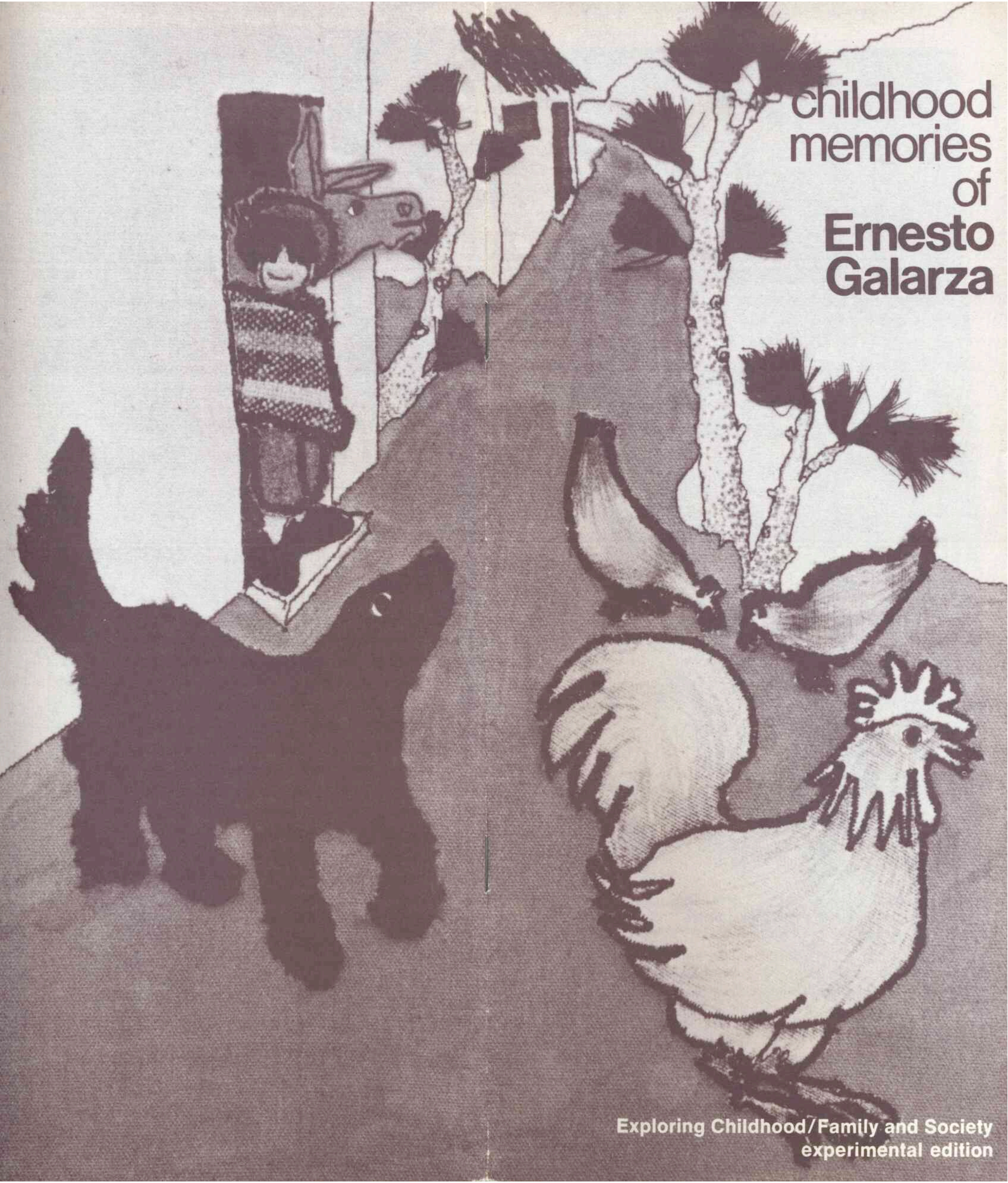
childhood
memories
of
Ernesto
Galarza
Exploring Childhood/Family and Society
experimental edition

Ernesto Galarza, *Barrio Boy.* New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1972. Copyright © 1971 by University of Notre Dame Press. Reprinted by permission of University of Notre Dame Press.

