light from the lamp was beginning to dim. Two colorless teardrops rolled down Alicia’s cheeks. The doctor stood up.

“Meeting adjourned. If you want to take a sedative, there are some in the medicine chest.”

Alicia remained seated awhile longer, in the growing darkness. Then, as mist filled the air, she walked across the patio. Lying on her cot she reflected on her ineffectiveness. Why hadn’t she held her tongue? What was she trying to defend? Alicia’s eyes, now dry, opened wide in the dark. She was afraid. She wanted desperately to run away, to be anywhere but there. In a clean world with good roads, where people were happy and healthy and could speak Spanish. That night she dreamed of her childhood home.

The expeditions were monotonous. Sometimes the doctor summoned Alicia. She assisted him, trembling with tidiness, hurrying to comply—and often incorrectly!—with his orders. But under Salazar’s gaze, her actions lost their meaning and became no more than absurd routine.

One night, very late, there was a knock at the door. Alicia awoke startled and, disregarding the doctor’s direct orders, went to open the door.

Before her stood two Indians. In spite of their exhaustion and the awkwardness of their broken Spanish, Alicia was able to understand that they brought with them a woman, near death from a difficult labor. Alicia had them come in. The suffering on the woman’s tortured face could be seen in the candlelight. They helped her onto Alicia’s cot. Then she ran to the kitchen and put a pot of water on to boil.

“What’s all the commotion?”

It was the doctor (still in his pajamas), speaking from the doorway.

Alicia walked toward him, imploringly.

“It’s an emergency, Doctor. I couldn’t leave them outside.”

“Is someone hurt?”

“A woman in labor.”

“How very strange! That’s the witch doctor’s job, or the midwife’s. The doctor is only needed for accidents.”

But while he was talking, Salazar didn’t remain inactive. He was already in
his room, getting dressed, and later in his office, disinfecting the instruments he would use. Alicia didn’t have to urge him to hurry. The doctor watched over the patient all night with a diligence that Alicia could only attribute to their previous conversation. By morning a baby boy slept beside his mother, wrapped in makeshift diapers.

Salazar went to the kitchen to get a cup of coffee.

“That woman owes you her life, Doctor. If they don’t make you the child’s godfather, they ought to be ashamed.”

“Who needs godchildren,” Salazar protested. But Alicia’s eyes caught a glimpse of secret satisfaction in the rough features.

“All I want to do is sleep. Don’t wake me up unless it’s an emergency.”

“Don’t worry, Doctor.”

Alicia kept everyone quiet. The patient’s husband and father-in-law walked on tiptoe through the clinic. The woman rested, holding her baby. Alicia lay down on the office couch. Several hours passed.

When Salazar awoke, he went to check on the patient and the baby. Everything was in order. So much so that his presence was no longer required there at the clinic. So he decided to go to a meeting at the municipal secretary’s office. If anything came up, they could find him there.

“Meeting,” Alicia thought to herself. Cantina, you mean. Salazar always returned late from such gatherings. Oh, well. They’d just have to pray that calling him wouldn’t be necessary.

Throughout the day Alicia prepared meals for the patient, who was weak from loss of blood. The Indian woman picked at her food so as not to appear rude. But she had no desire to eat, preferring only to rest. She fell asleep once more without realizing that night was falling. The next morning her baby’s cries awakened her abruptly.

She tried to calm him by letting him nurse. The newborn sucked desperately for a few minutes and then began to cry again. He had not been able to get even a drop of milk. The mother looked around without understanding.

The baby’s cry was at first choleric, strong and vigorous, but soon turned to plaintive whimpering. The Indian woman struggled to force milk from her breasts.

Her husband and father-in-law looked at one another knowingly, acknowledging the obvious truth. She had doubtless fallen victim to an evil spell. All women give birth easily, all women can nurse their babies. Why couldn’t she? Was she guilty of some wrong and was this misfortune part of her punishment?

After a few moments of doubt and hesitation, Alicia sent the girl who had helped her with the housework to find the doctor. Salazar arrived at the clinic furious and slightly drunk.

“What’s going on here?” he asked as he entered.

“The woman doesn’t have any milk,” answered Alicia.

“Then give the kid some canned milk. In the medicine cabinet there’s plenty, and bottles to put it in.”

“But you took the key with you.”

