

SUN, STONE, AND SHADOWS

20 GREAT MEXICAN
SHORT STORIES

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Blame the Tlaxcaltecs

ELENA GARRO

Nacha listened, motionless; someone was knocking at the back door. When again they persisted, she opened the door cautiously and looked out into the night. Señora Laura appeared, shushing her with a finger on her lips. She was still wearing the white dress, singed and caked with dirt and blood.

"Señora!" Nacha murmured.

Señora Laura tiptoed in and looked at the cook, her eyes puzzled. Then, feeling more assured, she sat next to the stove and looked at her kitchen as if she'd never seen it before.

"Nachita, give me some coffee. I'm freezing."

"Missus, your husband . . . your husband is going to kill you. We'd already given you up for dead."

"For dead?"

Laura looked at the white tiles of the kitchen with amazement, put her legs up on the chair, hugged her knees. She grew thoughtful. Nacha put water on and watched her mistress out of the corner of her eye; she couldn't think of a single thing to say. The señora rested her head on her knees; she seemed so sad.

"You know, Nacha, you can blame the Tlaxcaltecs."¹

¹ *Tlaxcaltecs*: an indigenous group from Tlaxcala in Mexico, who aided the 16th century Spanish conquistadors, led by Hernán Cortés.

Nacha didn't answer; she chose to watch the pot, which hadn't boiled.

Outside, night had blurred the roses in the garden and cast shadows across the fig trees. The lighted windows of neighboring houses shone far beyond the branches. The kitchen was kept separate from the world by an invisible wall of sadness, by no more than a bar rest.

"Don't you agree, Nacha?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'm no different from them. I'm a traitor," Laura said, mournfully.

The cook folded her arms, waiting for the water to start bubbling.

"And you, Nacha, are you a traitor?"

She looked at her, hopefully. If Nacha shared with her this capacity for betrayal, then Nacha would understand her, and tonight Laura needed someone to understand her.

Nacha thought about it for a moment and went back to watching the water that now boiled noisily. She poured it over the coffee and its warm smell made her feel attuned to her mistress.

"Yes, I'm a traitor too, Señora Laurita."

She poured the coffee, happily, into a little cup, put in two cubes of sugar and set it in front of the señora. And she, in turn lost in her own thoughts, took a few sips.

"You know, Nachita, now I know why we had so many accidents on our famous trip to Guanajuato. At Mil Cumbres we ran out of gas. Margarita got frightened because it was getting dark. A truck driver gave us some gas to get us to Morelia. In Cuitzeo, when we were crossing the white bridge, the car stopped suddenly. Margarita was annoyed with me. You know how lonely roads and the eyes of Indians frighten her. When a car full

of tourists came by, she went into town to look for a mechanic and I was stuck in the middle of the white bridge that crosses the dry lake and its bed of flat white rocks. The light was very white and the bridge, the rocks and the car began to float in it. Then the light broke into pieces until it became thousands of small dots and began to whirl until it was fixed in place like a picture. Time had entirely turned around, like it does when you see a postcard and then turn it to see what's written on the other side. That's how, at Cuitzeo Lake, I got to the child I'd been. The light brings about crises like that, when the sun turns white and you are in the very center of its rays. Thoughts, too, become thousands of small dots, and you get dizzy. At that moment I looked at the fabric of my white dress and, just then, heard his steps. I wasn't surprised. I looked up and saw him coming. In that same instant I remembered how serious my treachery had been; I was frightened and wanted to escape. But time closed in around me, it became singular and transitory, and I couldn't move from the seat of my car. When I was a child I was told, 'Some day you will find yourself faced with your acts turned to stones that are as irrevocable as that one,' and they showed me the statue of some god, though I can't remember now which one it was. We forget everything, don't we, Nachita, although we only forget for a time. In those days, even words seemed to be of stone, although of a stone that was liquid and clear. The stone hardened as each word was pronounced, and it was written for always in time. Weren't the words of your grown-ups like that?"

Nacha thought about it for a moment, then agreed, fully convinced.

"They were, Señora Laurita."