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Experimental Edition
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In these pages, Galarza recaptures some of the feelings and experiences of his childhood in the remote village of Jalcotãn in Western Mexico. In later chapters of this absorbing book he describes his life as a Chicano youth growing up in Mexico and California.

Some weeks before Ernesto's birth, his mother, called Dona Henriqueta, walked to Jalcotãn to take up residence with her sister, Dona Esther, and her sister's husband, Don Catarino. There Ernesto grew up in a cottage much like the forty other such homes in that mountain village.

Living in the one-room home were not only Ernesto and his mother, but also Ernesto's aunt and uncle, their two children, and Ernesto's two young uncles Gustavo and Josẽ.

Aunt Esther had married Don Catarino Lõpez, one of a numerous family of Jalco. Don Catarino, his father, and brothers worked the corn patches and the *milpas* on the mountain, tilled and harvested bananas deep in the forest and earned a living in other ways from the countryside. Don Catarino had brought his bride, Esther, to the pueblo where they were living with their two boys—Jesũs, a year older than myself and Catarino junior, a year younger. The four of them hardly filled the one big room of the cottage. The extra beds behind the curtain and the *tapanco* [sleeping loft] could accommodate us all, cramped or cozy, depending on how you looked at it.

Don Catarino became the head of our household. He was a dour man of middle height, with a skin sunburned to a chocolate brown. He talked slowly, drawling in a soft, pleasant rumble, but when he was angry he could clench his voice as quickly as his fist. Like a true *campesino* and *jalcocotecano*, he always seemed to count to a hundred before

speaking and when he did speak it was a decision, not a discussion. What he decided he backed up with some ancient proverb that everybody knew and everybody believed. With his voice, his way of looking at you and his proverbs Don Catarino left no doubts in my mind that he was the *jefe de familia* [head of the family]. . . .

Breakfast was before daybreak and regularly announced by our rooster, Coronel. He was always a half hour ahead of the dawn, crowing lustily in our back yard. It was the signal to get up. Up in the *tapanco* we stirred on our mattress of cornhusks and mats, sitting up hunched in our sarapes, listening. In the corrals of the village the other roosters picked up the reveille, trumpeting as if this was the first dawn of time and a marvelous sight to see. Up and down the mountain the cocks of the ranchos and the other pueblos took up the fanfare, their calls fading with distance.

One by one we came down the notched pole, still snug in our sarapes.

"Buenos días, muchachos."

"Buenos días, Don Catarino."

"Buenos días, Tía."

"Buenos días, Tío."

"Buenos días, mamā."

We huddled around the fire in the *pretil* as close as we could without getting in the way of the business of preparing breakfast. Over our heads the oil lamp sputtered, giving off more smoke than light. My mother stirred the coals she had bedded down the night before under a thick bank of ashes. On top of them she dropped small splinters of pine heavy with resin, the pungent *ocote*. With a small mat she fanned the splinters into a flame, feeding it with larger pieces of *ocote* to

set the fresh charcoal on fire. From the center pit coals were scooped and transferred to the side burners. On the three fires now going the pots were arranged, their black bottoms sitting on the ruby coals. The tortillas were already warming on the *comal,* the beans coming to a boil in one pot, the coffee in another. . . .

We ate breakfast in silence. The men, sitting on the edge of the beds, were served first—a plate with beans and red pepper rolled in tortillas, a large bowl of coffee, still boiling, to warm their hands and burn their stomachs on account of the early morning chill. The tacos for their lunch were already rolled in cornhusks and a napkin, tucked into the haversacks of woven hemp. My aunt took down the crossbar from the front door and the men stepped out into the dark, wrapped in sarapes. Their huaraches sandpapered the hard surface of the street, the white stuff of their clothes disappearing like dim blobs into the night. They would be in the fields by daybreak.

My aunt closed the door and served breakfast to the three boys, huddled around the *pretil.* It was a bowl of coffee, a tortilla with beans and pepper, and a few sucks on a chunk of brown sugar, the *panocha* that was kept in a clay pot on a shelf out of our reach. The women always ate last.

