

Modesta Gómez

Rosario Castellanos

Few Mexican writers have written as gracefully or as poignantly about the inequalities of class and the intersecting dynamics of race and gender as Rosario Castellanos (1925-1974)—themes that are brilliantly invoked in “Modesta Gómez.” Castellanos was raised on her affluent family’s ranch in southern Chiapas, near the Guatemalan border, where she witnessed firsthand the cruelties and ambiguities inherent in Indian-white relations. She later studied in Mexico City, earning a master’s degree in philosophy from the National University in 1955, where she later taught comparative literature and also served as press and information director. Castellanos published two highly regarded novels, some theatrical works, and several volumes of poetry, essays, and short stories, including City of Kings, about San Cristóbal de las Casas, in which the following selection appears. In 1971 she was named Mexico’s ambassador to Israel, where she was electrocuted in a tragic accident in 1974, at the age of 49.

How cold the mornings are in Ciudad Real! A mist covers every thing. From invisible places you hear the chimes of the first mass, the creak of massive doors opening, the wheeze of mills beginning to turn.

Huddled in the folds of her black shawl, Modesta Gómez was shivering as she walked back and forth. Her friend, Doña Agueda, the butcher, noticed:

“Some people don’t have any stomach for this sort of work, they pretend they’re too delicate, but what I think is that they’re just plain lazy. The bad thing about being an ambusher is that you’ve got to get up so early.”

I’ve always gotten up early, thought Modesta. That’s how my mother raised me.

(No matter how she tried, Modesta couldn’t remember her mother’s scolding words, that face bending over her in early childhood. Too many years had gone by.)

They sent me away when I was just a little girl. One less mouth at home was a great relief for everyone.

Modesta could still remember the clean change of clothes they had dressed her in for the occasion. Then, suddenly, she found herself standing before an

enormous door with a bronze knocker: a finely sculpted hand, with a ring entwined on one of its fingers. It was the house of the Ochoas: Don Humberto, owner of the "La Esperanza" store; Doña Romelia, his wife; Berta, Dolores and Clara, his daughters; and the youngest, his son Jorgito.

The house was full of marvelous surprises. What a feeling of wonder when Modesta discovered the drawing room! Cane furniture, wicker holders with fans of multicolored postcards spread out against the wall, the floor made of wood. Wood! A pleasant sensation of warmth rose from Modesta's bare feet all the way up to her heart. Yes, she was happy to stay with the Ochoas, to know that from now on this magnificent house would also be her home.

Doña Romelia led her to the kitchen. The servants gave the waddling little girl a hostile reception, and when they discovered that her hair was swarming with lice they unceremoniously dunked her into a vat filled with ice-cold water. They scrubbed her with soap-root, over and over again, until her braids were squeaky clean.

"All right, then. Now you look good enough to be presented to the *señores*. They're finicky enough already. But they really take a lot of pains with little Jorgito. Since he's the only boy . . ."

Modesta and Jorgito were almost the same age. And yet, she was the baby-carrier, the one who had to take care of him and keep him entertained.

"They say that my legs got twisted from carrying him around so much, because they weren't strong enough yet. Who knows?"

But the little boy was really spoiled rotten. If he couldn't have his own way, he went "completely nuts," as he himself used to say. They could hear him screaming all the way out to the store. Doña Romelia would hurry over.

"What did they do to you, lambkins, my little darling?"

Without breaking his wails even for a second, Jorgito would point to Modesta.

"The carrier?" the mother nodded. "We'll fix her so that she doesn't lay a finger on you again. Look, a smack here, right in the noodle, a yank on the ear and a whack on the behind. Is that better, my little dumpling, little apple of my eye? All right, you're going to have to let me go now; I have things to do."

In spite of these incidents, the children were inseparable. Together they suffered through all the childhood illnesses; together they discovered secrets; together they got into mischief.