"The terrible thing is—and I discovered it that very moment—that everything that is unbelievable is true. He was coming, along the side of the bridge, sunburned and carrying

the weight of defeat on his naked shoulders. His eyes shone. Their black sparks reached me from the distance and his black hair curled in the white light of our meeting. Before I could do anything about it, he was in front of me. He stopped, held on to the car door and looked at me. He had a cut in his left hand and the blood that spurted from the wound in his shoulder was so red it seemed black. He didn't say anything to me. But I knew he was escaping, and that he had been beaten. He wanted to tell me I deserved to die, and at the same time, that my death would bring about his own. As wounded as he was, he was looking for me.

" 'You can blame the Tlaxcaltecs,' I told him.

"He turned to look up at the sky. Then he focused his eyes on mine again.

" 'What are you doing to yourself,' he asked, in a deep voice. I couldn't tell him I'd married, because I am married to him. There are things that just can't be said, you know that, Nachita.

" 'And the others?' I asked him.

" 'The ones who got out alive are in the same shape I am.' I saw that each word pained his mouth and I hushed, realizing the shamefulness of my treachery.

" 'You know I'm frightened and that's why I betray you.'

" 'I know,' he answered, and bowed his head. He's known me since I was a girl, Nacha. His father and mine were brothers and so we are cousins. He always loved me, at least that's what he said and that's what we all believed. At the bridge, I was embarrassed. The blood kept on flowing down his chest. I took a small handkerchief from my bag and, without saying a word, began to wipe the blood. I always loved him too, Nachita, because he is the very opposite of me. He's not fearful and he's not a traitor. He took my hand and looked at it.

" 'It's very pale; it looks like their hands,' he told me.

" 'I haven't gotten any sun for a while.' He lowered his eyes and let my hand drop. We stayed like that, in silence, listening to the blood flowing down his chest, he didn't reproach me for anything; he knows what I'm capable of. But the little threads of blood wrote a message on his chest, that his heart had preserved my words and my body. That's when I knew, Nachita, that time and love are the same thing.

" 'And my house?' I asked.

" 'We'll go see it.' He held me with his hot hand the way he would hold his shield, and I realized he wasn't carrying it. 'He lost it when he was escaping,' I told myself, and I let him guide me. In the light of Cuitzeo, his footsteps sounded the way they had in the other light: muffled and soft. We walked through the city that blazed on the water's edge. I closed my eyes. I already told you I'm a coward, Nacha. Or perhaps it was the smoke and the dust that made my eyes water. I sat on a stone and covered my face with my hands.

" 'I can't walk any more,' I told him.

" 'We're almost there,' he answered. He knelt by me and caressed my white dress with his fingertips.

" 'If you don't want to see what happened, don't look,' he told me, quietly.

"His black hair shadowed me. He wasn't angry, only sad. I would never have dared to embrace him before, but now I've learned I don't have to be respectful of the man, so I embraced his neck and kissed him on the mouth.

" 'You've always been dearest of all things to my heart,' he said. He lowered his head and looked at the earth, so full of dry stones. With one of them he drew two parallel lines and then lengthened them until they met and became one.

" 'These are you and me,' he said without looking up. I was left at a loss for words, Nachita.

" 'There's only a little left for time to be over and for us to be one. That's why I was looking for you.' I had forgotten, Nacha, that when time is all spent, the two of us will remain, one in the other, to enter true time as one. When he said that to me, I looked in his eyes. Before I had only dared to look in them when he was taking me, but, as I told you, I've learned not to respect the man's eyes. It's also true that I didn't want to see what was happening around me. I'm such a coward. I remembered the shrieks and I heard them again, strident, flaming in the middle of the morning. I also saw the stones whiz over my head and heard them crashing. He knelt in front of me and raised his arms and crossed them to make a little roof over my head.

" 'This is the end of man,' I said.

" 'That's true,' he said, with his voice over mine. And I saw myself in his eyes and in his body. Could he be a deer come to carry me to its hillside? Or a star, flinging me out to trace signs in the sky? His voice traced signs of blood on my breast, and my white dress turned tiger-striped in red and white.

" 'I'll return tonight; wait for me,' he whispered. He grasped his shield and looked at me from high above.

" 'Soon we'll be one,' he added, with his usual politeness. After he left, I began to hear battle cries again and I ran out in the middle of the rain of stones and was lost all the way to the car, parked on the Cuitzeo Lake Bridge.