"Now, up the *tapanco* and raise your bed." I could never understand why Aunt Esther always said "raise your bed." *Al tapanco y alzar la cama* was what she called this part of the morning routine. We climbed up the notched pole again, to spread the cornhusks evenly, lining up the woven mats on top, like a bed cover. We did this crawling on all fours, butting one another like goats. By the time we came down it was time to round up Coronel and his hens in the corral for their daily ration of maize. When the chickens were fed we called Nerōn, our dog, to the kitchen door for a tortilla dipped in bean juice. In one

swallow Nerōn finished his breakfast and he chased us to the edge of the woods back of the corral. While Neron stood by, as if he understood what was going on, we lined up along the wall for a minute or two. Whoever won the race back to the kitchen when my mother called would get the first licks on the *panocha.*

Doing chores and chasing one another we warmed ourselves during the morning chill, playing as much as possible between the routine jobs we were assigned. Most of these jobs were as agreeable as the games we made up. When it was full daylight, both doors of the cottage were opened. Jesūs and I walked Nerōn up and down the street so he could explore the fresh garbage in the gutter. He was then left on his own, except when he got into a fight and barked for help. Coronel and his hens were ushered through the kitchen into the street to scratch in the litter. Some time during the morning we had to sprinkle the street directly in front of our house.

The protection of Coronel and his hens and the supervision of Nerōn were two of the important tasks assigned to us. There was one other—to look after Relāmpago, the burro that didn't belong to anyone in particular. . . .

He was a small, brownish-grey donkey. His left ear always drooped and he didn't swish his tail like other burros. Nothing in Jalco moved as slowly and deliberately as Relāmpago, for which reason he was called "Lightning." He didn't belong to anyone and no one knew where he had come from. But his way of gazing at people, of stopping in front of doors to stare, and his willingness to give the children rides, made him at least a cousin to every family in the village. Josē hoisted me on Relāmpago's back now and then, walking us from one end of the street to the other. No reins, no saddle, no stirrups, almost no hands, except that Josē would be alongside to steady me on top of the burro. Whenever Relāmpago cared to do so, he was welcome to

walk through our cottage and into the corral to spend the night.

Don Chano, who lived at the other end of the street from us, was one of the elders of Jalco. He had been to Guadalajara when he was a young man. "Don Chano," said my mother to Aunt Esther once when Jesūs and Catarino and I were up in the *tapanco,* supposedly asleep, but eavesdropping, as usual, "tells that nothing ever happens in Jalcocotān."

The remark made no sense. If we had been as old as Don Chano we would probably have argued about it. For the three of us, important things happened in the cottage, on the street, in the corral, along the arroyo, and on the edge of the forest. Not only that. Most of the things that happened, happened every day. Coronel started them, bugling to all the other roosters on the mountain. Nerōn ran races with us in the corral when the sun was hardly up. We got our licks at the *panocha* without missing a day. Moreover, in Jalco the happenings stopped when night fell, so you would not miss any of them while you were asleep.

Whether we were playing in a neighbor's corral, or on the street, or down by the pond, we knew the afternoon was about over by the voices. "Juan." "Neto." "Chuy." "Melesio." They were calling our names, the voices of mothers and aunts poking their heads out of doorways or over the walls of the corrals. The voices were not shouts. They were tunes. And we knew when we heard them—being only five or six years old—that we had to dance to them, at once. "Si, señora." "Ya vengo." "Voy." When we answered we were already on the trot. We obeyed by trotting. We showed respect by answering. Failure to do either could mean that you would have your ear pinched at the doorway or be asked that ominous question that nobody knew how to answer and had better not try to: "Quē pasō?"—how come?

The voices always called about the time the shadows began stretching from the forest side of the pueblo over the cottages. After reporting in, Jesūs and Catarino and I looked after Coronel and the hens. Usually they were on their way home, dawdling as they scratched. If Nerōn wasn't around he had to be caught and turned home by the scruff of his furry neck. We herded all of them—usually Nerōn first, the hens next and Coronel last—through the doors and into the corral. From then until supper we hopped to chores and errands—some charcoal for the *pretil,* bringing in the straw *petates* that had hung freshening in the sun on the walls of the corral, stopping a ruckus between Nerōn and Coronel, or propping the rickety ladder the hens climbed to roost in the willow tree.