Although this sort of intimacy relieved Doña Romelia from the extreme attention that her son demanded, it still struck her as uncalled-for. How could she ward off the risks? The only idea that occurred to Doña Romelia was to put Jorgito into primary school, and to forbid Modesta from using the familiar *vos* when she addressed him.

"He's your master, your *patrón*," she explained condescendingly, "and you can't be so chummy with the *patrones*."

While the boy was learning to read and count, Modesta was busy in the kitchen; feeding the fireplace, hauling in water, and gathering up slop for the hogs.

They waited until she was a little bigger, until she'd had her first period, to give Modesta a more important position. They put away the old mat she had slept on since first arriving, and replaced it with a cot that was going unused since a cook had died. Under the pillow Modesta placed her wooden comb and her mirror with its celluloid frame. By this time she was a robust little pole, and she liked to put on airs. When she went out to the street to run an errand, she washed her feet very carefully, scrubbing them with a stone. The starch in her skirts crackled as she walked past.

The street was the stage for her triumphs: young men, barefoot like her but with decent jobs and ready to marry, courted her with rough compliments; the "swells," Jorgito's friends, propositioned her; and wealthy old men offered her presents and money.

At night Modesta dreamed of being the lawfully married wife of an artisan. She could imagine the humble little house on the outskirts of Ciudad Real, having to scrape to make a living, the life of sacrifices that awaited her. No, better not. There would always be time enough for a legal marriage. Better to sow her oats first, to have a good time like bad women do. An old bawd would sell her, the kind that offers girls to gentlemen. Modesta could see herself in a corner of the brothel, wrapped in a shawl with her eyes lowered, while drunken, scandalous men made bids to see who would be the first to possess her. And then, if everything went well, the man who made her his mistress would set her up in a little business so she could support herself. Modesta would not hold her head up high, she wouldn't be a model of purity as though she had left the charge of her *patrones* heading for the church, all dressed in white. But maybe she would have a child with good blood, and a little savings. She would learn some trade. With time her reputation would grow, and they would call on her to grind chocolate or to cure evil spells in the homes of well-off people.

But instead, she had ended up being an ambusher. What a topsy-turvy world this is!

One night Modesta's dreams were interrupted. The door to the servants' room opened quietly, and in the darkness someone moved toward the girl's cot. Modesta felt heavy breathing close to her, and a rapidly beating pulse. She crossed herself, thinking it a ghost. But a hand fell brutally upon her body. She tried to scream, and her scream was smothered by another mouth cover-

ing her own. She and her adversary struggled while the other women slept soundly. From a scar on his shoulder, Modesta recognized Jorgito. She didn't try to defend herself any longer. She closed her eyes, and submitted to him.

Doña Romelia had suspicions about her son's hanky-panky, and the servants' gossip removed all doubt. But she decided to pretend that she knew nothing. After all, Jorgito was a man, not a saint; and he was at that age when the blood starts to boil. Besides, it was preferable for him to find release in his own home, instead of going around with tramps who teach boys bad habits and bring them to ruin.

Thanks to his rape of Modesta, Jorge could brag about being a "real" man. For several months he had been smoking in secret, and he had gone off and gotten drunk two or three times. But in spite of the taunts of his friends, he still hadn't dared to go with women. He was afraid of them: all painted up, so vulgar in their gestures and the way they talked. But with Modesta he felt comfortable. The only thing that worried him was that his family might find out what was going on between them. To mislead them, in front of everybody he treated Modesta coldly, and even with exaggerated harshness. But at night he again sought out that body he knew through long familiarity, in which the smells of home and childhood memories mingled together.

But as the saying goes, "What night hides is revealed by day." Modesta's complexion began to take on a mottled look; there were dark circles under her eyes and her movements were listless. The other servants made comments, accompanied by obscene winks and malicious laughter.

One morning Modesta had to stop her work grinding corn because a sudden attack of nausea swept over her. A tattletale went to notify the *patrona* that Modesta was pregnant.

Doña Romelia showed up in the kitchen like a fury.