" 'What's the matter? Are you wounded?' Margarita shouted at me when she arrived. Frightened, she touched the blood on my white dress and pointed to the blood on my lips and the dirt that matted my hair. The dead eyes of the Cuitzeo mechanic stared at me from the other car.

" 'Indian savages! A woman can't be left alone,' he muttered as he leapt from the car as if to help me.

" 'We arrived at Mexico City at nightfall. How it had changed,

Nachita, I couldn't believe it! At noon the warriors had been there, but now there wasn't even a trace of them. There was no rubble left either. We passed the sad and silent Zócalo; nothing—nothing!—remained of the other plaza. Margarita watched me out of the corner of her eye. When we got home you opened the door. Remember?"

Nacha nodded her head, agreeing. It was quite true that, barely two months before, Señora Laurita and her mother-in-law had gone to Guanajuato on a visit. The night they returned, they, Josefina the chamber maid and she herself, had noticed the blood on the dress and the señora's vacant gaze. Margarita, the older lady, motioned them to keep quiet. She seemed very worried. Josefina told her later that, at dinner, the master stared at his wife in annoyance and said, "Why don't you change your clothes? Do you enjoy returning to unpleasant memories?"

Señora Margarita, his mother, had already told him what happened and motioned to him, as if to say "Hush, have a little consideration." Señora Laurita didn't answer; she stroked her lips and smiled as if she knew something. Then the master went back to talking about president López Mateos.

"You know how he's always talking about that man," Josefina had added, contemptuously.

In their hearts, they were sure that Señora Laurita was bored with so much talk about the president and his official visits.

"How odd things are, Nachita, I'd never noticed until that night how bored I could be with Pablo," the mistress noted, hugging her knees affectionately, and subtly acknowledging that Josefina and Nachita were right.

The cook folded her arms and nodded in agreement.

"From the time I entered the house, the furniture, the vases and the mirror toppled over on me and left me sadder than I was. How many days, how many years will I have to wait before

my cousin comes to fetch me? That's what I told myself, and I regretted my treachery. As we dined, I noticed that Pablo did not speak in words but in letters. I started to count them while I watched his thick mouth and dead eye. Suddenly, he was silent. You know he forgets everything. He stood there with his arms by his side. 'This new husband has no memory and all he knows are the day in, day out things.'

" 'You have a troubled and confused husband,' he told me, looking at the stains on my dress again. My poor mother-in-law got embarrassed and, as we were drinking coffee, she got up to play a twist.

" 'To cheer you up,' she told us, pretending to smile because she could tell trouble was brewing.

"We didn't talk. The house filled up with noise. I looked at Pablo. 'He looks like . . . ' and I didn't dare to say his name because I was afraid that they would read my mind. It's true that they look alike, Nacha. Both of them like rain and cool houses. The two of them look at the sky in the afternoon and have black hair and white teeth. But Pablo talks in fits and starts, he gets angry about anything, and is always asking, 'What are you thinking?' My cousin husband doesn't do or say anything like that."

"That's for sure. It's true that the boss is a pain in the neck," Nacha said with annoyance.

Laura sighed and looked with a sense of relief at her cook. At least she could confide in her.

"At night, while Pablo kissed me, I kept repeating to myself, 'When will he come for me?' And I almost cried, recalling the blood streaming from the wound in his shoulder. Neither could I forget his arms folded over my head that made a little roof for me. At the same time I was afraid that Pablo would notice that my cousin had kissed me that morning. But he didn't no-

tice a thing, and if it hadn't been that Josefina had frightened me in the morning, Pablo would never have known."

Nachita agreed. That Josefina loved to start trouble; she was to blame. Nacha had told her, "Be quiet, be quiet, for God's sake. There must have been a reason they didn't hear us scream." But it was useless.

No sooner had Josefina come into the bosses' room with the breakfast tray than she told what she should have kept to herself.

"Missus, last night a man was peeking through your bedroom window. Nacha and I screamed and screamed!"

"We didn't hear anything," the master said. He was shocked.

"It was he," that fool of a mistress screeched.

"Who is he?" the master asked, looking at the señora as if he wanted to kill her. At least that's what Josefina said later.

The señora was really scared. She covered her mouth with her hand, and when the boss asked her the same question again—he was getting angrier and angrier—she answered, "The Indian, the Indian who followed me from Cuitzeo to Mexico City."