While supper was being prepared, a quietness settled on the family waiting for the men to return from work. On one corner of the *pretil* there were the freshly baked tortillas, wrapped in a double jacket of napkins and stacked in the cream-colored basket with the musical name, the *chiquihuite.*

Don Catarino was always the first to walk in out of the dusk, if he and Gustavo and Josē had been working the same field. Gustavo was second and Josē last. They unfastened the machetes and hung them in their sheaths on pegs by the back door. They dropped the sarapes, folded, on the beds. Without a word they stepped into the darkening corral to wash from clay bowls. We stood by, a boy to each man, holding the chips of soap and the mended towels.

In the same order as at breakfast, the men were served first. The food was laid out on a side table not much wider than a shelf. As the men ate they tore the fresh, warm corncakes into halves and quarters and eighths, making tiny spoons with which they scooped the food, eating the spoon along with it.

When they finished, the men rose from the

table. Don Catarino rumbled "Buen provecho," which was a Jalcocotān way of wishing the diners a comfortable digestion of the meal.

Jesūs, Catarino, and I took the places of the men. The beans came steaming out of the tall pot, red-brown, *frijoles de la olla,* sprinkled with browned rice and washed down with coffee, but no pepper. With the last tortilla spoon we sopped up the bean juice and nitpicked the last grain of rice on our plates. When my aunt Esther said "Buen provecho," the meal was over. While the women ate, we loitered, any place where the men were not.

In the corral, by the bright orange light of a long stick of flaming *ocote,* they sharpened the machetes, or secured a hoe handle that had come loose. We could watch, careful not to get under foot, for we knew the men were irritable at the end of a bone-tiring day in the *milpa.* Don Catarino looked menacing with the shadows the dancing *ocote* flame made on his dark face. Gustavo hummed as he whetted his machete. Josē tested the edge of his blade, feeling it gently with his thumb crosswise, licking it before testing—one of the tricks of a good *machetero.*

Except for the candle turned low indoors, it was pitch dark when the men sat down or squatted along the front wall facing the street. Only Don Catarino smoked. Gustavo and Josē were not allowed to—at least not in the presence of my Aunt Esther and Doña Henriqueta. As the men relaxed they talked in low voices and short sentences. We sat on mats just inside the doorway, the women on the edge of the bed or standing behind us in the gloomy room. When Don Catarino was in an easy mood he told about things that had happened when he was a boy, such as the flood that carried away his father's mule. His voice, low and pebbly, came to us in the darkness mingled with the chirping of the crickets and the croaking of the frogs in the pond.

At a signal from Doña Esther we turned in, climbing the notched pole to the *topanco.* Wrapped in our sarapes we settled quickly into the cornhusk mattress and the mats and stopped squirming the better to hear the low-keyed talk that continued below us. It was easier to hear up there. The words climbed up the wall and in through the space between the thatch and the top of the adobe wall.

What we heard were bits of village gossip, the names of people we didn't know, talk of things that had happened somewhere else a long time past, or things that might happen in a day or a year or two. Even though we understood little we knew we were listening secretly. The grown-ups were in no hurry to talk. They, too, seemed to be listening to the sounds of the night—the rumble of the arroyo, and the stirrings of the forest. . . .

The morning of one memorable day Jesūs, Catarino and I climbed down from the *tapanco* as usual. Bundled in our blankets, we scrunched ourselves against the wall as close as we could to the warmth of the fire without getting in the way....

Doña Esther was already at the *comal,* making the fresh supply of tortillas for the day. She plucked small lumps, one by one, from the heap of corn dough she kept in a deep clay pot. She gave the lump a few squeezes to make a thick, round biscuit which she patted and pulled and clapped into a thin disk. The corncake grew larger and larger until it hung in loose ruffles around her hands. She spread her fingers wide to hold the thin, pale folds of dangling dough which looked as if they might drop off in pieces any moment. As she clapped she gave her wrists a half turn, making the tortilla tilt between each tat-tat of her palms. On each twist the tortilla seemed to slip loose but she would clamp it gently for another tat-tat. When the tortilla was thin and round and utterly floppy, she laid it on

the comal. My aunt worked on the next tortilla as she turned those already on the griddle, nipping them by the edge with her fingernails and flipping them over fast. When they browned in spots, she nipped them again and dropped them into the *chiquihuite,* covering them with a napkin to keep them hot.