"You ungrateful little slut. You would have to go off the deep end. And what did you think would happen? That I was going to cover up your carrying-on? Not on your life. I have a husband that I have to answer to, daughters that I need to have good examples for. So I want you out of here right now."

Before she left the Ochoas' house, Modesta was subjected to a humiliating search. The lady and her daughters went through the girl's clothing and possessions to make certain that she hadn't stolen anything. After that they formed a sort of barricade in the entryway, and Modesta had to go through it in order to leave.

Fleeting, she glanced at those faces. Don Humberto's, ruddy from fat, with its watery little eyes; Doña Romelia's, twitching with indignation; the girls', Clara, Dolores, and Berta's, curious and slightly pale with envy. Modesta looked for Jorgito's face, but he wasn't there.

Modesta had reached the town limits of Moxviquil. She stopped. Other women, barefoot and badly dressed just like her, were already there. They looked at her with distrust.

One of them spoke up for her: "Leave her alone. She's a Christian like anybody else, and she's got three kids to support."

"And what about us? Are we some kind of rich women?"

"Did we come here to sweep up money with a broom?"

"What this one takes isn't going to get us out of the poor-house. You've got to have a little pity. She was just left a widow."

"Who was her husband?"

"Alberto Gómez. The one who just died."

"The bricklayer?"

"The one who drank himself to death?"

(Although it was spoken in a low voice, Modesta could hear the remark. A violent flush spread across her cheeks. Alberto Gómez, the one who drank himself to death! Filthy lies! Her husband didn't die like that. All right, it was true that he did his share of drinking, even more than his share lately. But the poor man had good reason to. He was tired of wearing the pavement out looking for work. Nobody builds a house, nobody has repairs done when it's the rainy season. Alberto got tired of waiting on porticos or in doorways for the rains to stop. That's what got him going into bars in the first place. Bad company did the rest. Alberto neglected his obligations, he mistreated his family. You had to forgive him. When a man isn't in his right mind, he does one awful thing after another. The next day, when the haze wore off, it scared him to see Modesta all full of bruises, and the children in a corner, trembling with fear. He cried with shame and remorse. But he didn't change. Vice is stronger than reason.

While she waited up for her husband at all hours of the night, Modesta tortured herself thinking about the million things that could happen to him on the streets. A fight, a stray bullet, being run over. Modesta imagined him carried in on a stretcher, covered with blood, and she wrung her hands wondering where she was going to find money for the burial.

But things happened differently. She had to go get Alberto because he had fallen asleep on the sidewalk, and there the night found him and the evening dew fell on him. Alberto had no visible cuts or bruises. He complained a little about a pain in his side. They made him an ointment out of animal fat just in case he had taken a chill; they put cupping-glasses on him; he drank em-bered water. But the pain only got stronger. The death rattle was brief, and the neighbor women took up a collection to pay for the coffin.

"The cure turned out to be worse for you than the disease," Modesta's

friend Agueda told her. "You married Alberto so you'd be under a man's hand, and so the son of the famous Jorge would grow up with some respect. And now you end up a widow, not a penny to your name, with three mouths to feed and nobody to look out for you."

It was true. And true also that the years Modesta was married to Alberto were years of pain and hard work. True that when he was drunk, the bricklayer beat her, throwing in her face how Jorgito had abused her, and true that his death was the biggest humiliation of all for her family. But Alberto had come through for Modesta at just the right time: when everyone had turned their backs on her so as not to see her dishonor. Alberto had given her his name and his legitimate children; he had made a lady out of her. How many of these beggars in widows' weeds talking behind her back wouldn't have sold their souls to the devil to be able to say the same thing!)

The early morning mist began to lift. Modesta had sat down on a rock. One of the ambushers approached her.

"Yday? Weren't you one of the clerks in Doña Agueda's butcher-shop?"

"I still am. But I don't make enough money there. With me and my three little ones I needed something extra. My friend Agueda told me about this."

"We only do it because when you're poor, you lead a dog's life. But being an ambusher wears you down. It's hardly worth it."