That's how Josefina found out the business about the Indian and that's how she told Nachita.

"We have to let the police know immediately!" the boss yelled.

Josefina showed them the window the stranger had been looking through and Pablo examined it closely. There were almost-fresh blood stains on the window sill.

"He's wounded," señor Pablo said in a worried tone. He took a few steps around the bedroom and stopped in front of his wife.

"It was an Indian, sir," Josefina said, just as Laura had said. Pablo saw the white dress thrown over a chair and picked it up roughly.

"Can you tell me where these stains came from?"

The señora was silent, looking at the blood stains on the bodice of the dress while the master punched the chest of drawers with his fist. Then he went to his wife and slapped her. Josefina saw and heard all that.

"He's rough and his actions are as confused as his thoughts. It's not my fault he accepted defeat," Laura said disdainfully.

"That's true," Nachita agreed.

There was a long silence in the kitchen. Laura stuck the tip of her finger in the bottom of the cup to stir the black grounds that had settled, and when Nacha saw this, she poured her a nice fresh cup of hot coffee.

"Drink your coffee, Señora," she said, feeling sorry for her mistress's unhappiness. After all, what was the boss complaining about? You could see from miles away that Señora Laurita wasn't meant for him.

"I fell in love with Pablo on a road, during a moment when he reminded me of someone I knew, someone I couldn't remember. And later, just sometimes, I recaptured the moment when it seemed that he would become the one he resembled. But it wasn't true. He became absurd again, without a memory, and he only repeated the gestures of all the men of Mexico City. How did you expect me not to notice the deception? When he's angry, he doesn't allow me to leave the house. You know it's true. How many times has he started arguments at the movies or at restaurants! You know, Nachita. On the other hand, my cousin husband never gets angry at his wife."

Nacha knew what the señora was saying was true, and that was why that morning when Josefina had come in the kitchen, scared and screaming, "Wake up Señora Margarita, the master is beating the mistress," Nacha, had run to the older woman's bedroom.

His mother's presence calmed Señor Pablo. Margarita was very surprised to hear the business about the Indian, since she hadn't seen him at Cuitzeo Lake and had only seen the blood, as we all had.

"Perhaps you suffered from sunstroke at the lake, Laura, and had a nosebleed. We had the top down on the car, you know, son." She talked almost without knowing what to say.

Señora Laura flung herself face down on the bed and was lost in her own thoughts while her husband and her mother-in-law argued.

"Do you know what I was thinking this morning, Nachita? Suppose he saw me last night when Pablo was kissing me. And I felt like crying. Just then I remembered that when a man and a woman love each other and they have no children, they are condemned to become one. That's what my other father told me when I brought him a drink of water and he looked at the door behind which my cousin husband and I slept. Everything my other father had told me was coming true. I could hear Pablo and Margarita's words from my pillow and they were talking foolishness. 'I'm going to fetch him,' I told myself. 'But, where?' Later, when you returned to my room to ask me what we were going to do about dinner, a thought came to my head, 'Go to the Tacuba Café.' And I didn't even know that café, Nachita, I'd only heard it mentioned."

Nacha remembered the señora as if she could see her now, putting on her white, blood-stained dress, the same one she was wearing in the kitchen now.

"For God's sakes, Laura, don't put that dress on," her mother-in-law said. But she didn't pay any attention. To hide the stains, she put a white sweater on over it, buttoned up to the neck, and left for the street without saying goodbye. The worst

came later. No, not the worst. The worst was about to happen now in the kitchen, if Señora Margarita happened to wake up.

"There was no one in the Tacuba Café. That place is dismal, Nachita. A waiter came up to me.

" 'What would you like?' I didn't want anything but I had to ask for something.

" 'Some coconut nougat.'

"My cousin and I used to eat coconut when we were small. A clock in the café told time. 'In all the cities, there are clocks telling time; it must be wearing away bit by bit. When it only exists as a transparent layer, he will arrive and the two lines he traced will become one and I will live in the dearest chamber of his heart.' That's what I told myself as I ate the nougat.

" 'What time is it?', I asked the waiter.

" 'Twelve, Miss.'