Breakfast over, the men left, and pink shafts began to show through the gray sky over the corral. Nerōn was standing at the back door, observing the food on the *pretil* and waiting for his tortilla dipped in bean juice. That day it was my turn to run with it to the back wall of the corral, tantalizing Nerōn until he managed to grab it from me.

Coronel and the hens were already scratching in the patio. They were used to the daily commotion of Nerōn's tortilla, but they always made one of their own, cackling and flapping their wings as they scattered.

Coronel himself was always cool and dignified. He circled around the hens, high-stepping carefully between them and me and Nerōn, his body stretched tall. Wobbling his comb from side to side like a red pennant he turned his head to watch us now with one yellow, beady eye, now with the other. It was a mean look.

More than the *jefe de familia* among his hens, Coronel was part of the security system of the family. With Nerōn he patrolled the corral when he was not on the street, as puffy and important as an officer of the watch. In Jalco any boy or man who was not afraid of anything was known as *muy gallo* [very rooster]. Coronel was the most rooster of them all.

After Jesūs and Catarino and I had done our morning chores that day, I went to the corral to escort Coronel and his household through the cottage and into the street. He was circling one of the hens, making passes at her, his neck feathers ruffled. She ducked and

swiveled away from him, but Coronel drew nearer and nearer. Suddenly Coronel was on top of her, his yellow beak clamped on the hen's crest, his talons and spurs on her back.

I ran to the back door, excited and angry. My aunt was tidying up the kitchen. "Tı̄a, tı̄a," I yelled. "Coronel is squashing the hen. Shall I hit him?" My aunt stepped to the door and looked at the scene. She didn't seem worried. She turned to me and said matter-of-factly: "Leave Coronel alone. He knows what he is doing. The hen will be all right."

The hen, after her horrifying experience, had straightened up and gone about her pecking and scratching as usual. Coronel renewed his strutting. He did, indeed, seem to know what he was doing, but what was it? It was one of those things that adults were always leaving half explained. I would have to think about it in the *tapanco*.

My mother called out, "Take the hens out." I rounded up Coronel and his flock and shooed them through the cottage into the street. Nerōn followed us.

Up and down the street the chickens of the pueblo had begun their daily search along the gutter. The pigs and dogs had spotted themselves where the garbage looked most promising. Halfway up the street, a *zopilote* [turkey vulture] was already pecking at something. . . .

Coronel and his hens were making their way up the street between scratches. The hens kept their beaks down, pecking; and he paced this way and that, flaunting his comb, his feathers glistening in the sunlight.

When they were a few steps from the *zopilote*, the hens became alert. They stood still, some on both legs, some on one, looking intently at something that lay between the talons of the buzzard, which held his attention completely. He lowered his bald white

head and tore at the garbage with his hooked beak. Among the pigs and dogs and chickens there seemed to be an understanding not to bother the *zopilotes* that came down to scavenge. To all the residents of Jalcocotān, including the domestic animals, the vulture's looks, not to mention his smell, were enough to discourage sociability.

Nerōn and I were watching when one of the hens left the flock and went in for a peck at the *zopilote's* breakfast. She moved head low, neck forward, more greedy than afraid.

The buzzard struck. With a squawk the hen flipped over and scratched the air madly, as if she were pedaling a bicycle.

Coronel sailed in. His wings spread, his beak half open and his legs churning over the hard earth, he struck the *zopilote* full front, doubled forward so that his beak and his spurs were at the *zopilote's* breast feathers. The buzzard flapped one great wing over Coronel and bowled him over. The rooster twisted to his feet and began making short passes in cock-fighting style, leaping into the air and snapping his outstretched legs, trying to reach his antagonist with his spurs.

Up and down the street the alarm spread. "Coronel is fighting the *zopilote.*"

"He is killing Coronel."

"Get him, Coronel. *Ēntrale, ēntrale.*"

A ring of small children, women, pigs and dogs had formed around the fighters. Nerōn and I had run to the battleground, Nerōn snapping at the big bird while I tried to catch Coronel.

As suddenly as it had started, the fight was over. The *zopilote,* snatching at the heap of chicken guts that had tempted the hen, wheeled and spread his great wings, lifting himself over the crowd. He headed for a

nearby tree, where he perched and finished his spoils.