(Modesta searched the face of the woman talking to her, suspicious. What was the point of saying awful things like that? Probably to scare her off so she wouldn't be any competition. That was a big mistake. Modesta was no pansy: in other places she had gone through her own hard times. Because the business of being behind a butcher counter was no paradise either. Nothing but work all morning long: keeping the place clean — and with the flies there was never any end to it; taking care of the merchandise; bargaining with the clients. Those maids from rich houses who were always demanding the fattest pieces of meat, the best cuts, and the cheapest price! She had to give in to their wishes, but Modesta took out her revenge on the others. The ones who looked poor and badly dressed, the women who had stands in the market place and their employees, she held strictly to account; and if they ever tried to get their meat at another stand because it was a better deal, she would scream at them and never wait on them again.)

"Yes, handling meat is a dirty job. But it's even worse to be an ambusher. Here you have to fight with Indians."

(And where don't you have to? thought Modesta. Her friend Agueda had instructed her right from the start: for Indians you saved the spoiled or grainy meat, the big lead weight that tilted the scales, and your howls of indignation if he made even the slightest protest. The women who ran the other stands



Chamula Women. (Photographer Gertrude Blom. Reprinted by permission of Na Bolom Museum, Mexico.)

would come running over when they heard the outburst. A fight would break out, with gendarmes and people who were just curious joining in, egging on the participants with sharp words, insulting gestures and shoves. The outcome of the scuffle, invariably, was the Indian's hat or bag that the victor held up in the air like a trophy, and the vanquished's frightened run to escape the threats and mockery of the crowd.)

"Here they come now!"

The ambushers stopped talking in order to look toward the hills. Now they could make out some figures moving around in the mist. They were Indians, loaded down with the merchandise they were going to sell in Ciudad Real. The ambushers moved forward a few steps in their direction. Modesta imitated them.

The two groups were face to face. A few brief seconds of anticipation went by. Finally the Indians began walking again, their heads lowered, their eyes fixed obstinately on the ground, as if the magical recourse of not looking at the women could make them non-existent.

The ambushers threw themselves upon the Indians tumultuously. Stifling screams, they struggled with them for possession of objects they didn't want to damage. Finally, when the wool blanket or the net of vegetables or the clay utensil were in the ambusher's hands, she would take a few coins from her blouse, and without counting them, let them drop to the ground, where the fallen Indian would pick them up.

Taking advantage of the fight's confusion, a young Indian girl tried to escape, running away with her burden intact.

"That's one of yours," one of the ambushers shouted jeeringly to Modesta.

Automatically, just like an animal trained for a long time in the hunt, Modesta threw herself after the fugitive. When she caught up to her she grabbed her skirt, and the two of them tumbled to the ground. Modesta fought until she was on top of her. She pulled her braids, slapped her cheeks, dug her fingernails into her ears. Harder! Harder!

"You damn Indian! Now you're going to pay me for everything!"

The Indian girl writhed in pain. Ten thin lines of blood ran from her earlobes down to her neck.

"No more, Ma'am, no more . . ."

Inflamed, panting, Modesta held on to her victim. She didn't want to let go of her, not even when the Indian handed over the wool blanket she had been hiding. Another ambusher had to intervene.

"That's enough," she said forcefully to Modesta, pulling her to her feet.

Modesta staggered like a drunk while she used her shawl to wipe her face, dripping with sweat.

"And you," continued the ambusher, turning to the Indian, "quit sniveling: that's no way to act. Nothing's happened to you. Take this money and God help you. Be thankful we're not taking you to the Courthouse for causing a disturbance."

The Indian girl hastily picked up the coins, and quickly ran away. Modesta watched, uncomprehending.

"Let this be a lesson to you," the ambusher told her. "I'm keeping the blanket since I paid for it. Maybe tomorrow you'll have better luck."

Modesta nodded. Tomorrow. Yes, she would come back tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, and forever. It was true what they said: an ambusher's job is hard, and there's not much profit in it. She looked at her bloody fingernails. She didn't know why. But she was satisfied.