" 'Pablo arrives at one,' I told myself. 'If I have a taxi take me outside of town, I can wait a little longer.' But I didn't wait and I went out on the street. The sun was silver. My thoughts turned into shining dust and there was no present, past, nor future. My cousin was on the sidewalk. He stood in front of me. He looked at me for a long time with his sad eyes.

" 'What are you doing?' he asked me in his deep voice.

" 'I was waiting for you.'

"He was as still as a panther. I saw his black hair and the wound on his shoulder.

" 'Weren't you afraid to be here all by yourself?'

"The stones and the shouts buzzed around us again and I felt something burn against my back. 'Don't look,' he told me.

"He knelt on the ground and put out the flame that had started to blaze on my dress. I saw the despair in his eyes.

" 'Get me out of here!' I screamed with all my might, because I remembered I was in front of my father's house, that the

house was burning and that my parents were in the back and my little brothers were dead. I could see everything reflected in his eyes while he knelt in the dirt putting out the fire on my dress. I allowed myself to fall on him and he gathered me in his arms. He covered my eyes with his hot hand.

" 'This is the end of man,' I told him, my eyes still under his hand.

" 'Don't look at it!'

"He held me against his heart. I could hear it pound like thunder rolling in the mountains. How long would it be before time was over and I would hear him forever. My tears cooled his hand, still burning from the fire in the city. The shrieks and the stones surrounded us, but I was safe against his breast.

" 'Sleep with me,' he said in a very low voice.

" 'Did you see me last night?' I asked him.

" 'I saw you.'

"We fell asleep in the morning light, in the heat of the fire. When we remembered, he got up and grabbed his shield.

" 'Hide until morning. I'll come for you.'

"He ran off quickly, his legs still naked. And I slipped away again, Nachita, because I was frightened when I was alone.

" 'Are you feeling bad, Miss?'

"A voice just like Pablo's approached me on the middle of the street.

" 'How dare you? Leave me alone.'

"I took a taxi that drove by the outskirts to bring me home and I got here."

Nacha remembered her arrival. She had opened the door herself, and it was she who gave her the news. Josefina came down later, almost diving down the stairs.

"Missus, the master and Señora Margarita are at the police station."

Laura stared at her, wordless in amazement.

"Where were you, Missus?"

"I went to the Tacuba Café."

"But that was two days ago."

Josefina had *Today's News* with her. She read in a loud voice, "Mrs. Aldama's whereabouts remain unknown. It is believed that the sinister, Indian-looking man who followed her from Cuitzeo may be a psychopath. The police in the states of Michoacán and Guanajuato are investigating the event."

Señora Laurita grabbed the newspaper from Josefina's hands and tore it angrily. Then she went to her room. Nacha and Josefina followed her; it was best not to leave her alone. They saw her throw herself on the bed and start dreaming with her eyes wide open. The two had the very same thought and told each other so in the kitchen. "As far as I'm concerned, Señora Laurita is in love." When the master arrived they were still in their mistress's room.

"Laura!" he shouted. He rushed to the bed and took his wife in his arms.

"Heart of my heart," the man sobbed.

For a moment, Señora Laurita seemed to soften towards him.

"Señor," Josefina blustered. "The Señora's dress is completely scorched!"

Nacha looked at her, disapprovingly. The master checked over the señora's dress and legs.

"It's true. Even the soles of her shoes are singed. What happened, my love, where were you?"

"At the Tacuba Café," the señora answered calmly.

Señora Margarita twisted her hands and approached her daughter-in-law.

"We know you were there and that you had some nougat. What happened then?"

"I took a taxi and drove home past the outskirts of town."
Nacha lowered her eyes. Josefina opened her mouth as if to say something, and Señora Margarita bit her lip. Pablo reacted differently; he grabbed his wife by her shoulders and shook her violently.

"Stop acting like an idiot! Where were you for two days? Why is your dress burned?"

"Burned? But he extinguished it . . ." The words slipped out of Señora Laura's mouth.

"He? That filthy Indian?" Pablo went back to shaking her in anger.

"I met him at the door to the Tacuba Café," the señora sobbed, half dead of fear.

"I didn't think you'd stoop so low," the boss said and pushed her onto the bed.

"Tell us who he is," her mother-in-law said, softening her voice.

"I couldn't tell them that he was my husband, could I, Nacha?" Laura asked, wanting the cook's approval.