“All right, here it is. Get what you need. Check the prices and give the father the bill. But make sure you collect before you give them the milk or else you won’t ever get paid.”

Alicia was stunned. She didn’t know that the Mission charged for its services. Salazar explained impatiently.

“It’s a new rule I’ve made. Nothing out of the ordinary. Just a token charge. And enough of this. I have a right to rest, too, or don’t I?”

Staggering, Salazar made his way toward his room while Alicia wrote up the bill. The cost of the can of milk and the feeding bottle was ten pesos.

“I don’t have any money,” said the younger Indian. The old man backed him up with a gesture of confirmation.

“It doesn’t matter,” Alicia started to say. “You can give it to me later.”

What was important was to satisfy the baby’s hunger. If they didn’t pay her—one never knew what to expect from these Indians—she’d pay for it herself. It wouldn’t break her.

Behind her she heard Salazar’s voice.

“So there’s no money, eh? I suspected as much, so I came back. There’s no money. Well, go home and get some. Your son won’t get a drop of anything until you come back.”

Alicia turned to the doctor with eyes filled with disbelief. But Salazar, instead of repenting his decision, jerked the can of milk and the bottle from her hands.

“And as for you, Miss Nurse, I forbid you to give them anything without my authorization.”

The doctor went to the medicine cabinet, put the things away, and locked it. Then he turned to the two Indians.

“I’ve known you a long time. You’re cant fool me. Your last name is Kuleg, that means rich.”

“But I have no money, sir.”

“Check yourself well, unfold your belt. You, old man, maybe you have some money from Guatemala. You don’t mind paying the witch doctor three or four hundred pesos, do you?”

The Indians lowered their heads and repeated the only words they knew:

“We have no money.”

Salazar shrugged his shoulders and without another word headed for his
Alicia caught up with him just before he shut the door.

"We can't let that child die of starvation!"

"It's not our problem. There you have the new father, the grandfather. It's up to them to feed it."

"But they don't have any money."

"That's a lie! They do have money. I know that for a fact. The old man owns a cornfield and some sheep. The young one could sign up to work on a farm on the coast and ask for money up front."

"And meanwhile, the child dies!"

The crying had ceased. Alicia grumbled with fear. Salazar smiled.

"Dying isn't as easy as you think. It's probably fallen asleep. And if not, what difference does it make? If that child dies today, it will be saved from thirty or forty years of suffering. To end up drunk or consumed by fever. Do you think it's really worth saving the child?"

"I don't care! You have no right to make that decision. Your duty..."

"What is my duty? Suppose I give Kuleg a can of milk. It would only last for a little while, three or four days at most. Then he'd be back for more. I know them, Alicia, they take advantage, like all Indians, like all poor people. And the clinic can barely support itself. It cannot give itself the luxury of raising children."

"Doctor, I beg you..."

Alicia would not listen to his arguments. She only wanted to run to the baby and put a bottle of warm milk in its mouth.

"What a fine example we would be! Today it's Kuleg who wants to take advantage of us. He has money. I am positive about that! Tomorrow it'll be someone else. And when we finish giving out all the medicine, then what? We won't have a cent to buy any more. But besides that, we will have lost a client. Because what is received without some sort of payment isn't valued. The witch doctor has more power than we do because he charges more!"

Alicia covered her ears. She moved away from Salazar quickly. In the patio she found the two Kulegs seated, smoking. She approached the younger man.

"I am going to give you the money, but don't tell anyone and go give it to the doctor. Hurry, before it's too late."

Alicia knelt down and was talking rapidly. She found a few coins that the two Indians contemplated without making the least effort of taking.

"The evil spirits are devouring my son."

This explanation, so simple, made any other action superfluous. Alicia turned to implore the older man. But he also looked at her with a stupefied gaze that the foreign words, the incoherent gestures, were unable to penetrate.

Alicia stood, defeated, and went to her room. The sick woman was sitting on the edge of the cot braiding her hair. Her face was still pale, but without traces of anxiety. The child was asleep sucking on its fist.

Alicia began talking hurriedly. She was shaking the Indian woman by the shoulders, as if to awaken her. She didn't protest. Though she quietly agreed to what Alicia asked, she understood little of the conversation. She was content to obey her husband.

Alicia left the room and went to the office. She tried for awhile to force the door of the medicine cabinet, but the lock would not budge. And she didn't have the strength to break it.