Coronel, standing erect among the litter, gave his wings a powerful stretch, flapped them and crowed like a winning champ. His foe, five times larger, had fled, and all the pueblo could see that he was indeed *muy gallo.*

Seeing that Coronel was out of danger, Nerõn and I dashed back to the cottage to tell the epic story. We reported how our rooster had dashed a hundred times against the vulture, how he had driven his spurs into the huge bird inflicting fatal wounds. Nerõn, my dumb witness, wagged his tail and barked.

My mother had stepped to the door when she heard the tumult. She had seen it all and heard me through my tale solemnly. Coronel himself was strutting home prodding his flock and followed by the children who had seen the fight.

That night, after Jesũs and Catarino and I were in bed in the *tapanco,* we heard Doña Esther give the men an account of the battle. Coming through to me in the dark, the story seemed tame, nothing more exciting than throwing the dishwater into the street.

"The boys think Coronel was magnificent," my mother commented.

Gustavo chuckled. Don Catarino drew on his cigarette and said: "Coronel is smart. *Zopilotes* are very chicken. They will fight among themselves, but if it's alive they won't even fight a fly."

The next day I asked my mother what it meant that somebody was chicken if he was not a chicken.

"It means he is not very brave," she explained.

"Is Coronel chicken?"

She guessed what was troubling me. "In no way. He is not chicken. He is the most rooster in Jalco. And I think he is the most rooster from here to Tepic."

I looked out into the corral. Coronel was standing on one foot, erect and watchful, under the willow. I knew something that he didn't—that people were talking about him as the only *gallo* that had ever beaten up a *zopilote*—something to be proud of even if a *zopilote* was, in some fashion, chicken....

Like many other mountain pueblos, Jalcócotãn has no school. Once the village had sent a committee to Tepic to petition the government for a teacher. The committee assured the government that the neighbors would be willing to build the school themselves and to provide the teacher with a place to live. Once in a great while, when the *Jefe Político,* who represented the government, visited Jalco he would be asked very discreetly and courteously about the petition. The answer was always the same: "It is under consideration." Many years had passed—how many no one really knew—and Jalco still had neither teacher nor school when we went to live there.

Reading, writing, and arithmetic were held in great esteem by the jalcocotecanos. A few adults in the town had finished the third or fourth grade somewhere else. They taught their own children the *a, b, c's* and simple arithmetic with the abacus. For writing they had the *pizarra* and the *pizarrín*—a small square of slate with a decorated wooden frame and a slate pencil.

Books were rare. My mother had one, which she kept in the cedar box. It had a faded polychrome drawing on the cover with the title *La Cocinera Poblana,* a cookbook which had belonged to Grandmother Isabel. We did not need it for cooking the simple, never-

changing meals of the family. It was the first book from which Dona Henriqueta ever read to me.

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In Jalco it was easy to think about what you would be when you grew up. On the street, in the *corrales,* and in the family workshops people who had decided what they would be and had become what they had wanted to be, showed you how, if you watched.

On the other side of our street, next to the chapel, lived Don Crescencio, who made bedsteads out of ash poles and rawhide. Don Chencho, as everyone called him, brought the rough poles out of the forest and trimmed them and sized them with his machete. Under the eaves of his cottage he always had strips of rawhide exposed to the sun, and he took them down when it rained. Don Chencho notched and girdled and bored the poles, joining them to short legs, weaving the rawhide back and forth, up and down and across to make a pattern of small squares which was the spring of the bed. When they dried, the thongs became as taut as steel rods. Anyone could fix a broken rawhide spring, but only Don Chencho could make one properly.

Don Aparicio made *huacales* and wove *reatas.* The *huacales* were crates made of branches tied with rawhide or hemp rope. Inside the *huacal* you could crowd eight or ten hens to take them to market, or two large *ollas* [pots], or a couple of dozen small ones. The *reatas* were ropes of woven cowhide made from thin strips and used for cinching loads on donkeys and mules. The strips gave off the stink of the tallow that Don Aparicio was constantly rubbing into them.

Up and down the street, there was somebody who could weave the shoulder bags in which the men carried their lunch to the fields; or cut, trim, and fit a pair of huaraches. We saw the butcher kill a steer, rip open its belly,

yank out the guts, hang the carcass on a crossbar, peel off the hides with a knife, and cut up the raw red meat into strips for drying in the sun.