Nacha approved of the señora's discretion and remembered how, at noontime, and, saddened by what her mistress' was going through, she had said, "Perhaps the Cuitzeo Indian is a witch man."

But Señora Margarita had turned towards her with her eyes blazing, to scream an answer, "A witch man! You mean a murderer!"

After that, they kept Señora Laurita in the house for days. The master ordered them to watch the doors and windows. They, the maids, went in and out of the room continuously to check on her. Nacha never discussed the situation or the odd, surprising things she'd seen. But who could silence Josefina?

"Master, this morning at dawn the Indian was by the window again," she announced when she took in the breakfast tray.

The master rushed to the window and again found a trace of fresh blood. The señora began to cry.

"My poor little one, my poor little one," she sobbed.

It was that afternoon that the master brought a doctor. After that, the doctor came every afternoon.

"He asked me about my childhood, about my father and mother. But, Nachita, I didn't know which childhood he meant, or which father or mother he wanted to know about. That's why I talked to him about the conquest of Mexico. You understand me, don't you?" Laura asked, keeping her eyes on the yellow bowls.

"Yes, ma'am," and Nachita, feeling nervous, examined the garden through the window glass. Night was just beginning to announce its presence in the deepening shadows. She remembered the master's listless face and his mother's distressed glances at dinner.

"Laura asked the doctor for Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *History*. She said that that's the only thing that interests her."

Señora Margarita dropped her fork. "My poor son, your wife is mad."

"The only thing she talks about is the fall of the great Tenochtitlán,"² Señor Pablo added somberly.

Two days later, the doctor, Señora Margarita, and Señor Pablo decided that locking Laura in made her depression worse. She should have some contact with the world and face her responsibilities. From then on, the boss sent the car so his wife could take short rides around Chapultepec Park.

² *The great Tenochtitlán*: capital of the Aztec empire, whose ruins lie within modern-day Mexico City.

The señora was accompanied by her mother-in-law, and the chauffeur had orders to watch them closely. Unfortunately the eucalyptus-laden atmosphere didn't improve her condition, and no sooner would Señora Laurita get back home than she would lock herself up in her room to read Bernal Díaz's *Conquest of Mexico*.

One morning, Señora Margarita came back from Chapultepec Park alone and frantic. "That crazy woman ran away," she shouted in a huge voice.

"Look, Nacha, I sat on the same bench as usual and told myself, 'He won't forgive me. A man can forgive one, two, three, four betrayals but not constant betrayal.' This made me very sad. It was very hot and Margarita bought herself some vanilla ice cream. I didn't want any and she got into the car to eat it. I realized that she was as bored of me as I was of her. I don't like being watched and I tried to look at other things so I wouldn't see her eating her cone and watching me. I noticed the grayish foliage that hung from the *abuehuete* trees and, I don't know why, but the morning became as sad as those trees. 'They and I have seen the same crises,' I told myself. During the lonely hours, alone on an empty path. My husband had watched my constant betrayal through the window and had abandoned me to this path made of non-existent things. I remembered the smell of corn leaves and the hushed murmur of his steps. 'This is the way he walked, with the rhythm of dry leaves when the February wind carries them over the stones. At that time I didn't have to turn my head to know that he was watching me from behind . . . ' I was meandering through those sad thoughts when I heard the sun spill and the dry leaves begin to shift. His breathing came close behind me, then he stood in front of me. I saw his naked feet in front of mine. He had a scratch on his knee. I lifted my eyes and found myself under

his. We stood there a long time without speaking. Out of respect, I waited for his word.

" 'What are you doing to yourself?' he asked me.

"I saw that he wasn't moving and that he seemed sadder than ever. 'I was waiting for you,' I answered.

" 'The last day is almost here.'

"I thought that his voice came from the depth of time. Blood still surged from his shoulder. I was embarrassed and lowered my eyes. I opened my bag, and took out a small handkerchief to wipe his chest. Then I put it away again. He followed, watching me quietly.

" 'Let us go to the Tacuba door. There are many betrayals.'

"He grasped my hand and we walked among the people, who screamed and moaned. Many bodies floated in the water of the canals. Pestilence rose up around us and children cried, running from here to there, lost and looking for their parents. I looked at everything without wanting to see it. The shattered canoes didn't carry anything but sadness. The husband sat me under a broken tree. He knelt on the earth and watched what happened around us. He wasn't afraid. Then he looked at me.