Exhausted from lack of sleep and from the events she witnessed so helplessly, Alicia sat on the ground under the caves in the patio. Hours passed. Occasionally the hoarse crying of the child broke the silence. Then everything was quiet again.

At nightfall, the old man, his son, and the woman carrying a tiny corpse, left the clinic. Salazar had not yet awakened.

When he woke up, Alicia was packing her suitcases. Yawning, absorbed in thought, Salazar made no mention of what had happened.

"I've often told the Mission director that it isn't enough to put warm pox on a wound. You've got to pull out the evil by the roots. Do you remember what we were talking about the other night? You must know what the real problem is. I have finally come to realize it. The real problem is educating the Indians. They must be taught that the doctor and the clinic are a necessity. They already know that necessities cost. If we just give them everything, they won't appreciate what they get. They're easily influenced by evil. I should know them. I've lived among them. Alone like a dog. Without anyone to talk to. And in fear. Fear of the revenge of the witch doctors, of the angry families because of those I couldn't save. How do they think I can save them? They bring them when they're almost dead. There's no gratitude. The credit always goes to someone else: the saint, the witch doctor... But they're cowards, they only know how to kill through treachery. They never show their faces; they never look you in the eye. And with no one to talk to. The whites in Ochuc are scheming, envious. You've got to watch out for them, too, because they'll do you in at any time. It takes guts to put up with all that. Before you came, I made my own meals because I was afraid they would poison me. There's no justice. A person prepares for a career, studies hard for years. There's no fun, no women, no nothing. And the family making sacrifices so you can get your diploma. Compensation will come, you think. And then they send you to rot in a place like this. Of course, I could leave whenever I wanted to. I'm a good doctor; you could never find a better one anywhere. It would be to my advantage. I need to see people, I need to find someone to tell, someone to..."
explain to. Because I have discovered something, something very important.
Good will isn't enough. What's essential is education, education. These
Indians don't understand anything, and someone must begin teaching them.

Then you arrive with your fussiness and your nun-like manner and you find it
easy to despise me because I get drunk once in a while and because you found
out that I have a lover and because...".

Alicia did not answer. Sobs were gripping her throat.

"Sometimes I wind all of my watches at once. It's nice to hear them run.
They don't stop, nothing ever stops."

All of a sudden Salazar drew closer and took Alicia by the shoulders.

"What do you think is more important? The life of this little boy or the
lives of all the others? Kuleg will tell them what happened. We taught them
a lesson and what a lesson! Now the Indians will have learned that they can't
play around with the Oxchuc Clinic. They'll start coming, sure they will! And
with money up front. We'll be able to buy medicines, tons of medicine..."

Salazar was illustrating his thoughts with dramatic gestures. Alicia moved
away from him. When she'd finished packing her clothes, she closed the suit-
case. Outside the rain was falling.

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From Oficio de tinieblas (Tenebrae Service)

CHAPTER 1

Saint John the Protector, the one who was present when the worlds
first appeared, the one who gave approval for the century to begin, one of the
pillars that holds firm that which is firm. Saint John the Protector looked down
day one to contemplate the world of men.

His eyes went from the sea where the fishes play to the mountain where
the snow sleeps. They passed over the plain where the wind mounts its fury,
over the beaches of shimmering sand, over the forests made for the animals'
cautious roaming, over the valleys.

The gaze of Saint John the Protector fell upon the valley that is called Cha-
mula. He was pleased with the softness of the hills as they came breathlessly
from afar to seek repose here. He was pleased with the nearness of the sky,
and with the morning fog. And it was then that the spirit of Saint John was
moved with the desire to be revered in this place. And so that there would be
no lack of material for the building of the church and so that the church would
be white, Saint John turned all the white sheep of all the flocks grazing there
into stones.

The promontory, silent and motionless, remained there as a sign of good
will. But the tribes that populated the valley of Chamula, the Tzotzil bat-men,
did not know how to interpret the sign. Not even the elders, nor the men of
the council, were able to offer a valid opinion. All was confused mumbling,
downcast eyes, arms falling in fearful gesturing. Because of this, other men
had to come later. And these men came as if from another world. The sun
was in their faces and they spoke in a haughty tongue, a tongue which strikes
fear in the heart of those who hear it. A language, not like the Tzotzil, which is
spoken also in dreams, but instead an iron instrument of lordship, a weapon
of conquest, the sharp scourge of the law. Because how, if not in Castilian,
are orders given and sentences declared? And how is it possible to punish and
reward if not in Castilian?