The girls of Jalco learned from the women of the pueblo how to sew and embroider. But my cousins and I, like the rest of the boys, paid no attention to such matters. An exception to this was my mother's letter writing. When she wrote one for a neighbor, she explained to us that in the large cities there were *escribanos* in the public squares who wrote letters for people who didn't know how. Since the *escribanos* were men, I thought that letter writing might also be a worthy profession for me.

It was the outsiders, the people who passed through town, who gave us some notion of other occupations besides those we saw in the village.

That is what Relāmpago and I observed when the manager of the hacienda de Los Cocos rode through town. With me straddling his rump, my burro was standing stock still in the middle of the street staring into space. I was bending forward, grasping his shaggy coat as well as I could and giving his flanks gentle kicks with my heels. Out of the trail and into the sunny street rode the *Señor Administrador,* as he was respectfully addressed. He was on a horse twice as tall as Relāmpago, a black beauty that glistened with sweat and bubbled white foam around the bit. The steed nodded from side to side as he stepped, shaking his mane and flashing a silver medallion in the middle of the strap across his forehead.

The *Administrator* sat on a horned saddle, a rifle in a sheath of tooled leather hanging from the cantle. The coil of the reata was looped over the horn. He rode as if he were standing tiptoe in the stirrups, his spurs jingling. His face was almost as dark from

sunburn as his brown hat with a cone-shaped crown. The chin strap tied under the jaw ended in two strings dangling below the knot. Watching him pass, I conceived a vague notion that Relāmpago and I could grow up to be *administradores.*

The *varillero* was another possible ideal. He came one day to the door of our cottage—a tall man wearing *huaraches* with thick soles and the loose cotton shirt and pants of the peasants. Doña Esther invited him in. He unstrapped a flat wooden box from his back and laid it on the bed. The box contained a pair of large trays filled with glittering gifts—combs studded with sequins, bracelets, buttons, party fans for ladies, rosaries, medallions with the picture of El Santo Niño de Atocha, needles, spools of colored thread, coils of bright ribbons, earrings, thimble-sized bottles of perfume, and mouth organs.

Our neighbors already knew the notions man was in our cottage. They came to our door, said "Con su permiso," and walked in, making a circle around the *varillero.* Cut off from the sparkling display of the trays on the bed, Jesūs and Catarino and I climbed into the *tapanco* and had a birds' eye view of the houseparty: the *varillero* picking up and passing the trinkets around, the smiles of delight on the faces of the women, the girls giggling. The *varillero* made a bow with a red ribbon on his thumb and wiggled it. He blew a scale on the harmonica, which we bought for Josē, who had been wanting one a long time.

* * * *

If you were past six and going on seven, life in Jalco could be made disagreeable by neighbors who seemed to think that they could scold you and tell you how to behave. You never knew when a *compadre* or *comadre* of your aunt, or uncle, or your father, or your mother was watching. For that matter, even people who were not *compadres* to your family thought they had some sort of rights

over you. If you did or said something slightly irregular at the farthest end of the street from your cottage, where your legimate bosses lived, somebody would be watching and ready to call out: "Mira, que muchachito tan malcriado." ["Look at this badly brought-up boy."] And if the offense was considered serious, the voice would say, "You will see, I am going to tell your mother." In a village so full of snitchers and busybodies you could get an extra ear-pull for any trivial breach of good manners—the *buena educaciōn* which the adults prized so highly.

As a result you paid attention to what was expected of a *muchachito muy bien educado* [very well-educated boy]. You never broke into an adult conversation. This was called putting your spoon in, or the way I remember the rule: "Los muchachitos bien educados no meten su cuchara." No one ever entered a house, or left the room without saying "Con su permiso." It was "with your permission this" and "your permission that" practically all day long, unless you were playing with your friends. Whoever called you, for whatever reason, if you answered "what do you want?" you were in trouble. You had to answer by asking for a command: "Mande Usted?" People talked to one another on the street in low tones; only drunks and *muchachitos mal educados* [poorly-educated children] raised their voices, or the *arrieros* when they shouted to their donkeys.