" 'I know you're a traitor and that you mean well. The good grows alongside the bad.'

"The children were screaming so loudly I could hardly hear him. The sound came from far off, but it was so loud that it shattered the daylight. It seemed like the last time they would cry.

" 'It's the children,' he told me. 'This is the end of man,' I repeated, because I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"He put his hands over my ears and then held me against his chest. 'You were a traitor when I met you, and I loved you that way.'

"‘You were born without luck,’ I told him. I embraced him. My cousin and husband closed his eyes to keep the tears from flowing. We lay ourselves on the broken branches of the *pirú*. The shouts of the warriors, the stones, and the weeping of the children reached us even there.

"‘Time is almost over,’ my husband sighed.

"The women who didn’t want to die that day were escaping through a crevice. Rows of men fell one after the other, as if claspings hands as a single blow felled them all at once. Some of them let out such loud cries that the sound echoed long after their death.

"It wasn’t long before we became one that my cousin got up, joined some branches together and made me a little cave.

"‘Wait for me here.’

"He looked at me and went back to the fray, hoping to turn aside defeat. I stayed there, curled up. I didn’t want to see the people escaping, so I wouldn’t be tempted, and I didn’t want to see the bodies floating in the water, so I wouldn’t cry. I began to count the little fruits that hung from the cut branches; they were dry and when I touched them with my fingers, the red husks fell from them. I don’t know why I thought they were bad luck and decided to watch the sky as it began to darken. First it turned grey, then it began to take on the color of the drowned bodies in the canal. I recalled the colors of other afternoons. But the evening grew more and more bruised, swelling as if it would soon burst, and I understood that time was over. What would happen to me if my cousin didn’t return? He might have died in battle. I didn’t care what happened to him, I ran out of there as fast as I could, with fright on my heels. ‘When he comes back to look for me . . .’ I didn’t have time to finish my thought because I found myself in the Mexico City dusk. ‘Margarita must have finished her ice cream and Pablo is probably angry.’ A taxi drove along the

outskirts to bring me home. And you know, Nachita, the outskirts were the canals, clogged with bodies. That's why I was so sad when I got home. Now, Nachita, don't tell the master that I spent the afternoon with my husband."

Nachita arranged her arms on her purple skirt.

"Señor Pablo went to Acapulco ten days ago. He got very thin during all the weeks of the investigation," Nacha explained, feeling self-satisfied.

Laura looked at her without any surprise and sighed with relief.

"But Señora Margarita is upstairs," Nacha added, turning her eyes up to the kitchen ceiling.

Laura hugged her knees and looked through the window glass at the roses, blurred by the night shadows, and at the lights in the neighboring windows that had begun to go out.

Nacha sprinkled salt on the back of her hand and licked it eagerly.

"So many coyotes! The whole pack is in an uproar," she said, her voice full of salt.

Laura listened for a moment. "Damn animals! You should have seen them this afternoon," she said.

"As long as they don't get in the señor's path or make him lose his way," Nacha said, fearfully.

"Why should he be afraid of them tonight, he was never afraid of them before?" Laura said in annoyance.

Nacha drew closer to strengthen the intimacy that had suddenly sprung up between them. "They're punier than the Tlaxcaltecs," she told her in a soft voice.

The two women were silent. Nacha, licking bit by bit the salt on her hand, and Laura, who was worried, were both listening to the coyote howls that filled the night. It was Nacha who saw him arrive and opened the window to him.

"Señora, he's come for you," she whispered in a voice so low only Laura could hear.

Afterwards, when Laura had left with him for good, Nacha wiped the blood from the window and frightened away the coyotes, who had entered the century that was just then waning. Straining her ancient eyes, Nacha checked to see that everything was in order. She washed the coffee cup, threw the red lipstick-stained butts away in the garbage can, put the coffee pot away in the cupboard and shut off the light.

"I say Señora Laurita didn't belong to this time, and not to the master either," she said that morning when she took breakfast to Señora Margarita.

"I won't work at the Aldama house any more. I'm looking for something else," she told Josefina. And, because of the chambermaid's carelessness, Nacha left without even collecting her salary.

Translated by Ina Cumpiano