But not even the new arrivals understood exactly the enigma of the petrified
sheep. They only understood the command that gives orders to work. And
they with their heads, and the Indians with their hands, began the construc-
tion of a temple. By day they dug a ditch for cement, but by night the ditch
Indian Mother

She always walks with a load on her shoulders: her baby and, then, her simple wares.

Wearily she crosses the mountains that imprison her and descends to the hostile city below.

Once her goods are sold (or pillared or despoiled), the Indian mother seeks rest. From the streets she is expelled by the insolence of passersby and the profusion and speed of vehicles. She takes refuge instead in the trees—her ancient, trusted friends—in the park. There she remains, in silence. She speaks only with her gods in the church. Weeping, she utters her prayer of humble complaint, her sorrowful imploring and utmost submission.

When the Indian mother returns to her village, she can be seen shepherding her flock, weaving the coarse cloth that will protect her family from the cold, preparing their meager repast.

In her brief moments of repose, she holds her baby on her lap. She hovers over him with a solicitude as anxious as it is useless. She contemplates him with eyes filled with love and guilt. The shadowy depth of her gaze has a name: despair.

For the Indian mother knows that tomorrow's horizons will be the same as today's: misery, ignorance, humiliation. Her hands (hands that motherhood should have filled with gifts), are empty. They will never be fully able to stifle her child's hungry cries, nor pour oil on wounds made by the burdens he must bear. The sorrow of dignity offended will not be forgotten.

Behold, then, a pair of empty hands. Beggar's hands, victim's hands, stalk our consciences with the obsessive tenacity of remorse. No, there is no room for bewilderment. For if anyone has taken from these hands what is rightly theirs, it is we. And who, besides us, can make restitution and fill them once more?

Oh, may sleep elude our brows, may friendship pierce our hearts like thorns, and may songs offend our mouths, as long as the hands of this woman, this Indian mother, remain unable to give her child bread, light, and justice.
A handkerchief for farewells,
a wedding chemise,
in the river, among the fishes
playing in the waves.

Like a newborn child
being baptized, these bits of cloth
display their infinite
miraculous whiteness.

Women of the foam
and of gesturings that cleanse,
find me a beautiful river
to wash my days.

Presence

Someday I'll know. This body that has been
my dwelling place, my prison, my hospital, is

This that I drew together around a dream,
a pain, a memory,
will give way in search of water, the leaf,
the original spore, and even the inert and the si

This knot that I was (inextricable
from anger, betrayals, hopes,
sudden glimmers of light, imperiousity,
hunger, cries of fear and helplessness
and joy illuminating the darkness
and words and love and love and loves)
will be cut apart by the years.

No one will see the destruction. None
will gather up the unfinished pages.

Among the handful of disparate acts,
blown about by chance, none will be
set apart like a precious pearl.

And nevertheless, brother, lover, child,
friend, forefather,
there is no solitude, no death
though I may forget and 1 may come to an end.

Yellow man, wherever you are, wherever you live
here shall we all remain.

The Indian stumbles toward the temple,
as drunk from weeping as from strong drink.
He stops before God to pour forth his misery
and wails with the cry of a hunted animal
and beats his head with his fists.

The stream of blood that flows from his mouth
leaves his body silent.

Stretched out with abandon he sleeps
on the floor strewn with reeds and breathes
the air filled with candlewax and incense.

May your hands innocent of the crucifixion
find endless rest.
May your faith find serene repose
in the arms of Love
like a humble village on a hillside.

Birth

He was here. No one (and he less than anyone)
know who he was, how, why, or where.

He spoke the words that others understand
—his own he never heard—;
he hid himself in the place where others look,
in his house, in his body, in his ages,
still ever absent and silent.

Like everyone else he was the master of his life
an hour or more and then he opened his hands.

Then they asked: was he beautiful?
Now no one remembered that countenance
that struggled with light to illuminate
and was beaten back so often.

They invented actions, intentions. And he had
a history, a destiny, an epitaph.

And he was, at last, a man.

Revelation

All of a sudden it came to me:
there is someone else.
And since that time I hardly sleep;
and scarcely eat.

It isn't possible to live
with this countenance
that is really mine
and that I do not yet know.

Source: Another Way to
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