Every mother in the village could ask you to do an errand. If I was in the middle of a game, or just sitting in the street watching the *zopilotes,* some neighbor would call me: "Ernesto, come here and take this to Doña Eduvijes." What right she had to order me around no one ever explained, but I was taught to move right up, answer "Sī, señora," and do the errand.

In fact, running errands was the special business of any boy or girl between the ages of

four and six. When you delivered something you always began by saying: "My mother sends greetings and says may God give you a good day, and here is an egg." When you reported the accomplishment of your mission, you repeated the other half of the ceremony by heart: "She says that she sends greetings, how is the family, and many thanks for the egg." Any neighborhood courtesy—an exchange of a banana for a red pepper, or the return of a borrowed utensil—was sure to pass through our messenger system.

Some errands were special. Going for milk was one. There was one cow in the village. She was stabled in a corral on the arroyo side of the town, where she could be walked across the stream and tethered in the pasture beyond. No family drank milk every day, only when there was pudding or chocolate to make on feast days. It seemed to work out smoothly, with just enough milk whenever it was wanted, because nobody wanted much. I went to the one-cow dairy with a small pitcher about quart size. The cow was milked straight into it, nobody minding the flies or manure among the cornhusks that littered the corral. On the walk home the important thing was to avoid the pigs and dogs and hens with strict attention to getting the milk home unspilled. . . .

The priest came to visit Jalco. . . once or twice a year. Instead of drinking songs, we heard the chants and the litanies that he sang with the chapel choir.

José, besides serving as an altar boy, sang in the choir, and for a time his future as a chorister looked promising. But he composed comical Spanish versions of *Dominus vobiscum* and other Latin bits of the ritual. The priest heard about this and expelled him because his translations were disrespectful. One of them was to the effect that "if you are an awful sinner, just invite the priest to dinner." José was scolded (but not very severely) for entertaining us with his singsong imitations of religious rites.

The expulsion of José made it much less likely that we would be sent to mass or that the priest would receive from us gifts that the *jalcocotecanos* usually presented him on his visits—a roasted chicken, a pot of tamales, a comb of honey, and other savory foods that kept him overweight. He never visited a cottage without sending advance notice, so that when he knocked on the door there would be a milk pudding or a whole barbecued banana dripping with syrup ready to serve. José's humiliation put a stop to these visits to our family. After that we heard more and more family criticisms of the religious man. He charged too much for funerals. He collected fees for baptizing children as well as for blessing pigs and goats and other domestic animals. He sold scapularies which, my mother said darkly, a seamstress in San Blas made from his underwear. My cousins and I vowed that if José was not reinstated in the chapel none of us would ever become a priest.

For nearly everyone else in town the infrequent visits of the priest, his sermons and incantations, and his sprinkling of holy water in places where a ghost had appeared were serious matters. People spoke of *El Diablo* and of *La Muerte* as if they were persons you might run into any moment. The Devil could descend on you from a tree in the shape of a monstrous lizard or block you on the trail dressed in flames and aiming a spear at you. Death was a gangling skeleton who perched her rattling bones (Death was always a She) on the roof ridge of your cottage, or signal you with a bony finger to follow her into the forest. Against the powerful black magic of *El Diablo* and *La Muerte*, the *jalcocotecanos* needed the equally powerful protection of their scapularies, the sign of the cross, and Our Lady of Talpa and the Holy Child of Atocha, the most revered saints among our neighbors.

Pictures in polychrome colors of the holy ones of Talpa and Atocha were carried at the head of funeral processions that went by the front of our house. When a playmate died down the street, I saw the small coffin wrapped in a white sheet carried by a man on his shoulder. People stood in their doorways and made the sign of the cross and prayed silently as the procession passed. I didn't know the prayers exactly, which sounded to me between a whisper and a mumble, so I bowed my head and whispered and mumbled. The next day we made a bouquet of geraniums and carnations from the pots in our corral. We took it to the mother when we went to offer our *pēsame*, the mourning visit to the family of my dead friend. My mother spoke, and I repeated the traditional words: "I come to keep you company in your grief. May he rest in peace." My mother was dressed in black and there was a narrow black ribbon around my arm. When she walked me home I complained that she was holding my hand too tightly. I looked at her face. She was weeping. The dead boy had been about my own age. . . .